

Refuge

*I will say to the LORD,
“My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”
(Psalm 91:2 ESV)*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
(Psalm 42:2 ESV)*

*And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.
(Psalm 9:10 ESV)*

All My Springs Are In You

June 14th, 2020

Psalm 87

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Well good morning church – where ever you happen to be this morning, it is good to see you. It is good to see some of you in person. As much as I love Thomas – and I have come to love him a great deal over the last 4 months – it is SO NICE to see some additional faces. Preaching to a camera is not my thing – and I’m sure that doing church through a computer screen is not your thing – or at least I hope it’s not your thing.

This medium – this weird online thing that we’ve been doing for the last 4 months – has been a kindness. But it has not been church. This has been “preaching theatre with a studio audience” but not quite church.

The very word “church” comes from the Greek word “ecclesia” which means “the gathering or assembly”.

Church is BY DEFINITION the assembling of God’s people together. In person. Men. Women. CHILDREN. Young. Old.

We're not there yet.

Most of the people in this room today are between the ages of 40-60. That's not church. That's a high school reunion.

We're thankful – but we are still not satisfied. Nor should we be.

Now, I'm not saying we should be angry. I don't think anyone is being unfair to us. I'm not planning a protest. But I am thirsty – are you feeling that?

I hope you are feeling that.

The bible says:

“It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18 ESV)

God said that when there was only a man but had there been a woman and there been children I'm sure he would have said: “It is not good for ANY of you to be alone.”

We were MADE FOR COMMUNITY. All kinds of bad things happen to people when they are shut up in their basements for 4 months watching Netflix and surfing through Social Media for the latest conspiracy theories. As a group – as a SPECIES – we have taken a HUGE STEP back in terms of our character and conduct over the last 4 months. Why?

Because:

“It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18 ESV)

We need each other.

OLD TESTAMENT AND NEW – God's people are COMMANDED to be together – did you know that?

One of things I got so tired of hearing over the course of this pandemic was “the church is not a building”. “Wherever you are – you are the church.”

Brothers and sisters, that is nowhere near true enough to be helpful.

If you’ve been saying that please stop.

It’s true that the church is not a building – we could be the church sitting in a circle outside down at the park couldn’t be? It’s not about the building – but it is about the circle. It is about the gathering of God’s people in one place. We need that. We need each other – are you feeling that?

Gathering together is not optional. I think a lot of believe that it is. I think a lot of us would be content to stay at home for the next 6 months watching church in our pajamas – I’ve heard a lot of folks saying: “this is great! We should have been doing this the whole time”.

Well there is a verse for that. Hebrews 10:24-25 says:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24–25 ESV)

The basic premise of that passage is that BEING A CHRISTIAN IS HARD and you will need HELP from your brothers and sisters – therefore do not neglect meeting together.

Now of course, we’ve had to neglect meeting together for the last 4 months. This has been a very strange exception. Let’s not allow it to become the rule.

We fully intend to abide by the guidelines – we want to stay safe – we want to maintain a good reputation in the community – but today I’m just wanting to make sure that we are not LOSING our DESIRE to be together.

I'm not advocating today for silly risks or civil disobedience – not at all. My goal today is to MAKE YOU THIRSTY again for corporate worship. So toward that end, I'd like to invite you to open your Bible to Psalm 87.

We're not sure who wrote this Psalm – the ascription says that it is a Psalm of the Sons of Korah – but that just tells us who sang it or what endowed choir produced it – it doesn't tell us who wrote it. So we don't know who the author was but we know what the purpose was. It appears that this Psalm was written for pilgrims to sing as they made their way up to Jerusalem. It is therefore classified as a Psalm of Zion.

Now ZION was a special name for Jerusalem. It was a way of referring to Jerusalem that enveloped the ACTUAL CITY – AND simultaneously the HOPE that the city represented. To speak of ZION was to speak of the Kingdom of God both in terms of how it was manifesting PRESENTLY and also in terms of how it would manifest ULTIMATELY.

It was to speak of the kingdom that IS and the Kingdom that was COMING.

You see Jerusalem was not just a city – it was also a dream. It was a sign and it intended to direct our thoughts toward the city whose architect and builder was the LORD.

When you came to Jerusalem you came to the future. You came to a shadow cast in advance of the Kingdom of God. That's what the Psalmist is thinking of here. Willem VanGemeren says:

“The psalmist's ecstasy is not with the present, earthly city but with “the city of God” as a theological entity, from God's perspective.”¹

Now you say, well that's marvellous, but what does that have to do with us? We're not on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem – we're just people who may or may not go to church in Orillia, Ontario Canada. But the Apostle to the Hebrews does not agree with you. He says: (No, no, no)

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of

¹ Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms* in The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 5, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 563.

the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”
(Hebrews 12:22–24 ESV)

According to the Apostle – when you come to church - you come to ZION.

Christian interpreters of Psalm 87 have always understood that the ultimate referent of these verses is to the church. Derek Kidner says here:

“Since the psalm will make it clear that Zion gives its name to a community, not only a place, the relevance of this to the church is direct.”²

You see, when you come to church – when you ASSEMBLE as a people AROUND CHRIST and WITH THE ANGELS IN FESTAL GATHERING – you come to something bigger than you realize. You are a part of something much broader, much wider and much more significant than it appears at street level.

So we have come to Zion today – and this is our Pilgrim’s song. So let’s read it. We’ll take a walk through the text – it’s not very long – and then we will use it for a guide for our meditations and reflections moving forward.

A Pilgrim’s Song:

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

A PSALM OF THE SONS OF KORAH. A SONG.

¹ On the holy mount stands the city he founded;

² the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.

I mentioned that this Psalm was originally written for pilgrims to sing as they made their way up to Jerusalem – but some scholars go further than that. Some scholars believe that this Psalm was

²Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 346.

written specifically for proselyte pilgrims – meaning for pilgrims who had converted to Judaism from other religions. As they walked up the hill to Jerusalem they must have been thinking about the remarkable favour that rested upon this people and this place. In the days of David and Solomon – which was probably when this Psalm was written – you can imagine a pilgrim coming from Egypt, or Tarshish or Ophir and wondering over the favour that was given to Israel’s armies, or the wealth that was brought to the king from nations far and wide. Maybe he heard rumours of the throne that was overlaid with pure gold. Maybe he heard about the 12 gold lions around the throne – there was so much gold in the city, it says in the Bible that silver was counted as nothing.

So, what was it about this people and this city, he might have asked that God would love them and bless them so?

Verse 3:

³ Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God. *Selah*

There have always been stories of God’s goodness toward the city of Jerusalem. What story came to the pilgrim’s mind when he sang these words, depends likely on where he was located in time and history. If he was singing this song in the 7th century BC then perhaps he was thinking of that time when the Empire of Assyria encamped around the city with the largest land army ever assembled in ancient history.

You know the story. It is told multiple times in the Bible – we read it recently in Isaiah 36 and 37. King Sennacherib sent his general the Rabshakeh to demand the surrender of the city. He spoke to the officials at the gate and said:

“Say to Hezekiah, ‘Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this trust of yours? ⁵Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? ⁶Behold, you are trusting in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust in him. ... Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. ⁹How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master’s servants, when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? ¹⁰Moreover, is it without the LORD that I

have come up against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, “Go up against this land and destroy it.”” (Isaiah 36:4–10 ESV)

The King of Assyria MOCKED the people of God. He was the greatest Warlord the world had ever known. He had destroyed nations and empires greater and stronger than Israel. He had seized the gods of the nations and ground them into powder – how then would this puny nation stand against him in all his fury? If he gave you 2000 horses could you even set riders on them? You are small. You are pathetic – and even your god prefers us to you. He rides with us Israel – and you will fall.

But he was wrong about that.

God didn’t ride with them.

The story goes that King Hezekiah went immediately into the house of the Lord and prayed for God to have mercy. He took the letter and spread it out before the Lord and said:

“O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth.¹⁷ Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God.¹⁸ Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands,¹⁹ and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed.²⁰ So now, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD.” (Isaiah 37:16–20 ESV)

And God heard him. He heard his prayer and that night:

“the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.” (Isaiah 37:36 ESV)

I’ve heard that one, the pilgrim said. Everyone in the world has heard that one. Indeed, glorious things of you are spoken.

Verse 4:

⁴ Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush— “This one was born there,” they say.

⁵ And of Zion it shall be said, “This one and that one were born in her”; for the Most High himself will establish her.

⁶ The LORD records as he registers the peoples, “This one was born there.”
Selah

We forget how multicultural these festal gatherings in Jerusalem were but even in the New Testament we see evidence of that. In Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost we read about how when Peter and the disciples started speaking in tongues it was received as a miracle by the multi-national crowd that had gathered to hear them;

“they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome,¹¹ **both Jews and proselytes**, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”” (Acts 2:7–11 ESV)

So Jerusalem during a festival was probably the most multi-cultural gathering on planet earth. The pilgrim is thinking about that as he makes his way up the mountain:

“Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush”

These were other countries clustered all around the nation of Israel. Rahab is another name for Egypt – that was to the south and west, Babylon was to the north and east, Philistia was to the west, Tyre was to the north, and Cush was to the south along the Red Sea. Meaning – people have come from ALL AROUND – from all points of the compass to seek and to worship the God of Israel.

That’s a miracle, the pilgrim thought.

That's amazing. What is it about this God that makes people from other tribes and cultures want to be associated with him? What is it that inspires such loyalty? Why is it that they would rather be known by that association than any other?

“This one was born there,” they say.

Mitchell Dahood says here:

“Though born abroad, these converts to Yahweh will become citizens of the spiritual metropolis Zion.”³

I love that phrase. The Spiritual Metropolis of Zion – the same idea can be found in the New Testament; Paul says to a bunch of Gentile believers:

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19–21 ESV)

Do you see that? Belonging to the church **TOOK PRECEDENCE** over every other social and racial association.

The importance of belonging **HERE** has always confused – and at times even angered – the people of this world – but the pilgrim loves it. That's one of the main reasons he came.

Verse 7:

⁷ Singers and dancers alike say, “All my springs are in you.” (Psalm 87:1–7 ESV)

Everything I am looking for is here! Everything I need to be whole is **HERE!!!** I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

³ Mitchell Dahood as cited by VanGemeren in *Psalms* in The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 5, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 563.

Now in the time that we have left, I want to be like the pilgrim – I want to use this Psalm to dream about ZION. I want to think about our taste of it HERE in an immediate sense and our hope of it THERE in the future in an ultimate sense.

Meditations And Reflections:

The first question this Psalm would have us ask is this:

1. Why does the Lord love us so?

I mean, why are we even having this conversation? Why is it even possible for us to experience the love of God in ANY PLACE, IN ANY WAY?

We must never take the love of God for granted.

The Psalmist wondered about that; he said:

“the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.”
(Psalm 87:2 ESV)

God has CRAZY LOVE for this city – there is something weird going on here – why is that?

That was his question. We have an even better question: Why does God love the church? Have you seen the church? Have you met the church? Why does God love us so?

But he does love us.

The Apostle Paul says:

“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25 ESV)

Jesus died for the church! So if ever you are tempted to doubt that you just look up at that cross. God loves us. He loves the church.

But why is that?

Old Testament and New – it has always been a bit of a mystery.

Moses said to the people:

“The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 7:6–8 ESV)

He loves you because he loves you.

He is free. He is gracious and he is good.

I’m not sure I can add to that. I’m not sure I can explain to you why God has been so good to his people. I sure can’t explain why he has been so good to us. Not a single person from our church has been diagnosed with this virus. Our ministries have continued – our budget has been met – our contributions to missionaries and partners have INCREASED actually over the course of this pandemic. WE HAVE NOT DIED IN THIS DESERT church – in fact it feels like he has carried us on eagles’ wings.

I don’t understand that – but I’m thankful. And it sure makes me eager for the ZION that is coming.

The second question this Psalm inclines me to consider is this:

2. What does our church say to the world about God?

Are glorious things about us spoken?

Do people look at us and say: “Their God is awesome”?

I hope they do. I want them to.

We’ve been talking about apologetics these past couple of weeks – obviously we’re taking a break from that – it seemed appropriate – but again and again in that series we’ve gone back to 1 Peter 3. Peter says:

“Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.” (1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)

So Peter assumes that most of the time the culture is going to hate us. Peter assumes that most of the time people are going to say nasty stuff about us – they aren’t going to understand us. But he also assumes that if we live well and if we argue kindly and with respect – sooner or later people are going to have to say nice things about us. They are going to have to admit that God is with us and God is awesome – even our enemies will eventually admit that, he says.

That’s what this Psalm is saying too.

W.S. Plumer provides his own translation of Psalm 87:3. He says:

“Even the heathen, who hate thee, sometimes admit thy glories”⁴.

I like that!

That’s realistic – and aspirational.

⁴ W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 814.

Brothers and sisters, listen to me, I think it is likely that our meeting today will inspire some hatred from our unbelieving neighbours. They don't understand why this matters. In their eyes all we've done today is gather together to worship the SKY FAIRY – and in the process possibly increased the risk of getting and spreading this infection.

That's their read on what is happening right now in this place.

So what are we going to do about that?

Well first of all, let's not make it worse. Let's follow the rules and limit the risk. When you leave here – leave here. Don't linger in the parking lot inflaming the neighbours. So let's limit the risk.

And then let's give them something else to talk about.

Let's overwhelm local charities. Let's sign up for duty in the long-term care facilities. Let's remind them of who we are.

That's a conversation that needs to keep going over the next several weeks and months.

Thirdly, this Psalm makes me wonder:

3. Is our church now a picture of the church that is gathering in heaven?

The pilgrim wandered around Jerusalem and dreamed about the city whose architect and builder was the Lord. The experience of the immediate gathering made him long for and anticipate the ultimate gathering that was to come – do friends and visitors have that same experience when they come here?

Do they look around and marvel over our racial diversity, for example – because that is one of the main characteristics of the festal gathering that is coming.

The Apostle John said:

“I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9–10 ESV)

So that’s the church service we’re heading for. Does our service NOW stir up images and anticipations of that gathering?

Oh church in that way – in every way - let’s make this place a foretaste of the Kingdom that is coming! That’s what I’m saying.

And then lastly, this Psalm is asking us a very important question:

4. Are we happy/glad/satisfied/refreshed/delighted in the springs of our Lord?

The singers and the dancers say:

“All my springs are in you.” (Psalm 87:7 ESV)

We don’t have any singers here today – and generally don’t have many dancers - but all that’s going to change soon. We will back. We will sing – and there may be dancing. And I wonder, brothers and sisters when that happens – will it be clear to those looking on that we are SATISFIED, DELIGHTED and REFRESHED in the springs of our God?

It’s interesting, scholars and linguists go back and forth as to whether the “springs” in view here should be understood as IN GOD or IN THE CITY. The grammar actually, favours the latter.

Derek Kidner for example says:

“The expression, *in you*, could grammatically refer either to the Lord or to the city; the context points to the latter, somewhat as in 46:4 ... or as developed further still in Ezekiel 47, where the waters that issue from the temple threshold flow out to revive the very desert.”⁵

⁵Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 347-348.

So the idea is that the ULTIMATE SOURCE of the springs is of course GOD – but they are located inside the temple. Kidner refers to Ezekiel 47. There the prophet gets a vision of the ULTIMATE TEMPLE and he sees a river coming out of it that brings the whole world back to life:

Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). (Ezekiel 47:1 ESV)

Do you remember that?

The text goes on to say:

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. ⁷ As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. ⁸ And he said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and enters the sea; when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. (Ezekiel 47:6–8 ESV)

And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.” (Ezekiel 47:12 ESV)

So a RIVER – from God but flowing out over the THRESHOLD OF THE TEMPLE – will bring the world back to life. Will bring healing to the nations. That’s the imagery here – that’s what the Psalmist is led to think about as he approaches Zion. “There is something in there”, he said – “that will HEAL THE WORLD!”

Do you believe that church?

I believe that.

I believe that CHRIST IS THE SOURCE – he is the ROCK IN THE DESERT – HE IS THE WATER OF ETERNAL LIFE – HE IS THE FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING – I believe that!!!

But I also believe that this RIVER is intended by God to flow over our threshold. It's going to pass over human lips. It's going to leak out through human hands – I BELIEVE THAT TOO because that's how God works! He does extraordinary things through ordinary means.

The Old Puritan preacher William Nicholson said:

“The highest privilege is that in God's church He opens the fountains of living water; - in his ordinances God dispenses every blessing: every sincere and upright soul rejoices in opportunities to wait on God in his ordinances. Such a one can sing, *All my springs are in thee*. All other fountains are muddy; this alone is as clear as crystal.”⁶

Will you sing that with me, when next we can?

What a privilege! What a blessing! What a gift! Thanks be to God!

Let me pray for us.

Pastor Jody, will you come and lead us?

⁶ William Nicholson as cited in Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 817.