

**“I’ll Be Home For Christmas” Third Sunday of Advent December, 17 2017**

**Psalm 84**

**SI:** These four Sundays of December we’re looking at Christ’s Advent through the lens of home. What does it mean to be home for Christmas?

We’ve discovered that home has a number of facets.

Home is a person. God the Father is our home. Jesus is our home.

He came into this world to make his home with us and in us.

We’ve also seen that this world is not our home, not source of ultimate identity or security, but Jesus is preparing a home for us. A restored creation.

One day he will come to take us home.

So the question I want us to ponder this morning is this:

Until Jesus comes to take home, until we get to heaven our ultimate home—  
what’s our truest home now?

**INTRO:** We've all heard the expression "a home away from home."  
Of course that means a place where you are just as comfortable and at ease  
as if you were in your own home.

When you're little that might be your grandparents'.

I felt that way when I was at one grandparents' more than another.

One felt very homey and comfortable, the other one felt a little stuffy.

If you go away to college, your dorm might become a home away from home.

That was certainly true with me.

Sometimes later in life it might be a special spot, a cabin or vacation place.

My parents' home North Carolina has become that for us last 12 years.

There was a time when children were young we thought we ought to spend  
our vacations trying to go to unusual places far away, going out West,  
going to the Grand Canyon—and we did a few times.

But we eventually realized they just wanted to go back to North Carolina.

So that's what we did.

A home away from home is your truest home apart from your home itself.

Now what I want to argue from Psalm 84 is that for Christians, the church is your  
home away from home. It's your truest home this side of heaven.

You might be skeptical of that. It doesn't seem like the church is our truest home.

A lot of people even within Christianity aren't too fond of the church.

I once saw a billboard advertising a new church that said something like:

We're a church for people who don't like church.

Winston Churchill once said that his relationship to the church is like that of a  
flying buttress—he supported it from the outside.

That's the way a lot of people like it. On the rolls. Come sometimes.

But idea that church is our truest home here this side of heaven is a biblical idea.

Let's look at this in Psalm 84 under three points. Church our truest home because

1. It's where the Lord is
2. It's where the heart is
3. It's where the fellowship is

## **MP#1 The church is your truest home this side of heaven . . .**

**because it's where the Lord is.**

Psalm 84 is about the temple in Jerusalem so here's an interpretative question:

Is it valid to apply what the Psalm says about temple back then to church today?  
Some people would argue no.

The would say the temple and the church are completely different.

But they're not different.

The New Testament itself is not shy about using temple language to refer to church.

Eph. 2 [The church is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Building, temple, dwelling in which God lives. Sounds like Psalm 84.

1Peter 2 You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

There's more temple language. A spiritual house where there are priests, sacrifices.

So everything Psalm 84 says about the temple is true about the church.

The temple was God's dwelling place.

The church is God's dwelling place.

Of course in the big sense God is everywhere. Omni-present.

But throughout the Bible there are places where God is specially present.

The Garden of Eden. God was everywhere in the world he had made but it was in the Garden of Eden that he walked with Adam in the cool of the day.

After the fall, after the world was thrown into ruin, there were particular places where God was present with his people to redeem them.

Mt. Sinai—when God's glory cloud came down and covered mountain.

There the Lord met with Moses and people gathered around base of mountain.

Tabernacle in wilderness—cloud of glory rested on tent that had sanctuary in it.

I'm going to meet you here, pray here, worship here, home here.

When King Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem glory cloud filled that place too.

Temple was a permanent house for God's presence.

But it really wasn't a permanent. It was anticipatory.

It anticipated Jesus Christ.

It anticipated God coming down to earth.

Remember what Jesus said about himself. One greater than the temple is here.

Tear down this temple, in three days I will build it again.

People were bewildered. A terrorist? No, the temple was always about me. Temple is where God dwells with people. God is here. Emmanuel. God with us. In book of Revelation John sees a vision of a time when Jesus returns and makes the whole world his temple as he lives with his redeemed people.

But in the meantime the church is Jesus' temple on earth.

On the Day of Pentecost the glory cloud of God came down, broke into tongues of fire and rested on heads of followers of Jesus.

They went home and the church was scattered throughout nations in anticipation of whole earth becoming the temple of God.

Individual Christians are called temple of God in NT.

But usually corporate. The church is the place God is present on earth.

So what about the building? Is the building important? Is God in the building?

When Solomon dedicated the temple he said very pointedly that God does not dwell in temples made with human hands. Heaven his throne, earth his footstool.

OT believers understood just as we do that God not contained in a building.

When temple torn down and people went into exile, they knew God still with them.

Building wasn't the essence of spiritual life.

Furthermore, we could point out that buildings bring temptations.

Spiritual disaster when Israelites trusted temple itself, identity instead of Lord.

That happens with church buildings sometimes.

Can all think of examples. Congregations splitting over church buildings.

But in spite of all those important qualifications how does this Psalm begin? Vs. 1

How lovely is your dwelling place O Lord. My soul yearns, faints for the courts of the Lord.

Our tendency is to spiritualize that and say what Psalmist really means is

How lovely are you, O Lord. How I long for you. And he does say that next.

He says, My heart and flesh cry out to the living God.

But the Psalmist does care about the building.

Because it's all wrapped up together.

The building itself is sanctified by God's presence and that makes it lovely.

That's the reason we call this space the sanctuary. It's not an auditorium.

Some Christians call this auditorium. Sanctuary makes nervous. In Bible.

Whether it's beautiful structure like this, or a little country chapel, or a storefront church in a city, or a house church in China, that space is holy and God is there.

Why is the church our truest home on earth? Because God is here.

**MP#2 The church is your truest home this side of heaven . . .**

**because it's where the heart is.**

Home is where the heart is.

In the song the soldier sings: "I'll be home for Christmas if only in my dreams."

His heart longs for the home place, all the familiar things and people he loves.  
That's how the Psalmist feels about his church, the temple.

My soul yearns, even faints for courts of the Lord. Describing believer's heart.

Poets always talk about birds.

Psalm writer sees a sparrow hopping around in the temple courts.

He sees a swallow nest up in the eaves of the temple and knows the mother  
bird is up there laying her eggs and raising her young near the altar.

He says: I'm jealous of those birds. Wouldn't it be sweet to live here.

And those people who do get to live at the temple and work here—

the doorkeepers and janitors, they have it made. I would love to do that.

I don't think most of us feel that way about being in church.

At least not as passionately as the Psalmist.

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand days elsewhere. Really?

Better is one day in your courts unless the boat's on the lake?

Better is one day in your courts unless there's a soccer tournament.

Better is one day in your courts unless I'd rather sleep in.

I think if we were honest we might re-write this Psalm.

Lord, sometimes a day in your courts is not so bad.

What's our problem? A couple things.

For one, in America spirituality is almost entirely private and individualistic.

Spirituality is about me and my individual relationship with God.

It's not a team sport. If I'm a Christian it's about Jesus and me.

Church is an amenity.

I can see how sometimes it's helpful to get some teaching or be able to work with  
people on ministry project, but it's really tangential to my relationship with God.

If it's entertaining enough, helpful enough, I'll be there as often as it's convenient,  
but not all the time because it's not that important to spiritual life.

So this is one very American thing that keeps the heart from longing for church.

But God wants to be known and worshipped by us a group.

Like parents want all their children home for the holidays, the Lord  
wants to be present in the assembly of his people, with all of us together.

Even if that's not the thing that sets your little heart on fire most easily,  
it's what God likes, what he wants.

That's why we pray some unison prayers in service, recite things together.

It might feel stilted, might feel less genuine than extemporaneous prayers, but once again, we're doing this for God, not ourselves. Common worship impresses on the soul that our faith not primarily individualistic. As C.S. Lewis once put it, going to church "gets you out of your solitary conceit."

Another reason our hearts aren't attuned like the Psalmist regarding church is we live in a time and place of great wealth and comfort.

If the church is our home away from home this side of heaven, then one reason we should love to go there is to get a foretaste of heaven.

But once again, as Americans, we practically have heaven on earth.

The vast majority of Christians in the world don't have a fraction of the material things we enjoy—our comforts, our entertainment, variety and abundance of food.

I was reading about mission work in the Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya.

It's one of the densest populated slums in the world.

Average income is a dollar a day. Life expectancy is 47.

There are Christians in the Kibera slum who were born there and will die there.

They live hand to mouth and struggle to gather food to survive each day.

There is no American dream in the Kibera slums.

But there are churches.

I read about a church started 15 years ago by some missionaries connected to the PCA—it's called Kibera Reformed Presbyterian Church.

The very poor members of that church are there every time the doors are open.

Why do they give up precious hours that could be spent putting a little more food on their tables? Why do they have a Psalm 84 heart for church.

Because their daily encounter with struggle and poverty and pain has sharpened their appetite for heaven.

So they go to their home away from home to get a foretaste of their final home.

Those hours of worship lift them. They would say with the Psalmist—wouldn't it be great if I could just live here like the birds do.

How do we develop a heart for church?

How do we overcome our deeply ingrained, individualistic view of Christian life?

How do we get an appetite for heaven? Brings to third point . . .

**MP#3 The church is your truest home this side of heaven . . . because it's where the fellowship is.**

Psalm 84 depicts believers as a fellowship of pilgrims on their way to the temple.

Let's read those verses again, verses 5-7.

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

The Israelite people would annually come from all over the nation and make their way to the temple in Jerusalem. That's what appearing before God in Zion means. But it's also a metaphor for the whole life of a believer.  
If you follow Christ then you're making your way as a pilgrim to God in Zion. You're on the way to heaven and Jesus' eternal kingdom.

Now notice the detail about the journey.

They pass through the Valley of Baca.  
Commentators say two things about the Valley of Baca.  
It was an area east of Jerusalem, very arid, painfully dry and hard for travelers.  
If you ran out of water there, you and your animals would be hurting.

The other detail is that the word Baca itself means tears.  
The Valley of Baca is the Valley of tears.

It's from this Psalm that we get the poetic expression "the vale of tears."  
But what happens when the fellowship of pilgrims passes through Baca?  
They make it a place of springs. With their presence comes autumn rains.  
As they mutually make their way to temple, dry place of tears becomes wet and life-sustaining. Gives them strength. Go from strength to strength.

Now that's all very poetical. How does that apply to us?

If you were a Christian living in a place like the Kibera slum,  
pain and dryness and tears would be all around you.  
You would see them every day.  
You would deal with hurting people all the time.  
And it would drain you. You would start to feel dry. You would weep.  
So you would long for the courts of the Lord.  
You would drink the fellowship of believers in worship every week.  
It would be strength for your mission.

We don't live in a Third World slum, we live in a comfortable and wealthy place.  
We know this place is also fallen and sinful but pain and tears are much more easily masked by our material bounty.  
Without too much effort you can be oblivious to them yourself.  
But the Lord doesn't want you to be oblivious to pain and tears.

Because his mission was to enter this world of pain and tears to redeem it.

That's why Jesus came into the world, to reverse the effect of the fall,  
to push back the curse, to redeem our souls and eventually all creation.

He came to bring springs of living water in dry places.

He came to wipe away every tear from our eyes.

He accomplished that through his death and his resurrection.

He brought forgiveness of sins to all who believe, reconciliation with God.

So our mission, as we are on the way to Zion is to be agents of his new creation.  
He's placed us strategically here to fulfill his mission.

Part of that mission is to move toward pain and tears and bring the hope and  
love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

And it's often through church connections you get a new assignment.

Someone says: I'm concerned about so and so. Would you check on them?

Or you have a conversation and realize someone is lonely.

Let me give you a challenge this Sunday and next:

Be attuned to the people around you, they may be going through Valley of Baca.

Lord may say to you: Take them a gift, send them a card, invite them to lunch.

When you do that, when you deal with people in their dryness and tears—  
you need strength of God through fellow pilgrims.

It's in church fellowship you share your concerns for the hurting people God  
has placed in your life and you go from strength to strength.

And that exposure to their pain also weakens just a little bit the hold the world has  
on you and makes you long a bit more for heaven—even if just for their sake.

In *The Hobbit* and in *The Lord of the Rings* there is a place called  
the last homely house west of the mountains.

It's the home of the elf ruler Elrond in the elf city of Rivendell.

Anyone going on a mission or adventure or quest to the dangerous lands of the east  
would stop at the last homely house west of the mountains.

Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield and the company of dwarves  
stopped there on their way to the Lonely Mountain.

Bilbo said it was the perfect house whether you like food or sleep or storytelling or  
singing or just sitting and thinking best or a pleasant mixture of them all.

A generation later Frodo and his company stopped there.

That's where they took oaths and become the fellowship of the ring and  
committed themselves to the mission of destroying the ring of power.



So the last homely house was not a permanent place or final destination.

It was a home for pilgrims to rest, a place for counsel, encouragement, support, and vision for the journey and battles they would be facing together.

Not to much of a stretch to see the last homely house as an analogy of the church.

We're on a mission, an adventure, a quest for Jesus Christ.

This is the place where he meets with us in a special way—

he is present in the assembly of his people.

This is the place that is to be dear to our hearts—because we are not making our way through this vale of tears alone, but with a company of fellow travelers, who are our mothers and fathers, our sisters and brothers.