



Bethany Lee

I live and write in Lafayette, Oregon and draw inspiration from my travels, my daughters, and my work as hospice harpist and choral accompanist.

BIBLE READING: John 1:1–14

I love a good origin story. Whether it's a prequel to a beloved book series or flashbacks in a TV show, I love the glimpse into how my favorite characters became who they are. It's why we ask, "How did you two meet?" and "How do you know the bride?" and "What were you like in high school?" Our histories reveal clues about our present and guide the shape of our future.

Scripture contains many fascinating origin stories. Many of the great arcs in Scripture begin with backstory and continue with all the humor and tragedy, the drama and struggle found in a good storyline. How did Joseph go from being the pesky younger brother to second in command in Egypt? How did Moses go from obscurity to the palace, to the wilderness and back again? How did David come to kingship from his days as a singing shepherd?

Today's reading is a different kind of origin story—more of an origin poem.

*In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was with God
And the Word
Was
God*

Today, spend some time resting in the truth of this beautiful beginning.

*And the Word became flesh
And dwelt among us*

Lay your own story across these words and give thanks.

SONG: He Who Began a Good Work in You

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Alpha and Omega, the God of new beginnings, be with me today, beginning to end.

—Bethany Lee

BIBLE READING: Psalm 121:1–8

If you've spent any time with me or my writing in the past few years, you'll likely have heard me talk about the year my family spent at sea. My daughters were in middle school, and our family managed to cut enough ties to land life to take a sabbatical year aboard our small sailboat. Since my return, I've found commonality when speaking to others who've spent long, slow miles in one direction—my brother-in-law, who hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, one section at a time over the course of eleven years. My friends Martha and Sandra who walked the El Camino pilgrimage in Spain. Our methods diverged, but our pilgrimage seasons offered similar opportunities—to face into life's inherent uncertainty, to get lost, to stumble over surprises, to follow a path as well as to wander, to leave where you are as a way of finding your way home.

I didn't know when I left that I was embarking on a pilgrimage, but along the way, I began to walk in pilgrim shoes. Since my return, I've contemplated the history and tradition of pilgrims along with many stories of wanderers in Scripture.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all wandered, so maybe it should have come as no surprise that they fathered a wandering nation. John the Baptist lived in the wilderness. Paul spent much of his life of ministry traveling. Jesus himself had “no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20).

Tomorrow, I'll talk about the struggles and gifts to be found in the wilderness, but for today, consider where in your own life you are feeling unsettled or moving from one place to another. It doesn't take travel to be a pilgrim.

SONG: I Want to Walk (Walk Like Jesus)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, in my wandering journey, help me trust your guiding light.

—Bethany Lee

BIBLE READING: Genesis 12:1–9

In Genesis 12:1, God calls Abram, saying, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.” I’m fascinated by the seemingly casual response: “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him” (v. 4). I wonder how it might have felt to be Abram’s wife, Sarai, who didn’t, at least to our knowledge, hear the voice of the Lord, but packed up, left home, and followed anyway.

One branch of my ancestors came to Oregon on the Oregon Trail. They left their home and took their twelve children across the continent to settle not far from where I live today. I can’t imagine the challenges they met along the way, but I do know a few things about being on a journey in a strange place:

The wilderness can feel overwhelming, scary,
dangerous, deadly, and alone.

You won’t always know the way and might feel lost for
a long time.

You will probably know more about your orientation
than your destination.

You might not end up where you thought you would.

You may set out alone, but you will find help along the
way.

In what part of your life are you experiencing a wilderness journey? Are you being taken somewhere—like Abram, led away from what felt secure and safe—with no promises for how long you’ll be traveling or where you’ll stop? You’re not alone.

SONG: Servant Song

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Guiding God, help me follow as
you lead the way.*

—Bethany Lee

BIBLE READING: Jeremiah 29:4–14

I think it's safe to promise that you won't return from a pilgrimage the same. I don't know exactly how, but one doesn't come back unaltered. I couldn't have spent a year at sea without learning a thing or two about myself, my family, and the world of beautiful people. No one spends weeks on the trail without a new understanding of themselves and others.

But every pilgrimage eventually comes to an end. We are spit out the other side of the wilderness, changed. Uprooted and weathered, we may find it hard to feel perfectly at home in places that once felt comfortable as an easy chair.

Perhaps your pilgrimage brought you not back home, but to a new land, to a life in a new state, to a new church, or a new way of thinking about faith. Perhaps, though in the same house, you now live in a strange land marked by loss. This experience can be at least as disorienting as the pilgrimage itself. But there are guides for the way here as well. I find solace and help in the lineage of sojourners, temporary residents who live fully into the place and time where they find themselves, who release the illusion that they are in one place for good.

We are all sojourners. We like to live as if good times will last forever, as if loss will never touch our shores. But we know, if we are willing to admit it, that all is temporary. Can we learn from those who give themselves over to sojourning how to live graciously and gracefully in this place, open hearted toward the next?

SONG: This World Is Not My Home

PRAYER SUGGESTION: No matter where you have brought me, Lord, help me find my rest in you.

—Bethany Lee

BIBLE READING: Ephesians 2:11–19

I've spent quite a bit of the last couple of years wrestling with belonging. It's been a time of turmoil for many in my community and for our broader culture as well.

Over the last two years, in one area after another, I've lost connections I thought were unbreakable. In the midst of all that grief, I temporarily lost faith in my ability to belong anywhere, even with those who offered refuge in my journey through those rough waters. I thought a lot about belonging during that time—what it means, how it feels, and how to respond when I don't feel like I belong.

Today, I was thinking about belonging again, and though it's not etymologically accurate, I'm working my way toward holding both parts of this word—the *be* and the *long*. I can't imagine I'm the first to think along these lines.

There are times I walk into a place that feels like home. Maybe it's a room full of friends or family, or just one of those magical evenings with strangers where boundaries melt away and connection happens heart-to-heart. In those moments, I rest in the delicious joy of the *be* in belong, try to take it in and store it up for a difficult day.

Other days come when I don't feel included or settled, even among people I know welcome me. On those days, I lean into the *long* of belong. I let myself yearn for a better time, when the love of God will draw us all into place, where there's room for everyone, and all will finally feel at home.

SONG: Now I Belong to Jesus

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, help me find my belonging in you and offer it to those who long to belong.

—Bethany Lee

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 42:1–7

Occasionally in conversation, I mention my work as hospice harpist. People are often taken aback, astonished, or even disturbed. “How can you stand to be so close to the dying?” It can be heavy work at times, true. But for me the harder work is being near those in pain—whether physical or psychological. I don’t think I’m alone in this. In our discomfort, and because of our own fear of pain, we often cast about for a reason for their distress, even if it means blaming the one who is suffering.

If I see someone suffering and can point to something in their life—certain choices I can blame, unrelated actions I might judge as “sin,” *anything*—I can walk away convinced for the moment that I will be safe from suffering. “Perfect love drives out fear,” but fear does the same and casts out love.

Over and over, Jesus’ words and actions slash through bad theology tying pain to sin. Nothing we do or don’t do can keep us or our loved ones from pain and ultimately, death. This is a frightening awareness to face. But it is equally, even more deeply true that nothing we do or don’t do can keep us from being held in the love of God.

Only the perfect love of Emmanuel—the God who comes near a world in pain—can empower us to draw near as well, to be with and walk close to those in pain. For mercy’s sake, I must build my resilience to being in the presence of pain, my own and others’, to learn to be still in the face of that mystery and not turn away.

SONG: Comfort, Comfort Ye My People

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Give me a Christlike heart that draws near and cares for those in pain.

—Bethany Lee

BIBLE READING: 1 John 3:16–24

*The Godhead rings,
Humanity sings,
The Holy Spirit plucks the harp of the heavens
So that all strings resound
That are strung in love.*

—Mechthild of Magdeburg, c. 1207–1282

I've played the piano for most of my life, but three years ago I started learning to play the harp as well. Right away a harp moved into the house, and before long another came to join the first. One day, when she was bored, my daughter counted all the strings in our small living room. Between the piano, the harps, and a couple of guitars, we have over three hundred strings just waiting to sing.

The piano strings are tucked away inside the case, but the harps sit out, exposed. When all those strings are strung and tuned, whatever happens in the room makes them ring out in beauty. If I sit down at the piano and play, the harps hum along. If someone sneezes across the way, the harps resonate brightly. And on the few occasions that I've played outside, even a small breeze will light up the strings so they ring with energy.

The more in tune the instruments are, the more the strings resound. If I let them go for a few days between tunings, they begin to grow dull and silent. I know all of this is a natural response to the laws of nature, but I love to think that this could be true for us as well—that we could grow increasingly tuned to the Spirit so our natural response would be one of love.

SONG: Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, tune my heart to echo yours.

—Bethany Lee