



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“GOD’S DWELLING PLACE”

Scripture Lessons: Mark 14:3-9; Jeremiah 7:1-15; Psalm 84

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, March 15, 2009.

As you surely know by now, the generous pledges by our church officers and volunteer Pacesetters virtually assures us that we will be able soon to commence the long anticipated Generations building and renovation project that will serve this church for generations still unborn. It is a sacrificial thing our leaders have done with some 121 pledges totaling \$1,457,265. We now have 2/3 of the money needed either in hand or pledged. But those 121 commitments represent only 14% of our actual membership, so the Pacesetters are challenging the rest of us to step up today with our own commitments so that we can eliminate any potential long term debt of substance which might impact our ongoing ministries. I hope and trust that you have been praying about your own level of commitment and that when all of our pledges are in hand we will find ourselves in the position to do something amazing for our Lord and his church that will pay tremendous dividends well into the future.

Do you remember that nameless women in the little village of Bethany who during the last week of our Lord’s life came abruptly into the home where he was having dinner with his disciples and proceeded to break and pour over him a jar of expensive perfume. Judas complained about the waste and reminded the crowd of how that many could be better used elsewhere, but Jesus defended her and said in one of the most memorable and lovely statements he ever made so far as I am concerned, “Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing to me.”

My friends, many of you and many of our fellow members have already done a beautiful thing for our Lord and your efforts will serve his purposes and make his ministry much more effective well into the future. I thank you and I say with the Lord, that you have done a beautiful thing with your sacrificial pledges.

All of this prompts me to speak a word of praise and appreciation this morning to those people whose actions indicate that they love the Lord and are devoted to his church, despite all of her flaws and failings. John Calvin once said that no one could call God his father unless he recognized the church as his mother. The person who claims to love the one without the other has little understanding of the object of his affection. God without the church, or we might say Christ without his bride, becomes only a distant deity with little ability to make a tangible difference in a hurting world. But the church without Christ is simply another social club which we are free to take or to leave.

Speaking personally for a moment let me share with you that everything I cherish in this life from my faith, to my family, to my friends, to my values, to the hopes I entertain for every person and entity I love, have come to me in and through the church. Everything I am and everything I aspire to be as a person is a result directly or indirectly of the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ. So yes, I love the church! And, what is more, I love people who love the church! And to be quite candid, I am somewhat suspicious of people who take a rather casual and nonchalant interest in the

life and work of the church. People who say they love God but haven't time for the church have always been an enigma to me. Oh I know, there are no perfect churches including this one. But given the fact that God calls the church into being and redeems people so that they can serve him in and through the church; given the fact that the scriptures present the church as the apple of God's eye and as the very bride of Christ, how could one be serious about his commitment to God and not equally serious about his commitment to the church? That would be like saying I love Bach but I just really don't care for his music. Or, I love democracy but I haven't voted in years.

The God we claim to love, the God who called and commissioned the people named the Hebrews and entered into covenant with them, the God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ and created a new community and sent the Holy Spirit to empower that community, this God does not redeem people so that they can simply enjoy a private and intimate little affair with him. Rather, he does this so that they may become a part of his body, the church, and thus become a servant within a servant community. If God so regards the church, then how in the world can his servants disregard or dismiss the church?

Now if you are one of those persons who loves, no cherishes, the church and what it has meant in your life, then I am sure that you can appreciate and even identify with the psalmist who wrote the 84th Psalm, a psalm that has few rivals for its lyric beauty, its warm devotion and its fervent zeal.

It has been speculated that this psalm was written either by a Jewish pilgrim soon after a visit to the temple, or perhaps even by a devout Jew who for some reason could not return to the temple for an annual pilgrimage. Nevertheless he entertained precious memories of times spent there in the sanctuary of God in earlier days. There is no question that in the mind of this writer, and for him the temple is the very dwelling place of God and a blessed source of joy and peace and security and strength.

Most of us, if we have spent any time at all in the life of a church, have heard this psalm either sung as a solo, as an anthem, or as a hymn and for those who love God's house the 84th Psalm is both personally exhilarating and beautifully expressive of what our own deep feelings of affection and joy are.

The 84th Psalm almost always leaves a profound impression. This psalm, like few others, speaks of our heart's true home. So do me a favor: If I die before you do, have someone sing or read this psalm with all the joy and passion they can muster at my funeral.

Obviously the psalmist longs to be in God's house. But why? What was it about the temple which the psalmist found so appealing and so gratifying? It was not the beauty of the building itself or the pageantry of its sacrifices. Apart from one casual reference to the altars, the only formal aspect of worship the psalmist mentions is the singing of praises unto the Lord. To put it in modern terms, this worshiper was not drawn to the temple because of the air conditioning or the architecture, because of the eloquent preacher or the majestic organ, because of the fully equipped nursery or the financial break you would get if you married there or put your children in its kindergarten. No, this person longs to return to the temple because it is there that he was encountered by the living God. How lovely indeed is any such place, the very dwelling place of God.

The psalmist on an earlier visit to the temple must have noticed a bird's nest among the rafters. I am sure that if these were pre-Reformation Presbyterians someone had already filed a complaint about the messy birds up in the sanctuary and what a nuisance they had become, like the pigeons on our portico! I am sure that instead of doing something about it they probably appointed a

committee, had it referred to a diaconate group, who eventually had it overruled by the Session. But the writer isn't complaining about the birds in the rafters but rather he is identifying with them and thinking what a joyful privilege to stay in the temple always, to reside there and rear one's young in the sanctity of that holy place ever singing praises to God.

Not only is the temple, or the church, the place where God is encountered, where happiness and blessing are experienced, but it also for the worshiper a source of security and strength and refreshment in times of trial and difficulty. "Happy are those whose strength is in you," says the psalmist "as they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength."

The valley of Baca, what is that? Actually it is not a place name familiar to historians or Bible scholars. The word "Baca" probably refers to a small shrub or tree, like the balsam tree, which was not native to the area of Jerusalem but rather the more sterile and arid regions of southern Arabia. II Samuel 5 refers to such a valley which contains Balsam trees where the Israelites were threatened by the Philistines, but were ultimately victorious. This word "Baca" is also similar to the Hebrew word for weeping. All of these rich possibilities for interpretation only add in a figurative sense to the sublime meaning here.

As we make our way through this earthly pilgrimage each of us in his or her own way goes through valleys of Baca, through times of threatened peril, through days of dryness and depression, through seasons of sorrow and sadness. But we find out strength and support as we come together in God's dwelling place, his temple or his church, and discover there all the resources of God's grace to help us cope and to carry one.

How often have you heard someone say that they were blessed and supported and strengthened through the fellowship of their church as they dealt with some personal tragedy or family crisis? God's people are always there for us when we need them most and we are privileged to be there for others during their time of difficulty. I hear this all the time as people confess what the church has meant to them as they have gone through threatening and trying experiences --- as loved ones die, as illnesses are diagnosed, as marriages fall apart, as jobs are lost, as children go astray. This is not to say that the church always does the right thing or always responds adequately to each situation. But still in all, most people who love the Lord and who cherish their place in God's church have discovered personally, as the psalmist did, that the Lord is a "sun and a shield" bestowing favor and honor and withholding no good thing from those who trust him.

Consequently, I am supportive of any reasonable project which will strengthen the church and make it more efficient and effective, any project that will enhance its worship, its education, its mission and its fellowship, because I remain convinced that God is alive and well in the church today and actively engaged in its various ministries. The church needs us and we need the church. I am further convinced that we need to be about the business of drawing more people into this loving, supportive and servant community, for their benefit as well as our own, for the benefit of the world about us and for the glory of God.

Now what makes this church so special and so important and so deserving of our sacrificial support during this campaign is not that our brick and mortar is different from that of any other. It is not that these rafters and these rooms about us are somehow more sacred than any other space of place, but rather the fact that as God's people gather in God's name and earnestly seek together to praise him and to serve him, study him and encounter him, the sanctity of this place becomes all the more self-evident because God is especially real here among us. God has met us here often and so it is we cherish this space. People who have found this to be true cannot help but love the church and

all that it represents. They cannot help but love it and feel at home with the duty and the delight of supporting it.

Now of course the Old Testament has numerous examples of how God's temple in Jerusalem, (and God's church in the New Testament) which was intended to be a place of blessing, became instead a place of abomination because there was no connection between the people's worship and their witness. The problem was that the lives of those who left the temple stood in stark contrast to what they had heard and espoused while in the temple. If God does not indwell those of us who come to this place, then God is no more present here than any where else. The task before the church, you see, is not simply to get the names of people on its roll or to get their bodies physically present in the pews. Church membership and church attendance are not ends in themselves. No, the task before the church is to get its members to be receptive to the presence and power of God in their personal lives so that God might use them and bless them and through them bless others.

Do you happen to remember Jeremiah's scathing temple sermon found in Jeremiah 7?

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

2 Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD.

3 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place.

4 Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD."

5 For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another,

6 if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt,

7 then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

8 Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail.

9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known,

10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!" — only to go on doing all these abominations?

11 Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.

We can certainly rejoice that God has blessed and prospered this church through the past 278 years and we can be assured that he will continue to do so in the future as we are faithful and obedient in our time. But God will continue to dwell among us only to the extent that we are willing to allow him to dwell within us as well. On this Consecration Sunday morning as we submit our pledges for the Generations Campaign and as we present our tithes and offerings, let us consider how God might restore and strengthen this particular church through our combined efforts. But first, let each of us commit ourselves to believing what God would have us to believe, to doing what God would have us to do, to being what God would have us to be, and to living as God would have us live. With God in us and among us we will not fail in any of the challenges the Lord has placed before us.