

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 84, A Psalm of Longing

Sunday, July 26, 2020
Rev. Emily Campbell

Announcement by Rev. Emily Campbell

Friends, it is with joy that I announce that we will be returning to live worship services beginning next week the first Sunday in August. August 2nd, this live service, will be in addition to our online services. We will be operating at a gradual reopening, trying to follow best health practices as the health and safety of our members and visitors to this congregation is, of course, our highest concern, as we move forward. I can tell you that on both August 2nd and August 9th we will have one service only, here in the sanctuary, at 9:30 AM. This will be an abridged service, lasting approximately 35 minutes.

You will need to pre-register for this service and you can do that six days prior to the service. Beginning Monday July 27th in the morning, you can register either online, or if you do not have access to a computer, you can call our church office and leave a message on extension 115. and there we can take your registration as well. Friends, a few things for you to note as you prepare to come back to our church for worship. Here is what you can expect: You can expect health checks before you even come into the building, which means your temperature will be taken using a contactless thermometer. It also means you'll be asked a few health questions when you come into the building. Face masks are required, both in the building and throughout the worship service. There will be social distancing in our pews and we will limit the number of people in attendance to approximately 65 people in the sanctuary. What you need to know is that hand sanitizer is available all over the church.

You have the opportunity to bring your own bible, as our pew bibles will have been temporarily removed. In addition to that there will be offering stations located at both our entrances and exits to our sanctuary where you'll have the opportunity to give in a contactless fashion. There will be bulletin sheets located within the pews. We do want to assure you, again, that our online services will continue at the same time these live services are taking place, so you may be asking yourself who should come to these services? Well, the answer is anyone can come who wants to come, but I would strongly recommend that you take a look at the guidelines and health precautions put out by the CDC and you can find those on their website.

Friends, if all goes well these first two weeks of August, our plan is to expand our service offering to include a second service at 11:15 in the Upper Room. Again, pre-registration will be required, beginning six days in advance, and all the same health precautions will be in place. It is our hope that then we will be able to continue in this two worship service time format throughout the remainder of the month of August having one service here in the sanctuary at 9:30 and the second in the Upper Room at 11:15. Please pray for us as we make all these transitions. Please pray for us as we look ahead in to September to see if it is safe at that time to expand what we are offering here at the church. At the moment we do not have Sunday school or nursery, but hope maybe that in the future that, too, may be something we can offer. Thank you for listening to these precautions and we hope to see you in worship next week.

Rev. Emily Campbell

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God we thank you that at every point in our lives, at every time in history, your presence has been actively at work in the lives of your people. We thank you, dear God, for your faithfulness and grace. We thank you for your invitation to draw near to you, and we pray in this time of worship that we would indeed draw closer to you. Open our hearts and our minds at this time so that we would be open to the prompting and leading of your Holy Spirit. Free us, we pray, from many worries or distractions. Help us to focus fully on who you are so that we may approach your holy presence in praise and gratitude. Lord, we do praise you today for you are not only faithful, but you are majestic and wise. Lead us along the path of faith today. We ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, your son. Amen.

When we chose this series, "Summer in the Psalms", we shared that we did so because the Psalms were a reflection of every emotion under the sun. And as we go through every emotion under the sun related to this coronavirus, it seems an appropriate place to find comfort, guidance, and solace. Today's Psalm, I have to say, could not be any more appropriate for us. Psalm 84 talks about the experience of someone longing to return to church. If you were to look back in your bibles in the Old Testament, at Second Kings, Chapters 18 through 20, you'd find the story there of the Assyrians kicking the people of Judah out of their temple and houses of worship. Through this experience and through this absence of being able to go into God's house, this Psalm is written of someone who longs to return to their normal practice of experiencing the presence of God. Friends, there's much for us to learn from this Psalm! If we turn our attention to it, one thing we learn right away is that the person who's writing this Psalm most likely was a person from the Levite tribe, which meant they served as a priest within the House of God. They are missing the role that they played within that house. Most likely the role they played was that of a doorkeeper. They long to enter the House of God just as we do today and for worship to begin again. It says in Psalm 84, "I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than dwell in the tents of the wicked". I hope, as we study this Psalm, we indeed draw near the presence of God.

Rev. Mark Hovermale

Our scripture reading today is from Psalm 84

- 1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
LORD Almighty!
- 2 My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
- 3 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.
- 4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.
- 5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
- 6 As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;

the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

⁷ They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.

⁸ Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.

⁹ Look on our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² LORD Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Rev. Emily Campbell

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, as we turn our attention to your word today, we turn our hearts and minds to your presence. Draw near to us, dear God. as we seek now to draw near to you. This we pray in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, your son, our Lord. Amen.

Psalm 84 proclaims, “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.”

Friends, as I was preparing for today's sermon, I had this great idea that we should let a bird into the sanctuary as part of our filming. Now keep in mind this experience has actually happened here before, on a warm summer Sunday here in our church, when the back (Church Street) doors were propped open for ventilation. A bird or two have been known to fly into our sanctuary and join us for worship as they rest in our rafters. These bird visitors generally find their own way out of our sanctuary, but that is what happens when the sanctuary is crowded. The birds flit from spot to spot looking for a place to rest and ultimately they are led back outside. Now today, as I face an empty sanctuary, a sanctuary that longs for its people to return to it, you could actually see a bird flying in and taking the time to make its nest in this nice quiet space, even on or near the altar of God. Now, friends, you may also be relieved to know that my great bird idea was quickly, yet kindly, dismissed by those actually in charge of our church building! I *do* appreciate the experience of the psalmist who desperately desired to return to the House of God; the psalmist envied the freedom of the birds who could fly at any time into God's presence. Those birds were so free that they could even make their home near or on the altar of God.

This Psalm highlights that there are blessings found within the House of God and as we gather together in God's sanctuary, we are reminded through the community of faith of the fact that we are not alone in our search for God. Our pilgrimage is not an isolated event, but as we come together in church we are reminded that we are part of a much larger community of faith, and here in the company of God's people we find encouragement in the faith of others and in the presence of God. We find encouragement and support as we pray for one another, as we welcome each other, as we listen to one

another. In the House of God, we are also reminded, as we listen to God's word, that our own smaller story of faith fits within God's larger narrative. That narrative began with the creation of the world and as we return each week to church and return our thoughts each week to that larger narrative of faith, God helps to put into perspective our own experiences of trial and suffering. Our story is part of a much larger story, but, friends, what I have just shared with you, these three points, these are the blessings of a community of faith. They are unity and encouragement and perspective, but today as we face the reality of this empty sanctuary we stand in the position that the psalmist did so many years ago, which is outside of that community and the blessings associated with that community. We long for entrance into that place where we feel closest to God. We're longing for entrance into our spiritual home.

It is appropriate at this time that we would look more closely and more deeply at the words of Psalm 84, for within this Psalm of longing we discover what has been referred to as the Old Testament Beatitudes. Now some of you may be familiar with this term "Beatitudes". It is most often associated with Matthew, Chapter 5, part of the Sermon of the Mount. Jesus lists a whole series of statements, all which begin, "Blessed are". Within each of these statements, God's favor is declared for those who seek to live under God's rule through every circumstance in life. Now just as it is in Matthew's gospel, so it is in Psalm 84, that we find these statements, these beatitudes--statements of blessing. Each of these statements begin with "Blessed are". In verse four of Psalm 84 we find this proclamation, "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you".

Friends, dwelling in God's house implies living as close to God as possible. The one absolute way for us to stay close to God is to spend time learning about the person of Jesus Christ. Unlike the psalmist of old, we are actually blessed in that we have access to God, access to the person of Jesus Christ, through the word of God, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Through this gift, we have the opportunity to draw near to God, to dwell in the presence of God always. As we spend time within God's Word, it is natural that our response is praise. But our response to God is not only lived out in moments of praise. As Psalm 84 declares in its second Beatitude, we also discover God's strength as we spend time dwelling *near* God. Verse 5A of Psalm 84 declares, "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 cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion".

This song was used as an encouragement for those who were on a pilgrimage to God's house as they traveled through barren regions, those regions referred to as the Valley of Baka. They would find strength and encouragement, knowing that they were heading into the *presence* of God and by keeping their focus on God, they were able to navigate some of the challenges of those desert regions. As we trust in God today and look for God's direction and guidance through our own desert experiences, God transforms our lives. I have seen this truth so clearly in the life of Joni Eareckson Tada. In the midst of her own experience, living as a quadriplegic with chronic pain and later with breast cancer, she encourages others through her book entitled, "A Place of Healing," to cling to God's promises and to find that place of rest and healing in God's presence. In the presence of God's love, she fully lives into these Old Testament Beatitudes which said we are blessed if we can find our strength in God in every circumstance, we are blessed if we can dwell in the presence of God in every circumstance, and we are blessed if we are able to trust in God in every circumstance.

Friends, that is the promise! We are blessed if we can draw into the presence of God in every circumstance, and we are blessed if we are able to trust in God in every circumstance. The final Beatitude found in Psalm 84, at verse 12, says, "Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you". Some translations say, "Happy is the one who can trust in you." I wonder, friends, how long will it take us to learn this lesson of faith. We may think that our lives will return to some sense of normality, when our church reopens, when our worship services go back to being like they once were. The truth is if we want to know that deep peace of Christ, if we want to know the peace that comes from the presence of Christ and the strength of Christ, then we need to learn how to rely on God today, to turn to him in our every situation, in our every desert experience. We need to allow him to transform the land around us into a place of springs, into a place of healing. The psalmist declares, "Better is one day in your courts, dear God, than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the House of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked".

I pray today that our hearts would echo the eagerness of the psalmist, that we would desire to draw near to God. This is my prayer for us all today. Amen.