

### A Psalm for the Inward Journey

Psalm 84      *How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!  
...Happy are those whose strength is in you,  
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.*

Psalm 84 may have been sung or recited by pilgrims as they approached the city of Jerusalem. The destination was the great temple. It represented everything sacred about their faith, the very presence of God on earth and with God's people.

How lovely is your dwelling place! My soul longs for the presence of God! Longing to know God's presence is at the heart of our faith. We are not whole until we acknowledge and follow that longing. The life of faith is not about having answers or believing the right things. It is about living out of that spiritual longing and search that makes real our communion with God.

Even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for herself where she may lay her young, at your altars, O God. These are images of the comforting and enfolding presence of God not only with people but also with all of creation. Jesus used a similar image when he talked about the kingdom of God being like a mustard seed (Mk. 4:30-32). This tiny seed grows into a tree or shrub large enough to shelter the birds.

The spiritual life is not just a matter of doing good and right things. It is about being at home in God's sheltering care. Everything else flows from this spiritual at-homeness. To be people who work for peace, justice, and compassion we need to be people who are nourishing our spiritual longing and following that longing into God's dwelling place, God's presence.

Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. Pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem found strength for the journey in their relationship with and seeking of God. The way was marked not by some external roadmap. The way to God was within their own hearts. This deep desire to make the pilgrimage gave strength and endurance to the pilgrim toward the end of the long journey when the going may have been hardest. With such a desire in one's heart, even going through the valley of Baca, a dry and barren place, was made endurable. We don't know exactly where or what this valley was. Perhaps the image is like the "valley of the shadow of death, or deep darkness" in Psalm 23. Even the most difficult phases of the journey are made passable by God's strength within the pilgrim and the pilgrim's own longing for God.

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand anywhere else. Places offering all kinds of alluring delights and short-lived satisfactions cannot hold a candle to being near God's presence or just being on the

journey toward that presence. I would rather just stand at the doorway or be in the "cheap seats" than waste my life on things that don't matter.

As I worked with this psalm the past couple of weeks, I began to hear it as a psalm for what we call the inward journey. Life is constant change, and we can live it like logs being carried down the river. Or we can commit ourselves to an inward journey, a pilgrimage of seeking God and cultivating awareness of life within and around us. The psalm illuminates some dimensions of this pilgrimage, this inward journey.

The first thought that came to me was simply that God is not present only in a designated sacred place. The Jerusalem temple must have been an amazing and inspiring place. But it was a human project about which God had serious doubts. God allowed David to conceive the building of the temple (2 Samuel 7), which Solomon later accomplished. I don't need a house to dwell in, said God to David. When you carried around the Ark of the Covenant in the desert, we were much closer, my people and I. We were on a journey together. The trouble began when people tied God's presence too closely to the temple. Temple worship became separated from the way people lived. So the prophets attacked temple worship that had become disconnected from the way the leaders and the people lived. As we might put it today, religion became a Sunday morning exercise in piety that did not carry over to the rest of the week.

Temples, churches, even this modest chapel are places where we gather to be aware of God and God's presence, and to hear God's word to us. Worshiping together is essential to being a community of faith. But God's presence is throughout the creation and in our own hearts. In John's gospel, Jesus tells the woman he encounters at a well in Samaria (Jn. 4) that the time is coming when people will not worship on a mountain either in Israel or Samaria. True worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth wherever they are. Their very lives will become worship in all that they do. We can live in such awareness that all places and all times are sacred.

Our inward journey is the cultivating of our awareness of God's reality and presence all around us and in us. Not ideas or doctrines about God, but the reality of God in other people, in the world, and in ourselves. Working faithfully and daily with our inward journey, through silence, prayer, study, meditation, and the practice of being as present as we can be each moment, we can experience the loveliness of God's dwelling place anywhere and everywhere. That growing and deepening awareness will shape the way we live in peace, in just and right relationships, and in compassion.

Our strength and happiness for this journey is the very God whose presence we seek. In fact, happiness, in the view of this psalm, arises from simply being on the journey itself as we live toward something deeper and more real. The psalm talks a good deal about happiness. Happiness as we live in God's presence. Happiness as we draw our strength from God. Happiness as we trust God. We want to be "serious Christians," so I think

we are suspicious of this happiness business! It sounds superficial or bourgeois. However, throughout scripture, not just the psalms, happiness and joy are considered hallmarks of the life of the faithful person. It is a happiness that does not depend on things going well all the time. It is a happiness that does not ignore suffering in the world or in our own lives. It is a happiness that arises as we awaken more and more to our connectedness to God, as we realize increasingly that God's lovely dwelling place is all around us and in us.

I was talking with two young people in the work group that was here recently from New York and Connecticut. On our way to pick up lumber, I asked them what they were hoping to do with their lives. After giving it some thought, one said that he just wanted to be happy. It wasn't said lightly. This young man was giving a week of his summer vacation to help others. I was quite sure that he did not mean a happiness that comes from superficial things, the happiness promoted by our culture. A young person these days has usually seen much unhappiness, maybe in their own families and certainly in the world around them. Here was a young man who wanted to do good things with his life and to be happy. The two things seemed to be connected for him.

Happiness comes into a life rooted in God, trusting in God, loving God, and open to God's love. It is okay to be happy, to be joyful! Even in a world as messed up as ours. Even when there is so much violence and suffering. How are we going to offer anything that helps such a world if we ourselves are hopeless or despondent or angry? We can't. We only make the situation worse. If we are on the inward journey, that pilgrimage of prayer and awareness that leads us more and more into God's presence, then we will know the joy of being who God made us to be and doing what God calls us to do.

I was talking with Phil Boyce recently about matters related to the Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center that we are working to establish. He asked me a good question: What was my worst fear related to this mission? My quick answer was that the whole thing would fall apart and not come to be. We agreed after talking a bit more that even that worst fear is not fearful if we are doing everything we can. If we do that, then even "failure" is not failure. Later I said that I wanted a second shot at his question. My worst fear was not really that the mission might not happen. It was that in the process of working toward it, with all the frustrations and challenges, I would lose my joy, my happiness. I think that is the worst thing that can happen to us. And the psalm assures us that if we are working honestly and sincerely with this inward journey toward God and God's presence, we will find the deep happiness out of which everything else in our lives can flow.

The highways to Zion are in our hearts! Or as another translation puts it—Happy is the one who finds refuge in You, whose mind is on the pilgrim highways (Tanakh—The Holy Scriptures, Jewish Publication Society translation). I love that image. We don't need a roadmap. We don't need

someone else always pointing the way for us. We don't need to read all the latest books. All of that can be helpful, but ultimately it is about knowing our own hearts.

In Jeremiah 33, we read these words of God about a new covenant, a new relationship with us: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.* The kingdom of God is within you, said Jesus (Lk. 17:21). Stop looking here or there. Stop and look within your own hearts. We need to know our own hearts and look there for the ways that lead to God and awareness of God. This is a call to trust ourselves, that God has put within us all we need to live fully and faithfully. The inward journey is the discovery and unfolding of that life.

People who are on an inward journey of faith make a difference in the world. When they walk through dry and barren valleys, they have a way of turning them into fruitful and fertile ground. It isn't because they are above the struggles, the challenges, the sufferings. It is because they live in the midst of all of that with an inner life rooted in God. Some people, including many political and religious leaders, walk through the beautiful valleys of this life only contributing to the suffering and destruction. They may even claim religious justification for their destructiveness. But there are others who live in a different way, who are on that journey of faith that brings them closer and closer to the beauty of God's dwelling place that is everywhere, in each place and each person. Let us strive to be such persons by taking more seriously our inward journeys so that the authenticity of our faith might bring true happiness to us and to the world.