A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

*“The Dwelling Place of God”*

Psalm 84

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My text this morning is from Psalm 84, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!” It’s a beautiful expression of delight and longing for the Temple of Jerusalem. Either the psalmist is standing outside the temple in Jerusalem, beholding its beauty. Or perhaps, he is far, far away from the temple, remembering how beautiful it is and longing to be there, saying “my soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord, my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.”

Scholars call this a “pilgrim psalm,” one of several that are written by people on their way to Jerusalem. There are a number of these psalms, notably Psalm 121-134 known as the Psalms of Ascent, which traces a pilgrim’s journey from far away up to the city, up to the temple, up the steps to the very front door of the temple. Of all of these pilgrim psalms, 84 holds a special place. Fleming James says, “Psalm 84 will remain forever the supreme psalm of the sanctuary.”

Which makes it even more interesting that the psalm doesn’t describe what the temple looks like. Nowhere here does the psalmist laud the bronze pillars, the cedar lined walls, or intricate carvings. The focus of the psalm isn’t on the look of the temple, though the view itself must have been outstanding. It is written in the Talmud about the days when the Temple was new, “Whoever did not see Jerusalem in its days of glory, never saw a beautiful city in their life.” (Talmud: Succah 51b) Centuries later, Jesus’ own disciples will remark, “Look teacher, what wonderful stones, what wonderful buildings.”

Yet the psalmist is not overly impressed with these visible things. Like God, the psalmist does not look on the outward appearance but the heart. The focus of his prayer is the sacred experience of being in the temple. It’s not because the temple is a beautiful building, though it may be. It’s not because the temple is big and impressive, though it was that too. It’s because the temple is God’s dwelling place and humanity’s true home too. Everyone can find a home in the place where heaven and earth overlap, even the humble. In the place of God, little sparrows and swallows play and find a safe home here. Their song is welcome. The doorkeepers are blessed among all men. “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.” The temple is such a place of delight that a day in those courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

The focus isn’t on the outward appearance but the inward reality. This is not just a shrine for the memory of the past or an inert space constructed for a deity made of wood or stone. It is not primarily the building that attracted the pilgrim much as he loved it, but the Person who dwelt there not as historical memory, nor as lifeless idol, but as living Presence, living Divine Presence. God is here. The psalmist’s love of the Temple is really for only one reason. It’s where we encounter the living God. For that reason, it is the best place in the whole world. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts.

King Solomon, who built the temple may have been relieved to hear that later pilgrims would have such an experience. On the day of the Temple’s dedication Solomon lifted his eyes to the heavens in prayer and then back down to what he had built. For Solomon, it was a rare moment of humble introspection, “Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”

Solomon is right of course; nothing we build with human hands can approximate or contain God. Nothing we say or do can control God. God transcends all. But Solomon also knew that the place he built was special, a house for God. We still hold that same hope today about the places we hold sacred and special. Even though many keep trying to find ways to say that there’s no such thing as sacred space, we keep returning to churches, to beautiful places not just for the aesthetic qualities but for intangible mystical reality that transcends our understanding and touches our souls. Some say God is everywhere, some say God is nowhere to be found, but the poetic pilgrim’s experience at the Temple anticipates what Christians experience in their churches. Whether it’s a soaring gothic cathedral or a humble clapboard chapel, you walk in and something beyond your senses tells you: God is here.

Justin Popovich was a 20th century eastern orthodox monk who gave words to this experience at the consecration of a church:

“This place of ours also has its own heaven. It is this holy church. For every holy church is also a piece of heaven on earth. And whenever you are in a church, behold, you are already in heaven. When the world torments you with its hell, hasten into a church; enter it, and behold, you have entered paradise . . .Take refuge in a church; fall down before God, and He will take you under His gentle and almighty protection. Should it happen that entire legions of demons attack you, flee into church—among the angels; for a church is always full of angels, and the angels of God will defend you from all the demons in the world. And nothing will be able to harm you. Do not forget, brethren, that we Christians are strong in God . . .” (Grace for Grace, 311, Archimandrite Justin Popovich. A Sermon at the Consecration of a Church, *The Struggle for Faith.* B#57, Vol IV, 86-89.)

It may have been the first time I was in an Eastern Orthodox Church. It was in Jerusalem when our guide walked us through the ancient sanctuary, pointing out the icons of biblical figures and saints which covered almost all the walls and posts in the room. I remember he said, “when you come to worship here, you are not the most important person in the room. When you come in here, you join your worship to the ongoing praise of God these saints are always offering.” That was over 20 years ago and I’ve not forgotten it. Even in a sanctuary without icons all over the walls, I’m not the most important person in the room. This is not about me.

There’s something about a holy place, even for we protestants who have tended to downplay the importance of church buildings. Protestants have done just about everything we could do to insist that bread and wine are just symbols not sacraments, that baptismal water is just a ritual not a new beginning, and that buildings are just four walls and a ceiling to keep people dry while they listen to the Word proclaimed. We have done everything we can to wring the mystery out of the material, to tell you that God is in your heart but not in the sanctuary, that the church is the people who gather, not whatever building in which they gather. But you know better. Even after centuries of we preachers trying to insist that the earth is flat and so is the spiritual dimension, you still know better, you still go to the mountains and feel cosmically small. You go to the ocean and something stirs in you and you whisper, “Search me and know me. Where can I go from your presence? If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there you will hold me fast.” And you go into a church and you know there’s something different about the place. For some people it feels like reverence. For others it feels like peace. For still others its raw, like you have to be careful here lest you open yourself up to what’s happening here, lest someone see you smile, or cry, or pray.

Margaret Visser in her wonderful deep dive into what a church means writes, “The closest relative of a church is a theatre, where people also come together to witness a scripted performance. There is a stage in a church, and seats for the audience; in both theatre and church, people come in order to live together through a trajectory of the soul. They come to be led by the performance to achieve contact with transcendence, to experience delight or recognition, to understand something they never understood before, to feel relief, to stare in amazement, or to cry. They want something that shakes them up—or gives them peace. Successful drama, like a well-performed ritual, can provoke an experience of transcendence . . .

    It is perfectly possible to be moved at a spiritual level at the theatre; one can open oneself and be brought to mystical insight, as Aristotle showed us, through attentive watching . . . But a performance in a church is permitted to involve people to an extent that the theatre traditionally avoids. People come to participate in it, to join in, and then allow the realization to enter them and work upon them. The whole point of the proceedings is to help them change the orientation of their souls, even though they are also confirming the foundation of their beliefs. They have come to meet, to make the ceremony, and to respond, at a level that may include but goes well beyond the aesthetic. But a church can go on "working" even when there is no performance and no crowd. A person can come into a silent church in order to respond to the building and its meaning. This can produce an experience as profoundly moving as that of attending a performance. The same thing cannot be said of visiting an empty theatre.”

Thomas Merton who had been wrestling with God for a long time by then was so moved by the mostly empty Santa Sabina Basilica in Rome when he visited one day, that something in him flipped from being a tourist to becoming a pilgrim. He set down his camera and went down to the front, to the altar, knelt and said the Lord’s prayer and then stayed there rapt in silence. He said he could hardly do otherwise so drawn was he by the Spirit of God even though the whole time he was nervous some nun would come out and fuss at him. How odd, he reflected, that he would think it perfectly normal to tour a church, but scandalous to pray in one. It was the beginning of his conversion.

What makes a church lovely and not just utilitarian or awesome or inspiring is that it holds the historical memory in its walls of all the prayers spoken and held quietly, the tears shed in joy and in grief. A Church is compassion. There is love here. How lovely indeed is your dwelling place.

The people make the church and then the church makes the people. We have been shaped by this place, this simple, humble place of worship. As those who worship with our feet on concrete and look upon stone and iron, we become people who remember we worship a God we can trust. God is faithful and true. And truth is a gift. As those who worship with open windows through which the sun shines and through which we see the rain fall, leaves turn, red birds flutter, roses bloom, we are those who remember we are part of God’s creation of enduring praise. We are open to the Spirit’s movement among us; we breathe in the new and sometimes the surprising as we worship the God who makes all things new. In Christ, there is new creation. As those who worship under a cross, and with symbols of our faith, we become people who come to the foot of the cross, delighting in the mysterious wonder of God’s salvation given in Jesus Christ and attested through art and witness all through time. As those who worship at the altar table, with bread and the cup, we worship as those who come empty handed to the table of grace where we are all welcomed by Christ.

God is here. God is here in us, the congregation gathered in the name of Jesus Christ for worship, at the Table, and with one another in love. Indeed, how lovely is God’s dwelling place today.

Let us pray: O Lord, God of Israel and, in Jesus Christ, God of our lives, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who come before you with all their heart. Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, yet O God, we know you indeed dwelt on earth, in the person of Jesus Christ, in whose name and by whose death and resurrection we are saved. May your eyes be open night and day toward this house and those of this household that you may hear the prayers of your servants offered here and restore our souls. Hear our prayers O Lord. Receive us to your Table of Grace. Amen.