

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



## **“Better than a Thousand Elsewhere”**

**A dialogical sermon by Robert L. Yoder and Almira Mbah**

**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)**

**August 23, 2015**

**1 Kings 8:24–43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10–20; John 6:56–60, 67–68**

---

There are many things that are attractive to me about this church: its emphasis on justice and community in the city of Durham; the care and depth of worship which we experience each Sunday, including the emotional beauty of the music such as the anthem which lifts us into another dimension; the commitment of our members to each other—we are truly a family here. In addition, it does not hurt that we worship each Sunday in a place of such great beauty.

Sometimes when I want to pray alone, I have come into this room and, somehow, God seems very present. Sometimes I visit with people who are seeking advice and help and who are faced with needs far greater than I can imagine. Sometimes they want me to pray with them. We go into the sanctuary and pray. Somehow God just seems close there.

I. Something of this longing for God in the sanctuary was on the mind and voice of King Solomon when he prayed, “Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place [this temple]; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.” He then adds, “...when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house [this temple] then hear in heaven... and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you.”

The loveliness of the temple was on the mind of the *psalmist, who exalted,*

<sup>1</sup>*How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!*

<sup>2</sup>*My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*

This psalm invites pilgrims on that journey. It sings to the spirit of the travelers and it encourages those who have little or no hope. This is a pastoral psalm. Its singing reaches to those who may not be in God's house, those who may not know what it means to trust anyone, let alone God. It reaches with knowing hands.

The psalmist who envies the birds that forever live in the temple reflects...

<sup>3</sup>*Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.*

<sup>4</sup>*Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.*

David Smith has informed me that, while we may not have sparrows or swallows, Chimney Swifts have found a home and made their nests in the abandoned chimneys of our church. About a week before I started working on this sermon, I remembered how a bird somehow found its way into the church. We immediately sealed off the church as best we could to limit the extent to which the bird might fly. But it found its way up to the second floor where are our church offices. Eventually the bird became exhausted and Robert Daye captured it in a box, took it outside, and let it go. When I lived in the Philippines and worshipped in Central Church, Manila, it was a different story. Every Sunday we had birds flying among the rafters of the church, and no one was bothered. Indeed, somehow the birds warbling mingled with our voices as if to give praise to God. Those singing in God's house, so says the Psalm, are happy. Beyond that, the temple is a refuge. For centuries, the church has been recognized as a sanctuary where people can flee for safety. Some churches have given sanctuary to the so-called "illegal immigrants" in order not to split up families. More broadly, a church sanctuary is a place of refuge for anyone who needs emotional or spiritual support. While God is not confined to a building, many people seek out a sanctuary of some sort when they are at a low point.

The psalmist knows where encouragement comes. He declares...

<sup>5</sup>*Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.*

<sup>6</sup>*As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.*

<sup>7</sup>*They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.*

Traveling to the temple was not an easy task. There was no light rail, 4-lane highway, or airport to use. Pilgrims usually traveled in a caravan to avoid attacks from bandits. I don't know where the valley of Baca was, nor can you likely locate it on any detailed Old Testament map. If it is a literal place, it must have been a place of desolation. Actually, the word "Baca" could be translated, sorrow or weeping, so one possible translation is "the valley of weeping." The psalmist suggests that God will provide springs in the desert, and pilgrims will experience a journey of "strength to strength" as they look to Zion and long to worship God. In short, "Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion."

The psalmist extols God by saying...

<sup>8</sup>*O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!*

<sup>9</sup>*Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed.*

<sup>10</sup>*For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.*

<sup>11</sup>*For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.*

<sup>12</sup>*O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.*

Paul elaborated on God as a shield of faith in terms of the "whole armor of God." Other defensive weapons are the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes that lead to the proclamation of the gospel of peace, the helmet of salvation, and the spiritual sword or God's word.

The psalmist uses another word not often found in the Old Testament as a word describing God: the word sun [s-u-n].<sup>1</sup> Not only is God a shield but our *sun* and shield. Horatius Boner, a Scottish nineteenth century writer and religious poet, saw Jesus as the one from whom God had bestowed his favor and honor to God's people:

Jesus, Sun and Shield art Thou;  
Sun and Shield for ever:  
Never canst Thou cease to shine,  
Cease to guard us never.  
Cheer our steps as on we go,  
Come between us and the foe.

The gospel lesson used words which many people find offensive even today: eating Christ's body and drinking Christ's blood. The closing words ask the ultimate question, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

You've seen the bumper stickers, "I'd rather be dancing," "I'd rather be in Texas," "I'd rather be fishing." How about: "I'd rather be in the house of God." I've had times when I've been bored to death in a church service, and I've had times when I have felt the presence of God. Behind that, most of the time, was how I felt coming to church—grudgingly or expectantly.

The psalmist concludes...

*"O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you."*

© FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 2015. FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.

---

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps because some pagan religions such as the Egyptian actually worshiped the Sun as God.