

**Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-5**

**Psalm 84**

**July 27, 2014**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

***A Summer in the Psalms***  
**THE GOD TO WHOM WE GO**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

When Nancy and I graduated from Union Presbyterian Seminary in May 1983, my mother gave each of us a book called “My Pastoral Record.” The title page reads, “My Pastoral Record: The Life Ministry of \_\_\_\_\_,” followed by these words from Isaiah 30:8: “Note it in a book, that it may be for the time to come.”

When we moved from Richmond to Rocky Mount, NC in June 1983 and began our ministries at the First Presbyterian Church, the book was a blank slate. From the beginning, I determined to be disciplined in recording baptisms administered, marriages celebrated, funerals conducted, and sermons preached. Thirty-one years later, it’s quite interesting to see how the numbers have added up over the years. More than that, it’s significant to read through the lists from time to time and to think about the babies I baptized (some of whom are now young adults), the couples who were married, the saints who have gone before us, and the joy of proclaiming God’s Word.

Another historical record goes back even further, over one hundred one years. In the minutes of the session of the Wallace Presbyterian Church from early in 1913 you will read about this important event in the life of this church: “First Sunday, January 5, 1913, as previously announced, services were held in the New Church, with a congregation that filled the house. This date being just about five years since the building was commenced.” We are in that “New Church” this morning, although the sanctuary didn’t look like this on Sunday, January 5, 1913. This building was renovated from April 1955 - March 2, 1956.

Reading through these two histories — “My Pastoral Record” and the history of the Wallace Presbyterian Church written for the Centennial Anniversary Celebration in November 1984 — got me thinking about what has happened in this sanctuary while I have been the minister of this church. “My Pastoral Record” contains lists of **all** of the weddings, baptisms, funerals, and sermons in which I have had a part. But, I restricted my search to those events that took place in this sanctuary, and here’s what I found: I have baptized forty-two babies, young people, and adults, officiated at twenty-seven weddings, conducted sixty-seven funerals, and, including today’s sermon, preached seven hundred thirty-four sermons in this sanctuary.

One winter Sunday a few years ago, I called the clerk of session and some other members to get their input on whether or not to cancel worship because of the bad weather. One person said, “Well, you know, we have never canceled worship at the Wallace Presbyterian Church.” I decided I wasn’t going to be the first preacher in the

history of the church to cancel worship! So, including today, the people of God have come to Sunday worship in **this** building for 5,281 weeks in a row. That doesn't include all of the special services over the years: Holy Week, Christmas Eve, funerals, weddings, and revivals.

5,281 Sundays of God's people saying, "Let's go to church." 5,281 Sundays of God's people saying, "Let's go be in fellowship with other Christians." 5,281 Sundays of God's people saying, "Let's go to God." Today's sermon title comes from a commentary on Psalm 84 that was written by one of our seminary professors. Dr. Mays says, "This [psalm] holds together yearning for God and the longing to be at a place because God has made it a place of Presence. The two mean that faith must take the form of movement, that one must go toward God . . . We 'go' to God. Every visit to a temple or church or meeting of believers is in a profound sense a pilgrimage. We 'go,' not just for practical or personal reasons; we go theologically. Christians have read and sung Psalm 84 and through it praised the God to whom we 'go' in different ways. The psalm has interpreted churches and chapels as 'dwelling places of God's love, the abode to which our hearts aspire with warm desire to see our God.'"<sup>1</sup>

We call this sanctuary "God's house," even though we know that God is everywhere and doesn't really need a "house" to live in. But God has always met God's people where they are. God came down on the mountain and met Moses. When the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years, they set up the tabernacle outside of camp, and God would meet them there. Solomon built the Temple on Mt. Zion and believers would make their pilgrimages to worship in that holy place. When God's people returned from fifty years in exile, they rebuilt the Temple where they could go to meet God. Now, fast forward to some time in 1908, when some elders made the decision to build a "New Church" right here, so God's people could go to meet God.

As beautiful and historic as this room is, it's not the same when I'm in here by myself on a weekday without all of you. Certainly God is present here, even when God's people aren't here. But there's something special about the people of God going to meet God and God going to meet his people when we gather for worship on the Lord's Day. There may be as many different reasons why we all came here today as there are people here this morning. Some may have come for practical reasons. Some may have come for personal reasons. Let us hope we have all come for theological reasons — that is to say, the God to whom we go is here, waiting for us and wanting us to enjoy being in his presence in the company of God's people. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20)

Here we are in the "New Church," in God's sanctuary. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines "sanctuary" as (1) the most sacred part of a religious building, (2) the room in which general worship services are held, and (3) a place for worship." That's certainly why we're here in God's sanctuary today. "Sanctuary" also means (1) a consecrated place and (2) a place of refuge and protection.

When we go to God in God's sanctuary, it's not so we can escape from the world around us or stick our heads in the sand. Going to God in worship may provide us a place of refuge and protection, but our worship gives us the opportunity to draw strength and joy from our lively, living God, so we can keep on living as God's people wherever he calls us to be and in whatever he calls us to do.

The psalmist paints a beautiful picture of finding sanctuary in God's sanctuary: "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." Imagine that! Birds roosting in the house of God. If we came into this sanctuary for worship on a Sunday morning and found some sparrows settled in above the stained glass windows and some swallows nesting on the communion table, our Building & Grounds folks would jump into action!

But what if we let the sparrows sit quietly above the stained glass windows and didn't disturb the swallows sitting on their nests on the communion table? Maybe if we were quiet we could hear them sing their bird songs. "My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God." Maybe if we were observant we could appreciate their sense of security and calm at having found a place of sanctuary. Maybe the tiny sparrows and swallows could teach us exactly what the psalmist means when he says, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness." In other words, it's enough even to be standing in the doorway in God's presence, much less going in and being a full part of the worship of our lively, living Lord God.

One time when I was in Tabasco, Mexico, my friend, Huascar, came to me while we were eating at a church out in the country and asked, "Would you like to preach?" When I asked him, "When?" he said, "In about twenty minutes!" Of course I said yes. Keep in mind, this church was in a little town in the Mexican countryside. As we walked from supper over to the sanctuary, we noticed the crowd that was gathering for worship. Trucks pulled up in front of the church with people hanging off the sides. Groups of people walked down the street, almost like a river flowing to the church. When I stood up to preach, I noticed the sanctuary was overflowing with worshipers. Then I saw that the crowd had spilled out into the courtyard in front of the church. Then I realized that people were standing two and three deep along the sides of the church, craning their necks to see in the windows.

After the worship service, we shook hands with every single person who was at worship. One friend said, "This is the first time I've ever really understood what the Bible means when it talks about the 'multitudes' that surrounded Jesus." Another friend said to me, "Wow, your preaching really packed 'em in tonight, Phil!" No, it didn't. It wasn't my preaching, because they didn't know who was going to preach that night. The people came in droves because, as the psalmist says, "My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. . . Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise."

All these years later, I can still see those faces at the church windows, straining to hear God's Word, eager to be in God's sanctuary to worship God who is a sun and shield, our King and our God. Today's opening hymn was chosen because of v. 11: "he

bestows favor and honor.” “God of grace and God of glory, On Thy people pour Thy power . . .” Again, Dr. Mays writes, “God gives grace and glory; the good in life comes from the Lord. He is, says the psalm, ‘my king and my God,’ . . . that means something like ‘the sovereign power of the universe and the center of my personal life, the one who makes all things cohere for the life I have to live.’ To draw near to such a God is the greatest good [sic] . . . Pilgrimage to God’s place is a profound symbol of the centering and direction of all of life.”<sup>2</sup>

Let’s go back to “My Pastoral Record.” Those names and dates and scripture texts and sermon titles are more than just dry statistics. They remind me of God’s people who have faithfully gathered in God’s house for worship and at the most important times in our lives — birth, baptism, confirmation, marriage, death — to go to God. This beloved sanctuary is not the end goal, but a stopping point on the pilgrimage of life. We come here to connect with one another and with God on our journey through this life, until the day when we will see “the throne of God and of the Lamb” in the new Jerusalem, “and his servants will worship him . . . and the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 22:3, 5) Until that day, when we meet “the God to whom we go,” we come here to this sanctuary to worship our King and our God, where we can find our strength, our joy, our contentment.

A missionary in Paraguay tells the story about a Maka Indian coming and sitting on his porch when the missionary was eating. When he went outside to see what the man wanted, the villager said, “Ham, henek met.” The missionary again asked him what he could do for him, and the response was the same, “Ham, henek met,” which means, “I don’t want anything; I have just come near.”

The missionary understood the man’s words but not what he meant. When he asked a veteran missionary for some help, he was told, “He is honoring you. He only wants to sit on your porch. He finds satisfaction and pleasure being near you.”

When we come into the house of the Lord to meet the God to whom we go, let us listen for God asking us, “What brings you here, my child?”

And let us say, “Ham, henek met.”

“I don’t want anything; I have just come near.”<sup>3</sup>

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”

***Let us pray: We lift our eyes to you, O God, in worship and adoration. Help us focus on your promises and expect your grace. May we gather all our needs and desires and bring them to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 275.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, pp. 274-275.

<sup>3</sup>Stuart Sacks, Villanova, PA, “Worship on the Porch,” at [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com).