

**Psalm 84 - The Joy of Worship in the Temple**

*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.*

*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; he bestows favour and honour. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.*

Real summer has arrived! Summer is still my favourite season. Oh my, how I loved the freedom from school as a child! Summer for our family meant packing up the station wagon with a tent trailer attached to head to the cottage just outside of Brockville for one or two months. When I was a child we lived in Scotland, Ontario near Brantford, and then St. Catharines. Everyone helped with packing, but my father packed with precision. I remember some summers he would try to leave a child-sized section of the back of the station wagon so one of us could go back and sleep during the trip. I remember that before we started the journey, we would have a family prayer in the car that God would watch over us and that angels would travel with us to keep us safe. It was always so exciting to start the 6 or 7 hour drive to the cottage! The journey today wouldn't take that long, but remember there were 3 kids, usually a dog, no air conditioning — so the windows were wound down for the journey. In a day before devices and movies, it was a very long drive through Toronto. We'd play games like "I Spy" or something to do with license plates, sometimes we would sing some songs. We probably listened to the radio, (my dad was a CBC junky) we also had tapes

and 8-track before that. (I'm old enough to remember 8-track, but not old enough to have used one myself!) But no matter how many games we played, my brothers and I would inevitably start fighting about something. "He's kicking me!" "Stop looking at me!" And my parents would yell and try to whack us from the front seat (cars were bigger then and the whacking never seemed to work — but it would strangely help because instead of fighting, it made us kids laugh — such bad kids!) and they'd threaten to turn the car around. One of the kids, me or Josh, would end up car sick and throwing up, causing others in the car to throw up. I remember one year a guy honking at us to alert us that the trailer had blown a tire, and my dad worked to change the tire at the side of the QEW or 401. The trips were not without drama. But always the cottage awaited — that place on the St. Lawrence River that promised a summer of running around barefoot (with a Dettol foot bath before bed), swimming, fishing for rock bass or perch, row boating, tag football, BBQs, and board games and the dog, Obi Wan Kenobi, running around the point off leash. I'm sure there were challenges at the cottage too — I just don't remember them. Yes, I had a blessed childhood. But the journey to the cottage was part of the glorious summer.

The Psalm we read today, Psalm 84, is a Psalm that speaks of the journey to God's presence, the journey to where God dwells. The writer longs to be in God's presence. Nothing is better than God's presence! *How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord.* So much of what we are searching for in life — whether we are aware of it or not — is the presence of God.

Psalm 84 was a song for the journey, a song of pilgrimage. Every year, a couple of times a year the people of God would walk and make a sacred journey to Jerusalem, and while they walked, they often recited and sang Psalms like this one.

This summer we are taking a pilgrimage, a journey, through the Psalms. Some of you have committed to reading the Psalms this summer. We have 2 different reading plans that will get you either through all the Psalms over the course of the summer, or most of the Psalms. If you open the Bible in your pew and find the middle of your Bible you'll find the book of Psalms. (Of course, that doesn't work if your Bible, like mine, is on your phone!) The Psalms are a collection of many different poems from different sources and different authors, written at different times. The Psalms were the hymn book of the people of God. They were collected so that the people of God could sing and recite them. There are different types of Psalms: praise, thanksgiving, lament, royal psalms, wisdom psalms, imprecatory psalms (psalms of judgement that often involve cursing of their enemy), and penitential psalms, psalms of confession.

The earliest Christian churches recited and sang the psalms. Jesus recited and sang the psalms. The protestant reformer Martin Luther said that the Psalter "might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible." (Luther's Works, 35:254).

Bono frequently reads Psalm 116 from *The Message* at the beginning of U2's concerts: "*What can I give back to God for the blessings he's poured out on me? I'll lift*

*high the cup of salvation -- A toast to God! I'll pray in the name of God; I'll complete what I promised God I'd do, And I'll do it together with his people.*" The Psalms are written in **poetry**. Poetry isn't everyone's go-to language, though you're probably more into it than you think. Poets (whether you are talking about Keats or Shelly or Rachel Buchner or Wendy McLean or Bono or Drake) allow us to see and feel things that we couldn't see or feel without the language of poetry. In August, Cathie Kelso will preach on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm — The Lord is my Shepherd. Of course, God is not literally a farm hand who looks after and sheers sheep! But through that Psalm and that image we understand better who God is — one who cares for us and helps us in good times and difficult times.

The Psalms don't rhyme but they have a rhythm. One of the elements that you will notice in the Psalms is the use of **parallelisms**. They will have a line and then repeat it, but with slightly different words or images. Instead of rhyming the sounds they rhymed the idea — which is handy for us because it's hard to translate sound rhymes into other languages, but you can translate ideas.

Even Jesus used parallelisms. **"Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you."** The same idea is repeated in different ways. *"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."*

Why a sparrow and then a swallow? It deepens the idea. They say a picture has a 1000 words, and an image can have so many more.

I remember one Sunday coming out of the church and there was a little baby bird hopping around, clearly out of sorts — and it didn't seem to know how to fly. I called someone over who lives in the country who I thought might have some wisdom about how to help this sweet little bird. He looked at it and said "Oh it's just a barn swallow. It's nothing special. They just make a mess. Forget about it." I didn't like that answer! So we gently moved the bird under a bush and I prayed it would be okay.

After all, some days I feel like a barn swallow. Some days I don't think I belong or matter much in the eyes of the world. Even on days when I know I matter because I am one who is privileged enough that society regularly reminds me that I do matter, I am aware that there are so, so many that society does not remind that they matter. In this church we often see and serve people who are seen as 'less than'. About a month ago I witnessed someone die of an overdose in Ottawa. It was pretty disturbing. I was looking for a parking spot near my daughter's apartment in the Byward Market and there was a couple, a young woman and a young guy sitting in the mini courtyard by her apartment. You could tell they were living rough, probably homeless. They seemed happy. By the time I parked my car 5-7 minutes later, they were both passed out. Someone from a nearby business came out and was concerned. We both saw that they seemed to be breathing ok, and so decided to leave them. My daughter and I went shopping. When we returned an hour later there was police tape all around, and we found out the young woman had died. Her male friend survived and moved on. I don't know anything about that young woman. I'm sure she planned to get high, but I'm also sure she didn't plan on dying. And I'm guessing she mattered to someone. I'm

guessing there are devastated parents. Sometimes in very sad situations there are few on earth who notice or care. But God knows and cares.

In a world where many are homeless, where even more feel they don't matter and don't belong, reading this Psalm we understand something about God — that even the most common, the smallest, the ones who can seem like pests have a home — not in the back shed, but at God's altars. A safe place. A home. A place of rest and security.

*How lovely is your dwelling place ... a single day in your courts is better than a thousand anywhere else.*

That longing for God's house is built into us by the one who created us. Every one of us is created in the image of God. Around the year 400, Saint **Augustine** wrote: **"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."**

We are invited to read and immerse ourselves in the Psalms this summer — not because we should, but because we are all on a journey in this life. Life is a pilgrimage. I don't need to tell you that it's not always an easy one. We go through dark valleys. Or as in the case of Psalm 84 *the valley of Baca*, which was an actual place outside of Jerusalem. The word *Baca* also means 'the valley of weeping'. Will you love every part of this journey through the Psalms? No, you will not. There are parts that will be boring or just don't seem to connect to you or your situation. There are parts that will seem horrible and not at all what a Christian should be reading in 2024! We're going to talk about some of those sections in the coming weeks.

If you haven't started, I encourage you to start reading the Psalms. Be aware of what verses speak to you and what ones disturb or annoy you. Let some of the images soak in and speak to you. I promise you will find strength and blessings for the journey. Because as we travel on this journey of life towards the presence of God, **the end goal is with us even on the way**. It's a funny thing. If you're going to the cottage, *you're not at the cottage until you get to the cottage*. But the summer vacation has already started! The journey to the cottage was sometimes boring, (sometimes pure hell!) but the night before we left we were so excited and couldn't wait to wake up super early and start the journey, because the road trip to the cottage was part of the holiday.

The presence of God is experienced even as you seek to find that presence. *As they travel through the valley of Baca they make of it a place of springs. The early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength. Each one appears before God in Zion.*

One day you will arrive. C.S. Lewis had a great image for life after death. "The [school] term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."

May you find strength for your journey, may you know that you belong on the journey, indeed that you were created for this journey! And may you read the Psalms in search of God and find that God is already right here. searching for you.

Thanks be to God.