

Explore the Bible: His Presence

June 14, 2017

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for July 2 focuses on Psalm 84:1-12.*

We were having a great time, as we might say at church, “fellowshipping.” The only problem was that our fellowship was taking place right in the middle of the Sunday morning worship service.

I was seated right in the middle of a pew, packed in like sardines with my fellow junior high school buddies. We were telling stories and laughing, enjoying life. That’s when I heard a loud “Snap!” off to my right. I looked up just in time to see my father, leaning across three or four of my friends, having snapped his fingers at me, pointing in my direction.

“You be quiet!” he said in an unquestionably firm tone. He’d walked all the way down the aisle, in front of everyone, during the offertory to extend his discipline my way.

It was humiliating, among other things. Nothing worse happens to a teenager than to be disciplined in front of his friends. Humiliation turned to anger as I plotted what to say to my dad on the way home from church. Oddly, once we all got in the car, he didn’t say another word about the event. He knew he’d made his point.

I didn’t hear a word the preacher said that morning. But I never forgot the point that finally came to me with time. I learned my father wasn’t simply concerned about the distraction to others by the noise we were making. He also was concerned I learn a fundamental truth.

Sacred times, sacred space

There are some places and times that, by their nature, represent the most

sacred values of our lives. There is a time to speak, as the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us (Ecclesiastes 3). There is correspondingly a time to keep silent. All of which is measured out by more sacred truths and places and times.

The psalmist starts this lesson's text with these words: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God (vv. 1-2). To this psalmist, there was no higher place than the place in which we worship the Eternal God. (Is there a place we shouldn't? See Romans 12:1-2.)

It's important to balance out two important issues at this point. First, if there are no sacred places, or words or times, then all of life loses its sacredness.

Perhaps we've all felt this at one time or another. If I miss a Sunday at church for any reason, the rest of the week seems off kilter. Sunday is not the end of the week, it is the beginning of a new one. The whole week's clock gets reset on Sunday. If I miss a Sunday at church in a community of worship, I often can't keep track of which day of the week it is the rest of the week.

That's why we are commanded not to worship anyone other than Holy God nor to take the Lord's name in vain (Genesis 20:3, 7). At the outset of their history, the Israelites were being given the moral guideposts by which their entire journey through history should be guided. If God's name is not sacred, what else possibly could be?

The devaluation of all human life and relationships, all human abuse, is grounded in a failure to honor God as God even in the way we use God's name.

The people, not the building

The second great issue that must be kept in balance is what the New Testament teaches us about the true nature of the church. The church, the physical building, is not sacred. To be sacred means to be exclusively holy. Only One is sacred, the Lord God.

The church is the body of Christ. Jesus initiated this teaching at the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19). Paul extended this teaching into the foundation of the original church. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? For God's temple is holy and you are God's temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

The present-day church never gets in more trouble than when it equates the physical building with the spiritual dwelling place of God in the hearts of people. How many churches have suffered their demise because of fights over the value of the physical place in which souls gather to worship, while forgetting God is the object of our worship, not the place in which we do it? Some churches never move forward because they refuse to leave behind a building that no longer is useful and drains more than its share of the budget.

That said, the psalmist praised God with these words: "Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise" (Ps. 84:4).

We should gather to worship in community. It keeps us accountable. It keeps us connected to life's sacred truths. Yet, the true character of those who gather to worship will be seen in how they relate, in how they relate to each other in Christian kindness and mercy. It also will be seen in how they share the generosity of God they have experienced in God's house with those who only pass in the shadow of the steeple outside, even as the bells of worship are rung within.

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