

# God's House

May 16, 2021

First Presbyterian Church Champaign, IL

Psalm 84

Matt Matthews

*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.*

--- from Psalm 84

What does God's house look like?

The nave of National Cathedral in Washington DC (where the congregation sits in the sanctuary) is so long, the Washington Monument could be laid down and slide into it. There's a real moon rock in one of the stained glass windows. The cornerstone was laid in 1907, and in that stone were smaller stones gathered from the fields around the ancient city of Jerusalem.

What does God's house look like?

The domed roof above the chancel area of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NYC is so high that the Statue of Liberty can be set on the chancel and can stand upright, torch and all, without touching the far away ceiling. -

What does God's house look like?

A long time ago, "in the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt," in the fourth year of his reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv (which is the second month), King Solomon built a massive temple (I Kings 6). Its stone was finished at the quarry, so that at the temple site "neither hammer nor ax nor any tool of iron was heard in the temple while it was being built" (I Kings 6:7). By all accounts it was larger than any such structure in Palestine. Walls were lined with the massive cedars of Lebanon; the floors were covered with Cyprus. Flowers were carved into the cedar. The inner sanctuary was overlaid with pure gold.

What does God's house look like?

Help me to sing this children's song:

*"The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple,  
the church is not a resting place, the church is the people.  
I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.  
All who love Jesus all around the world, let's be the church together."*

We are right to remember that simple children's song today. God's house cannot be adequately described in cubits or construction materials. Jewish temple, Christian church, Muslim mosque, Buddhist shangrila aren't homes for the most-high God. Brick and mortar, stained glass, and cedar beams do not rightly describe where God dwells.

And nobody knew that better than Solomon. In his prayer at the dedication of the temple, Solomon rhetorically asks,

*"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!"*

God cannot be contained in a building. God, who cannot be contained even by heaven and the highest heaven, simply does NOT dwell in a musty building, no matter how grand. Solomon knew that.

Christians have understood God's presence best through the incarnation of God in Jesus. And we have affirmed Jesus words that "wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with you."

God dwells with God's people, in the hearts of God's faithful. "Happy are those whose strength is in [God]," the psalmist writes, "in whose heart are the highways to Zion." God makes a highway in our hearts. God makes our lives an offering. God makes a manger in our cradled arms. Emmanuel: God with us.

God is interested in being present with his people, not in their buildings which remain empty (and air-conditioned) most of the week.

But Solomon would be quick to point out the God who cannot be contained in the highest heaven, cannot be contained in the human heart, either. God is with us, but God also is "holy other" (which is good news). God is God and cannot be limited by the waywardness of our hearts or the cholesterol clogging our attitude. Solomon says that "God tabernacles in thick darkness," which is one way of saying that God is present with us but also distinct from us, and his nearness is a nearness that only God can give.<sup>[1]</sup> Building a house, in other words, won't limit God to a permanent address. Solomon knew these things.

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And yet, knowing that God cannot and will not be contained by a building, Solomon, nevertheless, builds God a grand temple as a tangible sign of God's presence with us in the world. The temple serves as a beacon, a spire, a steeple, a bell, a light.

(Psalm 84:1-12)

1How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!

2My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God.

3Even 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.

4Happy are those who live in your house,  
ever singing your praise.

Sparrows find place for their nests in the big building of the temple. And people over eons find safe haven with each other: support, nurture, challenge, love.

- Outlaws have come to the church for sanctuary, to be free and un-chased for a moment, where the world can't rush in after them with warrants and handcuffs.
- The tired have come to temple and church to find rest.
- The confused come for the hope of clarity.
- The busy have come to worship and re-center their orientation.
- Over the centuries, travelers have come to monasteries to find a place to sleep and eat;
- the sick would also come for healing prayer, and herbs from the monks' gardens.

The building is one place where the people of God gather to learn, to refuel, to grow, to lament, to worship, to be readied for service. We come to learn about what Jesus wants us to be; we go out to live like Jesus wants us to live; and we come back to ask God and each other, *Are we doing this right?*

We don't need buildings to worship God. Our year of on-line worship has proven that. But our worship spaces are beautiful when they become filled with pilgrims eager to worship, to humble themselves, and to serve.

I like our sanctuary, this physical space on the corner of Church and State streets. I like the comfort this building provides us all. But I would worship with you in a soccer field, on a street corner, or under a leaky tarp in a big rain.

And the neatest thing of all is that when we gather, ***God has chosen to dwell with us.***

AMEN.

Psalm 84

The Joy of Worship in the Temple

To the leader: according to The Gittith. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,

O Lord of hosts!

2 My soul longs, indeed it faints

for the courts of the Lord;

my heart and my flesh sing for joy

to the living God.

3 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.

4 Happy are those who live in your house,

ever singing your praise. Selah

5 Happy are those whose strength is in you,

in whose heart are the highways to Zion.<sup>[a]</sup>

6 As they go through the valley of Baca

they make it a place of springs;

the early rain also covers it with pools.

7 They go from strength to strength;

the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

8 O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
give ear, O God of Jacob!Selah  
9 Behold our shield, O God;  
look on the face of your anointed.  
10 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.  
11 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.  
12 O Lord of hosts,  
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

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<sup>[1]</sup> (p78, The New Interpreters' Bible, vol III)