

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, August 25, 2024**

**“Your Dwelling Place”  
Psalm 84**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

“How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints,  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God” (vv. 1-3).

Our psalm this morning, Psalm 84, was sung by ancient Jewish pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. As they journeyed, pilgrims sang this song about their deep longing to enter the Temple. But this longing was not about the Temple itself—it’s not just the building or the architecture; this is a longing for the One who dwells in that place: the psalmist longs for the presence of God. So it’s *not* “How lovely is [the] place,” but “How lovely is *your dwelling place*”; it’s not “My soul longs [...] for the courts,” but “My soul longs [...] for the courts *of the LORD*.”

For the psalmist, the Temple in Jerusalem was not just a beautiful building dedicated to God; for the psalmist, the Temple was a place where God chose to dwell. The psalmist revered the Temple, certainly not as a place that limited God’s power or reach (cf. 139:7), but as the place where God dwelt with a personal immediacy like nowhere else (cf. Psalm 11:4). So when the psalmist sings, “How lovely is your dwelling place,” this is about a concrete location where pilgrims could go and draw near to the presence of God.

God’s presence—the presence of the Lord—invited pilgrims to journey all the way to Jerusalem. As one scholar puts it, this “psalm celebrates the joys afforded by the dwelling of God with mortals,” “joy in the place where God dwells”; “this [psalm] holds together yearning for God and the longing to be at a place because God has made it a place of Presence” (Mays).

So the psalm celebrates God’s presence with those who worship in the Temple; and at the same time, the psalm declares why God’s presence is so precious. Amid celebrating God’s presence, and yearning for God’s presence in worship, the psalmist names three blessings of the Living God.

In our translation, each of these begins with the word ‘happy,’ but a better way to translate the original language would be ‘blessed’ (אַשְׁרֵי; LXX, μακάριος). Think of the beatitudes, where Jesus says: “Blessed are those...” (Matthew 5:3-12). So we hear these three declarations of blessing:

“[Blessed] are those who live in your house,  
ever singing your praise.  
[Blessed] are those whose strength is in you,

in whose heart are the highways to Zion.  
O LORD of hosts,  
[blessed] is everyone who trusts in you” (vv. 4-5, 12).

In these blessings, sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, we get a sense of what drew them toward the Temple, why they yearned so deeply for God’s presence in worship: there is blessing for those who offer praise to God in God’s presence; there is blessing for those who find their strength by seeking God’s presence; there is blessing for those who place their trust in God. When there is such deep blessing with God, it’s no wonder that pilgrims yearned to draw nearer to God’s presence through worship in the Temple.

The blessing of God’s presence is so precious that the psalmist imagines the Temple like a bird nesting:

“Even the sparrow finds a home  
and the swallow a nest for herself,”  
the psalmist says,  
“where she may lay her young,  
at your altars, O LORD of hosts” (v. 3).

For the psalmist, drawing near to the presence of God is like a bird finding rest and safety and shelter.

The blessing of God’s presence is so precious that, the psalmist says, even momentary joy with God means more than anything anyone can find elsewhere:

“For a day in your courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere,” the psalmist sings.  
“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than live in the tents of wickedness” (v. 10).

The psalmist considers it precious to be in God’s presence even momentarily, even fleetingly, even just at the doorway (cf. Mays)...

In these ways, the psalmist celebrates God’s presence in the Temple; but remember, this is a song for pilgrims. It’s not for those who’ve already reached the Temple (and there were psalms for that, too [e.g., 95, 100]); it’s for those longing and yearning for God’s presence as they journeyed toward the Temple. And that journey was not easy. We complain about the difficulties of travel today—with cars *and* airplanes—but the ancient Jewish pilgrims walked through the heat and the dust and the distance. There’s a hint of that difficulty when the psalmist speaks of “faint[ing]” for God’s presence (v. 2). The long journey to the Temple would not have been easy (cf. Howell), especially as pilgrims passed through what the psalmist calls “the valley of Baca” (v. 6).

Scholars haven’t been able to locate this valley. All we can gather from the psalm is that it was notoriously dry, which would’ve made it a very difficult stage in the pilgrims’ journey toward the joy of God’s presence in the Temple. In fact, one ancient translation of the Bible translated “the valley of Baca” as “the valley of weeping” (LXX: εἰς τὴν κοιλάδα τοῦ κλαυθμῶνος). So whether that valley was known for dryness, weeping, or both—“pilgrims pass[ed] through [this] place of [...] sorrow” before reaching the blessing of God’s presence (Bouzard).

And yet, the psalmist declares that the pilgrims' anticipation of God's presence, their excitement and hope in drawing nearer to God—that this anticipation could change that dry valley into springs of water and blessing:

“As they go through the valley of Baca,” the psalmist says, “they make it a place of springs” (v. 6).

For the pilgrims, the very hope of drawing nearer to God's presence in the Temple could transform that valley of weeping into a place of joy.

Our own experience of God's presence is, of course, different from those faithful pilgrims who knew God's presence in the Temple; we don't view this Sanctuary in the same terms that the psalmist viewed the Temple. And yet, we do know this place as a place of God's presence—a place where you, and generations before you, have gathered to delight in God's presence through worship.

This is indeed a place where we share in the joy of God's presence by praising God together. On this, you might recall your first return to this Sanctuary after covid; some of you were in tears when you first re-entered this place of God's presence. And so, making the trip here each week to worship in God's presence—this can perhaps still echo that ancient sense of pilgrimage (cf. Mays).

And in our own little pilgrimages today, we also pass through places of struggle. As one scholar puts it: “all who find a place in the pew have [...] come from his or her own Valley of Baca. Indeed, [...] that shadowy valley is [...] as close as tears and [...] a thousand little experiences of death [...]. We all approach our holy places hoping (even daring to anticipate!),” he writes, “that we too might join the celebration of God's presence, removed from the Valley of Baca” (Bouzard). Amid anxiety and worry, amid illness and death, amid the many struggles we experience, we pass through our own versions of the “valley of Baca,” that parched place of weeping, on our weekly journey to worship.

Yet this psalm promises that even the experience of that valley of weeping may be touched and transformed by our anticipation of God's nearness in worship—so that even the dry valley may become like springs: such is the blessing of God's presence in worship that even anticipating God's presence brings the promise of strength.

And I invite you to hold on to that promise: as you pass through your own struggles and setbacks, as you feel alone or isolated, as you experience “the valley of Baca,” remember: we will gather here again to delight in God's presence in worship. And may that promise transform your experience of the valley of weeping into a place of anticipation and hope.

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O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints,  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God” (vv. 1-3). Amen.