

WELCOME: "Pilgrimage to Zion – Reaching for Greatness" The psalmist and hymnists whose words we visit today expressed a deep reverence and awe for God. These are the Pilgrimage Psalms, which revere the temple of Zion and, even more so, they stand in awe of God.

CALL TO WORSHIP Psalm 46:1-2,10-11

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

**Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.**

"Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth."

**The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.**

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

**Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be created and you shall renew the face of the earth.**

**O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations, through Christ the Lord, Amen.**

THE WORD PSALM 84:1-4

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.**

LIVING THE WORD

"Bound to God eternally by love's strong chord." The promise of God is that God will always be there for us. God is always waiting for us to reach for all of the greatness God has planned for us. Sometimes this is our priority, we seek God and we wait on God's timing. Other times, not so much...we get involved in the stuff of our lives and sort of forget that life is easier when we stay directly connected to God.

In those times, we may still go through the motions of being in the right places to connect, but distracted from getting the message. Sometimes we settle for goodness when God would give us greatness, if we can just refocus on where God is.

The pilgrimage to Zion: Several years ago, while I was working with Pastor Graham West at Lake Street in Eau Claire, we were seeking the right words for a new vision statement for that church. We already had established the words 'on a journey.' His suggestion was 'pilgrims on a journey'. My brain envisioned the Mayflower, women in white aprons and bonnets and the men with large square buckles on their hats belts and shoes, both with large white collars.

I assured him that that wasn't the right word to use. Later we settled on 'Christ followers on a journey toward God's promise.' Yet even later upon more reflection I further realized that our journey is much more than just traveling to a place with God, it is the pilgrimage of knowing you want to be closer to God and continually seeking that.

Zion is a hill in Jerusalem just outside the walls of the Old City. Most often, Zion is used as a figure of speech for Jerusalem and the Biblical land of Israel. Zion is another word for an idealized, harmonious community; utopia. Zion is where we find God on the journey.

The poets who wrote the psalms and hymns used words to reflect that this is a personal journey within each of us, but also, with solid destination places, given us through visual images to help us understand what God is waiting for.

Looking again at verses 1-4, we can see the personal for each of us in verses 2 & 3: "*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.*"

We think of 'soul' as the disembodied part of us that gets squished out of us when we die; that idea isn't found anywhere in the Bible. Soul is the inner essence of all that we are. Today we might substitute the word life for soul – "My life longs for the courts of the Lord." The Psalmist wanted to go into the temple because that is as close to God as one could get.

"*Even the sparrow...*" God is so huge, majestic and powerful, but not so huge that he doesn't care about the tiniest bird, or you or I.

Verse 1 & 4 speak of 'place,' God's dwelling place. Those who live there are happy to the point of always singing praise. You know those people who are happy all of the time? Their glass isn't just half full, it is always overflowing...maybe we only see them when things are good, but maybe they are finding Zion along their ever present pilgrimage of life.

Listen in the next section of the Psalm as we share it, for the personal and the place:

THE WORD Psalm 84:5-8

Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.  
**As they go through the valley of tears 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!**

LIVING THE WORD

Personal – '*strength in God,*' Place – '*highway to Zion.*' Then it gets confusing; '*the valley of tears*' sounds like a place, but anyone who has traveled there will tell you it is a very personal place.

The writer has even turned the tears into a 'place of springs'. A spring, also known as a rising or resurgence, is any natural situation where water flows to the surface of the earth from underground, often cleansing the earth. Tears, though often associated with sadness, are a natural situation where water flows to the surface, cleansing a person.

Did you think of all of that while you read those words? Probably not, but they are still on the page and in the Bible for you to reflect on later. A human didn't come up with this good stuff all by themselves. All of the scriptures were inspired by God for us, so that we might see God waiting for us with greatness, ready to pour it all out.

*'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!'*

How many Olympians do you think said some kind of prayer like this in the last two weeks? They all have been reaching for greatness from whatever country in whatever their giftedness is.

The U.S. Women's soccer team, caught a bit of flack back in 2012 for running on the field after they won with T-shirts that said "Greatness has been found." The criticism was that it wasn't a very humble move, but I think of the time and effort each of the Olympians dedicate to reaching for greatness and I appreciated their shirts.

I doubt that they meant them as a 'put down' to any other athletes present at the games, but an acknowledgement of a long worked for accomplishment. They all are there to do their best, whatever the outcome.

The ones who come home disappointed are those who didn't make the effort in the final race. That same Olympics, if Michael Phelps hadn't done so well overall, I am sure the 200 butterfly race that he lost to South Africa's Chad le Clos might still haunt him. The report read "Phelps appeared to glide to the finish. It cost him a shot at winning his third consecutive gold medal in the event."

Anyone who watched Phelps know that for the most part, he is not a glider. Anyone who saw Chad le Clos sobbing on the medal stand for the honor of winning for his country, may realize the wonder of the end of that race. Even so, we are called to reach for the greatness God has established in each of us on our pilgrimage to Zion.

In doing that we often stumble on what our individual talents and gifts are. There has been a certain amount of excitement building about the silent auction at each of the last two spring salad luncheons.

The initial intent was to raise some funds to help with the church expenses and to have some fellowship and fun in the midst of it. But a new joy is blossoming here: as some people announce that they don't have any talents, others are saying "Yes, you do."

We are beginning to help each other celebrate the goodness within each of us. Once that is acknowledged it is much easier to reach for greatness. If you know what God would have you do in this life, it is easier to offer it back to God and say "Lead me, Lord, now that I have direction."

THE WORD Psalm 84:9-12

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.**

LIVING THE WORD

The sacrifice of the Olympians, has to be ours as well. It begins with a place in your world, but even more in a place in your life. The depth of your relationship with God, relieves the fear and discomforts of the sacrifice.

An Olympian makes the sacrifice according to their gift and talent to be in a relationship with their country and God, the one who created that greatness within them. They strive because they want to be a better self than they just were. When we can do that we end each moment, each day in a better place.

The Apostle Paul says in Hebrews 6: "Therefore let us go on towards perfection..." and then in Philippians 3: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

John Wesley spoke of moving on to perfection, though he did admit that he believed he had only met one person who reached it in this lifetime. It isn't so much in the goal of perfection, but in the journey toward the goal. It isn't so much in reaching greatness, but reaching for greatness. It's not about Zion, but the pilgrimage to Zion.

You can be in a physical place without letting yourself get personal with God. When we read the scriptures and sing the hymns, we each have a choice:

- a) just to be in this place going through the motions that are expected or
  - b) hear the meaning that are given to us in the words we say and sing;
- the choice to 'just come to the church' or 'to dwell in God's house.'

One of God's promises to each of us is that God is always waiting for us to come and dwell with our Creator, our Leader, our Guide, known to us through the scriptures, through the teaching and sacrifice of Christ and through the Spirit working in our lives. "*Be still and know that I am God.*" "*For a day in God's courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.*"

Standing on the promises I cannot fall, listening every moment to the Spirit's call, resting in my Savior as my all in all, Standing on the promises of God. Even after he wrote those words, Carter had to keep listening to understand what it meant to stand on God's promises.

So keep seeking! If you haven't found a revelation for yourself from God- keep reaching for greatness! Keep dwelling in the house of God; journeying the pilgrimage to Zion. You may already be living in your revelation, or your gift and you just haven't realized it yet.