

If Gates and Doors Praise God, Why Not Me?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
July 11, 2021

Ephesians 4:14-16 (NRSV)

¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Psalm 24 (NRSV)

¹The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
²for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.
³Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
⁴Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
⁵They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
⁶Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.
⁷Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
⁸Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.
⁹Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
¹⁰Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory.

Today's message is about Psalm 24, and here's what I would like you to take away from this message: let's banish our complacency toward worshiping God. Being able to revere and honor and thank God through this act of worship is a privilege that gives us joy, comfort, and energy for living lives of devotion and service.

Psalm 24 urges us to rid ourselves of any blasé attitude about worship. So let's examine that psalm for a few moments.

The Twenty-fourth Psalm is not simply a sequel to the famous and beloved Twenty-third Psalm. Both are ancient religious songs; the tunes are lost, the lyrics remain. But they were written for different purposes. The Twenty-third Psalm expresses an individual's reasons for putting trust in God: we all know its familiar phrases like "I fear no evil, for you are with me," and "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." We can imagine the Twenty-third Psalm being sung by a shepherd out on a hillside by himself amid a flock of goats and sheep.

The Twenty-fourth Psalm has a different function and was probably used in a different setting. It is a song about worshiping at the Jerusalem Temple. Biblical scholars believe that it could have been sung by Jewish people making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the actual Temple.

Psalm 24 has 3 sections. In the first section, verses 1 and 2 declare the reason it is right to worship and honor God. It imagines a worshiper looking at all that surrounds her: the simple homes and stone fences, the planted fields, the livestock in pens and the wildlife in the trees, and the vast sky beyond. That person offers the unspoken question, “Who does all this belong to?” and answers herself, “The Lord God who made the earth and sky and sea and everything they contain.” So the psalm opens with a simple but all-encompassing ascription of praise to God the Creator and Ruler of all.

The second section of the psalm, verses 3-6, gives us a hint about the setting and purpose of the psalm. Verse 3 opens with the question, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?” “The hill of the Lord” is a reference to the Jewish Temple which was built on Mount Moriah, one of Jerusalem’s many hills though not the tallest. (You know Mount Moriah from iconic photos of modern Jerusalem showing an Islamic shrine with a stunning golden dome. Until the Romans destroyed it in the year 70 CE the Jewish Temple used to stand somewhere in the vicinity of where that Islamic shrine is now.) Anyone approaching the Jewish Temple would have to “ascend the hill of the Lord.”

- Coming from the Garden of Gethsemane to the east you’d go up.
- Coming from the village of Emmaus to the north you’d go up.
- Coming from the little town of Bethlehem to the south you’d go up.
- Coming from... well, I’m not sure what’s to the west of the Temple besides the Mediterranean Sea, but anyway, you would be increasing in elevation until you reached the Temple Mount.

Imagine pilgrims finishing their journey by facing the climb up Mount Moriah to the grounds of the Temple. Years ago I ran a 5K race for some charity. The race began and ended at the stadium at Rocky River High School. The route went down Detroit Road then turned to go through a neighborhood. The return route brought us back to Detroit Road.

You don’t realize it as you’re driving your car, but that stretch of Detroit Road from St. Christopher Church to the high school is a hill – a long, gradual hill. Not too steep. But at the end of a race, it’s a challenge. Remembering the finish of that 5K I can sympathize with pilgrims nearing Jerusalem who caught sight of the last leg of their journey, realizing that they still had to “ascend the hill of the Lord.”

This second section of Psalm 24 asks pilgrims to assess themselves – are they worthy to “ascend the hill of the Lord?” The psalm presents the qualifications: “Those who have clean hands and pure hearts.”

We know about clean hands.... Trust me, in the wake of this pandemic we know about clean hands! But of course, in ancient times before any awareness of germ theory, “clean hands” didn’t suggest that they were sanitized. The next phrase explains that those with “clean hands and pure hearts” are those who

seek do what is right for all rather than giving their souls to what is false. Having “clean hands and pure hearts” means “speaking the truth in love” (as St. Paul would later write) rather than saying and doing what is dishonest. Just as clean hands in our day still are not sterilized hands, to the psalmist a desire for “clean hands and pure hearts” does not expect perfection without blemish. Rather, these verses invite the worshiper to strive for thinking and speech and actions that honor God’s way: goodness and mercy.

The closing section of Psalm 24 actually give us a glimpse into an act of worship in ancient Judaism. Scholars believe that verses 7-10 are part of a ritual, a liturgy that would have been spoken as pilgrims approached the walls, the gates of the temple grounds. It may have been done responsively, with priests calling out some phrases, and worshipers responding.

One characteristic of Hebrew poetry like in the psalms is repetition with slight variations. Can you hear that in the verses:

Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors!

And again, in response to the rhetorical question, “Who is the King of glory?” you can hear the repetition with a slight variation:

The Lord, strong and mighty,
The Lord, mighty in battle.

So a priest may have called out “Who is the King of glory” and the pilgrims would respond, “The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle, he is the King of glory!” Imagine their excitement as the pilgrims got “this close” to the end of their journey. It reminds me of the excitement my wife Mary and I would see every year when her middle-school choir kids finished their end-of-year choir competition. Their reward for being part of the program was a day at Cedar Point Amusement Park. Every year as their school bus approached the gates of the amusement park, they were so happy, so excited, so vocal – such anticipation!

This psalm suggests that the approaching pilgrims expressed similar anticipation, excitement, joy:

Lift up your heads, O gates! [they cried out]
And be lifted up, O ancient doors! [they shouted]

It was as though even the massive, mighty gates and the imposing, ancient doors would be swinging open with eagerness at the thought of even more people praising God, honoring God, submitting to God, offering themselves to serving God’s will.

Today’s message introduced you to Psalm 24, a song that would have been sung as people approached the Jerusalem Temple to worship. As I said at the outset, what I hope you’ll take away from this psalm’s message is that we should not take for granted the privilege we enjoy in being able to worship – to gather with neighbors to share our joy in knowing God. Being able to revere and honor and thank God is a privilege that gives us joy, comfort, and energy for living lives of devotion and service.