



“DWELLING WELL”
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 84
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, February 2, 2024, Online Only
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Psalm 84

84:1 How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! 84:2 My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. 84:3 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. 84:4 Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. 84:5 Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. 84:6 As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. 84:7 They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion. 84:8 O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! 84:9 Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed. 84:10 For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. 84:11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly. 84:12 O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

The Word of the LORD
Thanks be to God

Four years ago, February 2020, we were just starting to hear about a virus called COVID-19. The first cases in the US were out in Seattle, where my son, Sidney, was living at the time. One of the first confirmed cases was in the neighborhood where he lived.

Within one month the whole world was locking down. Thursday, March 12 is when the GCPC Staff had an emergency meeting to strategize about what needed to happen for us to work and worship outside our building, and completely shut down the building. That Sunday, March 15, was our first Sunday to worship remotely.

COVID 19 changed just about everything about the way we did things. Four years later this virus has adapted and changed more times than we can count. And here we are, worshipping

online only once again. This time not because the CDC told us we had to, but because so many in our number are sick.

Staff members, worship attendees, the childcare center—so many sick that we are not able to function the same way this week. We are praying for everyone who is sick right now. Remember you are not alone! If you need something, please let your church family know!

Now because of all the lessons learned during those early days and weeks of COVID, we were able to shift easily to creating some physical distance between us to try and slow the spread.

While things are different this time, there are many echoes of these last four years—memories, sensations, thoughts that take us back to a time when the changes were coming so fast and furious that our bodies were overwhelmed and mournful. There were bursts of creativity all over the globe with the human family finding ways to connect with each other when we could not physically be together.

There was so much death around us as COVID raged. And as people grew weary of isolation, the politics of COVID began to emerge. Things like mask wearing were code for your political affiliation.

And all of the things that plague our society like the gaping wealth gap, like unjust distribution of resources, like state sanctioned violence against Black people, like white supremacy and police violence and unraveling institutions and whitewashed history. All of those things were starkly on display—in ways that some people who had not seen before, began to see.

The summer of 2020 was a rising up of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and many people in white bodies after the public lynching of George Floyd. I use the term lynching because hopefully you have learned what that is, too. Lynching is extra-judicial murder in the public eye, allowed and/or exercised by those with power in the system.

And while we cannot unsee any of what we saw in 2020—many of us have tried to pretend like we can forget and act as if everything is fine. And here we are rounding the corner toward another presidential election in our country and it's like we are in a time warp. Trump is ascending.

Many white liberals have grown tired of the movement for justice for Black people. And movements to change the ways we do things like policing Black bodies and incarcerating Black bodies have become mired in the idolatry of the status quo.

At the same time many people of all walks of life are, understandably, frustrated with President Biden and the US Government not doing more to stop the genocide in Gaza. And still at the same time, things like anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia are on the rise as well.

Here in Asheville/Buncombe County we continue to struggle with a gaping differential in the ways white children and Black and Brown children get educated in our schools. In our own community, rent has gone up 78% since right before COVID. The fair market value of a one-bedroom apartment going from \$799 in 2019 to \$1,428 in 2024. Our unhoused neighbors have fewer and fewer options for shelter.

Our hospital system is in crisis since it became a for-profit institution. Staff and patients alike are in unsafe and inhumane circumstances. You may have seen the clergy statement in the Asheville Citizen Times today, of which Luke and I are both participating clergy.

The process for reparations for Black people in Asheville/Buncombe County continues even as the City and County have struggled at turns to understand the power dynamics and to know what true support from the government would look like in this process.

And this church has changed dramatically. There is so much life in our faith community, so much creativity and vitality. So much growth and many new members.

And there have also been those who no longer feel they can call GCPC their church community because of all the changes.

Changes that give life and make a place safe for people in Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies, changes that give life and make a place safe for people who identify as LGBTQIA+, changes that bring vitality and make a place safe for those who have been harmed by white, heteronormative, colonized Christianity. Those changes are the same ones that also repel some people.

There is a rawness to where we are right now on this planet. COVID was an apocalypse that exposed us to our utter vulnerability in a new way and all the trauma responses—fight, flight, fawn, freeze—all are on display so starkly and even tragically.

What have we learned? How have we changed? And how are we stuck in the same old patterns, patterns that no longer serve us?

Through the twists and turns of COVID once again, we have an opportunity to slow down and take a closer look at how we are moving and where our faith is guiding us and where fear has us in the grip. We can pause and reflect together in the midst of many different jolts of reality, who we are and where God is showing up in who we are.

As we explore the Psalm for how it can support our reflection and our transformation for the next few minutes, feel free to share how your life has changed these last 4 years, and places where you feel stuck, and places where you feel you are getting free!

This Psalm was probably sung by pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem. “How lovely is your dwelling place” was probably about their delight at seeing the temple from afar and anticipating being so proximate to the living God. This practice of journeying to Jerusalem may well have been the experiences that gave birth to these poetic lyrics.

But the people who knew this song would also be jolted by the shock waves of exile, of the destruction of the places they saw as Holy and the loss of the ways of living that were sacred to them. They would have absorbed the charge of not being able to move freely and live the lives they wanted to live.

Roman occupation, political conquests and corruption, religious conflict, disease, oppression and empire—all of these things changed the landscape of life and how people could move and relate to each other. There was much sorrow, much loss, and much change.

And just as when any tragedy strikes humans, there was also resourcefulness, creativity, and transformation.

And just like every moment, every moment—God is at work, taking the devastation, the ruins, the lamentation, the anger, the injustice, and the creativity, hope, and resourcefulness and weaving it into new beginnings and healing opportunities.

I have said it many times, God is the most amazing and artful composer of the multiverse... Nothing is wasted in God’s creation—including our losses, our obstinacy, and our yearning.

The words of this pilgrim song, that were about a place, a human created building, became a way to see the world anew when all that was gone. This became the song of generations of our ancestors who have been able to see God in all sorts of different times, places, and contexts. It was in experiences of loss and change that they gained a deeper kind of trust that God can change everything about the way we see and move in the world.

We can learn that our yearning for home may not be about a place at all, but about being able to feel known, at peace, well with ourselves and those around us. We know that change does not always create expansiveness in the human heart and mind, it can also make us close ranks and lash out and try to control what is happening. It can make us fearful and resentful. It can make us feel numb and disconnected.

This Psalm is an invitation to a wisdom that expands. It's a song about being well in the whole wide world. It's a song about knowing that the whole world is God's dwelling place and that we can be home with God anywhere we are—dwelling well is about our self-understanding and the ways we see all others.

Dwelling well is knowing the difference between those who are self-serving and those who are serving God. Being blameless, or walking uprightly, is not about being perfect and getting everything right, it's about humility and knowing your dependence on God, it's about trust, and putting God at the center. It's about right relationship with God, ourselves, and others. The “wickedness” in the translation in the NRSV is about being self-serving, instead of God-centered. It's not about the different things that institutional Christianity has used to try and exile people—sexuality, identity, marital status, speaking truth to power. Wickedness is about being out of kilter with God's central role in our lives. When we forget the unique power of Spirit is not the same as our own, we forget what right relationship really is.

And the word “happy” that is repeated several times is not about everything being easy, it's not about good things happening to us as a reward for good behavior, this happiness is about the deep intuition that our lives are held in God's embrace, happiness is the repeated act of taking refuge in God, not in our own understanding.

God is not located in a temple. The people learned. God's dwelling place is everywhere. The world is God's dwelling place. I can remember us learning that anew, GCPC, in those early days of COVID. We were strengthened in our faith even as so much of its architecture was gone.

Faith is learning how to see the whole world and every person in it as God's dwelling place.

Faith is trusting that God dwells within each one of us, and that there is no exile from God.

We are exiled from our idols, our normalcy, our limited perspectives. We are exiled from our comfort, from our malaise, from our stubborn clinging to one right way.

We can also be exiled from our own people, from those we had trusted, from those who had taught us who we are. From those who made promises to us that they just could not or did not keep.

We can also be exiled from our own truth, our own trauma, our own belovedness. We can be exiled from our own well-being.

Dwelling well is the gift and aspiration of a faithful life.

Being able to trust the way life unfolds even when everything around us, everything that oriented us is unraveling, even when we lose the things we thought we could not live without. God breathes the offer of deep healing into these moments of truth.

The kind we are in right now, for so many reasons. The work we are doing at GCPC is hard work. We are being decolonized from the false gods of white Christianity. We are being deprogrammed from the socialization of white supremacy. We are experimenting and playing with what true worship can be in a decolonizing space. We are learning how to take better care of each other—in different ways than the ways that make us conceal ourselves and our vulnerability. We are learning how to be church in a way that isn't about maintaining an institution, but in ways that heal the human family.

Spirit has brought each and every one of us here for such a time as this. Whether this has been your church home for decades or you just found us today online. We are here because God brought us here—knowing that is the first step to dwelling well no matter where we are.

God's table stretches across contexts, time zones, and generations. God's table has room for all and enough for all. God's table is not limited by the buildings we build or the walls we put up in our communities or in our hearts.

As our ancestors sang from exile "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD. My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my 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, my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you... They go from strength to strength...For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. For the LORD God is a sun and shield... No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you."

May it be so with us, Grace Covenant.

Thanks be to God.