

Finding Faith Amidst the Ruins

Prologue

Thanks to the generosity of Rockfish Presbyterian and the vision of Worship and Personnel Ministry Teams, Deb and I were able to afford a two-week trip to Scotland and England. What was to be a vacation turned into a project to rediscover my love of English History and even more important, my faith. It is not that I had lost it. Like any job, showing up every morning diminishes some of its charm. Many folks my age have retired. I still believe I have something to offer and so I press on. But sometimes we all can use a spark. I saw this trip as a chance to rediscover my deep religious roots. Ironically I went looking for one thing and discovered another. God does work in mysterious ways.

My companions, Deb, Bill, and Darby, were forced to put up with someone caught in a maze of melancholy and confusion. All three, at different times and in different ways, found the appropriate words to remind me that we came to discover a magical land with a rich and evolving history. I suspect they occasionally wished I had stayed home. I am glad I did not make the trip alone. Somehow we all survived. Now I am left with many thoughts and one desire. When I retire, I want to take Deb and my golf clubs back to Scotland.

Is a dream a lie if it never comes true, or is it something worse?

Bruce Springsteen

September 2019 I turn 69. Fifty years ago the idea of living this long was unimaginable. When I was 19, Neil Young sang that dying was preferable to rust. I Neil and I both have accumulated our fair share of corrosion. Back then, I was a sophomore at a small college which required students to choose a major. Biology and chemistry required attending class regularly. Economics has never seemed interesting. Declaring myself an English major would require three years of a foreign language. History seemed the logical choice. King College had a wonderful European History department. I loved Lerner and Lowe's musical *Camelot* so I figured this would be the perfect match. Excelling in Russian or Chinese history would have served me better. But then there was that language thing.

Since graduation I have wanted to visit the British Isles but things kept getting in the way. I have only played the lottery once and I finished 18th. When the lottery is the Selective Service Draft, 18 is pretty much a winner, or loser, depending on one's perspective. But I did have a plan. I volunteered to go to Korea for 13 months. From there I planned to request to finish my enlistment in England. But I got homesick. Actually I was in love. Deb and I married soon after my return to the States. I went to grad school, twice, we had children, twice. Then I went to grad school again. There was no third child but we could find neither the time nor money to search for Camelot, until now. Today begins a dream come true. So why do I feel so lousy?

My emotional insecurities often pour cold water on raging passions. My traveling partners are bouncing off the walls. Why can't I join their dance? I can't help but wonder what I will miss. I have already given up playing at St. Andrews and spending a couple days at Iona. Those sacrifices made perfect sense. We are a foursome but only I play golf. The beauty of Iona is discovered through long periods of stillness. Silence is rarely a characteristic of this band of travelers.

The real reason for my dismay goes deeper than the elimination of holy places. I come seeking Camelot, a place that never existed. I come looking for the birthplace of my faith and fear the stories I was taught as a child are as mythical as Galahad and Lancelot. Wednesday we shall worship at St. Giles, the Kirk of Edinburgh. Will I find it as dead as Stonehenge? As I approach the twilight of my ministry, will I also be witnessing the twilight of my church? Is it possible to discover new life in the midst of these ruins?

The Time Warp Rag
Rocky Horror Picture Show

Have I gained five hours or lost them? Time travel is not for the weary.

An old friend made an appearance last night. Not really knowing why, I tossed J. Phillip Newell's book, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, into my travel bag. Stuck on a plane for seven hours gave me time to read an alternative history about the Celtic monk Pelagius. Every first-year seminary student has encountered this brazen Brit who dared to suggest that each of us is born in the image of God. Today that thought doesn't seem so awful. But Augustine of Hippo, the darling of Western Christianity, and the primary proponent of "original sin", single-handedly led the charge to discredit the writings of Pelagius. Most views on Pelagius are seen through the eyes of Augustine of Hippo and later Augustine of Canterbury. So what are the damning views of this heretic?

1. He believed scripture and doctrine were developed by human hands.
2. Pelagius believed it was more important to strive to become Christ-like than believe in who Christ might be.

History would have us believe Augustine was the champion for grace over Pelagius's belief in works righteousness. History also allows Augustine to make the argument for both men. Through the night I read the letters of Pelagius. They were wonderful encounters with a human spirit who lifted up everyone as a child of God. Pelagius saw God equally in the birth of an infant and the setting of the sun. As Catholicism became the faith of the land, Celtic spirituality disappeared throughout the island, with the noted exception of the highlands and heather of Scotland. In Gaelic, a lost language never completely lost, the Celtic prayers have been passed down. Will I understand them better when they are prayed in a land where water and sky so easily kiss?

Today we arrive in Edinburgh, the home of John Knox and the birthplace of my beloved denomination. Could it be the purpose of my journey to the ruins is not to resurrect the proud son of Calvin? Could it be that I am here to listen for the heartbeat of God?

People just grow lonesome waiting for someone to say, "Hello in There."

John Prine

We land in the fog. How appropriate. We couldn't see a thing until we hit the ground. I hope this trip proves to be a little more revealing. One thing for sure, our Scottish friends know how to do Customs. There was no drama; no inspection; just a sign that said, "Welcome to Scotland."

We found a bus which took us to Edinburgh. A comfortable and welcome walk revealed our apartment. It could not have been more strategically located. After a couple of minutes to freshen up, we entered a wonderful pub. It was full of life and joy, a microcosm of what we would regularly discover when spending time with the folks of this delightful country. They laughed often, loved to tell stories, and almost made us homesick for their home.

After lunch we headed downtown, both literally and figuratively. Not far from the pub we spied an historic Church of Scotland. A sign outside the church proclaimed, "All are welcome." Nothing about the church lived up to that promise. There was no indication when worship might take place. The gate around the church was bolted. Weeds served as the building's only vegetation. It appeared no one had been through the front door in quite some time.

This scene was repeated numerous times in the next few blocks. An Episcopal, Methodist, and Jewish Synagogue had suffered the same fate. We decided there must have been a population shift and the congregations had moved to a more fertile location. In the next few days we never discovered those new communities of faith, only empty shells, deserted by their congregations.

Tomorrow we visit St. Giles. I fear already I will not be pleased with the outcome. I wonder if Sunday is just another day in Scotland. We noticed the folk singer John Prine would be in playing on Edinburgh Sunday night. He should have booked an earlier show for Sunday morning. There would be little competition from the few churches that are still open. It seems the prevailing ecclesiastical dogma has closed the minds of those seeking God's holy and joyful presence.

They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.

Joni Mitchell

My father, a Presbyterian Minister, was particularly proud of his Scottish heritage. In the pulpit he wore Geneva Tabs. He raised his children on the heroic exploits of John Knox, the Scottish Reformer who, according to my father, single-handedly defeated the papist Queen Mary and brought Presbyterianism to the Highlands. All of dad's children proudly wore Celtic Crosses displaying our faith and heritage. I could not wait to walk through St. Giles and bask in the glory of my spiritual lineage.

We began our journey along the Royal Mile in the rain. That should have been my first clue that the day would end in tears. Edinburgh is a glorious city, even in the fog. Everyone continued to welcome us with open arms. They loved our accents and the way we freely opened our purses. Before reaching St. Giles we visited the John Knox House and Book Store. We wandered through the house with great anticipation. Matching his reputation, the house was sparsely decorated. His favorite colors appropriately were black and white.

The next stop was St. Giles Cathedral, the home church of Knox. I feared it also would be quite dark but to my amazement glorious banners draped the walls and stained glass lit up the windows. There was even an enormous pipe organ. It seems in the 19th century Queen Victoria restored St. Giles to the glory it displayed before the Knox renovations. A corner of the church was set aside to honor the great poets of Scotland. Amazingly, many crypts housed the heroes of the 18th century Jacobite Rebellion. How curious that the remains of Catholics were honored in the church of John Knox.

We attended a brief prayer service at noon in the center of the Cathedral. In silence I tried to collect my thoughts and make sense of these new discoveries. It was difficult. Tourists were noisily making their way through the church, undisturbed by our attempts to worship. I wish the sale of souvenirs could have been suspended during this brief moment of prayer.

After worship I continued my search for the remains of Knox. Frustrated, I resorted to asking one of the souvenir hawking volunteers. She politely responded, "Space 23 out back." The four of us reverently entered what we had

imagined would be a cemetery. Instead, it was a parking lot. The volunteer had not misled us. We found space 23. In the middle was a plaque which declared, "Below this spot are the remains of John Knox."

In his day Knox stood eye to eye with Queen Mary and she was forced to blink. Knox's greatest regret may have been he did not live to see Mary's execution. He was the father of my denomination. He preached about the grace of God. But his favorite sermons highlighted the depravity of his enemies. Is it any wonder that those who have tried to continue this legacy of fear and damnation now preach to empty pews? Standing in that parking lot I prayed my head and heart would be opened in ways I could only anticipate but hardly imagine.

Meet me at Mary's Place, we're gonna have a party.

Sam Cooke

We left the parking lot, and John Knox, and headed to Mary's Palace. The official name is the Castle of Edinburgh. Rising high above the city it was impenetrable to anyone not British. Is it any wonder a majority of Scots prefer the E.U. to the UK? The Scots seemed to have a much better history with their friends and relatives across the channel.

This hill outside of Edinburgh has served as a fortress for 3,000 years. For a city that was invaded regularly, it remains a great place to look down on your enemy. The castle, as it presently stands, was built 800 years ago. Before that it was constructed of wood. In the 13th century Robert the Bruce, a great Scottish warrior, stormed the castle, eliminated all the English sympathizers and burned the castle to the ground. He found the upkeep of such prize real estate to be a burden. After his death the castle was rebuilt with stone. During the reign of Victoria, a rare moment when England and Scotland were on speaking terms, the English installed cannons. Taken from a warship they would prove to be useless in battle but are a nice touch when looking up from the city.

The highlight of our experience was a bodacious tour guide who undoubtedly had a gig at the local Comedy Store. His mixture of knowledge and humor left all of us delighted. When the tour was over I asked for his take on the rival between Mary and Knox. He thought for a moment and then responded, "Mary has become quite a celebrity these days. She has a couple of movies out and while they rely on revisionist history, they may not be that far from the truth. Knox and his followers wrote the history of the day because they triumphed. But the truth is Mary was an extraordinary woman. Many believe she opened the door to the Enlightenment in Scotland."

"And what about Knox?" I asked.

"He was just a mean old man looking for revenge after all those years as a galley slave. Look at his descendents. They were folks like Cromwell and the Puritans. We Scots had no stomach for those joyless slugs. If Elizabeth didn't have Knox's back, history would have been written differently."

"So are there still ill feelings between the Presbyterians and the Catholics?"

“Look around laddie. Nobody cares about religion anymore. We follow football (soccer). When the Hearts (Edinburgh) play the Celtics (Glasgow) that is the closest thing we have to a religious war. I haven’t been to church in 25 years. I got tired of hearing how bad I was.”

I thanked him for his time and disappeared into the crowd. I was afraid he might ask me what I did for a living.

Oh Maggie I wish I'd had never seen your face.

Rod Stewart

One icon down, one to go. The chapel at the top of Edinburgh Castle was built for Queen Margaret. Built of stone it was the only thing left when Robert the Bruce burned the place down. Margaret’s husband was Malcolm III. You may have heard of him. If not, read *Macbeth*.

Margaret and Malcolm ruled around 1,070 AD. She was a devout Catholic who made it her holy quest to eliminate any trace of the Celtic branch of the Christian faith. 700 years before, Pelagius merged what he believed to be the best of Christianity and Gaelic spirituality and celebrated this birth with joyous prayers, songs, and service. Spurned by Rome, the remnant retreated to Ireland and the Western Islands of Scotland. The holy symbol of these groups was the Celtic Cross. It marked their places of worship. By the time Margaret took the throne only a small group remained on the tiny Island of Iona. Taking an army, she executed the priest, scattered the people, burned the wooden worship center, and erected a stone Catholic chapel. The Celtic Cross disappeared for over 800 years. The prayers and songs were quietly passed from one generation to another, never finding their way back to church until almost 1,000 years later.

And what of the Celtic Cross? All my life I believed it was the cross of Presbyterians only to discover it was not the cross of Knox. During the 19th century the cross was resurrected in cemeteries. In the 1870’s people in Edinburgh began to mark the graves of their loved one with Celtic Crosses carved from stone. How did memories of the cross survive? No one knows. But on the alter in Margaret’s Chapel is a century old cloth adorned with a Celtic Cross. How ironic! Even in death the heartbeat of God refuses to be silenced.

In short there's simply not, a more congenial spot.

Alan Lerner

To really appreciate Edinburgh one must climb Arthur's Seat, an ancient volcano that rises beyond Edinburgh. Some suggest it was the inspiration for Camelot. That was probably a rumor to infuriate the English. It is amazing how much ill will exists between these neighbors. Memories last a long time and these folks have been bickering for over 3,000 years.

The morning was perfect for climbing so up we went. We didn't find the Holy Grail but the view was worth the effort. It also gave us the chance to escape the noise of the city. Looking away from the city we were given our first real taste of Scotland. I was told in the 19th century mutilated bodies were discovered at the top of the mountain. No one has unlocked the mystery but the prevailing rumor is that doctors were given the bodies of inmates from prison. At night they would dissect them to learn about internal organs and muscle structure. Then the bodies were hauled up the hill and disposed in shallow graves. I guess knowledge is a wonderful thing.

We proceeded down the hill without incident and visited Holyroot Castle. It was built when Charles II was King of both Scotland and England. He was a terrible king and only ascended the throne because folks wanted a little joy in their lives after a decade of Oliver Cromwell. The castle is still active today and is a favorite getaway for the Royal Family. My favorite part of the tour was walking through the gardens while looking up at Arthur's Seat. Charles may have been a lousy king but he picked the perfect spot for a summer home.

This was our last night in Edinburgh so I went to the markets in search of a Celtic Cross. I had lost mine years ago. Although I now realize it was never a symbol of my denomination, it represents the free spirit of a people who have so wonderfully integrated the mystery of God's grace and creation. Unfortunately my search was futile. I couldn't find a single Celtic Cross under 100 pounds. I did find a couple attractive Stars of David. My Presbyterian father, with his strong Hasidic influences, would have been pleased.

Take me riding in the car, car.

Woody Guthrie

Today we picked up the car. We are four older adults with enough baggage to last until the second coming. I was hoping for a Ford van with more dimples than the dark side of the moon. It seemed the only rental on the lot that would fit our comfort and space demands was a 2019 Jaguar. Normally I would have given my left arm to drive such a magnificent machine. But these were not normal circumstances. The roads in Scotland are built for go-carts. They have no shoulders, often only one lane, and traffic comes from multiple directions. Every mile there is round-about, sometimes for no apparent reason. Then of course there is the MINOR inconvenience of driving on the wrong side of the road. Fortunately I have three willing companions who helped me through these perils with helpful hints like:

You Missed The Turn.

You are too close to the Edge.

Get in the LEFT Lane.

Oh my God I can't watch.

That evening, with no scratches on the car and our marriages intact we arrived at our destination. Once the car was parked, and a delicious meal had calmed our nerves, it was a unanimous decision a long walk was in order. Not far from where we were staying we came across a wonderful restaurant that had once been a church. It seems in Scotland more churches are now restaurants and music venues than places of worship. Maybe that is what happens when the church forgets that it is called to drive on the wrong side of the road. Once upon a time Jesus' primary message was God is good. Now churches insist it is our way or the highway. I think folks are tired of hearing about us and them, heaven and hell, righteous and unrighteous. In Scotland everyone under 65 has headed for a round-about and gotten off at a place without pews, guilt, and long-winded sermons. Believe it or not, they haven't missed church one bit.

Golf is a good walk spoiled.

Mark Twain

It has taken me 600 years to finally arrive at St. Andrews. By Scottish standards the wind was hardly blowing. The temperature was a balmy 65. It was a perfect day to be playing the course affectionately known as the ‘Home of Golf.’ For all the right reasons I was standing behind the first tee box without a tee time. I watched as one group after another teed off or finished number 18. Scores didn’t seem to matter. Each player had a story or two and anyone who has played this silly game would eagerly listen to their experience.

Deb and I walked the Road Hole backwards and forward with no clubs in our hands. For all the right reasons I was not trying to drive the ball in the fairway. For all the right reasons I never challenged those infamous sand traps. For all the right reasons I never had the experience of a birdie putt from 40 yards away. And for all the right reasons I gave thanks for all those crazy people who ignored their inner voices, paid the green fees, and had the experience of a lifetime.

Six hundred years from today, when I make it back to St. Andrews, I will irrationally tee it up and walk in the sacred footsteps of Jones, Palmer, Nicklaus and Watson.

We will, we will rock you.

Queen

Today we and Queen Elizabeth II attended the Scottish Games in Braemar. Getting there was half the fun. We rode through the hills and highlands in search of an athletic event in the middle of nowhere. We arrived to discover a farm converted into a field of valor. Thousands of folks showed up, all clad in traditional dress, to cheer for their local heroes. The field resembled a miniature American football field. It was barely 100 yards in length. Children and young adults competed from distances of 100 yards to two miles. Grown men tossed telephone poles and cow bells. Young lassies danced to the constant drone of a bagpipe. Occasionally the athletic events would be interrupted as pipe and drum corps would circle the field. I think everyone played the same song. But then after four hours of bagpipes it is really hard to tell. The most exciting event was the tug of war. Dressed in kilts the contestants would try to drag their opponents through the mud. It had all the color of a high school football game in West Texas except the losing coach wasn't run out of town..

It was a magnificent event. Winners and losers celebrated each other's energy and abilities. It seemed like a corner of the Kingdom of God. The first and the last blended into one. Pipers and drummers ranged from the ages of 12 to 82. There were the dancers who pranced like David before the Ark. Praises were sung. Everyone was celebrated. There was joy in the morning and the afternoon.

Of course one can only stand so much of a good thing. After 4 hours of droning, grunting, and cheering we decided to beat the crowds and head for Inverness. None of us wanted to be on the Highland roads after dark.

An hour after our departure, guess who arrived? I am sure someone informed Her Majesty that we had already left the building.

Did you say mops?

Gus

We were quickly discovering our favorite part of our adventure is meeting the folks who live in this blessed land. One of our favorites was the owner of a restaurant on Loch Ness just outside of Inverness. We walked into his establishment and were greeted with a sour look and equally uninviting query, "Do you folks have a reservation?" We shook our heads and started to leave. He broke into a big smile and in his best southern accent proclaimed, "Well y'all do now. Y'all just sit yourselves right here."

Confused and amused, we sat and let Gus entertain us. Gus had lived in Alabama for about a year. He had heard Americans loved old stuff so he and his wife shipped their worthless junk to the States and he sold it as antiques from Scotland. Gus then entertained us with a story about his adventures. He heard that there was a section of Birmingham known as the Highlands. Being somewhat homesick he decided to visit. When he got to the city he went to a store and asked the proprietor if he could sell him, "A map." The man behind the counter asked, "What do you need to clean up."

Gus responded, "I don't need to clean up anything. I just need a map."

The man said, "We have all kinds of mops. Some are sponge, some are string. We even have a steam mop. I don't want to sell you the wrong one."

Exasperated again Gus said, "I don't need to clean up anything. I am just trying to find out how to get to a place called the Highlands."

"Ohhh! You don't need a map. You need a maaaap. The store across the road will sell you one."

The rest of the night Gus entertained us with funny stories and some good food, and we left feeling like we had known each other for years.

Praise with elation, God's recreation, of the new day.

Eleanor Farjeon

Sunday morning we were at a B&B looking out over Loch Ness. We gathered in the grass and created our own version of a Gaelic Worship.

Call to Worship

This is the day the Lord has made.

Let us rejoice and be glad.

The goodness of the lake be thine.

The goodness of the earth be thine.

The goodness of heaven be thine.

Silent Prayer

Think of all we have celebrated and experienced the last few days. In your prayers, celebrate the goodness of God and God's creation.

Prayer Together

There is not a plant in the ground that is not full of God's virtue. (silence)

There is no wind upon the earth that is not full of God's blessing. (silence)

There is no life in the sea, no creature on the earth, that does not proclaim the goodness of God. (silence)

A Time of Thanks

Lift your face to the sun. Think of the warmth of God's love.

Take some grass from the ground. Give thanks that God supplies our needs.

Look at the water. Give thanks that we are baptized in God's grace.

Benediction (repeat each phrase)

Christ be with me, Christ be within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me.

Christ beside me, Christ restore me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger.

Christ in the mouth of all who love me,

Christ in the mouths of friends and strangers.

I begin my day by binding myself to Christ. Amen.

The Truth is out there!

Fox Mulder

Camelot is not the only myth that flows through the imagination of the British Isle. This is a land of make believe, literally. Let's start with Shakespeare. He was a wonderful storyteller who never let history get in the way of a good tale. Today we visited Cawdor Castle. If you have read *The Tragedies* you will remember this is the home of Macbeth. I can understand why Shakespeare made this claim. We spent a couple of glorious hours walking through the castle and gardens. Intrigue seemed to seep around every corner. There was only one small problem. Macbeth died 300 years before Cawdor Castle was constructed. But who cares. I turned one dark corner and half expected Lady Macbeth to moan, "Out Damned Spot."

Not far from Cawdor are the mysterious Clava Cairns. Until recently no one outside the Highlands knew anything about this ancient cemetery. But now folks have been reading Diana Gabaldon's novels entitled *Outlander*. Many of us wait anxiously for its new season return to TV. In case you have lived in a cave for the past decade, let me quickly fill you in. Claire is a doctor who lives in the mid-twentieth century. Claire discovers the rocks of Clava Cairns and is drawn to them. On touching the rocks she is transported back into the 18th century. There she meets and falls in love with Jamie Fraiser, a Jacobite and ally of Bonnie Prince Charlie. By the third season Jamie is preparing to fight the British at the Battle of Culloden. The results are disastrous and almost all the Jacobites were killed. Claire, now pregnant, fears for the life of her daughter and flees back to the future. Twenty years later she returns only to discover Jamie is still alive.

Today we visited the actual stones. It is a remarkable place which 4,000 years ago was a burial site. I stood silent and could almost imagine the memories once celebrated in this place. But none of the stones vibrated.

Later that day I asked a historian about the ancient stones and the myth associated with them. She smiled and said, "That is a recent myth crafted by Diana Gabaldon." Am I disappointed by this discovery? Not at all. Storytellers from Shakespeare to Gabaldon have always known the truth is out there. But sometimes a good story needs more than just the facts.

O Lord, how magnificent are Your works!

Psalm 104:24

On the road from Inverness to Oban we took a detour through Glencoe. We only thought we had been to the Highlands. On either side of us the earth exploded skyward to over 5,000 feet as tree lines disappeared into sheer granite. To this sojourner the views were breathtaking. But what if this had been my home? Could I live on beauty alone? I was born in a hospital and have always lived in a house. Running water, electricity, and automobiles have been inalienable rights. Those who have resided here somehow managed nourishment from the soil. Did they pray to a God I do not know for moisture in the spring? Did they offer sacrifices to an ancient Deity for warmth and safety during the winter? How did they become one with the water, earth and sky? Surely no one could have lived here alone. Creation must have a Creator.

When the light around you lessens and your thoughts darken until
Your body feels fear turn cold as a stone inside,
When you find yourself bereft of any belief in yourself
And all you have leaned on has fallen,
When one voice commands your whole heart,
And it is raven dark,
Steady yourself and see that it is your own thinking
That darkens your world.

Search and you will find a diamond-thought of light.
Know that you are not alone, and that this darkness has purpose;
Gradually it will school your eyes to find the gift your life requires.
A new confidence will come alive to urge you to higher ground
Where your imagination will learn to engage difficulty
As its most rewarding threshold.

(John O'Donohue)

***Alone on the wide sea, so lonely 'twas that God himself scarce seemed
there to be.***

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

A Celtic proverb states, “When you are too familiar with who you are, you have become a stranger to yourself.”

There is a tremendous difference between solitude and loneliness. In solitude one has the courage to look deep into the soul and beyond. Tonight, as I stare out at the Irish Sea, I only feel loneliness. Beyond my eyesight but not beyond my heart is the Isle of Iona. Perhaps I have mentally made it another Camelot, a spiritual nirvana where, *The rain may never fall till after sundown. By eight the morning dew must disappear. There's simply not a more congenial spot.* Imagination creates myths that take flight. Perhaps Iona is more dream than reality. Yet those I know who have visited Iona come back revived.

On an average day I punctually arrive at church and instead of a few moments for prayer, I check my emails, clear up leftovers from yesterday, and begin the day. I engage the Biblical text, make visits, have an amiable visit at 2:00, and a less friendly exchange at 3:00. I rush out for a little exercise before the nightly schedule of meetings. When I get home, I have had enough of God and flee to the absurdity of TV. Is it any wonder my dreams are restless? I labor for God but how often do I encounter God in my labors?

*Almighty God,
Sun behind all suns,
Soul behind all souls,
Show to me in everything I touch,
In everyone I meet,
The continued assurance of Thy presence,
Lest I should think Thee absent.
Remind me, in all things created, Thou art there.*

(A Celtic Prayer)

I stare out into the sea. A lonely Coleridge would have me believe not even God survives such darkness. I know better. Beyond my vision, God's heartbeat is heard in the whole of life. In my solitude, I will choose to listen.

I pulled into Nazareth, feeling 'bout half past dead. I just need some place where I can lay my head? "Put the load right on me."

Robbie Robinson

We took the low road to Loch Lomond and experienced why the lake had created such a poetic longing. Situated between two mountains it forms a regal visualization of God's creative hand. Unfortunately Glasgow did not leave us with such harmonious memories. After eating lunch in the midst of chaos, we quickly retreated back to the countryside and headed south for a long-awaited rendezvous with Bill's Scottish kin. Early in the evening we pulled into Langhorn, looking for a place to lay our heads. Bill's cousin Roger greeted us, ready and willing to lift our heavy load.

Roger and Bill last saw each other 40 years ago in North Carolina. It was amazing how much they now resemble each other. It was hard to tell one from the other until they talked. They both laughed at the other's accent.

Roger had grown up in Langhorn where his father had been mayor. I think his mom is still queen. We walked through the town and once again witnessed the ruins of ancient churches. One was still active. Less than two dozen attended worship with the exception of, not Christmas, not Easter, but the Sunday that marked the Opening Day of grouse hunting. The whole town showed up, went to worship, and put a wreath on the WWI Memorial. Roger said it was a worship of celebration and thanksgiving, entirely different from the other 51 weeks.

Roger and I spent some time by the river talking about religion and his community. I asked why no one went to church and he responded, "We all got tired of hearing how bad we are. I like the new minister. We have a pint or two regularly at the pub, but on Sunday he is required to follow the script. I think if worship was open to some laughter and joy some of us might go back. But not the way it is now. 11:00 is the worst hour of the week." He continued, "I love my community. When there is a crisis we all get together and take care of each other. When there is a celebration, everyone shows up. We have a community center that is very active. We have no police because we never saw a need."

I risked our new founded friendship by asking, "Do you believe in God?" Roger replied, "Of course I do. I just don't think God is found in the church. In fact

I think God stopped going a long time ago. Sometime I feel a little guilty about not being there. But if guilt is the only reason I attend, why bother in the first place?"

Later that night I thought about Pelagius, the English Irish priest who 1,500 years ago preached that caring and community were much more important than doctrine. He and his Gaelic community built churches out of joy. They offered hope to anyone who stepped inside their wooden worship space. But "God's chosen" felt the proper space for worship was in temples of stone which properly echoed litanies as cold as ice. And now, the church in Scotland is almost dead.

When the weight deadens on your shoulder and you stumble,

 May the clay dance to balance you.

When your eyes freeze behind the gray window,

 And the ghost of loss gets into you,

May a flock of colors, indigo, red, green, and blue,

 Come to awaken you in a meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays in the midst of thought,

 And a stain of ocean blackens beneath you,

May there come across the water a path of yellow moonlight,

 To bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours.

 May the clarity of light be yours.

 May the fluency of the ocean be yours.

 May the grace of God be yours.

May a slow wind

 work these words of love around you,

 Making an invisible cloak,

 To shelter your life.

 (John O'Donohue)

To Be.....or Not

Words are the gift and curse of all who choose to speak. Used thoughtlessly, words become the kerosene for any fire. Used endlessly, words are seldom heard. But used creatively, words are celebrated throughout eternity.

Today we arrived in Stratford. Shakespeare was born and died, many times over, in this town. The words we quote were conceived in London, but every genius has a beginning and an end. Both happened along these streets. Where did he discover such an imagination? Does such a muse dwell within each of us? We all know the words. How did he manage to put them in the right order?

We ended the evening being entertained by four comics who were almost profound and yet closer to profane. Spoken on stage, their discourse was permissible. Spoken publicly, the same words would have been blasphemous. Would people have listened to William's words if he had been predictable?

Does Romeo seek Juliet because she is beautiful or unattainable? Which matters to Harry most, the throne or his soul? What does the Dane hope to find beyond death? Was it necessary for Lear to speak at all?

In the hands of a master, a word can resuscitate the soul. Left to the amateur, words are only a clumsy benediction. What words will I choose when I return to the congregation I love? Having waltzed with death, will I offer the same song and dance? Will I risk a new word? Will it be profound or profane?

To be..... or not, that continues to be the question. Must "being" always attach itself to ancient dogmas? How can I profoundly preach the ancient litany now aware it might lead the church to the next funeral? Should I profanely sing a new song never being sure if the new tune will rest easy on the ears of the listener? For so long what must "be" have been words of fear designed to frighten people into confession. Weary of condemnation, people have left. What new word will bring them back? Maybe that is not the question? Maybe I need to ask what word they desire to hear? Imagine that, a preacher listening to the congregation. But why stop there? Imagine a new community, a new awareness of each other, a new understanding of who we already are in God's eyes.

To be..... or not. If nothing else I will carefully listen to the words I speak.

Break forth into singing you ruins, for God will comfort and redeem.

Isaiah 52:9

A million people visit Stonehenge each year. Almost 999,999 of these visitors take selfies. When someone is taking a picture, I am careful to step out of their line of vision. But what is the proper photo etiquette when everyone has turned their back on the subject.

Stonehenge is a remarkable accomplishment shrouded by mystery. Who constructed it? What were they trying to accomplish? A popular answer is the Druids were responsible but the rocks were in place long before those original tree huggers arrived in Great Britain. One thing is certain, the creators were engineering geniuses. How did they move stones those hundreds of mile? Is there a reason for the manner in which the rocks were laid? There have been a thousand answers but the best one continues to be, "No one knows." Of course that has not stopped speculation. For the past 200 years scientists, astrologers, and rock stars on LSD have waded into these mystical waters. And still, no one knows. So after one visit and less than an hour of observation, I shall offer my theory. Stonehenge is another ruin singing to God for comfort and redemption. In other words, it is a fancy graveyard, remembering the lives of folks who have been long forgotten. There are no names on the stones. When constructed the names were etched on the hearts of the living. Now those memories are lost. Only the stones remain. But God remembers. God always remembers.

We finished the day visiting two marvels of the human imagination, the cathedrals in Bath and Salisbury. We were awestruck by both the beauty and strength of these structures. But neither seemed any more alive than Stonehenge. We participated in evening prayers at Salisbury. As light poured through those beautiful windows I witnessed the illusion of ghosts prancing along the walls. While the music was marvelous and the scriptures from the voice of II Isaiah inspirational, I felt we were attending a funeral. I wanted to rush outside before darkness captured my soul. When the service was over we quickly escaped. To our surprise we witnessed a multitude of children playing on the lawn. They were laughing and singing prayers that were genuine. Inside, death reigned, but outside God danced. Amidst the ruins still exists the possibility of life.

Equilibrium
John O'Donohue

Like the joy of the sea coming home to shore,
May the relief of laughter rinse through your soul.

As the wind loves to call things to dance,
May your gravity be lightened by grace.

Like the dignity of moonlight restoring the earth,
May your thoughts incline with reverence and respect.

As water takes whatever shape it is in,
So free may you be about who you become.

As silence smiles on the other side of what's said,
May your sense of irony bring perspective.

As time remains free of all that it frames,
May your mind stay clear of all of its names.

May your prayer of listening deepen enough,
To hear in the depths the laughter of God.

Then came April with its shower sweet.

(Paraphrased)

Geoffrey Chaucer

A group of poets, song-writers, and story-tellers gathered at a shrine dedicated to the martyred Thomas Becket. A cry went up, "Someone tell us a new story." One by one each participant shared their best efforts. But none could match the words of the one who never claimed to be a poet or teller of tales. Merchant by day, Chaucer wrote at night, only sharing his words initially with a trusted few. He saw himself as an ordinary man with a few ordinary stories. So began *The Canterbury Tales*. Thank God he decided not to give up his night job.

After dark, Deb and I walked the streets of Canterbury looking for a gelato. The streets and buildings had been here for a thousand years and I doubt they have ever been quiet. It is a loud, joyful town filled with jubilant youth each sporting their own tale. I expected a knight, miller, or friar to emerge from around the corner. I think we caught a glimpse of an interesting lady from Bath. It was easy to see how these streets inspired Chaucer's imagination. Just outside the walls of the Cathedral, life extended well beyond midnight. New stories are still being written and heard for the first time. Immortality arises from these stories. That truth has never changed.

God is love and God enfoldeth all the world in one embrace.

Timothy Rees

Worship began with the singing of Timothy Rees wonderful poem, *God is Love*. It is a beautiful song in which word and melody fully unite both God the Creator and God the Embracer. I have found the need to cling to both on this journey. The Cathedral is magnificent, the choir amazing, and the preacher rather ordinary. His presence hardly mattered. As Deb later said, "To take communion in Canterbury consumes one's very breath."

For centuries the cathedral was the center of the Catholic experience in England. Bertha was married to Engelbert on these steps. St. Augustine of

Canterbury began his purge of Gaelic spirituality from within these walls. Becket was murdered by the henchmen of Henry II a few feet from where we took communion. Henry VIII claimed Canterbury as the first Abbey of the newly formed Church of England. Cromwell celebrated this by destroying all the statues and Catholic antiquities that remained. It is a church. It is a site of political intrigue. It has risen and fallen with every other king and yet it stands tall. I am sure the ghosts continue to battle each other for a place in history just as the church struggles to discover its identity in this brave new world. For 1,500 years the Cathedral at Canterbury has tried to maintain its marital vows with God.

For better or worse
In health and sickness
Till death do we part.

An Alternative

The cross.....We shall take it.
The bread..... We shall break it.
The pain.... We shall bear it.
The joy.....We shall share it.
The gospel..... We shall live it.
The love.....We shall give it.
The light.....We shall cherish it.
The darkness.....God shall perish it.
AMEN.

(From the Iona Worship Book)

Let me lead you through the streets of London

Ralph McTell

No one does London in a day.... but we tried. Who knew Westminster Cathedral and Westminster Abbey were two different places? Everyone but us. We asked our Uber driver to take us to Westminster Cathedral and he did. It was a beautiful place but not what we expected. I looked endlessly for the tomb of Elizabeth but with no success. Deb and Darby swore the wedding of Charles and Diana looked quite different on TV. Then we discovered the Cathedral was Catholic. I was completely confused. My HSR (historical significance radar) must have been off-line. Perplexed and disappointed we left the Cathedral to walk the streets of London. Miraculously we walked in the right direction. Ten minutes later we literally ran into Westminster Abbey. Suddenly everything made sense. Delighted, we got in line, paid our 20 pounds, and entered paradise.

Westminster Abbey is a functioning church but its real purpose is keeping an incredible record of the English narrative. Every step reveals another piece of history. I cannot imagine a more compelling monument to the marriage of religion and politics. Before my eyes 1,000 years of scheming and dreaming intertwined church and state. The relationship between the English throne and Rome was always shaky at best. With the advent of the Church of England, the intrigue only intensified. Henry II assassinated Becket. Henry VIII executed Thomas More, Mary I beheaded Thomas Cranmer, and no one liked Oliver Cromwell. Yet most of these folks ended up being buried in this place, often beside each other. I wonder if they still quarrel.

Thankfully, about the time my mind could not absorb another plot or betrayal, I found myself in The Poet's Corner. From Chaucer to Dylan Thomas, every English poet or writer known was here. I felt as if I was walking through my personal library. In the midst of all this madness, death, political intrigue, and dogmatic resistance, lie the poets. There is a good reason for this. Throughout the ages of any culture, only the poets can save us from our madness.

It's All over Now Baby Blue

Bob Dylan

Jack Kerouac wrote, "There is no place to go but everywhere." I feel as though this is what we have tried to do over the last fifteen days and I am physically and emotionally exhausted. Did we do it the right way? I am not sure there is a right way to experience two countries in two weeks. Do I have regrets? Of course I do. Am I glad we planned it this way? I would not have wanted to miss one single moment. True, none of my pressing answers were resolved but easy answers are seldom healthy solutions. They are only convenient exits from significant challenges. So, the journey continues.

Ten observations:

1. I enjoyed Scotland more than England. I wish we had spent more time with these folks. The Scots are wonderful storytellers.
2. If you are looking for great food go to France or Italy. I never went hungry but then I also enjoy a very pedestrian palate.
3. Worshipping at Canterbury was extraordinary. But, if one has never been to church I can't imagine anything I experienced encouraging one to go more than once.
4. Walking through Westminster Abbey was a highlight of my life. But it was exhausting. I would like to go again on a day when there are fewer people, less noise, and unlimited time.
5. Glencoe rivals the beauty of anything I have ever seen.
6. Driving in both countries was not for the faint at heart. Next time I might opt for public transportation.
7. If attempting a trip like this, go with folks you like. My traveling companions were remarkably resilient and forgiving.
8. I give thanks for the words of J. Phillip Newell and John O'Donohue.
9. I am blessed to serve Rockfish Presbyterian Church. You encouraged me to take more than a vacation. By suggesting I use the time as Continuing Education, You not only made the trip affordable, you encouraged me to look with more than just my eyes. Thank-you.
10. I CAN'T BELIEVE I DIDN'T PLAY ST. ANDREWS!

You Don't Always Get What You Want

Jagger/Richards

I believe the Christian Church in the British Isles is on life support. It might even be dead, only no one has bothered to check for a pulse. Thankfully the existence of God has never been dependent on the human experience. Fifteen hundred years ago, Berta introduced her God to the King of Kent, her new husband. Overnight England became Christian. Most folks did not even know they had been saved. Instantly, the King and God appeared to be in a league of their own. This invisible hand of God legitimized power. Taking a cue from Solomon, castles and cathedrals were built side by side. Ancient beliefs were pushed aside for the sake of the realm. God's love, God's forgiveness, God's grace, even God's fidelity became secondary as God and the King reigned supreme. A few resisted and they were declared heretics. The nation became one under God.

We can only imagine what would have happened if Pelagius and others like him had been left alone to go their own way. Would it have ended differently? Certainly, if nation building was the goal, the Gaelic poets would have failed. If you want to build an empire, Pelagius was not your man. But what if the goal is to search for God? What if there is a desire to be inspired by more than power, and fear, and eventually corruption.

My heritage, my faith evolved from the streets of Edinburgh. I have sung the praises of Knox all my life. His battles with Mary are legendary. They condemned each other as evil incarnate. Looking back, I am not sure either fully comprehended the grace of the God. Jesus asks us to do two things, love God and love that person we don't particularly like. It is amazing how once we practice this, everything else falls into place.

America has always prided itself on being a Christian nation. Can someone tell me what that means? Have we inherited the exclusive Holy Mantle? Will we follow the steps of Henry II, Henry VIII, Knox, Cromwell and all the rest who justified their actions as preordained directions from God? So many have desired this holy permission, but is it really what we need?

When I was a child, I wore a Celtic cross. When I was a child, I believed this cross represented my unique brand of Christianity. Now, I am no longer a child. In

the past few weeks I have discovered the Celtic Cross is not the cross of my youth but rather a symbol of faith for a gentle folk who believed they were born in the image of the One who created the earth and sky. They were a people who chose not to be constrained by a static dogma but rejoiced in new discoveries and beginnings. They believed themselves to be Christian but were not accepted by those who occupied the thrones and cathedrals. Eventually they were converted, exiled, or killed. Their places of worship were eliminated. The Celtic cross disappeared around the year 1,000 A.D. Yet 800 years later the cross mysteriously reappeared in cemeteries. How is that possible? Listen to a Gaelic prayer that has survived 1,000 years.

O hidden mystery, sun behind all suns, soul behind all souls, in everything we touch, in everything we meet, Your presence is around us, and we give you thanks. We rejoice that You through Christ have chosen us. It is not through our work, skill, or virtue but because Your love is generous and not conformed to human will. O restless God, inspire us to become rather than just be. Liberate us from a smallness of vision and help us to anticipate the wonder that is yet to be.

I believe this joy and vision can still be realized. The Celtic Cross was once worn by folks who declared God represented light, hope, and grace. The wearers of this cross announced that the mystery of God cannot be limited to a particular dogma. This cross inspired poets who sang of God's goodness in the sun and moon, the soil and water, and most important, in stranger and friend alike.

Christ within me; Christ within you.
Christ surround me; Christ surround you.
In Christ we are one.
No longer strangers; No longer enemies.
Brother and Sister
Together,
In God's Holy Light.