

Every Great Nation's Aspirations

Psalm 48
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Many of us have great affinity for certain places.

Some of us speak with great fondness of our home towns, for example. Somebody told me when we arrived here that there's nothing like a winter day here when the sun is out and the sky is blue and you can see forever.

Ask me about Hampton, VA, sometime. I was born and raised in sight of water. There's nothing like moonlight on the harbor in my home town.

Writers often take great care to describe their beloved surroundings. Imagine Jack London without the danger, the cold, and the wild of the great outdoors. You feel the dustbowl grit in your mouth from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Hemmingway spoke of Paris and Havana with great admiration. The Lithuanian poet Czeslaw Milosz said, "Language is the only homeland."

We feel affection for certain places.

Where would Claude Monet be without the gardens and water-lily-ponds of Giverny (Jee.ver.nie)?

Concert pianists dream of one place: Carnegie Hall. Singer songwriters dream of the Troubadour in Los Angeles. Would-be jazz greats pay homage to Preservation Hall in New Orleans.^[1]

John Williams, who preached from this pulpit not so long ago, talks about Texas with great respect and love; he might call MoRanch, a Presbyterian Conference Center outside of Kerrville, God's country.

And our country. The United States. We love the country that God has entrusted to our care—the spacious skies, amber waves of grain, purple mountain majesty, the ample, fruited plain.

Some of us were born far away and immigrated to get here—through many dangers, toils, and snares they have already come. Some have dreamed of the land long before they stood on its shores. Others of us have deep, deep roots in this land we have long-called home. All of us love our country—its freedoms, contradictions, opportunity, diverse population. Its promise. Its hope. Its potential. Our prayer is, "God, bless America."

We often feel great affection for places. We feel love and pride.

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The psalmist feels this deep connection and affection for Jerusalem.

Jerusalem—the city on the holy mountain, greatly to be praised, beautiful in elevation, the joy of all the earth. On ancient maps, Jerusalem is often painted as the center of the four corners of the earth, the belly button of the known world. That's how central the city was to Jewish cartographers.

Psalm 48 is a pilgrim's psalm. The faithful are making their way—at least once in their live times—to Jerusalem. They are excited about its citadels, its ramparts, its soaring towers. Even as Muslim pilgrims long for Mecca, Jewish and Christian pilgrims still make treks to Jerusalem, "The Holy Land." These pilgrims,

both ancient and modern, think of that great city with every step that takes them closer to it. They adore their iconic city, and they are filled with obvious civic pride.

We know the feeling.

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I think this psalm may be a cautionary tale for us.

The Psalmist runs the risk of letting pride and patriotism take center stage; she appears to be revering the city as much as or more than she reveres the God who reigns over the city. Glorification of the city and glorification of God seem to be described almost as the same thing. They are not.

Again, we know the feeling.

When we rightly love our country, our family, our team, our tribe so much, we run the risk of loving so fiercely, so patriotically that we put God and the things of God in second (or third, or fourth) place. Our Christian intellect affirms that God and only God transcends all allegiances, all alliances, all affinity and affection.^[3] But our hearts sometimes betray us.

Here's how it happens. A true story. Alex was a great club soccer player in her community soccer league. Her team won a city title and a regional title. The state title game was to be played on Easter Sunday morning.

There was one glitch.

Alex was a student in her church's confirmation class. And on Easter, she was scheduled to make her statement of faith and be confirmed as a church member. For Alex, this was a big deal, and she wasn't going to miss it.

Her coach didn't like it one bit and talked to her, to her parents, and to her pastor. He explained that Alex couldn't miss the state final game. The coach said she had been part of the team since winter. Alex, a precocious girl, said she'd been part of the church since her baptism when she was a little baby.

I don't know if her team won or lost the state championship, but they played the game without her. She celebrated Easter with her church family and confirmation class. The way she put it was that she had high duties on Easter, and a deeper commitment to fulfill.

Priorities get mixed up in life. Our passionate love of places, people, and things sometimes turns us around.

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In the center of Jerusalem sat the temple. And in the center of the temple was the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies. It was there that the priest would be reminded what must be at the center of every great nation's aspirations. The love of God and God's love of us is at the center of anything that resembles true success and health.

Every pilgrim knows that every city's walls will crumble. Monuments will be pulled down and others will go up. Everything about Jerusalem is subject to the dust and havoc of history, but God is not subject to life's inevitable decay. God's power and love will not, does not, cannot fail or fade, and is not bound by borders, or language, or creed.

And this God is worthy of all praise, and honor, and power forever. AMEN.

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Let us pray:

Almighty God,
you have given us this good land as our heritage.
Make us always remember your generosity
and constantly do your will.
Bless our land with honest industry,
sound learning,
and an honorable way of life.
Save us from violence, discord, and confusion;
from pride and arrogance,
and from every evil way.
Make us who come from many nations
with many different languages
a united people.
Defend our liberties
and give those whom we have entrusted with the authority of government the spirit of wisdom,
that there might be justice and peace in our land.
When times are prosperous, let our hearts be thankful;
and, in troubled times, do not let our trust in you fail.
We ask all this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[1] Some of us speak powerfully of places we have visited, places where we have fallen in love, places that matter to us, places we cannot forget. Some remember the beaches of Normandy from that day on June 6, 1944. My father would never, ever forget the woods and the cold of Belgium on the day before the Battle of the Bulge began. Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese speak of NYC with proud, fierce, familial love. Sandburg paints a compelling picture of Chicago—the City of Broad Shoulders.

[2] Rachel's spiritual home is in the mountains of western North Carolina that cradle the town in which she received her call—Montreat, NC.

[3] (252, The Interpreters Bible Commentary, vol 4.) "What was the meaning of God's dwelling in the midst of the great city? What purpose did its power and pretentiousness serve? To frighten neighbor kings? Hardly. Beneath it all . . . was not terror or bombast or threat, but goodness. The temple was where . . . [God] became to them the embodiment of love."