

Journey to God's Presence: A Pilgrim's Heart

1. Warm up: On Sunday, Pastor Robert encouraged us to see life as a journey, with all the ups and downs typical of travel. He described a scary motel he and Tyrell once stayed at on a road trip. What's one of the scariest or most uncomfortable things to happen to you while on a road trip?
2. It's easy for us to allow ourselves to be lulled into operating on spiritual auto pilot. That might work pretty well much of the time, but not when the unexpected happens. Just as self-driving vehicles struggle to know how to react to unexpected encounters, so do we. Life's roadway is full of unanticipated bumps, crashes, twists and turns. Unexpected encounters require great intentionality to know how to react. How would you define the term "spiritual auto pilot?" What are some signs we can watch for to realize we're on auto pilot? What's the difference between being on spiritual auto pilot versus the spiritual equivalent of being attentive behind the wheel?
3. Our scripture reading this past Sunday is what's called a "pilgrim's psalm." It's a song that Israelites would sing on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. These journeys were often filled with hardships as travelers moved through the wilderness over great distances to reach the temple. The journey itself was seen as a religious act, with pilgrims often enduring great physical hardships, like long distances, harsh weather, and dangerous roads. This was seen as a test of faith, and a way to purify oneself before reaching the destination. Pilgrims often traveled in large groups, led by religious leaders, carrying banners and singing hymns. They made stops at sacred sites along the way, where they received food, shelter, and spiritual guidance. Sunday's pilgrim psalm is chocked full of wisdom for how we can thrive on our pilgrim's journey through life. Read Psalm 84, printed on p. 3.
 - a. Psalm 84:6 refers to the pilgrims passing through the "Valley of Baca," which literally means "the valley of weeping." At this moment in your life on your pilgrim's journey, are you passing through the Valley of Baca? If so, tell us what you're facing.
 - b. Being a pilgrim means you're on a journey to an ultimate destination. In Psalm 84, the destination was the temple in Jerusalem. What's our destination? What's the ultimate end point you hope your journey through life will lead to? How would you define the ultimate place you hope to reach?
 - c. Robert talked about the difference between approaching life as a pilgrim rather than a tourist. What do you think he meant? What's the difference? Which perspective feels more dominant in your life right now?
4. Based on what Psalm 84 says, Robert identified three key characteristics of the pilgrim's heart. **First, spiritual pilgrims find joy by coming together with other likeminded pilgrims and sharing the journey.** In Psalm 84, pilgrims are traveling together, and along the way they joined up with other similar groups, ultimately converging on the temple in Jerusalem together to be part of a mighty throng worshipping as one. In this,

they found great joy. Robert compared that to being at the Statehouse LGBTQ rights rally last week and to the time he participated in the Million Man March on Washington. Robert said, “The pilgrim heart finds joy and happiness in the house of God and with the people of God praising God. There is joy in community! When we come together we can encourage one another and strengthen each other with the joy of the Lord.”

- a. Tell us about a time in your life when you’ve been struggling or scared, but found great joy and comfort by being in community with others.
 - b. Eugene Peterson says, “Scripture knows nothing of a solitary Christian, people of faith are always members of community.” Why is that? What do we get from being in community that’s so essential?
5. **Second, spiritual pilgrims find their strength in God.** Psalm 84:5 says, “Blessed are those whose strength is in You.” Robert pointed out that there is a difference between turning to God occasionally when we’re in trouble versus immersing ourselves in God on an ongoing basis all along the journey. The author of Psalm 84 is unknown, but the prescript to the chapter mentions the sons of Korah. The story of Korah and his conflicts with God is told in the book of Numbers. His sons witnessed firsthand what life was like apart from God and as a result they longed to be near to God and reflected fondly on the place where God was made manifest.
- a. Robert said that for pilgrims, “God doesn’t so much give them strength. God is their strength.” What’s the difference? What do you think it means to experience God as our strength?
 - b. Think about a time in your life when you faced a crisis without being in close fellowship with God and compare it to a time when you faced crisis while in close fellowship with God. How were those experiences different? How would you explain the difference to someone?
 - c. Robert said that, if we want God to be our strength, we must cultivate a lifestyle of intentionally seeking God, prioritizing spiritual growth, engaging in community worship, and living with a sense of purpose and direction. In other words, we must immerse ourselves in spiritual life consistently over time. At this point on your journey, how well do you feel you’re doing in that regard? Are you abiding in God deeply enough to be able to feel God’s strength welling up in you even in times of crisis? If not, what might be missing?
6. Psalm 84:12 says, “O Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in You.” This is the third characteristic of a pilgrim’s heart. **Pilgrims trust in the Lord.** We throw that phrase around a lot, but what does it really mean to “trust in the Lord?” Imagine facing a devastating health diagnosis, losing a job, experiencing a break up, or some other grave challenge. What does it look like to trust God in that crisis? How would you explain it?

Psalm 84

For the director of music. According to gittith. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
LORD Almighty!
- ² My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
- ³ Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
LORD Almighty, my King and my God.
- ⁴ Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.
- ⁵ Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
- ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
- ⁷ They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.
- ⁸ Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.
- ⁹ Look on our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.
- ¹⁰ Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
- ¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does God withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.
- ¹² LORD Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.