

“Directions, Please!”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
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Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

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.

Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.

Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.

They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!

Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed.

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.

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.

O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Do you have a place? A place where you are completely free to breathe deeply, to take off all the niceties of being out in society – maybe it’s taking off the smile that you’ve put on for everyone, or the professional appearance. Maybe it’s loosening the belt or the tie, taking off the heels, flopping and not worrying what your body looks like.

Maybe it’s a place where you’ve taken things on – where there is the opportunity or ability to be inspired, challenged, and relaxed at the same time. Where you are surrounded by people you trust, what do you do when you’re completely comfortable? Share ideas without worry of judgment? Sing as loud and as off key without shame? Dream up projects that you may or may not ever get around to?

Psalm 84 reminds me of those places that have inspired and embraced me. And actually, one of those places for me isn’t actually *my* place, it’s a place created by CS Lewis – Narnia.

Narnia is the *place* of the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, Prince Caspian, the Voyage of the Dawn Treader. Maybe I think of Narnia when I read Psalm 84 because courts feature prominently in Narnia, as does the imagery of a sun and shields, as do springs and life-giving pools.

The beauty of Narnia is that Lewis creates there both a place *and* a metaphorical sense of what it means to live out the best of God's calling. These four children are called into this other realm, and there they are called to be the best part of themselves. They have some learning and growing to do while they are there. Edmund, the character who betrays his family, has to learn what values will truly lead him to the best. Susan becomes less self-absorbed, Peter becomes less arrogant, and learns how to be a true leader.

You don't have to go to Narnia to find God's place.

"Better is one day in your courts." When I first heard those words in the song we're about to sing, I pictured stately courts – columns, white marble, light reflecting off of everything. I assumed that these courts were in heaven, and I would get to them after I die. Of course one day in heaven would be better than a thousand *not* in heaven.

I realize now, though, that I don't have to wait, and I don't have to try to will God to pull me through a magical wardrobe to Narnia, either. I realized that it's a little more abstract than one day getting to a perfect utopia. The Psalmist isn't describing a place he's never been, a place that he only dreams about existing. The Psalmist is describing the *feeling* of living at one with God, symbolized by the Temple, the Hebrew dwelling place of God.

That version makes it a little problematic for me, though – when those courts were in heaven, I didn't have to worry about how to get there. It would just happen when I died. If it's a feeling, a way of being that I can find *now*, though, then I'm left to my own devices, left with the question – just how exactly do I get there?

If you're looking for God's courts, if you're looking to find that place where you're whole being responds with energy and confidence, for the place that is safe to build the foundation of your being, as the swallow builds a nest for her young, you, too, might find yourself asking God – I need a little direction, please!

Because surely if I were already living in God's courts, I would not be surrounded by news of terrorists, or wildfires destroying homes and lives, or walk by people who spent the night cold huddled in the bushes, while also finding in my own self greed and selfishness. If I were living in God's courts, we would have already perfected the delicate balance between supporting the world economy and making sure that everyone experiences the *abundance* that our world has to give. If I were living in God's courts, I would constantly be aware of God's presence walking beside me, I would feel God's love shining on me every second of my day.

I know these problems can be solved. I know there must be a solution. I just need to take the right turns to get there. The right GPS.

It turns out that the "right GPS" is embedded all around me – in scripture, in prayer, in others who model real Christian love. Not the prejudice or piety that Christian has come to be associated with, but the love of Christ, who embraced *all*, whether that meant tax collectors, prostitutes, or even Roman soldiers. *That* kind of Christian love.

Another preacher tells the story of his own search for holiness, and holy places. Through his life, he's done many pilgrimages, visited many sacred sites. He says:

“Yet, despite all these visits to sacred places, the Psalm reminds me that the essence of sacredness is not in a location but in a lifestyle. Sacred sites are preserved and revered because they help us to feel closer to God, and yet the Psalmist informs us that we can be no closer to God than the values we uphold in our everyday lives. As inspiring as they are, visits to holy places (including church on Sunday morning) do not constitute real holiness or sacredness.

“Real holiness is determined by the honesty of our relationships, by the justice we promote in our communities, by the respect we express for others and by using our financial blessings to help those in need. The sacred is not really about special places, but good values that should be lived out in every place.

“And when we live our faith in the love we share, in the service we give and in the justice we promote, we never leave the holy place, because we personify it.... Let's become the church that we invite others to attend.” (Kenneth Samuel, Stillspeaking Daily devotional 8.8.15)

There is good news on this journey.

In one sense, it is not *your* act, but God's. God is already walking the roads to Zion with you. Narnia was not a place that they could find or get to by will – when Lucy tried, the wardrobe was just a wardrobe. God invited and called, and they were pulled into their calling.

In another sense, *you can follow directions*, they are just not marked by places and landmarks, by left or right turns, by street names or Interstate exits. The directions we follow are marked by some of those points of that preacher... “Real holiness is determined by the honesty of our relationships, by the justice we promote in our communities, by the respect we express for others and by using our financial blessings to help those in need. The sacred is not really about special places, but good values that should be lived out in every place.”

The problems of our community do not mean that we are not living within God's courts every minute of day, whether we are in our Sanctuary or in the middle of a row of dilapidated strip mall or in a park surrounded by people who do not have a home to go to.

God's courts are found wherever God's people are living out the values of love that God has laid out before us. Wherever God's people are responding with confidence and strength to rebuke evil and exalt righteousness.

We come to this *place* to lay everything of ourselves out – the strongest *and* the weakest – and we spend time here with God. And then, when we leave this place, we ask God to come with us. To walk the roads of our lives with us.

When we need directions after we leave, we listen to the ways that God is calling.

We can be God's courts – we can be a community of God's people in and with whom God is present. We might know recognize "Christians" most easily in a church building, but we will recognize them wherever people and the creation are being nourished, wherever they are providing "rain" for the earth. What a happy place to be, says the psalm.

For the psalmist, God's courts – a lifestyle following God, with all the safety, passion, and adventure it involved – was way better than anything else he could imagine. Better, even, than walking the same streets and simply commenting on, or lamenting, their condition. Perhaps like an I Spy book – can you see the hidden picture? Can you find God's courts in *this* picture? And will you be known outside of these church walls, but also out in God's community, recognized as one who is favored and honored by God's sun and shield, one who is making Colorado Springs a *true* place of life-giving springs?

"When we live our faith in the love we share, in the service we give and in the justice we promote, we never leave the holy place, because we personify it." (Samuel)

Where do you see God's courts? Are you creating them around you?

Amen.