

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, Wash.
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Psalm 84

A Healthy Church = Regular in Worship!

- 1. The joy of the Old Testament psalmist**
- 2. Our joy in a New Testament church**

Hymns: 226 – 224 – Distribution: 310 –
Closing: “Glorify Thy Name”

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Psalm 84 –

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. 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, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion. Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob.

Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one. Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. O LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you.

It's over. The special guests have gone home. The instruments for the special anniversary hymns have been packed up and put away. The gym has been returned to its regular condition. The food has been cleaned up and the dishes washed. The church archives and memorabilia have been packed up and put away as well. The anniversary celebration from last weekend is over. What now?

A pastor planning worship services might really wonder about that. The focus for an anniversary weekend is certainly clear and the preparations are many. But now, there are a number of Sundays coming up on the calendar before we begin the seasons of Advent and Christmas, which have a pretty clear focus. What now?

I believe that answer is clear. After a look at the past 50 years of God's grace to our congregation and 35 years to our school, I believe the place to look now is toward the future. After all, as nice as anniversary celebrations are, they are not the place on which a church should focus its continued attention. A church that only looks in the rearview mirror at the “good old days” is living in the past. A church that continually gets out the old archives and pictures is a museum. And that is not the purpose of the Lord's Church. In fact, a church that only dwells on its memories is a very sick church.

Therefore, we're going to start a sermon series today that will focus on the present and the future. It is called “**Characteristics of a Healthy Church.**” In the coming weeks we will look at various things the Scriptures say about the purposes and attitudes that are found in a God-pleasing congregation. We will analyze ourselves for such characteristics and then pray that the Lord would bless us with these characteristics as we strive to move toward the future as a healthy congregation. The first aspect we will examine today is that “*A Healthy Church is Regular in Worship.*”

1. The joy of the Old Testament psalmist

A recent survey in our country was conducted asking this question: “Why don't you go to church?” The question was asked of

thousands of unchurched people. How did people respond?

- 12% of those polled said that it's because they don't believe in God or are sure he exists. (would make sense, I suppose)
- 36% responded that they don't attend because church services are usually "boring." 34% also said they are "irrelevant to the way I live." (kind of interesting coming from a person who is not attending church at the moment!)
- 48% said, "I don't have the time."

I don't think that's the right question to ask. I think a better way to approach it is to ask people who come, "Why do you go to church?"

The writer of this psalm would not be able to relate to the people in the survey. What were his feelings so long ago? *"How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. 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, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you."*

We see strong feelings in this man's heart. **He simply longed to be at God's house.** You might remember that in Old Testament times, one official worship site existed for worship: The Temple at Jerusalem. This man longed to be at this place. He uses unique words to describe his feelings:

- He "yearned" to be there. Psalm 42 has a similar thought: *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?"*
- He also says he "fainted" to be there. Literally it says that he's "at the end." He's "consumed" by the thought of simply being in God's house.

Some have speculated that this writer also wrote Psalm 42, where the author reveals that he's separated from God's house by distance. If that's true, he's even jealous of the birds! Even

the birds can come and make a nest in its eaves, but I can't be there, he laments.

His thoughts go on: *"Blessed are those... who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion."*

The writer also longs to make a pilgrimage to God's house. Back in Old Testament times, pilgrimages were common. In Israel's worship cycle, it was required that adult males come to the Temple in Jerusalem three times a year for festivals. You may remember that in a well-known account Jesus' parents brought him to the Temple from Nazareth when he was twelve years old.

The psalmist longed to make a pilgrimage. He stated that even dry, arid places on such a trip wouldn't seem so hot and dusty, because he knows the destination is God's house. Also, the travelers go *"from strength to strength."* This could be another reference to the uplifting feeling of strength as the joyful group makes its way through barren places on the journey. It could also mean that their numbers grow as they near Jerusalem. More believers joining to go to God's house together!

Have you ever had such excitement on a trip to a beloved place? A couple years after our family arrived at Holy Trinity, we were driving through Portland, where I was born and where I lived for six years. I told my wife I wanted to drive by the house where I lived. I hadn't been back in almost twenty years! I remember how I felt as we got off the freeway and drove down Stark Street toward my old neighborhood. I know I had a feeling that no one else in the car had. It was an exciting feeling coming back to a place that was a part of my early life.

That doesn't even compare to why the psalmist is excited. His destination is no earthly house. It is God's house!

- It is the house of the *"God of Jacob."* This God is the One who promised a Savior to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When mankind was plagued with the problem of sin, God desired to send a solution in his own Son. He set apart

Abraham as the ancestor of his special people, the Jewish nation, to bring this Messiah into the world. Through the God of Jacob we have forgiveness!

- It is the house of his God who is a “*sun and shield*.” This is the only place in Scripture where God is called a “sun.” What a fitting title, for the sun provides us with light and warmth. The sun brings about the growth of plants and crops. Life would not be possible without the sun.
- When Jesus calls himself the “Light of the world,” Jesus testifies that he is the way from our sinful condition to heaven. In a world darkened by sin and unbelief, he casts the light of his gospel for all to see and enjoy.
- As our “shield,” we recognize that the Lord is our refuge and fortress in times of physical danger and spiritual temptation. He holds back the forces of evil, including the devil, and equips his followers with the Word of God for the good fight of faith.

This is why he longs for God’s house! It was more than a “3rd Commandment thing” for him to come to God’s house in obedience to a law. He loved to go there!

The sights and rituals there would reinforce the faith and joy that he has for God. The burnt offerings would point ahead to the cross where Jesus would be offered for his sins. The incense would symbolize the prayers that God accepted from him. The lampstands there symbolized the spiritual light that God shines in the world. The Most Holy Place at the Temple was where God said his presence would rest. **What joy this man had as he thought about God’s house!**

This is why he wrote, *“How lovely is God’s dwelling place... Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.”*

2. Our joy in a New Testament church

Let’s fast forward to our New Testament times, and examine this healthy attitude today. “Why do you go to church?” is the question we are asking today. What can we say about joy today in a New Testament church?

Not long ago a talk show host had a tennis star on her show. The episode was held in Colorado in a beautiful location in the Rocky Mountains. As the two talked during the interview, suddenly a beautiful sight of snow-covered mountains came into view. The tennis player paused, looked at the mountains and said, “This is my church.”

What can we say about a New Testament church? The place where Christians worship in a church building is called a “sanctuary.” The word literally means a holy, sacred place. We don’t worship in a gym, although there is no sin in that. This is not an auditorium. It’s not a classroom. It’s not a warehouse. It’s not a barn. It is a sanctuary. When we enter, we respectfully remember “God himself is present. Let us now adore him,” as we sing in one of our hymns. High ceilings in sanctuaries have traditionally lifted our thoughts upward toward God. It is the place where God speaks to us in the still, small voice of his Word. It is a place of refuge, where things come into focus and where we find renewed strength to face the world again.

When you look in a Christian church building you will see features that remind us of things that are sacred to us:

- An altar – This is the centerpiece of the sanctuary. The New Testament altar is strange because it is empty. Altars are built to be used for sacrifice. Our sacrifice for sin has already been paid by the Lamb of God, Christ himself.
- A cross – Front and center we see the cross, an instrument of torture and horror, but for us an instrument of reconciliation with God. It is where our sin was paid for.
- A lectern and pulpit – Here the Word of God is read to us and expounded on. Here the pastor speaks to us the message of God from Scripture.

- A font – We’re reminded how we became members of God’s family when God placed his name on us in baptism. He washed our sins away and made a covenant with us.
- A communion rail – We’re reminded how our Savior’s body and blood comes to us in a personal, reassuring way. Our sins are forgiven as we receive this sacrament. We are also bound in fellowship with those with whom we kneel together.
- Symbols and colors – Spiritual lessons are taught in things like the candles, the white robe of righteousness, and the symbols on the paraments.

The events that happen in a New Testament church’s sanctuary are sacred to us also:

- Confirmation Days that you remember, when your young loved ones have professed their faith and vowed faithfulness to God. Days filled with worship, white gowns, corsages, and receptions.
- Marriages, when the vows of faithfulness have been spoken and a new life together has been begun. Music, tuxedos, flower girls, and some tears.
- Christmases, when the familiar story of the birth of our Savior has been recounted and joyful songs of Christ’s birth sung. Trees, wreaths, and lights.
- Easters, when the victorious message of Christ’s victory over sin, death, and the tomb have been trumpeted. Lilies, sunshine, and the color white.
- Funerals, when loved ones have been laid to rest with Scripture’s words giving comfort to loved ones.

It’s more than a “3rd Commandment thing” for us to come to God’s house! In fact, such events can be so sacred and meaningful that the style and structure of the building itself can evoke emotion. There are some of you here who remember well the old church building that was torn down 13 years ago. Maybe you see pictures of it in albums and a smile crosses your face as you remember your family’s spiritual

history there. Seventy-six weddings were held in the old church!

Now, this beautiful sanctuary is our worship home. It is the place where we pause when we round the corner in the back and gasp, “God’s house!” It is the place where mothers will tell their children, “Don’t run! And not such loud voices! This is God’s house.” And it is the place we eagerly look forward to gathering in each week.

Yet Satan would tempt you to feel otherwise:

- There may be some people here today who would have to honestly say, “My mom dragged me here today.”
- He will tempt you to feel that you’re “doing your duty” by coming to God’s house.
- He will tempt you toward an unenthusiastic participation.
- He will tempt you to be distracted.
- He will tempt you to sleep.
- He will tempt you to be bored with monotony, even with such sacred things as the Lord’s Prayer.
- He will tempt you to say, “There’s no time this Sunday.” (Or Monday night)
- He will tempt you to remember that your friends aren’t all going this week.
- He will tempt you to say, “Life’s going pretty well. I don’t need to be in God’s house that much.”
- He will tempt you to say, “Don’t get crazy about going to more than one service a week when those midweek and special services come up.”

But such thoughts are not natural or healthy for a disciple of our Savior. This is his church, where his Word and sacraments are used!

It’s over. The readings, music, and food of our anniversary celebration are now past. Yet today, we see that things are not over at all. A healthy congregation will naturally be drawn to worship at God’s house regularly. May the Holy Spirit work this continuing desire in all of us, and may he bless us in the weeks ahead as we continue to look at characteristics of a healthy church! Amen.