

“Be Thou My Vision”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on September 20, 2020

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Isaiah 43:1-7;18-19

The hymn I have chosen for us to reflect on together this morning is, I confess, one of my favorites. In fact, this hymn is one of the reasons I keep track of what we sing each Sunday because I know I would choose it far too often, left to my own devices. So, that it showed up early on in this sermon series about hymns is no surprise. It was always on my list, and I was pleased to see it was one which also came up multiple times in suggestions I received from others. There can be no doubt it is a beloved hymn and why seems obvious to me. For one, the tune, *Slane*, is easy to sing and its lilting melody is both joyful and reverent. But it's the words, the lyrics, that really hit home with those of us who love it: “Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; Naught be all else to me save that thou art. Thou my best thought, by day or by night, Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.” This is what it means to have God in your life. This is what it means to have God at the center of life lived each day, acknowledging that every good thought is from God. This is what it means to know that any time, day or night, God reveals a way forward for each of us, especially in those dark nights of the soul when we feel so lost.

As much as I love this hymn, I learned a lot about it I didn't know as I did some reading about it. For one thing, I didn't know how old it is – some scholars date it as early as the 6th century, but most believe it is a little older than that – say 10th century, as if that isn't still ancient. Another thing I learned is that this is an ancient Irish hymn. Its oldest written form is in a manuscript currently held by the Royal Irish Academy and that manuscript dates to the 10th or 11th century. Presumably, the hymn existed before that, and was in fairly common use, which is why it would have been included in the manuscript. I also learned that the lyrics of this ancient hymn are a particular type of prayer known as a *lorica*, or a prayer of protection. This is also why it is sometimes referred to as a breastplate hymn calling to mind a similar and more well-known hymn called St. Patrick's Breastplate. That ancient hymn is titled “I Bind Unto Myself Today.” Its more modern iteration appears in our own *Renew! Songbook* as “Christ Beside Me.” This

beautiful sung prayer invokes Christ as the physical protector of every aspect of one's being: "Christ beside me, Christ before me, Christ behind me – King of my heart; Christ within me, Christ below me, Christ above me – never to part."

This brings me to another curious fact I didn't know about this hymn, "Be Thou My Vision." The oldest versions have a lot more verses than the three we are accustomed to singing, the three included in today's worship resource. Some of the lyrics we don't usually see in our hymnbooks include these lines: "Be thou my battle shield, be thou my sword. ... Be thou my shelter, be thou my stronghold. Mayst thou raise me up to the company of the angels." And it goes on from there. These verses are from the English translation of the Original Old Irish Text done by Mary Byrne in 1905. Apparently, Eleanor Hull didn't fully appreciate Mary Byrne's translation since she did another translation shortly after in 1912. It is Eleanor Hull's translation that appears in our hymnals, although not all five verses. The English Methodist hymnal eliminates the 3rd verse, which describes the sword and shield, in 1964. It was then shortened again in 1989 by the elimination of what had been the 4th verse, bringing it to the version with three verses we are used to singing when the arrangement we use was copyrighted by Hope Publishing.

So, when we consider this simple and beautiful hymn, we are also celebrating a rich legacy of prayer and reflection stretching back over 1000 years! But what is it about this hymn that it remains so captivating, and inspiring for so many people as they gather together for worship? For me it's the incredible simplicity of its message – that if we want God to empower and embolden us to live the faith we profess, we must constantly remind ourselves to see the world as God sees it. In other words, it is God's vision of the world and for the world which must guide our actions and our lives each day as we strive to be who God needs us to be in our increasingly fragile and broken world. Beautiful words. If only it were so simple. And for a precious few, it seems to be well worth the effort it requires.

I'm sure all of you are aware by now of the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg last Friday. She was a woman of spectacular vision, not to mention courage, commitment and perseverance to name but a few of the characteristics that have already propelled her into history.

Supreme Court Justice Ginsberg, or the notorious RBG as a young generation came to call her, left us far too soon even though she was 87 at the time of her death. She was appointed to the Supreme Court by President Bill Clinton in 1993 by an almost unanimous vote and she would have spent 30 years on the bench of the Supreme Court if she had achieved her goal of serving til she was 90. Sadly, this was not to be as her battle with illness, which began back in 1999, was ultimately won by the pancreatic cancer she could not escape. There is no way I could do justice to her life story in this brief moment this morning and I won't attempt to do so. If you don't know much about her, learn. All you have to do is google her name. She was a wife and mother and grandmother. She was a constitutional lawyer, a law school professor, and a justice on the US Court of Appeals to which she was appointed by President Jimmy Carter in 1980. Her legacy as a leader in the legal fight for gender equality is without peer and it is in this realm that her absence on the court raises such alarm bells for so many. Yet, one of her closest friends while he was alive was Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, the most conservative of the conservative justices. This fact speaks volumes about who Ruth Bader Ginsberg truly was. She knew who she was and this self-confidence allowed her to be deep friends with someone who could not have been more different than her when it came to the legal cases they pondered together. She was a woman of vision who possessed a unique wisdom, a dream of how things could be, that drove her ever forward. She was a woman on a mission who would not be deterred or dissuaded. She is an inspiration to millions of women and girls here and around the world whom she taught by word and deed to refuse to take no for an answer. She will be greatly missed.

What many folks do not know about RBG is that she was Jewish. She did not consider herself to be a practicing Jew for many years when the Orthodox Judaism of her upbringing denied her a place at the minyan, or prayer circle, when her beloved father died simply because women were not permitted at the minyan. In her later years, she did reconnect with her Jewish roots after a fashion which makes the timing of her death in the Jewish calendar so incredible. She died on the eve of what are known as the High Holy Days of Judaism. Her life ended the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year celebration. Technically, the holiday begins

at sundown that day and she died earlier in the afternoon but, to me, her death on this particular day is no coincidence. First and foremost, it was an act of mercy by her God who loved her fiercely and who knew how much she was suffering. As the shofar blew in synagogues across the country at sundown to mark the beginning of the Jewish New Year, she was at peace, free from the very real pain that had been her constant companion for the last several years. What's really interesting to me about this happenstance of timing is that Rosh Hashanah, which literally means "head of the year," is that this holiday is the traditional anniversary of God's creation of Adam and Eve. Thus, it is a celebration of God's introduction of humanity into the world God had created. It is also a recognition of the importance of humility on the part of humans when they awaken to the reality of their sinfulness before God. This is why the shofar is blown as Rosh Hashanah begins, to wake up sinners to the reality that it is time to reflect on their sins and repent during the upcoming days of reflection during Yom Kippur. How amazing is it that this woman who fought for gender equality all her life dies on the eve of the holiday which acknowledges that God created Adam *and* Eve, not Adam and then Eve as is too often emphasized. It all comes down to which of the two Creation stories you affirm – the first one in Genesis 1:27 or the second one in Genesis 2:22. I think it's pretty clear which one RBG gave credence to.

So, where does all this leave us? We have an ancient hymn petitioning God for vision and wisdom inspiring us to be who God needs and a 21st century woman whose life makes plain just what is possible when God's wisdom and vision are put to the best possible use. Time to check in with our friend, the prophet Isaiah as his writings appear in the section of the book known as Second Isaiah. Isaiah at this time was writing to the Israelite refugees returning from captivity in Babylon to their home back in Jerusalem. They were afraid of what they would find when they returned. They were afraid to leave the familiar world they knew for the unfamiliar world God was calling them back to. Uncertainty and fear enveloped their every waking moments. This is the time into which Isaiah speaks, reminding them "now thus says the Lord ... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine." Wow. Do not fear – I have called you by name, you are mine. What powerful words! God

is reminding God's people then, and God's people now – that's us, you and me – that we are not alone. Not now. Not ever. God is still and always with us. God is paying attention to what is happening all around us. God knows about the pandemic and the corruption rampant in our governments and our corporations. God cares that this sin is happening and God wants and expects this sin to be rectified. Not by some magic incantation uttered by temple priests as smoke from sacrifice wafts heavenward, but by the actions of the people of God inspired by the wisdom and vision God has already given them. Don't give up, Isaiah reminds us. God is with us, God is with each of us, you and me – every moment of every day. God is with us when we're afraid and anxious giving us hope that a better day is coming. Isaiah remind us of this truth directly in verse 19, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." God tells us God will make a way forward for us!

Dear ones, God's promise is all we need to make it through these anxious days. God IS doing a new thing and if we allow God's vision of what's truly possible to become our vision, we can be a part of making God's new thing our new reality. "Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word; I ever with thee and thou with me , Lord." God with us, every moment of every day – the happy moments and the scary ones, the confident moments when everything is happening as planned and hoped for and the anxious moments when everything feels like its falling apart. God is right here with us, through all of the moments of our lives. And, if we let God into all those moments, if we allow God into our hearts and into our lives then, no matter what happens we will know beyond doubt, "heart of my own heart, whatever befall, still be my vision, O Ruler of all."

When we see as God sees, dear ones, the world is always a beautiful Creation of love filled with hope and possibility. Loved ones come and go. Great leaders come and go. Only God remains constant and unchanging, the source of our vision, our wisdom, and the confidence it provides to live the faith we profess – that with God all things are possible. "Thou my best thought by day or by night, waking or sleeping thy presence my light." So, dear ones, is God your best thought by day or by night? Might be worth a little time to consider the possibilities. Amen.