

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

# SEEKING INTIMACY

A sermon preached the 23rd of October 2016, the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Psalm 84.

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*To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.*

How lovely is Thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!  
My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord;  
My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.  
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.  
Blessed are those who dwell in Thy house, ever singing your praise!

— Psalm 84: 1 – 4

In the year of our Lord 1203, an Englishman teaching theology in Paris used his spare time to arrange biblical books into chapters. Four years later he became Archbishop of Canterbury, and in 1215 he composed the 'Articles of the Barons', soon dubbed the *Magna Carta*. It's good to know Stephen Langton. We live with his handiwork every day.

Before Langton, it could be hard to tell where one biblical passage ended and the next began. But it's always been easy to see where today's Psalm begins because it has a title, as 116 of them do. These titles are very old, so old that their language wasn't well understood by the seventy Jewish men who translated the sacred texts of Hebrew into Greek in the 3rd century BC to produce the Septuagint. The man most responsible for calling attention to these titles was one of my teachers at Yale, the preeminent Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs. The title of Psalm 84? "*To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.*"

Musicians attached to temple worship were called the 'Sons of Asaph'. The guild of altar musicians, they were the glamorous people. This will not surprise our choir, especially the sopranos, who hover over us.

The sons of Korah, on the other hand, were the doorkeepers, the sextons of the temple. They cleaned and maintained the sacred spaces. They were delighted to do so. "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than dwell in the tents of wickedness." [Psalm 84: 10]. Like the members of our Altar Guild, they were content to serve the Lord in obscurity. An Altar Guild

team is here every Saturday morning, cleaning votives and replenishing candles, sweeping the floor, laying out the corporals and linens and purificators and patens and chalices and cruets, preparing this sacred space for the beauty of holiness. They do this for the LORD of hosts.

Psalm 84 was meant to be sung. Psalms 45, 69, and 80 were sung to a tune called "lilies." The 56th Psalm was sung to "the dove on far off terebinths", a title that, for its length, is like *Last Night, I Didn't Get to Sleep At All* ("The sleeping pill I took was just a waste of time, I couldn't close my eyes 'cause you were on my mind . . ."). Ancient people were like you and me: they'd hear a song title and the whole lyric would be on their tongues; their bodies would sway as mine does with Marilyn McCoo and the 5th Dimension. Sometimes the tune was a dirge like Psalm 9's "the death of the sun." That psalm is a plaintive cry, a lament for God to intervene.

The tune for Psalm 84 was 'Gittith'. We're forty-four miles from Napa so this interests us. There are, in the rectory, not less than a dozen bottles of Freemark Abbey 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon. (*Great complexity. Aromas of fresh boysenberry, blackberry pie, Bing cherry, and cocoa-dusted chocolate berry truffle, all integrated with the spicy sweetness of oak, cedar, cinnamon, clove and a hint of black pepper. With dark cherry and berry flavors from start to finish, this Cabernet is full-bodied, rich and opulent.*) How those bottles got there I don't need to tell you, but I can tell you this: 'Gittith' means "grape treading." It was associated with the wine press, the mirth and merriment of bring-

ing in the grape harvest.

The tune is lost to us. The truth is that the music, if we could hear it, would be an offense to our ears, I suppose. But we can't hear it. We can only see that the psalmist hears it, or hears something through it, because it is plain even at the distance of thirty centuries that more than just her body is caught up in more than just the music. Her whole being is caught up and she abandons herself. And we keep rhythm with her, praising the Holy One who gives himself to us in bread and wine.

**A**s a collection, the Psalms are unique in the biblical literature. Usually written in the first person, their poetry, like the music of *Motown* or *U2*, is speech ready-made to be put into our mouths. Whereas the other sixty-five books of the Bible are designed to tell us what God does or says, the Psalms are formulated to give us the speech to talk back to him.

More than any other biblical genre, the Psalms show us ancient Israel's distinctive religious perception: God desires an *intimate* relationship with us. For the sake of that intimacy the Daily Office of the *Book of Common Prayer* puts all 150 of the Psalms into our mouths every month. I hope at least a couple of you will pray the Daily Office with me at this altar.

In April, when I came into St Stephen's with Teri Politt for the first time, I was gazing at the colored glass in the clerestory when Teri said someone told her that this church made her feel as if she were in a bomb shelter. That doesn't fall on our ears as flattery — St Stephen's is actually a stunning example of its type — but it's apt. The prototype of the church is the temple. The *temple* was God's *palace* — the word for both, *hekal*, is the same in Hebrew — the house where God dwells. And where God is is the most reliable shelter of all.

The 'self-made' man who doesn't depend on anybody was a great myth of nineteenth and twentieth century

America. That myth, to the psalmist, is a crock! "Blessed are those whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion!"

**Y**ou know how your GPS has favorite places so that you know how to get where you want to go? Your heart does, too. The blessed make their way to where God is. The psalmist isn't looking at God as a useful means to his own ends, reducing the Most High to a talisman or rabbit's foot to be used in search of something else. Try that on someone with whom you desire an intimate relationship. See how that works out for you.

As in any intimate relationship, intimacy with God is fraught with difficulty. Desire for God takes pilgrims "through dry land where there is no water" [Psalm 63]. This is why, throughout the Psalms, longing for God is expressed as thirst. And in Psalm 84, we get this astonishing phrase, the pilgrim 'going through the vale of misery [will] use it for a well; and the pools are filled with water'.

All this is unfurled for us in the Sacrament, and you can see it before worship. In the sacristy, where the clergy and acolytes vest, there's a picture of wheat and an Italian poem titled 'Il Grano'. *I have been taken, have been bound: / I have been beaten all around, / And with thorns I have been crowned. / Not as man nor God, I grew: / But if I reach my Being True, / I shall be Man, and God, for you.* A few minutes before the Mass begins, we meet the choir in the memorial garden to get our game faces on. There, among the dead, we pray. Sometimes our prayer is this: O Lord, most precious Lamb of God, most tender priest of man, who feedest thine own with the bread which cometh down from heaven, in whose hands is a cup and the wine is red. We pray Thee with this food and drink so to satisfy our hunger that we hunger yet more, and our thirst that it never be quenched, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

*St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,  
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission  
please email us at [office@ststephenschurch.org](mailto:office@ststephenschurch.org), call us at 415-435-4501,  
or visit us at [www.ststephenschurch.org](http://www.ststephenschurch.org).*