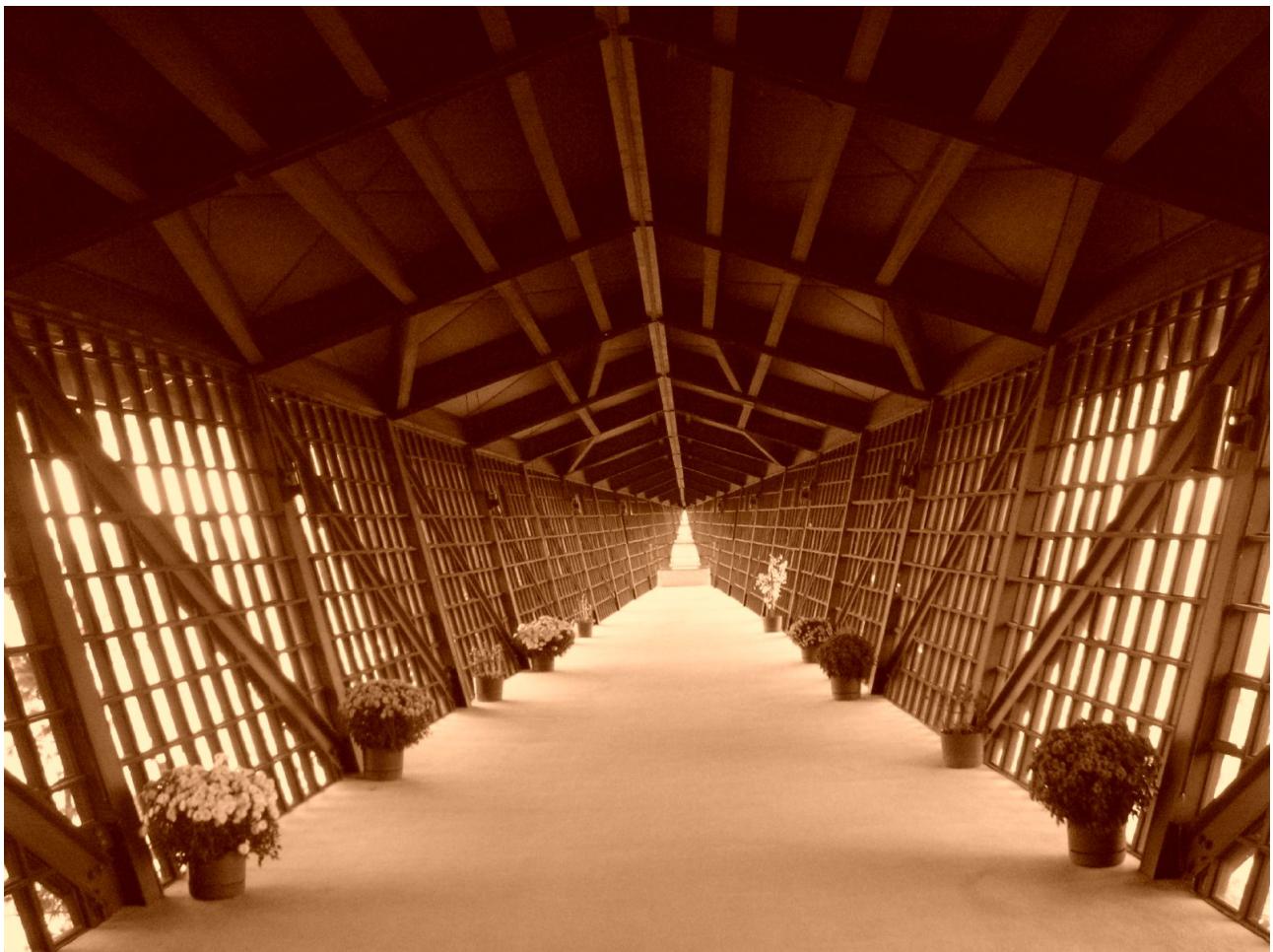




# Sermon

'Over the house heavenward'

Year B 2018 Pentecost 9



Christian Wiman, an American poet and lecturer in literature and religion, knows something about the Christian faith. Newly married, Wiman was diagnosed on his 39<sup>th</sup> birthday with incurable cancer. The poetry he has produced since that time is unsentimental and unflinching in its depiction of doubt and grief, but is also marked by transcendent and mysterious joy. Interviewed on ABC radio recently about his latest memoir, tellingly titled, ‘My Bright Abyss’, Wiman recited a poem in which we as the listener were invited to imagine ourselves watching, as if from a window, a flock of birds, taking off from a tree:

Incurable and unbelieving  
In any truth but the truth of grieving,  
I saw a tree inside a tree  
Rise kaleidoscopically  
As if the leaves had livelier ghosts. [Pause]  
I pressed my face as close

To the pane as I could get  
To watch that fitful, fluent spirit  
That seemed a single being undefined  
Or countless beings of one mind  
Haul its strange cohesion  
Beyond the limits of my vision  
Over the house heavenwards. [Pause]  
Of course I knew those leaves were birds.  
Of course that old tree stood  
Exactly as it had and would  
(But why should it seem fuller now?)  
And though a man's mind might endow  
Even a tree with some excess  
Of life to which a man seems witness,  
That life is not the life of men.  
And that - is where the joy came in.

In the preface to his memoir ‘My Bright abyss’ - meditation of a modern believer - Wiman reflects on the Christian faith.

‘Seven years ago I wrote a short essay called ‘Love bade me welcome.’ It was published in a relatively small magazine, and it generated what was, in my experience, a lot of responses. It was later, though, on the internet, in anthologies, in church services and reading groups, that the essay acquired its second life, and I still get the occasional letter from someone who has come across it. These letters are diverse, intense, intelligent, and often from people who have no contact with the literary world whatsoever. They are the most gratifying reactions to my work that I have ever received.

And the essay itself? It was about despair: losing the ability to write, falling in love, receiving a diagnosis of an incurable cancer, having my heart ripped apart by

what, slowly and in spite of all my modern secular instincts, I learned to call God.

I am a poet. To be a poet in contemporary America is to be accustomed to, let us say, muted reactions to one's work. It is also – and this, I suspect, is not limited to America – to learn to write without much concern for audience, not because you don't want your poems to be read, but because in order for poems to honor the voice that creates them, a voice that, as even the most secular poets acknowledge, seems to come from 'somewhere else' – in order that is, for the poems to *be* poems – you have to acquire a monkish devotion to their source, and to the silence within you that enables that source to speak.

I'll never give up on poetry – I wouldn't even know how – but all those letters in response to 'Love Bade Me Welcome' made me more aware of an audience and my

own need for dialogue. There is an enormous contingent of thoughtful people..who, though they are frustrated with the language and forms of contemporary..religion, nevertheless feel that burn of being that drives us out of ourselves, that insistent, persistent gravity of the ghost called God. I wanted to try to speak to these people more directly. I wanted to write a book that might help someone who is at once as confused and certain about the source of life and consciousness that I am...

When my life broke open seven years ago, I knew very well that I believed in something. Exactly *what* I believed, however, was considerably less clear. So I set out to answer that question, though I have come to realize that the real question – the real difficulty – is how, not what. How do you answer that burn of being? What might it mean for your life – and for your death – to acknowledge that insistent, persistent ghost?