SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. ADAM CONLEY, CURATE

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 26, 2025
JEREMIAH 14:7-10, 19-22; PSALM 84:1-6; 2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8, 16-18; LUKE 18:9-14

RAVENOUS HUNGER FOR A RAVISHING GOD

Luke 18: 9-14 *[Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."]*

"How *lovely* is your dwelling place, O God of Hosts!"

That's the most common English translation of the first line of Psalm 84. Our familiar prayer book version, which we just chanted antiphonally with the magnificent help of the Sr. Choristers and Schola, says, "How *dear* to me is your dwelling, O God of hosts!"

Hebrew Bible Scholar Robert Alter suggests that "lovely," even "dear," are somewhat tepid descriptors when it comes to the intensity of desire for God's presence indicated by the original Hebrew. The venerable King James Version gives us proper English restraint with, "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts!" but is somewhat drained

of the potent life source animating the Psalmist's desire for God.

Alter says the original Hebrew puts more skin in the game on the part of the petitioner. There is even an element of passionate, intimate yearning. I wonder if we might come closer to the psalmist's intention by, just once in a while, praying this beloved psalm like this: "How *ravishing* is your dwelling place, O God of hosts! My soul has a *ravenous* longing for the courts of the Lord!"

Our psalmist models a ravenous hunger for this ravishing God. The psalmist, of course, is speaking for Israel's deep yearning for Zion, the dwelling place of God, the great Temple in Jerusalem. Of course, like all psalms, this psalm operates on multiple levels.

This is often referred to as a Pilgrim Psalm because it describes yearning and sojourn, a homeward journey.

"Happy are the people whose strength is in you! Whose hearts are set on the pilgrim's way."

This is good stuff: it's also both a processional liturgy and travelogue! The psalm's poetic couplets celebrate the holy as it breaks through at points along the journey.

"Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, for the early rains have covered it with pools of water."

Literally and metaphorically, the Psalmist leads us from height to height, vista to vista, onward to the dwelling place of the Divine Majesty. All along the way, we are invited to share in the utter delight, even ecstasy, of the petitioner's ravenous desire for their ravishing God.

The psalm grabs us with its exuberance right out of the gate. When we finally arrive at our soul's desire, at the place where our "heart and flesh rejoice in the living God," …when we behold the courts of the Lord in their glory, we see again what we remembered at the psalm's beginning:

"The sparrow has found her a house, and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young."

The heart of God is intimately connected to all that God has made. And so, the psalmist's vision recalls the hospitality found by small winged creatures, not only in the rafters and gables of the Jerusalem

Temple's sprawling architecture, but also, surprisingly, in the immediate vicinity of the Holy of Holies.

Everything God has made bears a mark of the sacramentality, of sacredness. As seekers, as pilgrims ourselves, the psalm reminds us that our ravenous hunger for God must also fuel our commitment to care for the gift of Creation. Life on Earth, our island home, is fragile, but it's always and forever shot through with God's love for it, for us. To love God in return is to love and steward God's gift of the environment.

Saint Mark's knows well that our care for the environment goes hand in hand with caring for our neighbor. The societal sin of blatant, human-made climate change has a devastating impact on our most vulnerable and least resourced siblings and neighbors.

Global warming disproportionately affects nations and communities of color living in heat, flood, and famine zones, and pollution-plagued cities, all bearing the widening, increasingly irreversible scars of runaway carbon emissions.

The destruction of wild places and animal habitats around the globe and in our own backyard is an affront to our God. It is an affront to our ravishing God who welcomes sparrows and swallows into the innermost sanctuary of God's house.

This Stewardship Ingathering Sunday, your financial commitment to Saint Mark's affirms our shared Christian hope that we can make a difference as a community of faith. It honors the sacramentality of the world around us.

Among the many ways Psalm 84 draws us into the presence of God, is its liturgical quality as an offertory. It is as much a pilgrim psalm as it is a gratitude psalm. The psalm luxuriates in thanksgiving for the reality of God's ravishing presence with, among, behind, and before us.

"Happy are they who dwell in your house, they will always be praising you!"

There is a direct connection between our desire for God and the generosity of our stewardship practice. It's the yearning we want to foster, because it's the yearning, a ravenous yearning, even, that takes us home to God.

And yet, cultivating ravenous desire for our irresistible, ravishing God is less something we have to "do" as it's a grace by which God draws us ever homeward.

Continue to ask for it in prayer. Pray for it alongside the Psalmist, the sparrow and the swallow with her young babies, and the Great Judeo-Christian Cloud of Witnesses who have traced and rejoiced in the homeward liturgy of this psalm for millennia.

And finally, give your desire for desire over to Jesus. Ask for the desire of the psalmist.

May we know and share God's love in the "early rains" that cover the desolate valley with pools of water. And may we trust with the quiet confidence of the sparrow, that our home is forever and always in the holy of holies, secure in the joyful, life-giving presence of our ravishing God.

"How *ravishing* is your dwelling place, O God of hosts!"

Stir up in our souls a *ravenous* longing for your courts, the Realm of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!