

Regathering

Psalm 84

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First Central Congregational Church
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[Sigh]

So, here we are. A few of us, at least. For those of us who've been the faithful remnant here each week for the last five months, it is good to look out and see other faces, even if they are masked and distant.

Today is a festive day. Even if our festivity is muted, but more especially because it is only a foretaste of the truly big party that awaits—the longed for day when we can all gather together again with the hugs and handshakes and coffee hour. That day is not today, but we continue to pray and hope and do our best to follow the health guidelines so that we might hasten the coming of that day.

For today we are diverting from the Book of Genesis and chose Psalm 84 as our text. This is one of the Zion Psalms, used by God's people as part of a pilgrimage to the holy site in Jerusalem where they join together in worship. Walter Brueggemann writes, "This psalm articulates anticipation of being in that place and envisions arriving there."

As we continue our pilgrimage through this calamitous time, we turn to these ancient words to help us explore our longing, and also to recognize the importance of this day, when we begin to gather in new ways as a God's people at worship.

Walter Brueggemann points out that the psalm begins with "an exclamation of the beauty of the place of [God's] presence." The pilgrims have seen the city or the temple from afar and respond with joy.

Why our attractions to specific buildings? For one thing, they become central to key parts of our stories—where we and our children are baptized and married, where our family and friend's lives were celebrated and mourned, where we mark the significant turning points of the years.

But, of course, God does not need buildings to carry on the work of the church. They aren't essential in that way. Yet, through the centuries we've realized the importance buildings can play for carrying on that ministry over time. N. T. Wright describes them as "bridgeheads into the world." And adds that we should see our buildings of public worship as "advance signs of the time when God's glory will fill all creation." This is what they are designed to do, the role they play in the wider society. And he describes these last few months as an "enforced exile" as our buildings have been unable to fully serve their purpose, to the glory of God.

If our buildings are signs of God's intention for the world, that explains why we want them to be inspiring, comforting, and beautiful. And why being absent from them, and the worship that takes places in them, is felt as such a significant loss. I, for one, have felt so unmoored these months. Like many of you I have attended worship almost every week my

entire life, and only when it was absent did I realize how vital it is for my well-being, my identity, my morality, my very sense of self.

Which grasps the sense of the next section of the psalm, that begins with a beatitude—“Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.” The psalmist reminds us that God’s people are strengthened and comforted through troubled times by God’s presence with them. Brueggeman writes, “Those who anticipate a pilgrimage to worship and those who are in worship . . . know joy in life.” He adds, “The journey may be long and difficult, but the anticipation of encountering the presence of God in Zion brings hope and expectation.”

William Bellinger points out that it “is the encounter with the divine presence that makes the event and the place so significant.” Fortunately, we worship a God who is not confined by a specific place. Our worship is not confined to this building. We have shown these last few months the power of our spiritual connection, drawing people together across vast distances to worship God. And as we move into this new season of the church’s worship, we will never only gather here in person—we will always gather as a hybrid people, some physically present and some participating digitally. And in this way we will be more faithful as God’s people, better able to minister to those who are sick, staying home, traveling, or living away from us. For it is God’s presence which sanctifies the moment and the place, and God is present with us in all times and all places.

Verses 8 and 9 of the Psalm include a petition for God to support the leaders of the people. We have been reminded throughout these months of the centrality of prayer to sustain us. Let us keep praying. Let us pray for our leaders—political, medical, academic, scientific, moral, religious, etc.—that they be given wisdom, courage, and discernment. Let us continue to lament, being present with the world and sharing in its pain during this season of illness, death, and grief. Let us continue to pray for justice, as the pandemic reveals the long-standing inequities of our society. And let us continue to pray for the end of the virus, imploring God to deliver us, to bring salvation to the world.

The psalm concludes with another moment of anticipation of being in the divine presence and the grand blessings that bestows. What are those blessings? Walter Brueggemann describes them as “whole, healthy, complete life in all its dimensions.” Sounds like something we all desire right now, doesn’t it? And worship is one of the vital ways we receive those blessings. Brueggemann writes, “Encounter with the divine presence in worship can make possible an integration of the various dimensions of life and its hopes.”

Four years ago for my sabbatical I did a lot of reading and exploration on worship, so I turned back to some of those writers this week as I was pondering the importance of this day and why worship is vital to us humans. James K. A. Smith writes that beauty is the Gospel’s power, as Christian worship presents “a winsome invitation to share in this envisioned good life.” Worship does this by presenting a vision of the good life, of what it is “to flourish and live well.” We do that through words, songs, visuals, etc.

Part of the struggle these last months has been how to do that faithfully through digital media, and I hope you believe we’ve done our best, because we really have tried. It is a struggle, because, as Smith writes, “One of the first things that should strike us about Christian worship is how earthy, material, and mundane it is. To engage in worship requires a body—

with lungs to sing, knees to kneel, legs to stand, arms to raise, eyes to weep, noses to smell, tongues to taste, ears to hear, and hands to hold and raise.” So we’ve encouraged you to light candles, draw pictures and tape them in your windows, prepare communion to share together, etc.

This is one of the many reasons why regathering is so vitally important to our faith. As Smith adds, “Historic Christian worship is fundamentally formative because it educates our hearts through our bodies.”

Worship, then, engages us in a holistic view of life, integrating our various dimensions. We believe that Christian worship is vital to health, wholeness, and well-being. These are the blessings of God we receive together in this time of praise and thanksgiving.

So, with praise to the living God on this festive day that is itself only a foretaste of the yet more festive day that we anticipate together, we sing with the ancient psalmist, “My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord.”