

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, LORD Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion. Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty; listen to me, God of Jacob. Look on our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one. Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. LORD Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

How Lovely

The psalm we've just read together is understood as a pilgrimage psalm, a song of praise sung, or chanted for those headed up to Jerusalem to worship on the temple Mount. It's a tough journey, uphill, to get to Jerusalem, and to climb the Temple Mount, so perhaps the words were sung as encouragement – for as they sing praise to how good it is to be in God's dwelling place, the travelers' excitement, and sense of desire to be there would increase.

Perhaps you have a special place you often travel to. For me, as a kid growing up, our family regularly drove the long drive through Massachusetts and New York to get to the old family homestead in Southern Ontario. A beautiful red brick farmhouse, with a hipped roof and tall windows that arched at the tops, a house with a big front porch and white gingerbread trim -- this was where my Dad grew up and where my Aunt and Uncle and cousins lived.

In the last hour of the journey, we'd start asking how long? How long before we get there? We had a song we'd sing about "how many more miles, how many more miles, How many more miles to go? Pick up your feet and swing your arms, how many more miles to go?" (and my Mom and Dad would sing back, "Sixty more miles, sixty more miles..." And we'd start seeing, in that last hour the sights that told us we weren't that far away. The Peace Bridge that took you from the United States to Canada. The REEB House...(that was a pub, Beer spelled backwards) The A and W which came on a sharp curve. The bridge over the Grand River was when you knew there was only about ten more minutes left. Ten more minutes of flat farm land and mailboxes at the side of the road and suddenly you were turning down the long gravel driveway, and you were there, tumbling at last out of the car, into the arms of relatives and into the place that felt so much like *home*.

Through out life, we identify certain places as special. I know at a Women's Guild meeting I once whipped out my phone to show pictures of the farm house, its lovely late nineteenth century architecture...but it wasn't the structure itself that worked on me so much as the memories, the great meals cooked and consumed, the Christmas presents unwrapped and played with, and, in summer, the playing in the barn, while hay bale dust motes shone in the sunlight...and together with the memories, there was this sense of rootedness, of belonging, this sense of a place you could happily return to again and again.

Last Sunday, while many of you were gathered here to worship, to hear a fine sermon by Bill McCoy, my extended family and I were en route to the sanctuary that is Fenway Park. It was my birthday weekend and a few of the grown kids asked about it, so we got tickets early in the summer -- which was good, because it took me a while to get over feeling like we'd need to take out a second mortgage for taking the family out for this big treat!

So, financial anxiety having subsided, the big day came, and there was that excitement of making the way there. The drive in to Boston, the sights of the Southeast Expressway, the drive down Mass Ave, finding parking, walking the streets to the Ball Park, together with so many people dressed in their Red Sox regalia. Once we got in, there it was before us: the field itself, a glow of green in the bright summer sun. We had a long wait before the game began, but that was good. More people watching. And happy picture taking. To tell the truth, once the game began it was a pretty dull game, a loss, the Sox only had *two hits* the entire game! But I loved all of it: just being there with 30,000 other fans, being there with family, taking it all in...sharing a bag of Cracker Jack with the three year old grandson Ulee singing along to the national anthem, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" and "Sweet Caroline". "You were like a little kid, so happy to be there" Mike said.

I guess it even wouldn't be too much to say a day at Fenway is, for me, another kind of homecoming.

We have within us this powerful urge to go home., to be in those places that feel "like home". Apparently, the late Bartlett Giamatti, who was the commissioner of baseball, and before that, the president of Yale University was once asked about the popularity of baseball. Why is it so enduring? "Baseball is about coming home" he responded. "And we all want to get home."

The psalm suggests our home is with God, in the special places where we can find God, and that sense of being rooted in something larger than ourselves, something eternal. The psalm may have been sung by Mary and Joseph as they made their way to Jerusalem to worship, in that story we know about how, at age 12 Jesus got separated from his parents, staying behind, wanting to dwell a little longer in the temple, in the house of "his Father". That story is not just a cute Jesus growing up story (the only one we have of Jesus at that age), it speaks to something deep:

that Jesus from a very early age felt a sense of communion, connection, kinship in the temple. This was home for Jesus in a way he maybe could not fully identify but that went well beyond whatever “home” he had with Mary and Joseph. (Scott Hoezee, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*, Calvin Seminary website)

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. Eugene Peterson translates this line as “one day spent in your house, this beautiful place of worship, beats thousands spent out on Greek Islands.” That captures quite well the enthusiasm of the one longing for worship, for time in a special place, and, more importantly, for a real encounter and deep connection with the living God.

This psalm says some important things about worship. “Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young at her altars.” One need not be a peacock, a royal bird of distinction, to find welcome space in God’s house. Worship should include, draw in one and all, for that wide embrace is the nature of this one we call God. (I heard a story once about a Methodist seminary that had a resident owl. A large Great Horned Owl made a nest in the huge window high up and behind the pulpit area of the seminary chapel. It was in a clear pane of the huge clear glass window that was in the shape of the cross, and it, she, was clearly raising some chicks up there. It often happened that as some student was offering up a sermon this owl would swivel its big head and those big eyes around to peer down as the student preacher proclaimed God’s word.)

But I don’t think the mention of birds in the sanctuary is meant to be for us bird lovers so much as it is again this inclusive vision of God, as a place where all can find shelter.

The psalm continues: “Happy are those who live (like the sparrow, or the owl) in your house, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways (or paths) to Zion.” Happy are those who have found ways to be in the presence of the living God, and to make God’s ways our ways.

And then there is this: “As they go through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.” The location of Baca, apparently, is unknown, and it may be more a symbolic designation than a concrete place...but it would seem that Baca is known or understood as a notoriously dry place. Think perhaps Death Valley. It was meant to be something to surprise your ear that pilgrims would find springs in such a place. In fact, the text actually says that they will “*make it* a place of springs”.

I want us to stay a while with Baca, because surely for none of us the idea of dry times, trying times, times when our spirits are parched, and we are at a loss, unsure of how to proceed...surely for none of us is that a completely foreign idea. We’ve all known something of Baca.

This week I got a call from a family member who is going through a very hard time. She has had multiple surgeries for cancer, a cancer first deemed stage zero that has nevertheless taken six surgeries to get “clean margins”. And now after all that she has an infection. She knows this too shall pass but this all has gone on so long she wonders. She is a person of faith...but she is also, by her own admission, someone who likes to have things in order, to know what is coming up....someone who likes to make plans and see them through, someone who likes as we say “her ducks in a row.”

This whole ordeal has put her on very different ground. Ground that feels more shaky, uncertain. And she doesn't like it. Not one little bit.

The only thing I could think to say to her, besides that this is very hard is that it is a spiritual challenge to be in a time like this.

Have you had a time when you look at the future and it terrifies you? A time when we realize our peace is *not* going to come from anything outside but that we simply must let God help us make peace within.

I think that is what Baca is. When we come to the uncertain times, the trying times and we have to let go of the idea that we are in control. Let go of the idea that we on our own make our life, that it can be completely of our design. Baca is when we say “God you are the source of my strength. I am scared, angry, disappointed (you fill in the blank) and I really, really need you.”

It's interesting then, that this psalm of praise to God includes this mention of the harsh places. The harsh places, it is often said, are actually our best spiritual teachers. The harsh places strip away our assumptions, our overly developed self reliance, our sense that we can fix everything or whip everything into shape if we're just given enough time or if people would just follow the vision we have for how things should be. The Baca times bring us to a place of acknowledgement that we are not in charge, and we need God's grace. In the midst of the Baca times we find it is *God* God who brings springs, rain and strength to those who seek the ever abiding presence of God.

Truth is, none of us is free from our consumer culture, or from wanting our religion (or our life!) to be at all times a pleasing commodity. We resist the Baca times, whether it is what we are experiencing as individuals, or as a church, or as a nation. Reflecting upon this with my husband this week Mike said something helpful: “There is a difference between insurance and *assurance*”

Psalm 84 is about the *assurance* that no matter where we go, no matter what is happening, no matter how much life seems to be changing and no matter what shape our spirit is in, God is with us. I think of William Sloane Coffin, the well known preacher from Riverside Church in New York, who, after the death of his son in a car

accident, said in a sermon that God “offers minimum protection and maximum security.”

Minimum protection and maximum security. We are none of us exempt from the Baca places. That is the minimum protection part. Maximum security comes when we place our hope in God who can turn the most dry and desolate places into places of life again.

We can hear our psalm today as a simple praise song, the biblical equivalent of “How Many More Miles.” But its about so much more. There is in God’s house *sanctuary* -- a place we can come to, a place we can turn to, a source of healing and meaning and perspective.

When life is good, *and* when life confounds us, we are invited to come into God’s house, to turn our hearts to God and say, as the psalmist proclaims

“Happy is *everyone* who trusts in you.”

Amen.