**Psalm 122:1-4** September 22, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Pentecost 15

*Psalm 122:1 I rejoiced with those who said to me,*

*“Let us go to the house of the Lord.”*

*2Our feet are standing*

*in your gates, O Jerusalem.*

*3Jerusalem is built like a city*

*that is closely compacted together.*

*4That is where the tribes go up,*

*the tribes of the Lord,*

*to praise the name of the Lord*

*according to the statute given to Israel.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

***“I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.”*** Is that the way it went this morning?

Or, when someone said, “It’s Sunday. Time to get ready for church!” did you try pulling the sheets over your head?

When you were watching silly videos on YouTube and suddenly realized that you had only ten minutes to get ready for church, did you for a moment truly contemplate which of the two you would rather do this morning?

Or maybe you were home, not alone, but lonely. Others were going on with their Sunday plans: the meals, the football, the yardwork, the \_\_\_, and the only voice in the entire house saying, ***“Let us go to the house of the Lord”*** was the conscience inside your head. You sighed, shoulders drooping slightly, and thought about how unfair it is that you, the godly one of the bunch, first feel guilty if you don’t go, and then a little guilty if you do because you know that deep down in the bottom there is part of you that doesn’t want to go… Meanwhile those who have not the least desire to darken the doorstep of God’s house don’t have a twinge of conscience.

***“I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.”*** Is that the way it went this morning? We’d like to wish it so.

A professor at a seminary—that’s a school that trains pastors—a seminary professor once told a bunch of future pastors, “When you get into the pulpit to preach on Sunday, just remember: about half of the people almost didn’t make it.” If you are in that half this morning… If you are in that half who almost didn’t make it this morning… we praise God for you! You made it! You won. You beat the old evil foe. Maybe only just barely, but by God’s grace you are here in God’s house. God bless you!

And if you were one of those who faced no internal struggle getting to God’s house today, thank God. Thank God for the battle he made sure you didn’t even have to fight. May he fill you will a humble joy that seeks to make the Lord’s house a place of joy, an appealing place, even for those not excited to be here.

**Reasons to Not Rejoice**

The first verse of our reading begs a question: Why is that? What makes it so hard to rejoice about going to the house of the Lord? (And let’s be honest. We all know what I am talking about. Even the most stalwart Lutheran has had at least a couple Sundays in his or her life when he or she did not rejoice in going to church.)

What is it? It is sin. I am not saying that every time someone doesn’t make it to church they sin. People get sick, find themselves stranded in airports, take children to the hospital. But if we consider it a chore to regularly be in God’s house, it is sin. If we opt out of God’s house for a reason other than another God-given duty, it is wrong. If my reason for not going to church is nothing more than “I didn’t really want to,” then I sin. You see sin, even more than a matter of action, is a matter of attitude. That is what our reading is about. It isn’t about going to the house of the Lord. It is about how you *feel* about going to the house of the Lord.

What is at issue is our attitude toward the things of this world over against the things of God. Of course, we can make excuses. And we do. From work, to vacation, to boring church music, to people who looked at us cross-eyed back in 1997, to beautiful weather, there are all kinds of excuses we can find. But each and every excuse is an attempt to hide a truth that we do not want to admit: No, we do rejoice to go to the house of the Lord because we do not love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength. We want God to fit into a neatly demarcated, tiny portion of our life, and not to expect any more from us than that.

This morning, when you and I did not feel joy in our hearts when they said to us, “Let us go to the house of the Lord” we need to realize that happened because we really don’t like God having first place in our lives.

**How the Psalmist Could Rejoice**

So what did David the psalm-writer have that made him go to God’s house rejoicing?

First of all, notice this: he is rejoicing even before he started going to God’s house. His friends came up to him and said, “Let’s go to church!” And he says, “Just what I was thinking!” How do you get the kind of joy that on Saturday night is looking forward to Sunday morning?

It’s a mindset. ***“Let us go to the house of the Lord… That is where the tribes [of Israel] go up… to praise the name of the Lord.”*** In our reading, you get a sense that for this guy, going to the house of the Lord wasn’t a casual walk down the block. Israel’s tribes journey “up” to the Lord’s house. That little detail is worth considering. God’s house was so important to Old Testament believers that they always spoke of “going up” to God’s house. Even though other parts of Israel were higher, they always went up to the temple. If Mount Everest and Jerusalem were right next to each other, Mt. Everest elevation 29,000 feet, Jerusalem elevation 2,500 feet, the Israelite still would have said that they go up from Mt. Everest to Jerusalem. To this day, Jews speak this way. This is not just an interesting trivia. This way of talking shows a profound reverence for God’s place of worship. To the Old Testament believer there was no more special, blessed, or better place on earth than the worship area of the Lord.

But it was more than that. For nearly all Israelites, going to the temple was a lot of work. In their entire nation less than a quarter the area of Kentucky, there was only one temple. It was expected that the men would journey to the temple three times a year—which makes you think, “Well, no wonder they could be excited about going to church. I could be too if I only had to go three times a year.” But think about traveling 50 miles without a car, without even a horse or carriage. Think about packing a suitcase just to go to church. Think about taking a fair chunk of your annual vacation time to go to church. Think about a business man lamenting how much income he was losing over those two or three weeks. Imagine all the people grousing about all the nights on sleeping mats instead of in the comfort of one’s own bed.

These annual pilgrimages were a lot of work. Yet these three times a year pilgrimages were sources of joy. They were sources of joy because each celebrated God’s goodness to his people. One festival remembered God delivering his people out of slavery. Another celebrated the annual harvest. The other God’s choice of Israel as his special nation.

Whenever the psalmist went to God’s house, they were celebrating God’s goodness. That’s why it was a joy to him.

**How Our Worship Is Designed to Make Worship Joyful**

If only we did, right? Wait! That *is* exactly what our worship services do! They remember God’s undeserved goodness to us. Maybe you don’t realize it, but the core of our way of worship is always what God has done for us.

**A.** Look at the front of the church:

That is why we have a pulpit. It’s not about the preacher, but God’s gift of his word. He has not left us like orphaned children, wondering what he wants from us and for us. He speaks to us through his Word.

The Baptismal Font speaks again, not of what we do for God, but of what God has done for us. The font says that God *“saves us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit”* (Titus 3:5).

The Altar is the place where Christ gives to us the Lord’s Supper he entrusted to his people before he ascended into heaven. What could more vividly remind us of what Christ Jesus did for us than the body and blood which was given to wash away our sins.

And of course the cross reminds us that none of it would be ours without the selfless sacrifice of our Savior for our sins.

On the other side, these are the very reasons we don’t generally have choirs or musicians up front. Not to say we couldn’t, but in an effort to keep our minds on God, we generally don’t put them up front. God’s house is not about the performer, but about the Giver, God. We don’t have a stage for people, but an altar area picturing what God has done for us.

**B.** Our liturgy has three high points that focus on what God does for us. First is the Absolution, the announcing of the Forgiveness of sins. Second is the sermon which explains God’s own word given to us. The third high point is the sacrament of Holy Communion, again, Christ’s free gift to his people.

The way our church is designed, the way we worship, all of it reminds us that God gives freely, without cost. Focusing on what God has done for Israel was the foundation and joy of Old Testament worship. Focusing on what God has done for us is the foundation and joy of our New Testament worship.

On the other hand, when the ultimate question about worship in God’s house is whether I like or not, rather than whether it is true or not, we have a problem. We have ditched joyful worship for 21st century consumer culture. Having said that, we should always be willing to find better ways to communicate God’s unchanging message to a changing world.

There is so much more that could be said about our worship of God. But please allow me to close with a personal perspective. When I was growing up, Sunday after Sunday, my mother got my brother, sister and me up. Then she kept after us until we were properly dressed, hair combed, shoes shined. She herded us to church and sat us down in a pew. The three of us and mom. You see, my dad… my dad was a pastor. And pastors almost never get to take their families to church. (I don’t ask for sympathy because there are other blessings.)

For a while I enjoyed a tremendous blessing that few pastors are permitted. For five years, between my 13th and 18th year of ministry, while our children still lived at home but not too little, I got to take my family to church. (My wife would say, “How convenient, now that I have trained them to sit nicely in church!”) For five years. No one treasures food like those who have nearly starved. The 13 years before told me that I had something very special there. So for those five years I relished going as a family to God’s house. And then it ended, and now the time is past. Sure, my family sits there, but it’s not the same.

I tell you, ***“Rejoice with those who say to you, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”*** Rejoice with your family who came with you today. Rejoice with the people in front of you, the back of whose heads you have memorized over the years; Rejoice with those behind you whose voices you hear singing hymns and whose voices you know and can guess ahead of time what notes they will hit on pitch and where they will go flat. Rejoice with them! Rejoice with the new faces. Remember that they have names too, and maybe you should learn them. Rejoice that you have the opportunity to be with people who have the same faith, the same hope, the same eternal destiny. Rejoice in all God’s goodness to you. So that next Sunday—not three Sundays from now, not two months from now, not just on Christmas Eve, but next Sunday—you will be able to say, ***“I rejoice with those who say to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.”*** Amen.