

Text: Psalm 84
Title Homesick Joy
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For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON
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There's always that point at the end of a long trip when you're just kinda done.

When you're done with new experiences and new sights and sounds.
You get to the point where your stomach is done with new food.
Your body aches to sleep in your own bed.
You're done living out of a suitcase, especially because the dirty laundry outnumbers your clean clothes.
When you're full to the brim with new memories, and just can't take anymore in.

There's always the point at the end of a long trip when you're just kinda done and you're ready to be home.

When all you want is to pull into the driveway, walk in the front door, drop your bags, and be where you belong. And home is never quite as lovely, as appreciated, as when you return after being gone for a while.

Now we might find this particular longing for home a bit difficult these days, since we have spent so much time at home. Only at home. If absence can make our heart grow fonder, then constant presence can also make us a little contemptuous of our surroundings. And maybe at the end of your own brief travels and trips this summer, it took you a while longer to reach that point where you wanted to or needed to go home.

But the feeling of homesickness, of longing for that sense of belonging and being at home, we know that feeling.

It may be for our childhood home, or a home you left because of a big move, or the home you raised your kiddos in and have since downsized to something just for you. Or for some of us, we've never had the kinda home life where you're safe and beloved and you long for the kind of home where you do.

We all know that longing for home. Where we know we belong. Know we are loved.

This psalm is often treated as a simple song of joy. One that relishes in a sense of being at home with God. A song of praise. A song of homecoming.

How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!
Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere!

Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you!

And it does indeed sounds triumphant. There is an undeniable jubilant tone to this psalm. That's one of the reasons it's well known and beloved by many and worked into so many praise songs.

But if you listen a little closer and read it a little less cheery, this psalm is a spoken by one who is homesick.

My soul yearns, it even faints, for the courts of the Lord.
My heart, my flesh, cry out for the living God.
Look! Even the sparrow has found a home,
the swallow has a nest for herself and her hungry children,
they're tucked into a place near your altar.

Do we hear a tinge of envy here in the psalmist's words?

Envy of those little birds and their nests.
Envy that they are at home so close to the place of God's presence.
Jealousy over how the sticks of their nests right over the heads of the priests as they pour out offerings each day and pray before the altar.

This psalm comes to us from a time when God's presence rested most tangibly in the Temple of Jerusalem. Psalm 84 is part of a collection known as the Songs of Zion with the psalter. Songs focused on celebrating the presence of God in the Temple in the City of God. This psalmist knows the beauty of the Temple.

The way the sunlight in the morning warmed it to a lovely glow, the sound of the crowd chanting and singing and talking and laughing in the outer courts.
The smells of spices and incense mingling with the smell of sacrifices and smoke.
He has made the journey from his home to God's house.
He's walked the highways with other pilgrims going to worship the Lord Almighty for Passover or Pentecost.
He knows the valleys like Baka where the travelling becomes difficult, each step a struggle, and yet they know the cool rains that come and the strength they find to finish out the journey.

And he knows the sweetness of finally arriving at the Temple, the place of God's presence, and knowing he is at home with God, where he belongs:

With God's people worshipping and praising the Lord Almighty,
who is the sun and shield and home for his people.

But the poet, the psalmist, isn't there now. The joy expressed comes from the warm memories he has. And the longing, the homesickness, comes from the simple fact that he can't make the journey with the other pilgrims. He can't go home. He can't see the Temple. He can only remember it.

And we're not told why he can't. What stops him. Circumstances or exile. Illness or advanced age.

Just that he can't.

Psalm 84 simply gives us his past memories of joy and his present longing to be at home with God.

Now Psalm 84 is a bit tricky for us as 21st century Christians. Psalm 84 is about the Temple. But as Christians we know that God's dwelling with us is not just in one city in one country in one temple, but because of Jesus and through the Holy Spirit, God's dwelling place is with us in every place.

And so this Song of Zion has been adapted over the centuries by Christians in ways we can use it more easily:

Psalm 84 has been associated with funerals and death. With God's dwelling place becoming heaven and the pilgrimage of the psalmist to Zion a metaphor for our journey from life through death.

And Psalm 84 has been used frequently at dedication services for new church buildings as newly built lovely dwelling places for the Lord Almighty.

But maybe now, in this long season of separation from one another, we don't have to work so hard to reinterpret his psalm to apply to our lives.

At its heart, this psalm is about the deep joy of experiencing God's presence in worship with God's people. Yes, it's about the Temple. But the courts the psalmists longs for aren't empty - they are full of God's people gathered in worship. The roads to Zion are not deserted, they are full of pilgrims making their way together to worship God.

And the psalmist longs to be a part of that group
worshipping God together in God's presence.

Now that is something we know. That kind of homesickness, that kind of longing.

This week, I asked folks while on visits and on the church's social media what they miss about our our life together as a church. What we miss about our pre-pandemic life as a congregation and what we look forward to in our post-pandemic life as a congregation.

"I miss singing with everyone. I miss that lively, boisterous singing."

“I miss the voice of the congregation singing a song we really know and love. How that just carries you and brings you close to God.”

“Hugs. Handshakes. Catching up with people during the Coffee Social after the service in the gym.”

“Listening to a sermon together. Not just alone like listening to a podcast at home. I miss the quiet of hundreds of people listening to the Spirit speak together.”

“Communion. Not at home. Scattered and being climbed on by my kids. But fully present in the space with God’s people.”

“I miss the chance to be a big body of believers as we witness baptisms and professions of faith....I think the biggest thing I miss and look forward to the most is the laying on of hands on all the different occasions. This is one thing we truly haven’t been able to do.”

We miss each other. Being with one another in God’s presence. Worship can happen anywhere. We’re not tied to temple or church building. Thanks be to God. We are in God’s presence whether we’re in our living room on our own or walking a trail through a forest or sitting in a church pew. But, like the psalmist, we long to be in God’s presence together - raising our voices in song together, coming together around the Table and Word, marking our big moments together in prayer and celebration.

We’ve been on a long trip and we’re all kinda done. We’re ready to be home.

We’re done doing church at a distance and physically distanced.

We’re done taking communion a part from each other.

We’re done trying to sing along with just a screen in front of us rather than voices around us to carry us.

Everyone knows it’s at the end of a trip when we’re the most cranky and exhausted. When we’re just done and ready to be home. But when we’re not quite there yet. It can be the hardest part of the trip to stay positive and kind and patient. And it’s real easy to be that kid complaining in the back of the van saying:

“Aren’t we there yet? How much longer? I just want to be home.”

And this is where we need Psalm 84. Not just because we share his homesickness and his longing. Not just because as 21st century Christians in a pandemic, we can identify with an ancient poem about God’s dwelling place in Zion.

But because we need to remember joy.

Somehow this Psalm is known and remembered as a joyful psalm, even in the midst of separation and longing and homesickness. Not a psalm of lament or complaint or anger. But of joy.

And that's because the psalmist with an aching heart and a yearning soul, with envy for the swallows and sparrows at home near the altar, remembers and trusts the God to whom he belongs.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains cover it with pools.
They go from strength to strength
til each appears before you in Zion.

For the Lord God is a sun and shield..
Blessed is the one who trusts in you.

A few weeks ago, we baptized little Charlie and Tyler in an outdoor baptism service following the morning worship service. It's a concession to Covid. A way to keep us all safe while still marking the big moments of our life together as God's people.

So the families gathered around the baptismal font out on the grassy circle outside the front doors. Those gathered in here for the morning service made their way out into the sunshine and made a physically distanced semi-circle around the grass.

And we spoke of God's promises to us in baptism:

Promises to never leave us or forsake us.
Promises of claiming us as his very own.
Promises to always be with us.
Promises that God has made to his people over and over again.
To be our home. Our sun and shield.

And as we sang *Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow*, little Tyler who had just gotten baptized - and wasn't too pleased about getting doused with water - had had enough of standing still and took off from his parents' side to run around on the grass in the sunshine, his hair and forehead damp with the baptismal water.

One person who was there shared this week that that was a moment of joy for her in this hard season of homesickness:

A little boy marked with the waters of belonging and the promises of God

running in the sunshine while God's people sang around him.

In this season of homesickness, may you remember the joy of being with God's people. With trust and with hope in the promises of our faithful God to all those who belong to him.

Better is one day in your courts,
than a thousand elsewhere.

Thanks be to God.