

February 10, 2019

"Better Is One Day"

Psalm 84:1-12, Revelation 4 [Call to Worship]

Whether this Psalm was originally written, prayed, or sung before or after Solomon built the temple, the people of Israel often associated their experience of God's deepest and most powerful presence with particular places and physical structures. The Mountain called Sinai, The Ark of the Covenant, The Tent of Meeting, The Tabernacle . . . and, finally, the Temple in Jerusalem. The people of God loved to experience intimacy with God in these special locations. Ultimately, the temple in Jerusalem became the place everyone travelled to for numerous worship festivals. Everyone would have resonated with "Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere." (Psalm 84:10)

Unfortunately, this has led many to think that a church or sanctuary is the best place to encounter and worship God. We want to talk and think about worship a bit this morning, and this reference to "One Day" in God's courts is a great passage for us to do so. But we don't want people to get too attached to a place of worship – as in the place we have formal worship services.

Solomon, the king who actually had the temple built helps us with this dilemma. At the dedication of the temple, when the Ark of the Covenant is brought into it, Solomon is rehearsing the history of God's dwelling with His people and God's promise to David – Solomon's dad. And then the builder of the temple, standing in the temple asks, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27) If anyone should have lobbied to elevate the temple's significance, it would be Solomon. But he doesn't. He goes on to acknowledge that even though people come to the temple – and even pray toward it from their homes – God dwells in heaven. "Hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, Your dwelling place, and when You hear, forgive." (1 Kings 8:30)

Fast forward hundreds of years to the Church in Jerusalem after the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. When Stephen is being questioned and accused of blasphemy, he courageously declares a new reality in Jesus. He also rehearses God's history with Israel and the various structures that people associated with God's nearness. And then Stephen makes it clear that "The Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. (Acts 7:48)

This is Good News! It means our experience of God's presence and our encounters with Him can happen anywhere in thousands of ways. This morning we want you to hear some ways people experience God's presence and power; days, moments, periods of time they wouldn't trade for "thousands elsewhere." Joshua Sherman, our Contemporary Worship Leader, is going to share about the experiences of two others, and then share from his own life.

**[This is from someone in our choir who wished to remain anonymous.]**

*I experience God through music. Being a musician, it brings me comfort to know that when I enter into Heaven, I will be greeted with the sound of singing. I can hear God sing to me in the music of the waves crashing onto the shore, or in the rustling of the aspen leaves on the tree. I once listened to a video of Louie Giglio doing a remix of an exploded star - the Bella Pulsar - singing with whales, to Chris Tomlin's "How Great is Our God." I know that even the stars in the universe and the fish in the sea sing praise to our Lord!*

*Being in the choir and in MenSing has been a blessing to me. When I am in God's sanctuary and standing in the choir, I am happy for many things. Music allows me to transcend the limitations of my body, including the pain I experience from debilitation of my joints. I am glad when they said to me "Let me go into the House of the Lord" and I can make it up the sanctuary stairs without falling. When I lift my voice in praise, I am free from my pain. This musical pain relief can have an effect on me that lasts throughout the 24 hour day. I feel a sense of calm and ease in the sanctuary, and when I sing, I feel like I am singing directly to my Lord - standing right in front of me. Through communal music with my Maker, I know that "one day in His courts is better than thousands elsewhere!" As Louie Giglio said, God is surrounded by a symphony that goes beyond our wildest dreams. How Great is our God!*

**[This is from Derek Griffiths who plays guitar and sings in our praise band]**

*I got into my car, left my house and started driving to work. My routine usually consisted of stopping by the Safeway off of Patterson to grab a warm breakfast burrito and a Starbucks coffee on my way. This morning was different than most. I was in a rough season at my job, and I felt defeated – both personally and professionally. It was a miracle that I got up and headed to work that day. I could have easily called in sick, but I went anyway.*

*If you don't know me already, I work as a special education severe needs behavior teacher in District 51- in the Therapeutic Day Program at the Summit School. The population I teach are K-5<sup>th</sup> graders who are at high risk. They are high needs, and severely aggressive. They cannot learn with other students because of their unsafe behavior.*

*Imagine trying to teach a math lesson while keeping a student from stabbing another student with their pencil, and keeping another student from running out of the building. Or imagine repeatedly being kicked in the shins. Or getting spit on directly in the face while trying to keep your cool. These events can all happen during a typical day for me. It sounds crazy and at times it is. I couldn't make up most of the things that go on around here. However, there are good days, too; days that I see progress, and I'm proud of what I do. I love my job. I really do.*

*So now that you have a little context, I'm going to bring you back to my morning where I was struggling. I was struggling with my students. I was stressed and fatigued. I was currently dealing with difficult parents who were verbally attacking me, threatening my career, criticizing*

*my job skills, and involving me and my program in a legal suit with the State. So not only was I carrying the weight of student behavior, I was carrying stress, anxiety, anger, and fear of losing my job. I had lost 15 pounds from stress, and I could not be there for my students mentally due to where I was. Even though I was protected by our School district and our own legal team, I still took it personally - and that left me doubting everything.*

*While I was driving down Patterson, I was thinking in my head, “Why I am doing this?” I pulled into the store parking lot, found a spot near the entrance, and placed my car in park. I went into the store, grabbed my breakfast and coffee, then walked back to my car. After I closed the car door and set my things down, I sat there for a minute in silence. I began to have a conversation with God.*

*I closed my eyes and started telling Him I was defeated. I asked Him if this is what I am supposed to be doing. This was more than just questions - I was crying out to Him from the depths of my being. I prayed to Him, asking to see His presence. I just needed something!*

*After I asked Him that, my phone made a noise. I peeked through my eye lids while I was praying and saw a notification for the verse of the day. I kid you not, it was Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”*

*After I read it, I went numb. I started thinking to myself “No way. This is just a coincidence.” I even chuckled a little bit. I decided to leave, and started my car. The radio turned on, and the radio host began reading Philippians 4:13. The host went on to elaborate on the verse, but I don’t remember anything else they said. Once I heard him say the exact thing that I had just read seconds before, I realized that this had to be God.*

*Tears began running down my cheeks, and my body just gave out. I just closed my eyes and sat in the Safeway parking lot with the car running for a few minutes saying, “Thank You! Thank You, for giving me strength this morning.” I began to drive to work, feeling refreshed and strengthened. I continued to tear up all the way to work. I did not want to leave that moment because I knew that it was special. But I also knew in that moment that I am not alone, and He never leaves me.*

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**[This is from Joshua Sherman, Contemporary Worship Leader]**

*I was born 3 months premature, and had to spend 40 days in an incubator to let my lungs develop to the point where they could handle breathing air in a normal, healthy way. During that time, I was given an overdose of a medicine that should have made me deaf. So I owe my very life – and my ability to sing and praise God through music – to the powerful, delivering work of God. Needless to say, worship through music has always been an important part of my life, and my faith.*

*Like many people here, I've experienced God's presence in a powerful way; in what we might call "mountain top" experiences. A worship experience at Promise Keepers. The overwhelming sense of God's presence and love after a two-hour session of worship.*

*Experiences like this are what I usually think of when I read Psalm 84. But as I was preparing to share this week, I was reminded that David most likely wrote Psalm 84 while he was in exile – unable to enter the house of the Lord because his son, Absalom, had rebelled, and taken over the throne. "My heart and flesh cry out for You the living God" is not just a declaration of praise and worship – but the cry of a longing heart. A cry for help to the "Lord of Hosts" – a phrase that is sometimes translated as "God of angel armies." This reminder of David's exile jogged my memory. It reminded me that I've also experienced a longing for God in the harder parts of life's journey – the "Valleys."*

*I faced one of my life's biggest valleys when I graduated from college. I had learned a lot, and grown a lot – but I felt alone. What had started with great promise came crashing down around me as my college friends dispersed and went on to follow their dreams. Some went on to graduate school. Some started their dream job. Some were buying a house and marrying the love of their life. In contrast, I found myself single, living paycheck to paycheck working at a pizza restaurant, feeling depressed, unfulfilled, abandoned, and far from the presence of God – without a vision for the future.*

*Praying felt empty – like God was no longer present or answering my prayers. Worship felt like going through the motions – a nostalgic exercise doing things that used to mean something to me, but that could no longer stir in me a sense of God's presence and glory.*

*Coming out of this place of despair and darkness took time. It took counseling. It even took medication for a time to help me feel "balanced" and hopeful again. But, I think most importantly, it was new experiences of worship that helped me to feel God's presence again.*

*I hadn't been attending church for a while, but I decided to go when a co-worker and friend invited me to go with him. From the moment we entered, I felt the undeniable presence and joy of God being proclaimed in worship in a way that I had not felt in a very long time. This church saw worship, in part, as one of the most important ways that we can do battle in this dark world. Declaring the greatness and glory of God shines a light that can pierce through the darkness – both in our own lives, and in the lives of those around us! I was reminded of my namesake, Joshua, facing the walls of Jericho. God did not call his people to attack the city – rather, He called them to worship! Their job was to praise God – He would take care of the rest. I began to see the darkness and despair in my life falling like the walls of Jericho.*

*Indeed, even as Joshua was preparing to take the city of Jericho, he had an encounter with a man that appeared to him, sword drawn. Startled, he asked the man "are you for us, or against us?" The man replied "No, but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Joshua fell to the ground in worship, asking "What does my Lord say to His servant?"*

*When I was in the midst of depression and despair, much like David in exile, God heard my cries. He brought me back to a place where I could sing with my whole being, “Better is one day in Your courts, God, than thousands elsewhere!”*

*Thinking back to that turning point, I had found myself like Joshua in the Old Testament - humbled by the presence of the Commander of God’s armies. This underscores to me that worship not only reminds us of the greatness and faithfulness of God – a reminder we often need in the midst of hard circumstances. It also reminds us to be humble - to recognize that God’s work is not all about us. Rather, God is at work all around us, and we find purpose as we join with Him in this redemptive work.*

We encounter God in so many ways and in so many places. So why pour so much time (24 hours is an understatement), energy, and financial resources into worship here – in this sanctuary? Well . . . we keep planning and providing regular worship on Sunday mornings, not because it’s the only place and time to be in God’s presence – or even because it’s the best place for intimacy with God. We pour into our times of worship here because it is the most accessible place and dependable time to invite our entire community to encounter God and, possibly, have a moment in time they wouldn’t trade for all the Sundays up on the slopes. And you never know what someone might experience coming into this place – and how God might show up in a crucial and powerful way. I want you to hear another story of just how important it is to provide regular and accessible worship for someone who might just show up on a Sunday morning.

**[This is from Martha Caruthers. She recently reaffirmed her faith in Christ and join FPC]**

*I have been blessed by God from the time I was conceived. The youngest of four girls, I was born to Christian parents who were called to serve in the mission field for the Presbyterian Church in 1956. I was 3 years old when we left for Brazil.*

*My mother home schooled us through 4th grade and then we left to attend Presbyterian mission boarding school. My childhood then was growing up in an active Christian environment. When I was 13 and we were home on furlough, I was baptized at the First Presbyterian Church of Lubbock, Texas – our supporting church.*

*In 1971, I returned to the US to attend college. I attended a secular college in Texas, my parents having retired from the Mission partly due to the liberal changes occurring in the church at that time. My focus was getting a degree so I could get a job to support myself. There was a lot of adjustment to suddenly being in a different culture than what I had grown up in. During college I did not seek out any Christian campus activities or a church, focusing on my studies. For the next 40 plus years I turned my back to God. Only occasionally attending church with family. There were times I even doubted there was a God.*

*This past September when I retired one of my sisters and her husband were visiting for a few*

*days from out of state. They were here over a weekend and without much forethought I asked if they wanted to attend church since they were regular church goers. I had no thought or plans beyond that Sunday.*

*We attended the 11 am service. As I listened to the scripture readings, old familiar hymns, the Apostles Creed, and the words from Tom and Jason, the Holy Spirit reopened my heart and mind to God's love. I suddenly realized during the service that God had never given up on me, He had been with me all these years, blessing me and waiting for me to come back. I left church that day knowing I wanted to return to God.*

*Since that Sunday last September, God is continuing to reveal His love and plan for me through studying His word, through prayer, music and frequent communion with the people of this church. I feel blessed to be back in the family of God.*

I do not remember anything about that Sunday, but I know that all the preparation was worth it. I would not trade what happened for Martha for a thousand other Sundays.

Again, there are many other places God shows up and is worshipped. We don't need a church building. At Wednesday in the Word we heard of God making His presence known to a college student in her dorm room as well as at a mission gathering of 18,000 college students at a university in Illinois. Last week, I told you about a special place called Forest Home; a place I encountered God in powerful ways; a place I worshipped with hundreds of other kids my age. I wouldn't trade those days and weeks at camp for just about anything.

Recently, I talked with another person about worship who wished to remain anonymous. She shared three things:

- 1) By far the most powerful moments of intimacy with God were when she was all alone, in prayer, on her knees or with her face to the ground.
- 2) She felt the "palpable presence of the Holy Spirit coming down into the congregation at this year's Christmas concert."
- 3) And she saw the faces of the congregation "light up" with joy when our Kids Choir sang.

These were some of the moments she wouldn't trade for "thousands elsewhere."

How about you? When have you felt an intimacy with God that was palpable and life-altering? Can you think of a time, place, or season of life in which your hunger and thirst for God was quenched? When does your heart "faint for God"?

Revelation 4 gives us a glimpse into worship that is powerful and eternal. I don't personally think heaven is simply an endless worship service – or round of golf. But we will worship in heaven and join with people from every tongue, tribe, and nation in giving God the glory He deserves and basking in the radiance of His holiness. Why not spend our days getting started?