

July 29, 2018
Series: Summer in the Psalms

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Psalm 84
Luke 2: 42-49

You Have to Be There!

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. – Psalm 84:10a

Continuing with our Summer in the Psalms series we come to what is many people's favorite. Psalm 84 is a celebration of the sanctuary as the home of God. Listen:

*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.
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.
Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.
Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.^[a]
As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.
O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!
Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.
For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.
For the LORD God is a sun and shield;*



*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs...for the courts of the Lord;
My heart...sings for joy to the living God. \Psalm 84:1-2*

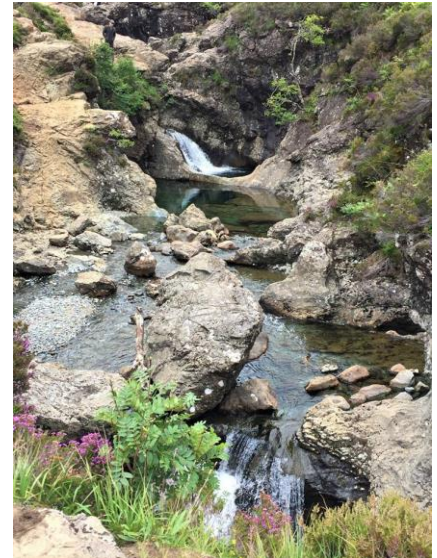
*he bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.
O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.*

Have you ever received a postcard like this with “Wish you were here!” written across it? Nowadays we don’t mail pictures like this one as often as we post them on social media. When vacation time finally rolls around and you find yourself in someplace special – you want to share it with everyone you know!



This is Glencoe, in the Scottish Highlands. We hiked there a week ago last Thursday, and no, I didn’t make it all the way to the top. But I did see – all our family saw -- some incredible beauty.

This is one of the Fairy Pools on the Isle of Skye. They are amazing. You can almost convince yourself



that this is an enchanted place. No photo can do them justice. As they say, you just have to be there.

When we experience something beautiful, inspiring, something peace-filled, something extraordinary or holy, it’s natural to want to share it, to want to say to everyone you love: “I wish you were here!” I wished that about 1,000 times in Scotland. I wished you could experience it. Many of you have.



Mission trips can be like that too. Here are some Woods young adults celebrating one of three Habitat houses our young people built this summer at WoodsWork and DriftWood. Understandably proud.

Here we are celebrating the Lord’s Supper at the work site.





There's a high that accompanies such an intense experience like this, something that's hard to put into words. You can try, and we do, but most of the time we finally end up saying, "I can't explain it; you just have to experience it for yourself. You have to be there."

The psalmist had a similar experience when he went up to the Temple in Jerusalem. You hear that same, undefinable joy in the poetry:

*How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of Hosts!
My soul longs for that place, God's house.*

Psalm 84 is about the pilgrimage of God's people as they make their way to the Temple. It is a celebration, and an invitation to the sanctuary as God's dwelling place. The psalmist sings:

*Better is one day in your courts
Better is one day in your house
Than a thousand elsewhere!*

There's nothing circumspect here, no analysis. The psalmist is simply exuberant, ready to share the thrill of being in the house of God. Love and faith flow out of him. Why wouldn't everyone want to be here? These lines from the psalm remind me of the story that Jeff/David read for us, one of my favorite stories from the New Testament-- Jesus in the Temple at age 12. In the confusion of the holiday crowds in Jerusalem and with aunts, uncles and cousins all around, Jesus is separated from his parents. It takes Joseph and Mary a whole day to realize he's not with them, and when they do they rush back to Jerusalem, to find him. They find him in the Temple listening to the teachings and asking questions. Like any other parents, they scold him. His response to them is priceless.

"Why were you searching for me? Where else would I be except in my Father's house?"

Jesus felt most at home, and nearest to God in his Father's house, the sanctuary. Maya Angelou wrote that, "the ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned." Some people experience God in nature, others in music and the arts, some come to know God in community. The psalmist, like Jesus, experienced God's presence here; he felt fully alive in the sanctuary, welcomed home.

As I was leaving the store yesterday a woman in a tee-shirt with something about Jesus written on it, and a huge smile, met me in the parking lot and offered to help load my groceries. "If you are looking for a church home" she said, "if you need a place to belong, we are looking to grow our church, and we would love to have you with us." She gave me a card with the church

address and service times on it. I was touched by her kindness and I told her so. I explained that I already have a fine church, Woods Memorial Presbyterian, and in fact, I have the privilege of being its pastor. We laughed and talked for a while and agreed to pray for each other's ministries. I smiled all the way home.

Wouldn't it be perfect, wouldn't the world be just about perfect, if everyone longed to share the dwelling place of God with the passion and compassion of that woman? It's that expectation that the psalmist sings. He expects to meet God in the Temple, he longs to be there.

And he makes it clear – like the woman in the parking lot said – all are welcome. Even a sparrow finds a home in God's house. I took this picture of a sparrow – at least I think it's a sparrow; it wouldn't let me get close enough to tell– it was resting in the rafters of Iona Abby last Saturday. Surely there is safety in God's house, a home for everyone.

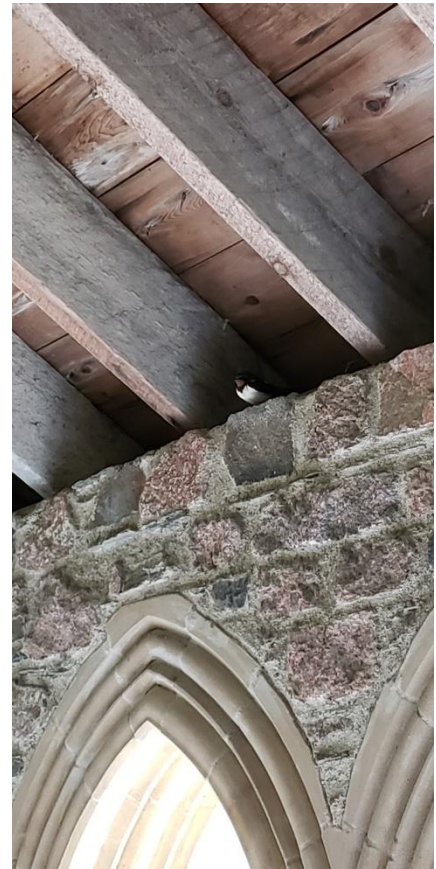
So what about you and me? Do we come into God's house with that same innocence and trust? Do we come with the psalmist's exultant expectation? Some do. I can see it in your faces each Sunday; I hear it in your voices as we sing.

For others it's more of a struggle. There are so many health problems. For some just getting here is a struggle. Others are weighed down by grief or worries, as well as the responsibilities of work, school or family. Then there are all the pastors' annoying mannerisms and attitudes. Yeah, laypeople have those too 😊

One of our biggest obstacles to finding joy in this place is that we confuse worship and entertainment. It's an easy mistake; the sanctuary looks like a theater, and it is a theater – the place where the divine drama plays out week after week. But there is one critical difference – in this drama YOU are not the audience. No. In the divine drama all of you are the players, those of us up here, the musicians, lay readers, and pastors – we are the directors. Do you see the difference? So who is the audience, then? The audience is... God!

That's hard to remember. The confusion and all the other things that steal our joy sometimes make it hard for us to simply be here – to be still and wait for God.

Listen: The delight of belonging to a worshiping family is worth the effort. Here you have access to the life-giving power of friendship. It's one reason we worship together and not privately, because together we are able to affirm and support and give our hearts in ways that none of us can do alone.



When we pray together, we are always praying on behalf of those who, for whatever reason, are not able to pray. When we sing, we carry with us those who are unable, for whatever reason, to make a joyful noise to God. When we hear and embrace and respond to the word of God in scripture, we do so not just for ourselves, but for the whole world. That's why you have to be here. That's why it matters.

That's why the psalmist exclaims:

A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere!

Barbara Brown Taylor was once a harried Episcopal priest responsible for a large, busy downtown church. Needing to get away from mounting stress, she took a break and drove up to the mountains. Without really looking for it, she came upon a church that was founded in 1842. Here's what she wrote:

"I looked up to see a white frame chapel with huge clear glass windows and green shutters sitting in an old grove of white pines...The small porch of the church was supported by four square columns. Just to the left of the double front doors, a thick rope leading to the bell tower was draped over a hook just taller than a second grader.

"The church yard bore evidence of having been loved by generations of gardeners...Simply to stand in the presence of that building was to rest. Peace poured off the white boards and caught me in its wake as the sighing of the pines reminded me to breathe. When I did, I could feel the clenched muscle of my mind relax. My shoulders came down from around my ears. I shook out my arms and put my hands flat on the side of the church, and thought, is this what happens to wood that has soaked up a hundred and fifty years worth of prayers? Did all that devotion seep into the grain like incense so that any passerby could catch a whiff of it?"ⁱ

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O God,
My soul longs for the house of the Lord.*

So many of us are looking for God; you are looking for security, acceptance, to be welcomed...and you are seeking hope, and a home. But you are often looking in the wrong places. Here's a poem by Stan Mast that I love.

I looked for God in the mountains;
I found grandeur,
but it was not God.

I looked for God down by the shore;
I found relaxation,
but it was not God.

I looked for God on the golf course;
I found camaraderie,
but it was not God.

I looked for God in my family home;
I found love,
but it was not God.

I looked for God everywhere,
I found many wonderful things,
but I could not find God.

Then I came into God's house
And God found me. ⁱⁱ

Let us pray: We need to be here Lord Jesus, fully present, attentive to your Spirit. We need to be in you. Help us to be like the sparrow and make a home in our Father's house. Dwell with us and in us, we pray, now and into eternity. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, Deckle Edge, 2007, 11-12

ⁱⁱ Stan Mast, commentary on Psalm 84, The Center for Excellence in Preaching, Calvin Theological Seminary website. Adapted