

First Presbyterian Church
Psalm 84, “Our Pilgrimage to God’s House”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/25/2024

I love to take time with Psalms, because they teach us to pray
for any season of life.

They offer a spirit-blessed pattern of prayer that
often comes from a different way of thinking or speaking
than I would think of on my own.

The great OT scholar Walter Brueggemann describes three types of psalms:
Orientation, Disorientation, New Orientation.

This is the first kind, a Psalm of Praise
for times when everything is going right.

In fact, Psalm 84 is a hit from the greatest boy-band in ancient Israel.
They were called the *Sons of Korah*.

The Sons of Korah were a guild of temple musicians whose poetry,
liturgy, and music was both worship oriented and prophetic.

What we know as Psalm 84 hit the top of the charts because it had a great beat
that you could really walk to while you were making your way
along the pilgrimage journey to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Why would people do that? Why not just worship God in their home towns?

Well, to some degree people did worship in their home towns,
but they weren’t able to offer sacrifices in their home town.
And they didn’t have the Ark of the Covenant in their home town.
And they didn’t have the place uniquely set apart
for God’s holy presence in their home town.

All of that was concentrated in the Temple in Jerusalem.

So the average Israelite would go about their work for six days,
cook up some extra food on Friday,
and then from Friday evening to Saturday evening
they would have a Sabbath rest.
During that time they would gather with a rabbi, use prayer books,
and worship in the synagogue,
but all of that was a reduced version of the *real thing*.

So when an ancient Israelite went to Jerusalem for a festival, it was a big deal.
This was the time for spiritual uplift,
the time for drawing near to God,
a time for cleansing and renewal,
a time to experience God's grace and love
as you approach the Temple of the Lord,
which contained the Holy of Holies,
the place where God's presence was fully realized,
and where atonement was made for all of Israel's sins once per year.

This is why Psalm 84 begins with the line,
"How lovely" (or better, how *greatly loved*) "is your dwelling place,
almighty Yahweh. My soul yearns – even faints – for your courts."

Making your way to the Temple wasn't just another trip to church.
It was a momentous encounter with the living God,
and those who made the pilgrimage were full of anticipation.
They were jealous of the sparrows who made nests in the temple rafters
and were able to live there all the time!

The first of three beatitudes is found in v. 4:
"Blessed are those who dwell in your house."

But most people had to journey to the temple,
and so we find the second beatitude in v. 5,

**“Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on ... *pilgrimage*.”**

When I think of a pilgrimage, my mind goes to road trips.

Back in 1997, my grandmother on my mom’s side had passed away.

So my family made a kind of pilgrimage out to SE Montana.

The destination was the old Patton homestead ranch

near a little town called Mill Iron.

If you don’t know Mill Iron, it’s about 20 miles east of Ekalaka.

And if you don’t know Ekalaka, it’s about 260 miles east of Billings.

My three older siblings went, along with their spouses and children,

my uncle Glen (my mom’s brother) went with his wife

and their kids and grand kids,

all together I think we had between 20 and 30 people out there.

I was 20 years old and I drove out with my brother, Jeff, who was 35.

We took our time on the way out, fishing the great rivers of Montana,
sleeping in the back of Jeff’s van,

watching massive thunderstorms roll through

the Bitterroot valley, telling stories,

playing cards, and imagining the life that our
ancestors had as we drew closer and closer to the

ranch land which our mother, June Patton,

had grown up on.

Being there with her and my uncle Glen,

and scattering my grandmother’s ashes on that land

was a truly profound experience.

You have your own pilgrimage stories to tell.

Journeys you have made that left an indelible mark on you
and your community.

They may have been literal and personal pilgrimages like mine.

They may have been official pilgrimages

like walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain.

Or they may have been figurative journeys in your life
where you embarked on a new era of life heading toward a destination
that God had pointed you toward: an educational attainment,
overcoming an addiction, healing a relationship,
or developing a better way of life for yourself and your family.

For many of us, Life with God is often understood as a journey,
a walk, moving down the road of life.
Early Christians were known in the book of Acts as “The Way.”
They were people who followed the way of Jesus.

What journeys have you been on with God?
What road are you walking with God right now?

Pilgrimage has two basic themes:
Wilderness
Paradise

We see the wilderness described in v. 6,
as those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage
**“pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs;
autumn rains also cover it with pools.”**

If only we knew where the Valley of Baka was, I would show you a picture of it!
Unfortunately, it has been lost to dustbin of history.
But it sounds like a very dry and deserty kind of place.

Wilderness can be the desert, it can be the woods, it can be Egypt, it can be exile.
It can be times when the deck is stacked against you,
when life piles on one thing after another.
You know life in the wilderness.

But our faith sustains us through the wilderness

(sometimes even causing springs of water to surprisingly pop up
when we least expect it!)

Despite the challenges of life, these pilgrims somehow go from strength to strength
until they arrive at their destination.

The destination is paradise. Paradise in scripture can be a garden, an oasis,
it can be a flourishing city, it can be the Temple of God,
it can be the presence of Jesus, it can be heaven itself.

God hears the prayers of the faithful pilgrims
and offers gracious favor to the king of Israel – described in v. 9 as
“our shield” and “your anointed one.”

As Christians we can read this in light of Christ,
who is our shield against our spiritual adversaries,
and who is our Messiah, our anointed king forever.

The Sons of Korah didn't know about Jesus,
but they knew another kind of paradise:
standing in the temple courts of the living God.
“Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.”

Do you believe you're heading there?

Do you know that God has a destination in mind for you?

Whatever your struggle is, whatever pain you deal with physically or emotionally,
whatever flaw you see in yourself that you cannot seem to change,
God is journeying with you to bring you through the desert
and welcome you with open arms and a huge smile
in the temple courts.

Let us give thanks for springs in the desert.

Let us give thanks for those who encourage us to keep going.

Let us give thanks for other people who journey with us.

And let us give thanks that God is taking us somewhere!

There is a destination where there will be no more tears, no more suffering,
no more cancer, no more dementia, no more poverty,
no more war and division.

The Spirit of God is taking us to be in the full and clear presence of Jesus,
our savior, our lord, and our friend.

Take a moment and let that vision of where God is taking you fill your body,
your heart, and your mind, and then I will lead us in a song
taken directly from this beautiful psalm.

It's not exactly the way the Son of Korah did it,
but it's pretty good.

[Sing "Better is One Day"]