

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 16-A (22 August 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

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Collect

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43, Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20, John 6:56-69

1 Rejoicing in the Temple

*How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts! * My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.*

This week I saw turmoil and terror in Afghanistan. This week I saw suffering and loss in Haiti. This week I attended a graveside funeral. This week I attended the ordination of six passionate new Deacons, giving themselves to Christ's Church. All of these are reasons why I go to church. I go to church to make sense of the world. I go to church to celebrate what's good in the world: babies, baptisms, marriages, any good event in life. I go to church to lament what's wrong with the world: death, sickness, loss, disappointment. I go to church to remember that God is in charge. I go to church to ask how my life will be shaped in response to a loving God and a challenging world.

The Church is that ancient and holy mystery that continues to be the visible expression of the Holy Spirit at work among God's people and in the world. For thousands of years, worshipers of God have connected specific places with their experiences of God, and looked to those places to be reminded of their connection to God.

The Psalmist today is enthusiastic about being at the Temple to worship God. Before there were airplanes and cars, buses and trains, most worshipers had to walk for *days*, and sometimes months or even a year or two, to get to the Temple in Jerusalem. For most people, especially those close-by, the trip was more uphill than down. Yet the Psalmist, who came from far away, sees the Temple as a home of sorts. Even the sparrows and swallows make nests in God's house — not to mention the squirrels and the bats we get at St. Thomas'!

The house of God is a place that was purpose-built for the worship of God. It's not a place where God lives, as though God needed shelter. It is not an exclusive place of encountering God, as if God was hidden away and only known there. But it is a place that is conducive to worship, a place that resonates with the prayers of the faithful and the occasional, uttered down through time; a place that reminds anyone who shows up, as they look around, what it is they came for. This is what Solomon recognized as he asked God to hear the prayers prayed in the Temple and those uttered looking toward the Temple. Even today we construct our church buildings with the altar in the East - so that we can pray looking toward Jerusalem. That's one reason I turned the Parish Hall sideways when we began using it for live-streaming services. Jews and Gentiles, residents and pilgrims: Solomon asked God to hear all the prayers directed toward God's house.

God's house is a symbol, representing one's longing for God and going there, or facing its direction during worship, expresses one's desire for God. God's house is a useful avatar to help us always "seek first" the Kingdom of God and to draw near to God with all our heart.

2 Valleys

There are certainly places in the world, places in our lives, where we can feel far from God. There are experiences of pain, heart-ache, and dullness. There are disappointments, lonelinesses, and changes that are as unwelcome as they are inevitable. We face health challenges, relationship challenges, and work challenges. Sometimes the roof leaks or the car breaks down or the bill is for more money than we earn in a month! Death knocks at our doors, and now this pandemic just won't go away. All kinds of events and circumstances can leave us feeling far from God, walking through desolate valleys, crying bitter tears.

But even in the valleys, says the Psalmist, there are signs of God's merciful presence, like unexpected pools of water along a dusty road in a thirsty land. We come to church see those refreshing pools of God's *grace and glory* more clearly, to receive them by faith, and to learn to recognize them during all those hours each week when we are not in church. The psalmist reminds us that being far from the Temple does not mean being far from God: we are all pilgrims on a journey, and wherever we find ourselves, God is already there.

3 Community in Pilgrimage

At the end of the "Bread of Life" discourse in John, chapter 6, many people turn away from Jesus because what he teaches is too challenging. Jesus is demanding too much change, too significant a break with what his listeners have known before. And, of course, Jesus is using the outrageous, shocking language of cannibalism to tell his disciples they must consume his body and his blood in order to be transformed, to have his own unstoppable life live within them. Jesus asks the twelve apostles if they too will abandon them. Simon Peter, he whom we poke fun at for always saying the wrong thing, says the only right and true thing. Peter says, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."¹

Jesus urges his disciples to "seek first" God's Kingdom, trusting God for everything else we need. Solomon recognized that Temples were not just for the professionals, and not just for the days you're feeling confident and looking good. Temples are for pilgrims, the hungry and needy, those who have made terrible mistakes in life. The house of God is a place of invitation: a place for Christians to come and rehearse the words and actions that tell us of God's presence. It is also a place of welcome and hope for those who do not identify as Christians, but who find themselves in need and God's people willing to help.

St. Thomas' Episcopal Church is first of all a community, a group of people committed to one another under the order and discipline of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of New Jersey. We are also often identified with our building, which is a beautiful place purpose-built to enable our worship together. But even as a worsening pandemic continues to keep our main service outdoors each week, it is not the place that give us grace and glory, not the building that is our sun and shield, not the institution that is our defender and God's anointed. These things instead point to Jesus Christ, who is all things for us and who travels with us through every valley.

¹Jn 6.68f. NRSV

As the Church we make pilgrimage together, through good and bad, joy and sorrow, sickness and health, in the company of our Lord, loving our neighbors as ourselves, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. The word in Hebrew is “blessed,” but our prayer book translates God’s promise to us with the word “happy”:

Happy are they who dwell in your house! *
they will always be praising you.

Happy are the people whose strength is in you! *
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims’ way.

O Lord of hosts, *
happy are they who put their trust in you!²

Amen.

²Ps 84.3, 4, 12 from the BCP