

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Traveling to a Holy Place

Psalm 84

"Welcome back! How was your trip?" That's a question I tend to ask more often here in our congregation during this time of the year. Folks in our congregation are on the road to destinations near and far. Some are local adventures. Some are trips to other parts of our country. Some are trips to other parts of the world. As we get deeper into vacation season, the destinations vary. Sometimes it's family you haven't seen in a while. Sometimes it's a relaxing location you go to every year. Sometimes it's new territory you've never ventured into. Sometimes it's a quick excursion. Sometimes it's a day trip. Sometimes it's a long and deliberate circuit that covers multiple days and thousands of miles. And of course, wherever you go and whatever you do, your return to home, and to church, frequently includes pulling out your phone and showing others pictures of your journeys.

The psalmist in today's text had already been sharing lots of photos during the course of his travels. He was especially eager to distribute his pictures of the Temple in Jerusalem. First, a shot of the Temple when it initially appeared on the horizon. Then a video clip of himself and his fellow pilgrims as they drew closer and closer to the house of the Lord. Then, upon arrival at the sacred site, multiple photos from various angles, capturing the beauty and splendor of God's dwelling place. One of the psalmist's personal favorites was a shot of some birds nesting in the Temple complex. There were also numerous photos of Temple priests and other personnel involved in their daily worship duties. To the psalmist, these were all reminders of what it means to literally find a "home" in the Temple.

Psalm 84 is one of several psalms often referred to as songs of Zion. They were probably recited or sung by pilgrims as they made their way toward, arrived at, or walked about Jerusalem. Imagine the excitement of arriving at such a destination. It's no wonder that the psalmist was eager to pull photos off of his iCloud and show them to family and friends. To God's people, this was the holy city, and the Temple was the sacred site of the Lord dwelling among his people. Making the journey to Jerusalem was therefore an act of worship and an expression of faith. It was rooted in the faith of the original pilgrim, Abraham, whose story began with God's command to get up and depart from his country and kin on the basis of God's promise. As we heard earlier in our reading from Hebrews, Abraham "obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ... For he was looking forward to the city, with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (11:8, 10).

From the start, God's people had been a journeying people, a community of believers on the way to a salvation secured by the promises of the Lord. So pilgrimage was part of their identity. They were sojourners in this present world. Just as they regularly made their way to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life and worship, so they were also part of the larger story of redemption, a story of the God who would bring them, finally and fully, to a "home" in the glory of his presence. This image of pilgrimage also marked the life and ministry of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as well the community of his followers, the church. We who confess Jesus as the Messiah are people of the way, people who are always journeying

rather than being completely settled. Our travels along the way of our Lord have meaning and purpose because the journey ends in a place called "home," a new heaven and new earth filled with God's glory.

The destination is what helps give direction and significance to all kinds of pilgrimages, including those that aren't explicitly religious. Some of you are probably familiar with the Rolling Thunder organization. Though its annual motorcycle demonstration in the nation's capital ended in 2019, there's still an annual event called Run for the Wall, a motorcycle ride that starts in Ontario, California and ends ten days later at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Several years ago, Jill Dubisch wrote of this event:

For the veterans making this pilgrimage, memories of the Vietnam War—memories that are often long buried—resurface in the course of the cross-country ride and during the rituals that accompany it. ... "Welcome home, brother" is the greeting given to the riders, both by fellow veterans and by those who host them in communities along the way. This welcome contrasts with the veterans' earlier return from Vietnam, a return often marked by hostile war protestors and an indifferent society. It is the support received in the course of the Run that enables many of the veterans to finally face that ultimate shrine to the Vietnam War: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial ("the Wall") in Washington, DC.¹

Note the language and imagery of journeying that helps describe and make sense of what these veterans experience. Pilgrimage. Memory. Ritual. Home. Shrine. These are categories that capture a sense of traveling through and traveling toward, a kind of active movement that helps hold together the past, the present, and the future. That's part of what pilgrimage does for us. It weaves together where we've been, where we are, and where we're headed.

Sometimes this journey from the past into the present and on into the future gets captured in music. The song "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is often referred to as the "Black national anthem." It was themed around the struggles of African Americans following the Reconstruction era. The second verse says:

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

From there, the hymn goes on to prayerfully ask God to keep the people on the path, "Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee."

For pilgrims like the psalmist in today's text, there was no more important place to meet God than in Jerusalem, particularly at the Temple. God's house, God's presence, is the psalmist's true home, no matter what house he has traveled from. And along the way, the psalmist and his fellow travelers have already met and experienced God in ways that sustained and renewed them. "They go from strength to strength, til each appears before God in Zion" (v. 7). So for these pilgrims, their vision of God, waiting for them in the holy city, energizes and enlivens them for whatever they experience in the journey, such that wherever they go, they bring blessings to others.

In his short story, "Two Old Men," Leo Tolstoy tells of Efim and Elisha, who decide that before they die they must make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. One person summarizes the story this way:

After months of planning, they collect what they will need and begin to walk. After a long day on the road, they come to a village that seems deserted. No one is about, and seeing a small hut, they look in to see what has happened. They enter its darkness and smell death. As their eyes adjust to the lack of light, they see bodies on beds. With trepidation they come close, and see that the people are still alive, but barely.

Elisha wants to stay and help. He encourages his companion to go on beyond the village, "And I will catch up with you." But as Elisha opens doors and windows, and offers them food and drink, he begins to see that their needs are more complex than he first imagined—and that it is not only them, but the whole village that is suffering. He finds his friend and tells Efim that he wants to stay longer, encouraging him to make his way on to Jerusalem. "I will find you," he says.

So one man stays in the village, helping the villagers find their way again to happiness and health, never going on to Jerusalem, eventually returning home; the other man makes his way to Jerusalem. He keeps waiting for his friend who never comes, so before long he returns home to Russia—again, walking across a continent. At one point along the way, he comes to a village that seems strangely familiar to him. And then he realizes that it is where he left his friend—but everything seems very different now. Men and women, older and younger, are busy at work and play; animals are healthy, and the crops are growing, and so he asks, "What has happened?" In simple innocence, the villagers explain that a man stopped along the way and gave them back their life.²

There are different ways to interpret Tolstoy's story. Through it, maybe each of us is called upon to consider his or her own spiritual journey. Though Tolstoy doesn't necessarily disparage Efim, who completed the pilgrimage, perhaps he does challenge us to consider how saving the village became Elisha's pilgrimage. As one person has asked, "Who really got the goal of the pilgrimage?"³

As Christians, the goal of our journey, this pilgrimage of faith, is the resurrection of the dead at the coming of Christ, and the full revelation of God's reign in the new creation, where God's people will enjoy the glory of his presence forever. But at every step along the way in this pilgrimage, God bestows strength, and we have opportunities to bring blessings to those we encounter along the way. This may be part of what's captured in today's text when the psalmist refers to "Baca" (v. 6), a place whose location is unknown. Apparently it was a dry place: "As they pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains cover it with pools." Somehow the presence of the pilgrims brings relief and transformation. May this also be said of our lives as we make our way by faith toward our destination in Christ, that our lives bring blessings and transformation to the places we go and the people we meet.

So wherever you go and whomever you meet in your travels, near and far, especially this time of the year, it's important that you understand both your routes and your destination within the larger frame of pilgrimage. Otherwise you start to treat your travels in this present world as something ultimate and eternal, rather than what they are, relatively brief adventures that point beyond themselves to a greater journey sustained by the strength of the Lord.

The story is told of a tourist who was traveling through an area where the famed Rabbi Hofetz Chaim was living. Since the tourist was a great admirer of the rabbi, he made

inquiries about visiting him at his home. He soon got word that he was welcome at anytime. When he arrived and entered the rabbi's one-room house, the tourist was amazed to see only a table, a lamp, and a cot, along with lots of books. Surprised, he asked, "Rabbi, where is the rest of your furniture?" And the rabbi calmly replied, "Where is yours?" Puzzled by the rabbi's response, the tourist said, "My furniture? But I'm only a visitor here." The wise rabbi replied, "So am I."⁴

Thanks for making the pilgrimage here to church today. Here in this community of God's people, you're both a visitor and at home. You're a visitor in the sense that along with the rest of us, this present world, as it is, isn't your ultimate home. Your ultimate home is in the fully revealed reign of God. But at the same time, you're at home in the sense that we're here together in the presence of our sovereign God. Your destination, daily and eternally, lies in him. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God" (vv. 1-2).

¹ Jill Dubisch, "Sites of Memory, Sites of Sorrow: An American Veterans' Motorcycle Pilgrimage." In *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred*, ed. Peter Jan Margry (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008) 300.

² Adapted from Steve Garber, *Visions of Vocation* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2014) 112-114.

³ David Steindl-Rast, in his retelling of the story. <https://grateful.org/resource/two-old-men/> (June 20, 2024).

⁴ *God's Little Devotional Book for Dads* (Honor Books, 2002) 142-143.