

Psalm 84
August 22, 2021
"Homecoming"
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I don't know, but I imagine that the tradition of "**Homecoming**" started way back in American church history, in a time when most people lived very local lives, and in extended families -- really "clans" -- such that that, even if people officially left their "home church" for some reason (I suspect the reason was usually marriage), they didn't move far away. So when, once a year, the call went out that such and such church was having their homecoming Sunday, all present and former members, and former pastors, were invited to "come home", worship together, and then enjoy a massive Sunday dinner potluck feast. It was like a big family reunion, and it recognized -- even if no one ever said this out loud -- that churches really were "homes" which those who really were "family" to one another could come back to.

In our day and time, however, when families are typically scattered far and wide, "Homecomings" -- along with big family reunions -- are becoming a thing of the past.

I begin by talking about "Homecoming" this morning because this tradition came to mind when I first looked at Ps. 84 for the sermon today. By category, it is one of several Psalms which are called "Songs of Zion", because they all celebrate the high status of Jerusalem and the Temple as being the real *heart* of -- the real **home** of -- ancient Israelite religion. Specifically, Ps. 84 is a "**pilgrim song**", which recalls the journey of a group on their way to *worship* in the Temple -- probably the closest thing to a "Homecoming" in that time.

Making this kind of religious **pilgrimage** was, in *that* day, and still *today*, a widespread practice. Jews and Christians from all over the world pour into Jerusalem every year, just for a chance to go and pray at the "Western Wall" of the "Temple Mount" (the huge retaining wall of the ancient structure). Cf. me in 2011. Several years ago, my friend, Rev. Tom Wall, was one of approximately 300,000 people who every year walk the 500 miles of Spain's famous pilgrimage trail, El Camino de Santiago, every year, to worship at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia (reputed burial place of James, one of the Twelve disciples of Jesus).

The idea of a pilgrimage is to intentionally uproot yourself from where you are, and from all that is familiar, and challenge yourself to journey to another place -- a place deemed to be "sacred" -- where you hope, having made yourself more available to God, to experience God as being more available to you.

So, the Jewish pilgrims going to the Temple long ago, their **excitement growing** with every mile, are thinking that -- no matter how hard the journey -- it will be all worth it in the end. In their minds' eye they are already imagining the sight they will see when the crest of the Temple -- the tallest part reaching some 20 stories high -- comes into view: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!" Cf. my mother building the excitement for my sister's and my first view of the ocean at Myrtle Beach, driving straight in on US 501, on our annual summer "pilgrimage" when we were growing up.

And then we hear the hear what is driving their making the pilgrimage in the first place: "My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord..."

In my church at Little River, I had a remarkable member by the name of Tressie Kelley. She died four years after I moved, in 2018, at age 106. Her longevity was not the most remarkable thing about her, however. The most remarkable thing about Mrs. Tressie was her passion for being present in worship. Up until she fell and broke a hip for the third time (twice on the same side), around age 100, she was regularly present on Sunday mornings. And I don't mean just "present", I mean actively present, standing and vigorously singing the hymns, raising her hands in the air, lifting her face up to God, and wearing an infectious smile which, when you saw it, multiplied your joy.

I soon learned from her what being in worship meant to her. "When I'm at home," she liked to say, "I'm *existing*. But when I'm at church, I'm **living!**"

What the pilgrim in Ps. 84 is longing for, fainting for is what Mrs. Tressie called "living", a kind of "living" -- or life, joy, peace -- that he knows he will find in "the courts of the Lord" as nowhere else: "My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God" -- the *living* God who imparts this kind of **life** to all people who worship him.

And who imparts this kind of life to **the birds** as well. The pilgrim is thinking about how he has seen the sparrows nesting in the 45 foot upper corners of the Temple interior, too high up to be shooed away. "*Even* the **sparrow** finds a home...at your altars, O Lord." The least to the greatest, i.e., are welcome to partake of the life gained through being **close to God**. *Unlike* the guy at the Walmart Neighborhood store on Friday who, when I turned a corner with my cart, entrapped me in a fine mesh net. When I asked him what in the world was going on, he told me he was trying to trap a bird in the store. I was in a hurry, and not much amused.

Where does **the longing** come from? Isn't it universal to us all? There are those who are able to say, "I have all I ever wanted in life", who still suffer the occasional intrusive thought that they are nonetheless **missing something**, something *important*, *some* yearning unfulfilled. Then there are those for whom

the notion of having all they ever wanted in life is just a really bad joke. And, then, there is everyone else in between.

The pilgrim in Ps. 84 says to us *all* of us: **all we are really longing for, all we are really hankering after, is finally to be found there -- in "the courts of the Lord"**, viz., in spending our **whole lives** drawing *closer* to God, more genuinely **worshipful** toward God, and finally more joyfully **obedient** to God. What this involves -- beyond Sunday mornings -- is our continually looking to see where God is already at work in our world, and then giving ourselves to that work, **aligning** our lives, our **commitments** in life -- how we spend our time, our money, our passion, etc. -- with what God is doing.

As someone pointed out to me a good few years ago, our greatest possible satisfaction in this life comes at the point or points of **intersection** between **what we most long for** and **what God most longs for**, in *our* lives, and for the life of the whole world God made.

To **reach** the "courts of the Lord", however, seems to require passing through a valley called "Baca", which no one living can locate on any map with any certainty. But -- and in a mostly desert land this is hardly surprising -- it is clearly a **dry** place, where sufficient water may well be lacking. Interestingly, the literal meaning of the text is "place of **weeping**". The journey to be closer to God really **mandates embracing challenges** which *may* even seem *impossible* to overcome, which *may* drive us to tears of *hopelessness*. In what way might we as Christians best understand this, "translate" it into some modern idiom? Perhaps by saying that, until we "lay it all on the line for Jesus" we may never experience the fulfillment in God of what we are all longing for.

Pilgrims suffer this, however, with the -- "big picture, the ultimate goal -- always as the motive force in their hearts, always in the forefront of their thoughts, such that "they **make** [this valley] a place of **springs**", and will **see finally**, as they **persevere**, that "the early rain also covers it with **pools**." So, "They go from strength to strength [because] the God of gods will be seen in Zion (Psalm 84:7).

How many who worship with us on Sundays are presently traveling -- or have been traveling for a long time in life -- through some "place of **weeping**", and are with us hoping that, in this time, or this time and place, they can find some kind of "**refuge**" (another translation for "home" in v. 5), or at least some kind of **reprieve**? Those who have struggled with losses of all kinds, with discouragements of all kinds, with addictions of all kinds, with chronic physical or mental health issues, etc. And any church worth the name must be a people who can, as one commentator put it, provide "*anticipation* for those who need *hope* in the midst of troubles, *peace* in the midst of *chaos*, and *comfort* in the midst of *distress*."

But the truth is that the pilgrim of Ps. 84 is much more like Jesus, the Jesus who -- when he had come to the point to which the whole sweep of his ministry was always taking him -- **wept** in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk. 22:44 says he sweated drops of blood), in now full, clear recognition that *his* pilgrimage to God - - *his* drawing near to God -- would involve his handing himself over to be tortured, and then hanged on a cross to die.

Such that any church worth the name *also* -- actually even *more* so -- must be a people who can encourage and support those who have come to the recognition that their pilgrimage to God, their drawing near to God, means embracing suffering and sacrifice which they could choose to avoid.

That's why the "doorkeeper" in Ps. 84 is so important ("I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness" -- v. 10). They are those people who are willing to be the least of all, servant of all, in the house of God, someone who others pass by without thinking about as he opens the door for them to enter into the "courts of the Lord". You want this kind of person at *all* the "doors" into the life of *any* church worth the name, someone who would never presume they knew better than God -- the God who, in the final analysis, is sending us *all* the people who *ever* come to our door -- as to who should be allowed in and who should be *discouraged* from coming in.

Churches who allow their "doorkeepers" to do so may well, without realizing it, discourage all the pilgrims who come to their door -- the ones who are willing to live, and serve, and give, and forgive in ways which would inspire many more to do the same, who are among us in order to remind us continually of what our souls are always really longing for, even fainting for, namely the "courts of the Lord" and "the living God"!