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On Making Springs

> As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs;
> the early rain also covers it with pools. (Ps 84:6)

So, which is it? Do God's people *make* the dry valley a place of springs (NRSV), or do they *find* it a place of springs (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)? Or perhaps they merely *regard it as* a place of springs (NJPS). Or might there be no human role at all? Maybe the dry valley just *becomes* a place of springs (NLB), or God *provides* a spring (NET). What does the verse actually say, and whence the confusion?

Psalm 84 describes Israel's longing for Zion, for the temple, where the lucky sparrows and swallows can make their home every day but which can be reached by the less fortunate human visitors only after an often arduous journey, and then only on special occasions. That pilgrimage to Jerusalem, described in many similar psalms, frequently uses language reminiscent of the exodus or becomes a metaphor for the eschatological journey to God's holy mountain, where at last all things will be made right. The goal is the promised land or even eternal happiness, but the journey can be difficult indeed.

The metaphor lives on in our own piety as well: "Guide me ever, great Redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #618); "Jerusalem, my happy home, when shall I come to thee!" (*ELW* #628); "Show us that bright shore where we weep no more" (*ELW* #624). Pilgrimage piety has its good and proper place, whether we speak of the literally barren land faced by ancient travelers with no plastic water bottles or the figuratively barren land faced by all humans every day—we pray for God's guidance and protection in all our dry valleys. But that same piety can lead—and has led—to a form of Christian faith that sees this world as outside our interest (and worse, outside God's interest), because our rightful "home" is, after all, in heaven.

So, again, what of Ps 84? The longing for Jerusalem and everything it signifies is strong: "My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD" (v. 2). Even better, what if, like the sparrows (those most blessed bats in the belfry), we never had to go home? "Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise" (v. 4). Yet, this psalm never succumbs to world-denying escapism. These pilgrims hold not only Zion in their hearts but also "the highways to Zion," where they go "from strength to strength" (vv. 5, 7). Yes, to serve as "a doorkeeper in the

house of my God" would be sheer bliss (v. 10), but God does not wait to bestow "favor and honor" only at journey's end; it is given also to those who continue to "walk uprightly" here and now (v. 11).

So, back to our original question: Apropos of water (the theme of this issue), does the upright walk of God's people include making the dry valley a place of springs? And can mere mortals do that? That seems to be the concern of the translators. The Hebrew is clear: "Passing through the valley of Baca [location unknown], they make it a spring." The subject of the spring-making project is "they"—the Israelite pilgrims, "those whose strength is in you." There is, no doubt, much strength to be found "in you"—that is, in God—strength that, in the poetic structure of these verses, literally surrounds the spring-making, even if the Hebrew uses different terms here for "strength":

those whose strength [*'oz*] is in you (v. 5)
they make it a place of springs (v. 6)
they go from strength to strength [*khayil*] (v. 7)

But even surrounded by God's own strength, can human beings turn dry valleys into places of springs? Is this not God's work, and God's alone? Indeed, the psalm plays here with images of the great reversal that transforms everything:

> I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
> I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.
> (Isa 41:18)

> In that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk,
> and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water. (Joel 3:18)

"That day" has not yet arrived in our psalm, but the pilgrims can taste it on their journey. They can "see it from here," and they get a foretaste of the fountains and pools to come.

Still, the transformation of creation can hardly be human work, can it? The translators who can't make themselves allow humans to be spring-makers see the problem and thus turn the human "making" of the text into "finding" or "regarding"; or they simply rewrite the sentence altogether making God "provide" the water—theologically correct, perhaps, but grammatically wrong.

True, the psalm is poetry, so we don't want to read it with wooden literalism. But it does seem to say—it *does* say—that God's people function as agents on their journey to Zion; they do not merely pass through, they transform—things happen in their presence. People can't do this on their own, to be sure. God "cooperates" by sending rain through the normal created order, and God's strength remains the energy behind all human efforts; but human creative efforts are possible. They have to be, don't they? We all know that humans are capable of *destructive* efforts. We can take valleys of springs and pools of clean waters and turn them into wastelands and cesspools, literally and metaphorically, so can we not act thoughtfully and helpfully instead?

Can we be spring-makers? Well, given the right equipment we can provide boreholes almost anywhere if we just dig deep enough; the Israelis have figured out how to make the Negev bloom; many of our fruits and vegetables derive from irrigation projects in once-dry California valleys; and we hear that the teeming populations of Los Angeles and the Arizona desert and other U.S. cities have now cast their eyes on all that "unused" water in the Great Lakes. There are certainly benefits to some of these projects, at least short term: many of my African friends owe their lives to boreholes, quite literally, and I too enjoy my daily grapefruit (but keep your greedy hands off the Great Lakes!). But some warn that, in the longer term, the bill for all those new water projects might be too high for us to pay—or at least too high for our human descendants and the broader environment to pay. Acts have consequences, and often they are not foreseen and finally not pretty.

Because of this, we sometimes hear now that humans are never wise enough to make proper use of "nature," so nature should simply be left untrammeled, left to its own devices. "Wilderness" is good; civilization bad. Despite the sometimes demonstrable truth to that sentiment, the trouble with it—at least for people of faith—is that the Bible knows nothing of the abstraction called "nature"; it knows only the relationship called creation. And in creation's garden, we are all in this together: not humans versus *nature*, but humans as part of *creation*, for good or ill. If this garden is to thrive, our efforts must be cooperative. Humans play their own proper role, Ps 84 insists. So does Michael Pollan:

> Civilization may be part of our problem with respect to nature, but there will be no solution without it. As Wendell Berry has pointed out, it is culture, and certainly not nature, that teaches us to observe and remember, to learn from our mistakes, to share our experiences, and perhaps most important of all, to restrain ourselves. Nature does not teach its creatures to control their appetites except by the harshest of lessons—epidemics, mass death, extinctions. Nothing would be more natural than for humankind to burden the environment to the extent that it was rendered unfit for human life. Nature in that event would not be the loser, nor would it disturb her laws in the least—operating as it has always done, natural selection would unceremoniously do us in. Should this fate be averted, it will only be because our culture—our laws and metaphors, our science and technology, our ongoing conversation about nature and man's place in it—pointed us in the direction of a different future. Nature will not do this for us.*

The Bible, I want to claim, will help point us in the right direction. True, we cannot create the heavenly city. Worse, almost all human efforts to do so produce tyranny and disaster, not utopia but dystopia. However, the Bible does provide us with beautiful and hopeful pictures of the heavenly city. Would it be so terrible to try to anticipate those pictures, to try to practice them in the present? If God shows us that the world to come is about peace and justice, about abundant food and

*Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Delta, 1991) 223–224.

clean water for all, would it be so bad to think God might like it if we worked toward those things in the present? All such anticipation would be through modeling and invitation, to be sure, never through compulsion. Faith invites; it does not compel. But if faith is not inviting, what are we in this business for?

As we journey toward Jerusalem, can we be spring-makers? The Bible invites such efforts, proclaiming God as the strength and the shield to give them hope. Since the time of the prophets, we have heard the call to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Can we do that? No legalism allowed, to be sure. No self-righteousness. No triumphalism. But, despite our theological demurrers—ever so necessary—we *are* called to let justice roll down like waters. If we are thus called to be metaphorical stream-makers in the realm of ethics, might we not be called to find a creative role also in the political and economic world of real streams, real springs, real water?

In a curious and unplanned convergence, theologian Catherine Keller calls us in this issue to "be a fish," while biologist Evelyn Gaiser calls us to "think like a diatom." Apparently, we *are* all in this together, and we have things to learn from all God's creatures as we fulfill our God-given roles to tend the garden and exercise our dominion even over "the fish of the sea." "Dominion," as we know, means "lordship." But we know more than that: in biblical perspective, God's people exercise their lordship only through service. In that kind of dominion, that kind of service, might even the dry valley become a place of springs?

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