

- ¹ *How lovely is your dwelling place,
LORD Almighty!*
- ² *My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.*
- ³ *Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
LORD Almighty, my King and my God.*
- ⁴ *Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.*
- ⁵ *Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.*
- ⁶ *As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.*
- ⁷ *They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.*
- ⁸ *Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.*
- ⁹ *Look on our shield, ^e O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.*
- ¹⁰ *Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.*
- ¹¹ *For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.*
- ¹² *LORD Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you. (Psalm 84)*

Do You Long for the Courts of the Lord?

Someone told me the other day that we have the hottest ticket in town. They were talking about our ap to sign up for church services. We usually send out the link to sign up on Tuesday morning and sometimes the early service is full by noon. Sometimes people can't get in. Now, that's a good problem to have. This week, we don't have it because the positive tests at HVL have affected some of our regular attenders, but I hope that's a temporary reality. Who would've ever imagined it would come to this? If you had told me on the day I was ordained that one day, we'd have an ap to limit how many people came to church, I would've thought you were dreaming. But that's where we are today. And it's clear that there are people who miss church. The fact that many people are willing to watch it online shows how much they value it. Our psalm for today may speak to people like us who were denied church attendance for a couple of months earlier this year and who may still not

be able to come as often as they would like. It speaks of longing to be in God's house – or to put in Old Testament terms – in the courts of the Lord. In 2020, does this psalm speak to you? **Do you long for the courts of the Lord?**

Psalm 84 was written by one of the sons of Korah, musicians who worked in the tabernacle, during the time of King David and in the temple once Solomon built it. Verse 2 says, **“My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD.”** Why courts? Well, most of the Israel's worship space was outside, for the simple reason that they offered animal sacrifices which they burned on an altar. That would be pretty hard to do inside. So, there was a courtyard that was enclosed with a wall. In that courtyard was the altar and a huge basin for washing. One on side there was also a structure – the building we usually think of as the temple or tabernacle. The structure was divided into the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place and God taught them to think of him as being inside the Most Holy Place. But the people never went inside that structure. Only priests did that. The people gathered in the courtyard and offered their sacrifices and their prayers and the hymns to God there. That was what church was like for them.

We might not find that to be terribly fulfilling. But that was how they drew near to God. God showed them his love in the sacrifices. Every one of those sacrifices was a shadow of Jesus sacrificing himself on the cross to pay for their sin and ours. You could say that every one of the sacrifices pre-enacted the death of Jesus. That was how they heard and saw the gospel.

So why did this son of Korah need to yearn and even faint for the courts of the Lord? It appears that whichever one of them wrote this psalm could not get to the tabernacle, at least for a time. Verse 9 speaks of a shield and of the anointed one, which here probably means King David. We know that some of the Sons of Korah were warriors who served King David during the time when his son Absalom rebelled against him. Maybe this psalm was written during that time or during another campaign, and the author was far from home. He missed being able to come and pray and worship and learn of God's love in the courts of the Lord. He envied the birds who built nests near that open air altar. He talks about pilgrims going up to the tabernacle. That's the point of that verse about the pools in the Baka Valley – it was normally dry there. But when it rained, the water gathered in pools and sustained the pilgrims who had to travel through it to get to the house of God. The author says, **“Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.”** He says, **“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.”** A doorkeeper was a servant. It was not a prestigious position. But this son of Korah would rather be a servant in the house of God than own the tent of wickedness.

We don't worship the way they did. When was the last time I burned an animal in church? It just doesn't happen. It doesn't have to, because Jesus has come and he has fulfilled all those Old Testament sacrifices. He offered his life as the payment for all our sins. He washed all our guilt away in his blood. We are now holy and perfect in God's sight. And in the New Testament, God has given us different ways to remember that truth. But they still involve gathering in his house. Now, in the Old Testament, there was literally one house of God. There was one tabernacle and later one temple. Most people did not go there every week, if for no other reason, it was too far away. Later, the Jewish people established local synagogues as places of prayer and worship (but not sacrifice) where they did attend every week, just like we come to church every week. But they still had that one central sanctuary. But when Jesus came, God did away with the whole concept of one centralized temple. The tabernacle and temple were symbols of God in heaven reaching down to us. God did that when Jesus came. Now, he is with us always so we don't need one central sanctuary.

But we do still come to God's house to hear his word, to partake of his sacrament, to be reminded of his love and his salvation, to be pointed to Jesus and to the life to come. That's what this place – and every Christian church – is: the house of God. Like that son of Korah, when we can't come here, it's natural for us to miss it. Life is hard. We may not be deployed in the army, but we are at war with the devil and the world and our sinful flesh. And sometimes, the battle gets us down. Sometimes, our own sins and failure weigh on us. We feel like hypocrites. We wonder if God will really forgive us. Sometimes, it's other things that drag us down. COVID has gotten really, really old. I'm not the only one who thinks that, right? The opposition we face from the world around us, the difficulties that come with going to work and school, the never-ending battle against stress – all these things can drag us down.

We come to God's house to be picked up. God picks us up from our guilt and our sin, not by pre-enacting Jesus' death through animal sacrifices, but by reminding us of what Jesus has now done. He describes

in the word. He applies it in sermons and hymns, and in a very special way in communion. He comes to us in his body and blood in, with and under the bread and wine of communion. He comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit connected to the stumbling words of a pastor. He comes to us when our shepherd tells us that our sins are forgiven. He lifts up our hearts and tells us that we don't need to feel guilty anymore because Jesus has made us righteous in his sight. Then he tells us that that same Jesus is with us, no matter what we face here. That Jesus spent his life on us and we are his. He won't let all those hard things separate us from his love. He will hear our prayers. He will work for our good every day. And he will bring us home to be with him. Until we get there, he will lift us up and carry us. He will support our faith and make it strong. We come here so he can do that. We come here to see Jesus.

Just like those Old Testament sacrifices pre-enacted the sacrifice of Christ, coming here pre-enacts living with Jesus forever. In the Old Testament, God taught his people to think of him as being there at the tabernacle and the temple. When the people were in the courtyard, God was inside the structure, inside the Most Holy Place, hovering above the Ark of the Covenant. They brought their sacrifices to the very doorstep of God's house. In the New Testament, God explains that that tabernacle and temple were models of heaven, God's true home. When Jesus died on the cross, he presented his sacrifice to his Father in heaven. And God the Father accepted it. When Jesus rose, he ascended into heaven to sit there at the right hand of God and rule all things.

When Jesus comes back, he is going to bring us into the very presence of God. We will live with him forever. Today is a festival of the church year called Saints Triumphant. It's all about how we win after all the years of waiting and worshipping and struggling and hearing are done. In our gospel lesson for today, we heard the famous account of the five wise and the five foolish virgins. They were waiting for the bridegroom to come and take them into the wedding feast – the wedding reception – to celebrate with him. That's us. In this life, we are waiting for Jesus to come. We are waiting for him to usher us into eternal life.

Every time we come here, we pre-enact that entrance. We pre-enact Jesus raising us and taking all sin out of our hearts forever. We pre-enact the end of all pain and sorrow and sin – the very moment when death dies and our world is made new again. We pre-enact the wedding supper of the Lamb every time we come forward and feast on the body and blood of Christ in holy communion. We do that because we're still down here. We're still waiting, like those virgins were. And like all ten of them, the wise as well as the foolish, it's easy for us to get sleepy here. It's easy for us to get distracted here. It's easy for us to get depressed and worn down by life here.

There is only one thing that wakes us up and renews our zeal: the call that the bridegroom is coming! Jesus is coming, my friends. Every time we come here to this house of God, we are reminded of that greater house in heaven. Every time we come and hear his word, we hear that Jesus is near. And God works in that good news. God works in that promise that we are soon going home with him. He builds up our faith so that we can make it through whatever is coming and then win. Jesus will return and we will be Triumphant Saints forever.

When I was vicar, I served at big congregation in Madison, Wisconsin. There was an elderly lady there in that church. I don't remember her name. It was almost thirty years ago. But I do remember that she was in her nineties. She was very frail. She couldn't have weighed a hundred pounds dripping wet and she walked with a cane – very, very carefully. And she never missed church. It didn't matter how much ice was on the sidewalk. She picked her way across that snow and ice and she came. The pastors and ushers and I would see her coming and we would rush to open the doors and get her safe inside. But there was never a question of her staying home. Why not? Her soul longed for the house of God – for the courts of the Lord, to put it the way Psalm 84 does. She longed to be there and hear the good news about Jesus. She longed to get a foretaste of heaven – the heaven that could not have been that far away from her anymore. The heaven that she entered decades ago now.

Do we long for the courts of the Lord? Can we imagine the teenagers in our families being that dedicated to getting to church? Can we imagine ourselves insisting on getting there, no matter how hard it has become to walk and how dangerous it is to pick our way across the ice? I hope so. But maybe God is allowing COVID to interrupt our church attendance to remind us how much we need it. Maybe God is encouraging us to treasure what he has given us. In Christ, God has forgiven us, even for our failure to be zealous for his house and his word. In Christ, God has forgiven us for all the times we didn't want to roll out of bed, or face the bad

weather, or listen to another long and boring sermon. In Christ, God comes to us in all the difficulties that bring us down and that make it hard for us to face the day. God loves in Christ. When we come here, we pre-enact the life we will experience with him forever. Consider it a joy and a privilege to hear that gospel message. It will preserve your faith until you reach eternal life. Amen.