

“How Lovely is Your Dwelling Place, Lord Almighty”

I. Where God comes to us with his grace

II. Where God gathers as his family

How lovely is your dwelling place,
Lord Almighty!

²My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.

³Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
Lord Almighty, my King and my God.

⁴Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.^[a]

In the year 537 BC, Cyrus, the king of Persia, issued a decree that allowed the inhabitants of Judah to return to their homeland after being held captive in Babylon for 70 years. They longed to return to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. But first they had to rebuild the temple because it had been destroyed by enemy armies. When the builders laid the foundation for the new temple, Scripture tells us, *All the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord (Ezra 3:11)*. And you can see why. The people were eager to be able to worship in the house of the Lord again.

And yet, the Prophet Ezra adds this note: *But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. (Ezra 3:12)* In other words, at this very special event surrounding the Lord's temple, there were mixed emotions. Some people were excited about the prospect of a new temple. And others were still thinking about the old temple. They were thinking about the way things used to be.

Tell me, can you relate? Like those Israelites, we've just returned from a bit of an exile. For 13 weeks, we were, in effect, banished from this familiar space. We had to conduct our worship services in a strange and distant land, called the gymnasium. But now, by order of the powers that be, we've been allowed to return here to our beloved house of worship. And just like those Israelites, we are singing songs of praise. We're thanking God for a newly renovated sanctuary. But just like the Israelites, there may be some among us who have some mixed emotions. They just can't help but think about how this house of worship used to look. They miss some of those features of old Mount Olive. There were some wonderful memories attached to that old pulpit, altar, and baptismal font. Now maybe they aren't weeping out loud, like the elderly Israelites were doing, but they certainly had some mixed emotions.

But maybe those aren't the only mixed emotions being experienced today. Maybe there is another elephant in the room. Today we celebrate the dedication of our new sanctuary. But today

also marks someone's last sermon as a Mount Olive pastor. (Now maybe you're celebrating that fact, too. "Finally, he's done.") Or maybe it comes with some mixed emotions. I know it does for me. Yes, there's lots of joy and gratitude to God, but there is also some sadness as we think about what once was and will be no more. In that sense, maybe we're not all that different than the people of God gathered there in Jerusalem some 2500 years ago.

But now, let's go back to why those Israelites were gathered together in Jerusalem in the first place. They had come together because they wanted to build a house for God. A place where they could commune with the Lord almighty. A place where they could offer their prayers and praises. A place where the Lord Most High would dwell. In fact, 450 years earlier, the psalmist described that place when he wrote in Psalm 84:1, *How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!*

My friends, couldn't you and I say the same thing today? As we gather to dedicate this newly renovated worship space to God's glory, we too can say with the psalmist:

How Lovely is Your Dwelling Place, Lord Almighty!

The question I'd like you to consider is this: What is it that makes God's dwelling place lovely? Why do you think the Psalmist used that term, "lovely"? Could he have been thinking of the beautiful cedar beams hewn from the forests of Lebanon, or the massive stone walls chiseled out of limestone, or the gold that covered the entire interior of Solomon's Temple? Maybe. All those things were certainly lovely. And today we could say the same thing about the various components of this worship space. But today the psalmist invites us to look past the appearance of this room and see what actually happens in this place. Because that's where it's true beauty lies. Why can we say that this is a lovely place? Two reasons. I. Because this is where God comes to us with his grace. II. Because this is where God gathers us as his family.

First, this is where God comes to us with his grace. I realize that when we talk about our interaction with God, we often think that we're the ones who have to do the moving. Right? We say things like "I'm going to church or we might invite someone to come with us to a worship service. And that kind of terminology is not wrong. I mean, what did the writer say in Psalm 122? *I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord. (Psalm 122:1)*

But let's understand, simply going to a building, even if it's called a church, isn't what strengthens a person's relationship to God. I mean, there are millions of people gathered in mosques and synagogues around the world who are not one step closer to a living relationship with the true God. In fact, there are millions of people sitting in Christian churches, who think that they are getting on God's good side by attending church, or they are somehow making up for the bad things they did this week, by putting in their time in the Lord's house.

But the fact is, when it comes to our relationship with God, the most important movement is not us coming to God. It's God coming to us. As sinners, we can't move one inch closer to God. God needs to come to us. And so that's what God does. He comes to us with his undeserved love. He gives us the things we truly need, the things our hearts crave. He gives the assurance that our sins are forgiven, and that, for Jesus' sake, we are all right in his eyes. He gives us the confidence that even in the darkest trial, he's on our side, working everything out for our eternal good. He gives us the sure and certain hope that when we breathe our last breath, we will be with the Lord forever. And understand, he gives us these gifts not because we are so worthy, but because he is so gracious. In love for us, God finds so many different ways to communicate his promises to us, so many ways to pour out his gifts of grace on us—whether it's through the words of the absolution, where the pastor speaks with the authority of Christ himself, declaring that your sins are paid in full, or through the promises God makes you in his holy

word, or the very covenant he establishes with you here in his body and blood, or the new life he gives you through the washing with water and the word.

For 31 years, God has given me the privilege of helping to distribute those gifts of God's grace. God has used me to communicate God's promises. You want to talk about the best job in the world? I've had it for the past 40 years, telling people about a God who loves you, who forgives you, who has a perfect plan for your life. For 31 years, I've been doing that in this place. Isn't that what makes this a lovely place? It's not the architecture, or the furniture or the preacher that makes this place lovely. No, this place is lovely because this is where God comes to us through the means of grace, the gospel in word and sacrament. That's what has us saying with the psalmist of old, *How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!*

But now, I want you to notice that in the next verse, the psalmist goes on to draw a connection between the place where God dwells and therefore the place where the psalmist desperately wants to be. The psalmist writes, *My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. (Psalm 84:2)*

My friends, isn't the same thing still true today? When we realize that this is a place where God comes to us, where God feeds us, where God builds us up with his word and sacraments, well, then we realize that this is where we want to be. And we want to be with others who have that same desire, that same appreciation for God's grace. In fact, it's that grace that ties us all together as members of the family of God. In fact, you might say that's the second reason we can say that this is a lovely place. Yes, I. This is where God comes to us with his grace. But it's also a place II. Where God gathers us as his family.

Man, you think about how many times the Mount Olive family is gathered for worship in this place. Did you know that since the day the sanctuary was first dedicated to God's glory in 1980, Mount Olive has conducted over 9,000 worship services here in this space? That's a whole lot of people coming together as a family. It represents couples pledging their lifelong faithfulness to each other before the Lord's altar, babies being welcomed into the kingdom of God through the waters of holy baptism, grieving family members taking comfort in the promise of a glorious resurrection in Christ, but most importantly, it represents believers being strengthened in their faith through word and sacrament and being equipped for life as God's people.

I don't know about you, but I feel like I've done a lot of growing in this place. Growing toward God, growing toward you, growing together as a family in Christ. In many ways, this place has become my spiritual home. And maybe you feel the same way. Yes, this is God's house, but it's also our spiritual home. It's where we find refuge from the storms of life. It's where we gather together with the members of our family. In fact, here in our text, the psalmist draws a parallel between this being our spiritual home, and the birds finding a home in the various nooks and crannies of the temple in Jerusalem. The psalmist writes, *Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, Lord Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house. (Psalm 84:3)* It's almost as if the psalmist is jealous of the birds for all the time they get to spend in God's house.

Now, you and I can't live in this place 24-7 (although I thought about it on occasion). But that doesn't mean we can't appreciate what a lovely place this is. Lovely, not only because of the new furniture, pews, lighting, etc., but more importantly, lovely because of what God does here. This is where God comes to us with his grace and this is where God gathers us as his family.

For 31 years, I've been watching that happen. For 31 years God has allowed me to serve you with his word and sacrament, and also serve alongside of you as together we worked to carry out the mission God has given to us and our children. In the end, some things never change. Pastors come and go but God stays the same. The promises that he has made and kept to us in the past, he will continue to keep in the future. Of that you can be sure. Your confidence about the future is not built on a pastor, or two. It's built on the promises of God that those pastors shared with you. God is good. God is with you. That means that the place where he dwells with you here in his house—and your spiritual home—this is truly a lovely place. And so, we can say with the psalmist of old, (say it with me, will you?) “How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!” To God be the glory. Amen.