

Psalm 84

The Joy of Worship in the Temple

To the leader: according to The Gittith. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!

2 My soul longs, indeed it faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

3 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.

4 Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. Selah

5 Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.[a]

6 As they go through the valley of Baca,
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.

7 They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

8 O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah

9 Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.

10 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.

11 For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the Lord withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

12 O Lord of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Homily

In the 27th Psalm, the psalmist proclaims, “I am confident, I believe, I trust that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” Fifty-seven psalms later, this good living is manifested in the house of the Lord. God dwells in Jerusalem’s temple, and God makes room for God’s people, and indeed every created being. Tiny swallows and sparrows find sanctuary; even Baca, an old-dried up creek bed in a hot, arid desert serves as a fruitful canteen, and the rain swells provide abundance and refreshment for weary travelers.

Earlier faith pilgrims like the ones who first sang these psalms found connection to the divine by visiting the Jerusalem temple, and gathering with fellow believers from all around the region. To be in the temple was to experience God’s presence. As time has passed, our connection with the divine is less tied up in our occupying space

in a specific Jerusalem, and instead, is more apparent in all the new, little Jerusalems that have been created in our communities.

Millbrook Baptist Church is our own little Jerusalem. We have a campus and grounds that helps make us more aware of God's presence, and of course, these landmarks serve as identifiable and tangible places to gather as believers. And I am proud to say that our property cares for all creation. She makes room for sparrows, swallows, and other birds, and deer, and all kinds of creeping and crawling things, too. And occasionally, our building has even made room for a bat, and a snake, or cicadas playing dead, and other creeping and crawling things. (I emphasize the occasional!).

The summer rains this past month make it hard for us to imagine dry creek beds. Even that old dry creek bed beside the labyrinth has puddled in August. And each day, I ride over a bridge crossing the Neuse River, and each day the water swells.

But people within our community certainly experience drought – grief, anxiety, illness, loneliness, doubt, disappointment – all of these experiences can empty us. And yet consistently, in the company of one another, bound up in God's spirit, we find a sense of restoration, of renewal, of sustainment.

The psalmist tells us that faithful communities are heart highways – they offer transport to God's presence. And in God's presence is joy, and hope, and love, and collaboration among neighbors that creates a spiritual abundance.

We gather on Sundays, and other times, too, as an extended community of believers, to express our commitment not only to God, but to one another. We seek to mark the meaning in our life journeys. Sometimes, that's more formal: a child dedication service, a celebration of life and resurrection, a wedding, an ordination, a graduation, a blessing or remembrance, the Eucharist, to name a few. But other days, like today, it's less formal. We give thanks, express concern, share greetings, hold one another close in the ordinariness of life. We seek, always, and collectively, as a community of the gathered, to become more aware of God's goodness and God's presence in the world.

We believe that God's goodness is revealed in the land of the living, *in OUR living*. What we are doing this morning, and every morning, is committing to be a heart highway. This highway is accessible, in any direction; HOV lanes, easy merges from on-ramps, exits with a Waffle House on both sides of the express way; rest stops and scenic overlooks; Hey, tailgaters and horn-honkers, we'll feed you and hug you, too! This highway of ours must be one with accessible entry and imaginative, transcendent destinations.

Millbrook Baptist Church promises to be heart highway right in the middle of Raleigh, NC. No, not a highway like 440 or 540 that gives you heartburn, but a highway that feeds your heart. This highway reminds us that God is present in all our lives.

And, you might wonder, Millbrook, "How do we go about building such a highway?"

King reminds us that the arc of the moral universe is long, but ultimately, this arc bends toward justice. If this is true (and I believe it is!), then that means we are like pole vaulters seeking to bend a rigid line. We use our long, strong, determined muscles of love with the knowledge that one day, our collective strength and generosity, rooted in God's spirit, will propel us over and beyond our potential.

I believe for us to build a highway of the heart, and to be a highway of the heart, we must be a community whose lives apply tension to that rigid line, day in and day out.

How do we know our calling? How do we find and ultimately express those gifts that apply tension to the rigid line? For some of us, there may very well be a moment of such clarity in our lives, that in an instant, we will know our purpose and calling.

It could be our baptism; it could be the first time we connect to something we love: we sing a song, or dance a dance, or draw a picture, or write a story; it could be the first time we offer aid to a friend; it could be some provocative thought or word of encouragement we hear from a teacher or mentor. But for most people, and it's certainly been true for me personally, odds are, our purpose and calling will be revealed by the thousands of little moments we experience in the villages that sustain us through the seasons of life.

What we promise to one another at Millbrook, whether in birth, whether in a time of transition, whether just joining this community or having been here for decades, or even just on an average Sunday, what we promise is a spiritual home. We promise that every time

someone is in our presence, we will give thanks for the God who has given us the gift of them! We promise to be intentional in noticing their gifts, encouraging their gifts, and always being a safe space for them to express and refine such gifts. We promise to tell them about a God of possibilities. And we assure them we will be eager to hear about the possibilities they discover in this loving God of ours.

She doesn't know it, but Jessica helps me frame this idea of a heart highway. Daily. She says it like this: "God loves you. I love you. We love you." Jessica says that everything we do in this place is centered around the undeniable, inescapable, world-changing truth, that God loves each and everyone of us just as we have been created. No exceptions. So...we tell, anyone and everyone who will listen, and even those who won't, "God loves you!"

Then, as individuals, and particularly in our role as ministers, we find ways to be in relationship to each person here, to express the thousand I-love-yous that need to be said.

And finally, as a community of believers, we hear the love extend outward: "We love you!" Think about the ordination a few weeks ago. Our new deacons heard of God's love for them, of each congregant's love for them, and of our collective love for them. Think of our children and youth. They hear stories of a God who loves them. They are loved by ministers and teachers and volunteers. And they hear from one another their love and value of one another.

Like the psalmist, and every created being, each of us are going to experience the full range of emotions: we'll be happy, and silly, and SO full of hope; other times we'll feel sad, or angry, or frustrated, or

just blah; we'll feel safe, and scared, and confident, and shy. Odds are, at some point or another, we'll even feel all these things in one another's presence. We promise to let everyone be themselves; to be present with one another, however they may feel in a particular moment; to help them navigate all the Holy conversations, especially the ones that come with all the feels.

But here's the biggest thing, Millbrook, the most constant thing, the most certain thing. We're gonna put tension on that line. We're gonna keep living our calling. Yes, there will be days when the world seems dark and dreary. But here at 1519 East Millbrook Road, and all those virtual addresses, too, we commit, just as we have for 149 years, to being a chorus of love, where our acts of kindness, one moment at a time, keep bending that stubborn arc toward justice. We want our living, our ordinary but sacred living, to be a window of God's goodness for one another.

Friends, welcome to the highway of the heart. Grab a shaker, or a noisemaker, or a tambourine, or your favorite musical instrument. Sing out loud. Express yourself. Sit with us for a while. Pass the peace. Light a candle. Say a prayer. Hear the stories. Tell them, too! Break bread with us. Laugh. A lot. Cry if you need to. Hugs are free. Fist bumps, too. Be on the look-out for Krispy Kreme doughnuts, or the best potluck in Raleigh. Ask us questions. Love inside these walls and out. Minister to the world. Let it minister back to you. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God. And live with us.

Good friends, may God help us to be a heart highway for one another, in order that we might always know God's presence. Friends, may it be so, and may it begin right now. Amen.