

Keeping our Distance

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Texts: Psalm 84

So, I've been thinking about distance lately, and not merely about my keeping mine to at least 6 feet from those around me. It's partly because I've had the pleasure of doing some long distance traveling to the West Coast earlier this month. We went for a family wedding and for a long-postponed visit with dear friends. It was a delightful trip. I've also been thinking about distance because my daughter has had her boyfriend visiting with us these past 10 days. She met him at school in Vermont, but he's been at home in Maryland this summer. In the days before he arrived, she was so excited to see him. That joyful anticipation alone reminded me of my own young adult experiences with l.d.r.'s, or long-distance relationships. It's that "I can't wait" feeling, and that monthly or bimonthly rhythm of sojourning by car, train, or Chinatown bus. Mind you, my experiences were before the days of constant texting and Facetime, when landlines and letters were the full extent of whatever contact. But I've been hearing the same excitement and pleasure in Nellie's heart and voice, and the heartache too, when he left last night. It's all led me to reflect on how distance and desire, presence and pilgrimage towards and away, are part of every relationship, even with the church and God, and how much more so during a pandemic. L.d.r.'s or not, I'm guessing we've all learned something recently about this aching anticipation and longing for reconnection. I pray we've all had some time to reunite with persons and places that give us life, and yet with Delta surging, and uncertainty about what comes next, it may feel fleeting. The longing and distance and absence may be making our hearts feel a lot of things. Grumpier, for sure, like you read about. Fonder, not so much!

To be honest, I hesitated before choosing our opening hymn, and Psalm 84 on which it's based. I wasn't sure it would be fair to you all, to conjure an experience of this place, this household of God, while most are still worshipping from a distance and many may be longing to be here. When we sing it together here... "How Lovely Lord How lovely is your abiding place"... "and so your temple calls us within its walls to rest!" it can feel like such joyful affirmation of this our spiritual home. Yes, this community to be sure, but this building as well! I wonder how it was to sing those lines from your homes. Not nearly the same, I imagine. If you've been here, you know this place *is* lovely - an expansive space of exquisite beauty, a feast for the senses -- the warm colors, lighting, stained glass and music, thank you Peter, all combine to soothe, calm, hold and inspire us. It wasn't until this week that I realized that the Psalm was never intended to be sung or prayed by people who are already inside a sanctuary like this! It's not an affirmation of what is so much as its recognition of what's not. It's written precisely for people who are living in exile from a place like this, the Babylonian exile to be specific. Psalm 84 is meant to be sung and prayed from an experience of longing and desire to be back in what they and we know to be a holy and sacred space, a space specifically designed for repeated encounters with God's presence. Yes, I know, church walls can't contain God and may not even be the site of your holiest moments but bear with me here.

Let's look more closely at the Psalm and see what we might learn about this experience of longing. To get us in the mood, humor me and let's assume many of us are having a moment of something like a long-distance relationship with the church right now, if not with God! I mean talk about a significant other, right! Many have told me how you can't wait to get back, whenever it feels safe to you of course.

We are hungry for the beauty of what this place means, for the presence of people and the way it all leads us to the presence of God in our lives. Zoom and livestreaming have helped but I trust most of us are longing for more!

First, note that God's dwelling place here has a twofold meaning. We know that God is everywhere, dwelling within you and me and all the spaces between! Let's not forget that. And, yet, God's abiding place, according to this psalmist, also has a specific location. "How lovely is your dwelling place" isn't just metaphor here. It's intended to recall the Temple in Jerusalem, the so-called Holy of Holies, the mercy seat of God there. Scholars note the Psalm appears set for a specific time when the Israelites would be preparing to gather for their own autumn festival, the Feast of Booths. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for "lovely" Yedidot is semantically associated with *dod*, which means, lover, and *dodim*, which means, I kid you not, "lovmaking." By choosing this word, it's as if the psalmist is trying to convey what the scholar Robert Alar calls a "virtually erotic intensity in the speaker's longing." This may underscore all the more our image of long-distance relationship. Here, we find passionate, visceral desire to be in the household of God, and to feel and know God's presence, which was, according to tradition and our scripture from Kings, uniquely manifest therein. So, the longing is both for a place and a presence! But here's the thing. Whatever translation we choose, what's clear is that the quality of that longing isn't one of sadness or despair in the distance but a knowing, hopeful and joy-filled anticipation. There's an almost giddy quality to the language here, a trust that whenever it happens, it's gonna be amazing!

I wonder as we look ahead to regathering our community in a few weeks, knock on wood, if we can relate to or at least take some comfort and encouragement from this psalm! I don't know about you, but I could use that right now. Again, recall the psalmist is writing for those who aren't there yet, who aren't yet back in their beloved worship space! Their writing for you, and for me, because let's face it, this place isn't nearly the same without all of you!

The theme of longing for place and presence carries throughout the psalm. "My soul longs, indeed it faints for the temple courts of God. My heart and my flesh sing gladness to the living God." And what comes next is one of my favorite biblical images, that of a sparrow finding shelter and a swallow, a nest in which to lay her young. Robert Alter is again helpful in pointing out that "Small birds such as swallows may well have nested in the little crevices of the roughly dressed stones that constituted the temple façade." The psalmist longs to so nestle into God's presence, to find nourishment, strength and security there. The longing and desire and hunger itself is a struggle to be sure but somehow a joyful and beautiful one. This is because it's based in deep trust, that the temple doors *will* reopen to them in time, and by extension that doors of heaven itself will one day open to them as well. There is a profound attitude and posture of faithful living here, of keeping the faith while in exile. As such, the distance isn't so much an obstacle but an opportunity to strengthen one's desire and commitment to God, one's conviction that God will make a way somehow.

One more note about the text: When we read that the psalmist would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God, it may help to consider the image of "standing on the threshold", as one commentator has said - the threshold not only of God's household, but also of God's presence. I like this, as we begin to turn our hearts and minds toward an as yet uncertain fall. On the threshold of what? At a fully open door to God's temple? On the threshold of a deep encounter with God's presence? It could happen on September 12 when we regather! Spiritually speaking, it could happen any time, for we are forever standing at the gates of God's presence, and what great delights are in store whenever we can close the

distance, and find proximity with God of one another, here or there, now or whenever we share love, friendship, service or prayer!

As we prepare to enter this fall with some uncertainty, we too are at threshold, still making our way through desert valleys of divisiveness and disinformation, still longing for touch, connection, people, places and presence. Indeed, the valley of Baca, is also known as the valley of tears. We are still there, for sure, in the valley, still in exile, yet can we trust, that a lovelier dwelling place awaits?

Hear what John O'Donohue has written about beauty and see if it does not call to mind this or some other lovely dwelling place or presence. He writes: "The human soul is hungry for beauty... When we experience the Beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming. Some of our most wonderful memories are beautiful places where we felt immediately at home. We feel most alive in the presence of the Beautiful for it meets the needs of our soul. For a while the strains of struggle and endurance are relieved, and our frailty is illuminated by a different light in which we come to glimpse behind the shudder of appearances and sure form of things. In the experience of beauty, we awaken and surrender in the same act. Beauty brings a sense of completion and sureness. Without any of the usual calculation, we can slip into the Beautiful with the same ease as we slip into the seamless embrace of water; something ancient within us already trusts that this embrace will hold us."

Perhaps Psalm 84 is just that, an invitation to trust that the embrace of God's presence and beauty will hold us, no matter the distance! It's a beauty that welcomes us home, wherever we are! A beauty and presence that reminds us that we are alive, and our souls needs will be met and nourished, even in exile, even in our deepest waiting and wonder and worrying what comes next.

I wonder if, after another brutal week of headlines, we can pause and recognize that our hunger for beauty and our longing for God's place and presence may be enough! No, it's not the same thing as the joy itself, but it's forward looking, and hopeful to have our hearts and mind's eye set on a place of God, and the presence of God. It's about learning to live as much as possible in a spirit of wonder and joyful anticipation in every moment, of every threshold encounter, trusting that we too can, whether today, tomorrow or someday, slip into the seamless embrace of beauty that hold us. What is that river of faith, in which we can choose to swim every day, that carries us from aching longing, to tentative hope, to joy-filled anticipation, to lasting assurance and trust, that in God, no matter where the river bends next, we too move, eventually, from strength to strength?

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 cloaks them with a blessing. They go from strength to strength, "from rampart to rampart", appearing before God, standing at that threshold of utter blessing and abundance and recognition that God is grace, all sufficient, and that God is Glory, everlasting.

May God bless all of our journeys, our longings, our aching desires and greet us in those threshold moments along the way. May God give us patience and even gladness of heart when we are traversing whatever distance. May God give us hope and trust and joy and love in the waiting, especially when we just can't wait any longer. Amen.

