

Thoughts While Watching Barn Swallows
(Meditation on Psalm 84.1-4)

for my mother¹

v 1: How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!

It is morning, but just barely. The sun has stretched above the hills to the east, pushing back the lingering shadows of the night now almost past. Everything else is still; the quiet is interrupted only by an occasional pickup heading south on the highway, towards town.

Only the swallows are up at this hour. I watch as they flit and fly around. Their energy amazes me. For such little birds they have so much stamina. The day has hardly just begun and they are already at work: hunting for material to build their nests, searching for food for their young, working. They are always working.

My mother was always working too. I try and remember a time in my youth when I got up before she did, but I can't. I think of her working through the morning -- getting things ready for us to go to school, making cinnamon rolls on Sunday morning before church. I can see her now, if only in my mind's eye, with her apron and her rolling pin and her flour-covered hands. She was always working.

v 2: My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

It is noon, or afternoon; without my watch I can't be sure. The morning has obviously passed and with it the cool of the day. From its place high in the sky, the sun beats down. It beats down hot and hard. I pause for a moment from my labors to mop the sweat from my brow. I am already tired. It feels good to take a break.

But the swallows, I notice, don't take a break. They don't pause. They keep going and going. Through the morning, past the noon hour, and into the heat of the day, they are moving -- always moving, first in one direction and then another. They head from their nests to the trees along the creek bottom and then circle towards the north. Moving. Always moving.

My mother was always moving too. It didn't matter what the time or the season of her life was; she was always busy. I can see her with her work clothes on, painting a bedroom or putting up paneling in the basement. I can see her hurrying through lunch to go to a meeting at the church or the presbytery office. I can see her, as my dad's health failed, hurrying to get him to his doctor's appointment on time. She never seemed to take a break.

v 3: Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

It is evening, and the hour is later than I think. Twilight this time of year doesn't come until almost nine o'clock. And everyone wants to make the most of these long, daylight hours.

Dave's old Ford pickup passes along the highway -- trailering a dozen big bales to the home ranch. This must be his third trip off the mountain, hauling hay. I imagine he will try and make one more run before the darkness catches up with him.

The swallows, too, are working -- still working through the final beams of daylight. They are going after the mosquitos (at least some of them) and in that task, I wish them well. Others are busy daubing their nests: fixing them, rebuilding them, making them more strong, more spacious, more comfortable. You would think these birds should be tired by now. But they keep going, always going.

I remember how, late into her twilight, my mother was always going too. Day or night, I would find her in the hallways of the nursing home. Always on the go. Occasionally I could coax her to stop for a cup of coffee. But after a sip or two, she'd be back up and on her feet. The moments left to her life were slipping inexorably away. But she had to be going. "Time's wasting!" she admonished me (much like she did when I was a child). "There's much still to be done!"

v 4: Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Selah

It is night, the dark of night. Not able to sleep, I wander out onto the porch. The sky is clear and it is as if I can see every single star flung across the heavens. The Milky Way curves just above my head. And it seems so close I can almost touch it. The night is perfect and still. Not even the coyotes interrupt the silence.

Only now are the swallows quiet, too. I look towards their nests on the east side of the barn. There is no movement, There is no sound. For the first and only time that I have watched them, the swallows are at rest. The peace which has settled over the valley has reached all the way into their nests.

I think now of how she is at rest, at last. My thoughts take me back to the morning that my mother died. There was a peace which came at the end. I remember how I held her hand close and tight, and smoothed back her hair. Everything was still. The phone rang, but I didn't bother to answer it. I just held my mother's hand and thought about how her busy mortal life was at last over. She was finally at rest.

In the stillness of this night, words of Scripture come, along with these memories, to my mind. "Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise." My mother, like the swallows, rests peacefully. A certain beauty accompanies the night's perfect stillness. Grace fills my soul as the Psalter's ancient words give voice to my praise: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts!"

Tim Lanham, Pastor

¹ July 7 was my mother's birthday. Had she lived, she would have been 88 years old.