

"Automobiles and Aspirations"

Psalm 84:1-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 8, 2016 – 7th Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

Have you ever seen those small half-pencils in the pew racks of sanctuaries with traditional seating? These little pencils are a favorite with churches, and also with golf courses where they're used to keep score. The manufacturers often supply them with a message appropriate to their customers.

I heard recently about a church that received its shipment with the mistaken imprint: "Play golf next Sunday." The pastor was a bit annoyed, to say the least, but then so was the golf course manager who received a batch that advised: "Attend church next Sunday."

You can get almost anything imprinted nowadays, from mugs to key rings to visors. Tee shirts are another popular item, as are letter openers and plastic bags. Bumper stickers, however, are probably the most common form of advertising. They also allow us to express our opinion on a whole variety of topics.

Earlier this week I decided to keep tracks of the bumper stickers I saw on the way to work. Among those I spotted were:

- + Retired: No work, no worry, no money
- + Back the Bucks
- + My child is an honor student
- + One day at a time
- + Question authority
- + Don't blame me, I voted for McCain

By far the most prevalent of the theme types is the one that begins with the words "I'd rather be..." There's almost no end to the variety of endings: I'd rather be fishing, sailing, flying, dancing, shopping, golfing, surfing. I'd rather be in Cape Hatteras, Nashville, or Key West. They make you wonder if anyone is ever where they want to be or doing what they want to do.

You name your "I'd rather be..." and somebody's probably already got it printed up for you. A sticker that you probably won't see is one that says "I'd rather be a doorkeeper." Now that's a strange aspiration, but one that would have been a sure sale to the writer of Psalm 84, our scripture for this morning. He probably would have put it right on the back of his chariot. He expresses the desire more fully when he says, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness."

There's nothing wrong in fantasizing about places where one finds happiness and renewal. All people seem to dream of such paradises. But perhaps one has to come up the spiritual ladder a bit before she can truly say, "I'd rather be worshiping!" We catch some of that enthusiasm in this particular psalm and discover it is marked by anticipation, longing, and a hunger for the house of God.

Most of the psalms were intended for use in certain worship settings. The 84th is no exception. Its primary purpose was to be used as a song at the autumn harvest festival, the Feast of Tabernacles. This has a positive message that can be discovered even upon first reading. Let's take a deeper look at it this morning and see if we can get an even fuller meaning from it.

The psalm starts out with a declaration, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!" This refers to the great temple in Jerusalem built on the hill named Zion. It was a magnificent structure and far different from the more commonplace synagogues in other cities. But it wasn't just the building itself that made it special; it was the feeling of the people that God was uniquely present in this place. If God also had an earthly dwelling place, then that place was surely Zion.

This site was so special that Jews from all over made regular pilgrimages just to worship there. The trips were arduous, and sometimes dangerous, but the people came by the hundreds and thousands. Their happiness at going far outweighed the negatives of travel. Perhaps this psalm is one of the songs they sang to keep up their spirits as they made the long journey to Jerusalem. When they finally arrived, and had the temple in sight, it was truly a joyous occasion.

The psalmist notes that even the birds find a home and protection in the courtyards of the temple. It's no wonder then that the faithful—those who realized the wonderful gifts God bestows on humanity, those who experienced the love and caring of God—it's no wonder that the temple was an welcoming "second home" to them. It felt right just to be there.

This is then followed by a blessing on those who live within the temple grounds. The reference is to the priests who alone may live within its walls. "Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise." And happy they should be, according to the pilgrims, for the priests reside in the temple, and who wouldn't be content to spend their days in this sacred setting? What more could one ask for than to be constantly in the awareness and presence of God?

"Happy are those whose strength is in you." Fortunate are those who understand their limitations and put their trust in the Lord. And those who have this kind of strength will not tire even though the journey to Zion may be long and demanding.

Despite the fact that the pilgrims may have to go through such arid places as the valley of Baca, their joy *en route* makes the land feel as if it is a fertile place teeming with pools of fresh water. The devotion of the believers is strong enough to overcome desolation along the way, and to feel positive even in challenging circumstances. The one who worships God turns work into play, and obligation into opportunity. The hot sands become like an oasis for those nearing their destination.

"They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion." The strength of the individual is supplemented by the strength provided by the Holy Spirit. God's presence is all that is needed. Should any be ready to give up on their journey, God gives them the stamina to carry on.

Verses 8 and 9 digress for a moment and are a prayer for the king of Israel. He is the one who has been "anointed" to office. He is the "shield" for the people, for he is the one who keeps the civil order and provides them with the safety to make the journey to worship at Jerusalem in the first place. They remember him with prayer.

"For a day in your courts is better than a thousand days elsewhere." Times spent in close awareness of God are qualitatively more valuable than those lived apart from the Lord. The psalmist declares that just a single day in the temple stands out from all the routine days of life. It is indeed an effort to get to Zion, but the hardships involved are slight when compared to the rewards that await the traveler.

Now here comes that strange line we quoted already: "I would rather be a *doorkeeper* in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness." Biblical scholars have been drawn to this text for centuries, variously interpreting it.

From my study I can offer this paraphrase: "I would rather sit at the doorway to the temple, in its least desirable place of service, than to be a honored guest in the feast tents of some pagan god. I would rather be in a humble role revering the one true God, than indulging with those who are led astray in their allegiance."

The psalm continues: "For the Lord God is a sun and a shield; he bestows favor and honor." It is the Lord who provides us with our requisites for daily living, in the same way the warmth of the sun restores us from the winter cold. God is likewise our protector, the one who makes it possible for us to survive even the hardest of times. The person who "walks uprightly," who does his or her best to live a faithful and just and compassionate life, will find that God is indeed present at all times.

The final refrain is an ascription. "O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you." It is offered both as a statement of faith and as words of praise. It summarizes what the psalmist believes and how he lives his life. We used this very sentence, composed several thousand years ago, as our scriptural call to worship today. It is an expression of devotion which is as fresh and relevant now as when this psalmist was first moved to express it.

Psalm 84 invites us to get in touch with what is really important in life; not to just wish for it, but to experience it directly and fully. It is then that we will be able to rise each morning and say from our hearts, "O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you."