

2018 08 26 - God's Dwelling Place

Psalm 84

How lovely in your dwelling place, O God of host!

My soul longs, even faints for the courts of God

My heart and my flesh cry for joy to the living God!

Imagine this song being sung by pilgrims as they walked the dry and dusty road to Jerusalem. Their tired and hungry bodies revived by the rhythm, the music and the words of this hymn of anticipation and praise. They were singing, of course, of the temple in Jerusalem, their holy place, where they would burn offerings to God and celebrate the Jewish festivals with thousands of other pilgrims who had walked similar paths . They were looking forward to experiencing their God in the majestic architecture of the temple and the beautiful liturgies that would be sung and spoken during worship. They truly believed that God resided in their holiest of temples, at the top of Mount Zion, in the city of Jerusalem..

Those pilgrims would have made that journey over 2000 years ago, and still today, many people travel to Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela, to Mecca and to other holy shrines around the world, searching for God. In fact, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is probably the largest and the most visited house of God in the Christian faith. And we are still continuing to erect temples, churches, mosques and other buildings so that we have places where we can meet God. Here at

First United we have been busy upgrading our building over the past few years and even now a new roof is being placed on our sanctuary.

I want to share with you some thoughts from Barbara Brown Taylor on building dwelling places for God. She writes:

As important as it is to mark the places where we meet God, I worry about what happens when we build a house for God. I am speaking no longer of the temple in Jerusalem but of the house of worship on the corner, where people of faith meet to say their prayers, because saying them together reminds them of who they are better than saying them alone. This is good, and all good things cast shadows. Do we build God a house so that we can choose when to go see God? Do we build God a house in lieu of having God stay at ours? Plus, what happens to the rest of the world when we build four walls – even four gorgeous walls – cap them with a steepled roof, and designate *that* the House of God? What happens to the riverbanks, the mountaintops, the deserts, and the trees? What happens to the people who never show up in our House of God?

(An Altar in the World, page 9)

Barbara Brown Taylor is not suggesting that building a church is wrong or that all churches should be torn down. But she is reminding us that we need to remember that God does not dwell only in our churches. During our Community Learning Time, we have already discussed the many ways that God shows up in the beauty of nature and even in the daily tasks that we are called to do. God

also is present for those people who have never set foot in a church or a temple or even a mosque.

The Holy Spirit is also experienced by the rest of God's creation. As the psalmist wrote, "Even the sparrow finds a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young at your altars, God of hosts, my sovereign, my God." Even the smallest of birds experience the presence of the sacred.

Yes, God is all around us: below us, above us, and ever before us. And God is also within us. In today's scripture we read,

Happy are those whose strength is in you,
who have set their heart on pilgrimage.

Going through the valley of Baca
they find a spring from which to drink,
the early rain also covers it with pools of water.

These lines could be interpreted in many ways. They could be referring to the pilgrim's road to Jerusalem, the fact that they are travelling through dry, desert-like valleys and yet they are able to find water to sustain them. But I believe that their meaning is even deeper, that the psalm itself is actually written at two different levels. The psalmist is also telling us that God's strength exists within each one of us and that God dwells within each of our hearts.

It is the presence of the sacred within us that nourishes us with the live-giving water that we need in difficult times. The Hebrew word "Baca" comes from a root word meaning "to weep." When we go through the valley of Baca, through times

of mourning, times of distress, then it is the presence of the Spirit that gives us the strength, the courage and often the patience to heal and to move on. That courage, that strength, comes from within. Each one of our bodies is a dwelling place for the sacred.

This may be hard for some of us to accept. Especially those of us who have a negative image of our own body... and I expect that is most of us. Again, I want to share with you some of Barbara Brown Taylor's words on this subject: She writes:

Whether you are sick or well, lovely or irregular, there comes a time when it is vitally important for your spiritual health to drop your clothes, look in the mirror, and say, "Here I am. This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul's address." After you have taken a good look around, you may decide that there is a lot to be thankful for, all things considered. Bodies take real beatings. That they heal from most things is an underrated miracle. That they give birth is beyond reckoning. (*An Altar in the World*, page 38)

No matter what our bodies look like, they are, without exception, dwelling places for God. We all have the sacred living within us.

God can be found in nature and even within ourselves, but the fact that we are here today, indicates that most of us find it helpful to come to a "house of God" to worship on Sunday morning. I believe that worshipping in community can amplify the impact of the Spirit and can help us experience the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, the Essence of Love. That is what it is all about, isn't it? That's

what every pilgrim is searching for. We are all longing, for the experience of unconditional and everlasting love. We are all searching for the healing powers of God's amazing grace. We are all pining, evening fainting for the sure knowledge that we are not alone. And we can find what we are looking for in the places where God dwells.

MV #89 Love is the Touch