

How Lovely Your Dwelling Place Psalm 84

The vacation season will soon begin with Memorial Day weekend and I bet many of you want to travel after a year-long covid-19 confinement. Where is your favorite vacation place? I like Las Vegas. I know it's a bit strange that a pastor likes Sin City as his favorite vacation spot. However, the splendid nature around Las Vegas such as the Grand Canyon and the amazing shows make for a great vacation. We go on vacation to feel refreshed, relaxed and happy. We go on vacation for fun and excitement. Where do you want to go for your next vacation?

Then, can you think of coming to church as a vacation with God for your spirits? It's hard to imagine worship as a vacation. I fear that more than a few of us sometimes experience joyless, obligatory worship on Sunday mornings. We go to church the same way we face a bowl of plain oatmeal or green juice. We eat it not because we enjoy it, but because it is good for us. Just like this, we come to church because it is good for our souls.

Worship usually does not make us feel as excited as the Super Bowl does. A psalmist said, "God grants sleep to those he loves," and sermons may make you sleepy. Of course, this is not a sign of God's love. In fact, we have been taught to worship God in spirit and truth, so we tend to think of worshipping God as an important Christian obligation. This is correct.

But worshipping God has another dimension. Worship is not just our sacred obligation but it is also a celebration. There should never be a worship service that is not a time of celebration. Worship is a time of celebration and joy.

Pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem

Today's scripture reminds us of this celebrative dimension of worship. Psalm 84 is classified as a pilgrimage psalm. Three times a year, the Israelites had to travel to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. (Duet., 16:16) The Pilgrimage was their sacred obligation.

How long did it take to come to church this morning? It takes less than 2 minutes for me to get here from the parsonage. We can easily come to church in our cars. But traveling to Jerusalem two thousand and six hundred years ago was not easy. Such journeys often involved dangers. A pilgrimage psalm was sung as praise while they walked on the long dusty road to Jerusalem. Could it have been be a joyous trip just like our vacation trip to Cape Cod?

From its opening verses to its final passages, Psalm 84 celebrates the joys afforded by God's presence and the pilgrims' longing for God. The psalmist speaks of the intense desire of these pilgrims: "my soul yearns, even faints ... my heart and flesh cry out for the living God."

The author of Psalm 84 reminds us what we often have missed in our routine worship: joy and happiness in the house of God. Just as we are excited and happy on our way to vacation, this pilgrim was filled with joy, happiness and excitement on his way to Jerusalem. Psalmist said, "Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion." Why did Psalmist so intensely year for his pilgrimage to Jerusalem? Because of his faith and love in God. Because he knew that being with God is bliss and happiness for life.

Happiness

When you hear the word "happiness," what image first comes to your heart? A relaxing family vacation on the beach or a delicious meal with good friends at a nice restaurant or job promotion or the security of retirement. Our understandings of happiness are often warm, fuzzy, and without complication. Happy means an enjoyable or satisfied state of being. But the biblical

account of happiness is different from a contemporary notion of happiness. According to a biblical commentary, “In Hebrew, happy is ‘ashre,’ which derives from the verb, ‘shr,’ meaning to ‘go straight or to advance.’ Following the instruction of God allows the individual to move forward, to develop, to grow in life.”¹ The notion of happiness in the Bible primarily relates to moving toward or moving closer to God. If happiness is a satisfying state of being, no one would like to take a dangerous pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but people would like to comfortably stay at home. But the palmist knew that being with God, moving toward God is bliss, he desired to move toward Jerusalem.

Life is better with God. Life is much better with God. The psalmist calls God a sun and a shield. God is the source of life and protection. He sings that life is good with God! Life is good with God.

Worship is a time of standing before God, so it is a good and joyful event. Worship is not a thing to endure but something to enjoy. When we worship God, we are exposing our deepest souls to the life-giving light and divine breeze of the Holy Spirit. How many of you like spending time and relaxing on a beach in the sunshine? Can you recall the feeling of laying on a blanket and enjoying the warmth of the sun and gentle breeze from the ocean? It must have been enjoyable and made you happy. Then on a different note, would you understand if someone said, “I don’t know why you waste your time on a beach.” Probably not because you have already tasted the joy of wasting your time on a beach under the sun. Just like we enjoy our time on the beach, worship can be a time of joy and happiness because we rest under God, the true source of life! St. Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.” The time of worship is a time of rest and relaxation for our souls.

Go to the Temple in Jerusalem

Of course, we don’t always enjoy our time of worship. I know, sometimes, we only endure it. To enjoy worship, we need to learn and practice how to taste the joy of worship. As the pilgrims actively sought God’s presence while they were on their way to the temple of Jerusalem, we need to be more active and participative during worship.

What is your favorite television show? Mine is NCIS. When you watch a television show, what do you do? You watch it. You just watch it. That’s all. The performers are supposed to entertain you and you just need to watch the show. If you don’t like it, you can just turn the channel. In our entertainment-saturated culture, congregation members tend to be audiences or critics who simply watch performers. In most cases, the pastor becomes a performer who stands before many critics. But it is highly unlikely that the pastor is going to hit a home run every week.

Worship passivity is very tempting because it absolves the worshiper of any responsibility for the joy of worship other than getting to church. It leads the worshiper to be spiritually infantile. “Feed me and make me feel something.” This is the mindset of the passive worshiper. But the joy of worship is not like the kind of joy gained from entertainment industries.

The joy of worship is not simply a given, but needs to be learned through practice just like fishing. How many of you like fishing? I did my first and last fishing a few years ago at my church member’s house. His house was located beside a small pond. Do you know what I caught? I didn’t catch a single fish but a lot of weeds. I thought fishing was easy but it was not.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-psalm-1-14>

Fishing requires skill, knowledge and certain virtues. Good casting techniques, knowing the right time and spot, patience, attentiveness and of course, good luck... many things are necessary to be a good fisherman. If you become a lover of fishing, you enjoy fishing as much when you don't catch anything as when you do. I have not tasted the joy of fishing but I have heard it is addictive. The joy of fishing is not simply a given but needs to be learned through fishing! Am I right?

To taste the joy of worship, we need to learn to orient our minds toward God. We need to be attentive to sense God's presence during the time of worship. We need to be patient and wait... until the Holy Spirit comes and speaks to us and moves our spirits. Sometimes, you may not feel the presence of God but that does not mean that God is not there. Just because you may not catch anything does not mean that there are no fish in the water. God is here with us during the time of worship and waiting for us to open our eyes and ears.

The more we learn and taste the joys of worship, the more our souls yearn for God. So when you come to church for worship next week, which is Pentecost Sunday, come with expectation. Come with an expectation of how God will speak to you and touch your hearts. Sense the movement of the Holy Spirit during the time of praise, prayer and preaching. Forget about other things and be attentive to God. Fully immerse yourself in the moment of worship.

So, let us celebrate this time of worship. Enjoy this time of worship! Because God is with us. How lovely is God's dwelling place!! "Those who trust in God are truly happy!" Amen.