

Psalm 84: A Love Song to God
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Tualatin United Methodist Church
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Jorge lived in a small town in Spain. Jorge's teen-age son, Paco, was a real hand-full and there were times when Jorge lost patience with his rebellious son. One day, Jorge got really mad at Paco and rather than shout even one more word, Jorge went off to a meeting and came home late at night.

The next day, Jorge went to Paco's room to rouse him for breakfast. He was shocked when he looked into Paco's room and discovered his bed was empty and un-rumpled. Paco had run away from home.

Jorge contacted all Paco's friends, no one knew anything. Frantic with worry, Jorge made up some posters and plastered them all over Paco's favorite hang-out. The message read; "Paco, come home. I love you. Meet me here tomorrow morning. Love, Dad."

The next morning, Paco was there--along with seven other boys named Paco who had also run away from home. They had all come, answering the call for love and reunion, each hoping that it was his dad inviting him home with open arms. *

Jesus told a similar story of a father's love searching for his lost son in the parable of the Prodigal Son. This is a picture of God as divine parent who does everything he can to welcome the wayward child in all our hearts. Psalm 84 speaks about a deep spiritual yearning for God. It is a soul-deep yearning for a place of safety, security and certainty similar to the words of the hymn we sang this morning; "Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me, 'Come home, come home'."

Psalm 84 is a beautiful song about a joyful homecoming. The Israelites sang as a song of hope and longing as they made their way to God's house, the temple in Jerusalem. As thousands of Jews made their religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem for religious festivals, they sang this psalm as a hymn of approach. They sang it as foot-weary travelers along the road, they sang it as their caravans of camels and mules kicked up the dust as they made their way ever closer to the Holy City.

They sang it as they trekked their way across golden fields and beside singing mountain streams. They sang it as they pushed relentlessly through the bad lands of the desert, the valley of Baca, also known as the Valley of Tears. Getting to Jerusalem required a walk of hardened resolve on a very arduous highway that passes through the wilderness east of Jerusalem. (84:5)

Incidentally, this valley of tears was the highway Jesus referred to in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It was a dangerous place notorious for ambush, known for undeserved beatings and robbery. Religious pilgrims on their way to the temple in Jerusalem, sang Psalm 84 to assuage their fear through the wilderness of the Valley of Tears. Their destination made it worth the hazard and the risk, "Oh, how lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord." Whatever it took to get there, the dwelling place of God was worth the journey (84:7).

The spiritual pilgrims sang their way across the valley of shadows where death looms over-head like vultures circumscribing their doom. They moved from oasis to oasis, from strength to strength, progressing from one life-giving watering hole to another.

Their song provided a cadence of hope on their march of determination; "How lovely is thy dwelling place, thou Lord of Hosts! I pine; I faint with longing for the courts of the Lord's temple." (vs1)

Who among us has not made a similar journey through a spiritual desert where we pray for strength to keep on going, hoping for some kind of oasis to refresh our parched souls. Maybe at this particular juncture in your spiritual journey you find yourself passing through a valley of tears, a valley of arid dryness and famine. There are times for most of us when our souls long for spiritual watering like a dry desert flower searching for a rain cloud. It's not always an easy road, this road of homecoming, this spiritual road to Jerusalem, the city of God, the temple of spiritual communion.

The road through the Valley of Tears was not the only lonely road. There was another road even more difficult to traverse; the road of exile, the road across the alien territory of Babylon. This was a forced march away from the temple, away from the holy city into a country not one's own. The Israelites sang Psalm 84 as they languished in captivity in Babylon. Their temple was far away in Jerusalem, a pile of rubble and demolished hope. The dwelling place of God had become only a memory. In Babylon they were far away

from God's house, living in a place of exile with foreign rulers and despot kings, a place where temples to other gods mocked their souls.

There is an even greater pain than homesickness and that is the pain of watching friends and family grow accustomed to foreign ways and turn towards worship of other gods. Babylon is the place where some of the people of God lost their spiritual bearings and were tempted and influenced by the surrounding culture. And still the faithful sang,

“Happy are those whose refuge is in thee, whose hearts are set on the pilgrim ways, as they pass through the thirsty valley they find water from a spring and the Lord provides even those who lose their way with pools of water to quench their thirst” (vs. 5-7).

The psalms were their salvation. The psalms were their lifeline, a message posted on their hearts, God's call to “come home.” In Babylon, they sang the songs of praise from earlier happy times; their worship served as both an anchoring memory reminding them that they were God's people and a beacon of flickering hope that God would not forget them or forsake them. Psalms such as 84 reminded the Israelites to stay loyal to the God of Abraham and not should not forsake their God for other gods. Their worship reminded them that they were still sojourners in a strange land not homesteaders putting down roots.

Without even knowing how they would ever get home to Jerusalem, they sang the songs of faith and thankfulness, because faith can anticipate a release from spiritual captivity. Faith supported and nourished by memory can support hope towards a future. And memory and hope can anchor the present.

And so, there is a third road in the wilderness, the road of restoration when God and history move the spiritual pilgrims back to Jerusalem, back to rebuilding the temple, back to the court-yards of the temple. There they sing; “Better is one day in thy courts than a thousand elsewhere.” (vs. 10)

Psalm 84 alludes to six blessings of worship. The first verse gives us the memorable phrase, “how lovely is thy dwelling place” which identifies the temple as a special place of worship, where hearts met their beloved God. The word “lovely” implies a stronger and more intimate relationship with God than we typically attribute to the word “lovely,” in this psalm “lovely” denotes a special relationship of beloved ness. The Hebrew word (dowd:

denotes a special relationship, like that extolled in the Song of Solomon where Israel is known as God's beloved and God is known as Israel's beloved. In essence then the meaning of the first verse in Psalm 84 is this, "When I come to worship" the psalmist says, "I find a place of special love and relationship."

In other words, the Psalmist refers to worship as a holy rendezvous where your heart is listened to and heard, loved and cherished. How often do we think of worship as a holy rendezvous? Psalm 84 poses an unasked question; do we realize how much our souls thirst for God, yearn for God's spirit to redeem our spirits from anxiety and ego-driven insanity? How much do we need this place where God offers us unconditional love and we offer the same to God, ourselves and others.

The second blessing of worship is found in verses 2-4, where the psalmist claims that worship in the Temple "fills a hunger in him." What is he hungry for? Three things, to sing out (v.2), to feel securely at home in God's house (v.3) and to be with his family praising together. In short, the psalmist hungers to belong. Isn't that what we also yearn for, a place of belonging?

A third benefit of worship is found in verses 5-7. The Psalmist reminds the pilgrim that getting to Jerusalem requires a walk of hardened resolve (84:5) on a very arduous highway that passes through the wilderness. It is the highway through the valley of the shadow of death, the spiritual place where temptation holds sway over a fainting heart. In this valley the possibility of getting ambushed is a high risk. We know about getting ambushed by events beyond our control and being marched through a country not of our choosing—yes?

But Psalm 84 advises us to persevere and not be overly discouraged by our difficulties.

Because from the Biblical point-of-view, valleys are inescapable, there will be valleys of tears, death, divorce, sickness, accident and dismissal from jobs and livelihood. If you are not walking through a valley now, then tend to your neighbor who is. The preacher Philip Brooks said, "In every pew there sits a person with a broken heart." In this house of worship, we know that about each other, don't we?

Verses 5-7 of Psalm 84 teaches us that if we stay focused on God and worship we will eventually exit the valley of tears and fears and arrive at the place of freedom.

Verse 11 describes the fourth benefit of worship in which God provides a spiritual shield to protect our tender hearts and our wounded souls. In this house of worship, we sing and pray to the God who provides the spiritual protection that shields your heart and soul.

Fifth, comes the reminder that it is better to spend one day in God's house than a thousand days in the tempting pursuit of trivial and tainted things. And that's a whole sermon in and of itself, because our culture is overloaded with trivial temptations and tainted pursuits. Is one hour a week in God's house enough to counter-act the negative influences of our culture?

The sixth blessing of worship is realized in receiving new blessings, graces by which God pours out every good thing you need for your spiritual journey.

In summary then, we worship God because He wraps us in His love. God fills us up with a sense of belonging when we worship, a spiritual belonging to God who calls us home and a spiritual belonging to the community of faith. In worship, God offers us hope and reminds us of how important it is to hold onto our resolve when life gets rough. Praise comes not only from a joy-filled heart; praise also comes through our songs emanating from broken hearts. When we worship God, God pulls a spiritual cover over us to shield our hearts and souls. Lastly, God brings the spiritual pilgrim to a secure, permanent and wholesome place where He can pour on us everything we need to keep going.

In addition, there are two notations written by the psalmist. There is a notation "to the choir director" which says, "For the music director; according to the *gittith* style. Biblical scholars think that the *gittith* was some kind of musical string instrument that accompanied the singing which was lead by a cantor. Much like we sang the response today, the cantor would have lead the worshippers through the psalm. This may have been the way Jesus sang the psalms, responsively following the lead of a cantor.

And then, there's another instruction, the word, 'Selah'. This Hebrew word simply means 'reflect', which referred to a pause in the singing so people could just think about what the psalmist had just said.

That's what I invite you to do now. Reflect on this place of worship and what God may be calling you to experience here—a sense of belonging, a place of spiritual strength and security, a place where the wounded soul is nurtured and sustained, a place of encouragement when life is tough and the road is rough, a place where God offers you every good gift you need.

The results of the worship and education survey are available out in the narthex. They will also be included, in their entirety, in the newsletter coming out this week. As you read through the comments, you may wonder at the different and sometimes opposite opinions. You may wonder how such different observations came out of the same worship experience. But when you think about it more deeply, it's less surprising. Everyone in this congregation brings life experience to the worship service. Some of that life experience includes some understanding of who God is and how to worship God. For some of us, worship is solemn, thoughtful and reverent. The worship environment should reflect the dignity of the event. The music and liturgy should speak to the soul through a thoughtful theology and a reverent tone. It is not surprising that the traditionalist among us feel uncomfortable with projection screen and guitar music.

For some of us, worship is joyful and reverent. The music carries us beyond our trials and tribulations to a place of praise and affirmation. The music, with string instruments, piano and guitar, leads us to a meditative place by singing the refrains several times. The more we sing the same refrain, the more it penetrates the soul with its truth. The music is the liturgy, the music is the call to worship, the music is the opening and centering prayer.

Can these two styles speak to one another in a dialog of worship?

Can we each hear the worth and value of the other?

Of course the projection screen is a visual intrusion to a more reverent worship setting. The reason the screen is needed is that praise songs don't use sheet music. Praise songs are learned by rote, by listening and singing. Just as in Jesus time, music was an oral tradition; Jesus learned to sing the psalms by rote, by following the choir director. In addition, despite the projection screen's ungainly appearance, it offers two benefits. One, it lifts our heads off our chins, and our voices are better heard and blended with one another. Second, arthritic hands are freed from holding a heavy hymnal.

In this integrated service the words of both praise songs and hymns are projected on the screen. And, in addition, the page numbers of the hymns are also listed in the bulletin for those of us who want to read and sing notes as printed in the hymnal.

We have very important, life-saving work to do here and we have only one hour a week, more or less, to do it. Reflect on the worship experience; is the sum greater than its parts? Can you look beyond the irritating aspects and focus on the message, can you hear God calling you home, softly and tenderly. And will you respond with praise, thanksgiving, and dedication?

The results of the survey indicate that the majority of the congregation is willing to step out of individual comfort zones for the greater good of a combined worship experience. By far, the response affirms that the advantage of worshipping together. A sense of belonging far outweighs the nuisance factors inherent in a combined service.

In keeping with that sentiment, the worship taskforce is concurred in its recommendation to continue with an integrated worship experience. Our recommendation is for one service to be held at 10:00 on Sunday morning with Sunday school concurrent with church. We invite your continued feedback through the response slips in the pews. We want to be responsive to your spiritual needs on an on-going basis so we will offer feedback sessions after the New Year.

In closing, Psalm 84 reminds us of the centrality of worship and the importance of wending our way through harsh times and places to enter into the courts of praise in the house of God. It is here that we receive that for which we most yearn a place of belonging in the heart of our beloved, our God of grace and mercy and a place of belonging to one another.

I close with this poem by Grace Adolphsen Brame takes us back to the central core of worship, prayer:

Prayer is For Real People

Prayer is
The real you
Recognizing the presence
Of the real God.
God as moved you to want him;

And you respond
In words or thoughts
Or concepts,
Or just
“being”
In his presence.

Prayer is the real you
Acknowledging the real god
In spite of:
Your bad grammar or your lisp
Or your elegant adjectives,
Your self-criticism
Or your “cover-up,”
Your intelligence
Or your knowledge;
The real you,
Hungry for something special
In spite of not having much to say
Although your heart is full
And your brain befuddled.

Prayer is being honest, the,
“getting to the nub,”
Caring about what counts.
You may wrestle;
Jacob did.
You may see a vision
A concept in a picture.
Do not put a veil between;
It will just for you.
Remember God is real too
And will start just where you are,
Even if you don’t know where that is.
Breathe deeply!

It’s a big relief
To be

Just you.**

* A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul, adapted from a story by Alan Cohen, "Paco, Come Home", p. 78.
**Images: Women in Transition, Janice Grana, The Upper Room, 1976, p.35.