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December 3rd: Psalm 84 & Acts 25:13-27

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Longing for the courts of the Lord. Agrippa and Bernice visit Festus.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalm 84 Although it contains elements of a number of genres, Psalm 84 is principally a psalm of pilgrimage, beginning with the pilgrim longing for the house of the Lord as they make their way up to Jerusalem. William Brown writes, While drawing its imagery from nature and theophany, this pilgrimage song integrates both movement and residence. Those who set their face towards Zion to dwell in its courts are identified with those who walk uprightly.

Indeed, the pilgrimage to Zion is a journey of the heart, within which is set the sanctuary route. As they go from strength to strength, sustained along the way by the fructified land, they reach their final destination. The journey to Zion is rooted in both the will and emotive depths of one's being.

The metaphor of the pathway effectively directs desire, conjoins body and soul, and prepares the heart to enter God's domain. The temple, the place of God's dwelling, is the

site of refuge for the pilgrimage, to which he makes his way. Faith here is a movement toward the place of God's presence.

Given the references to rain in verse 6, it might be the feast of tabernacles that is in view here, as Daniel Estes suggests. Psalm 84 is also, as James Mays observes, a psalm with three beatitudes in it. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. And then, O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you. Mays writes, You are the one, these beatitudes say, who orders the world in such a way that blessedness comes to those who dwell in your dwelling, in unbroken praise of you, to those who find in you the strength to travel the highways to you, and to those whose life is an expression of trust in you.

Pilgrimage to God's place is a ritual of entry into God's ordering of reality and the conditions of human life. Although its dominant theme is one of pilgrimage, it also contains intercession for the king and an expression of the delight of being in the presence of God. The psalm opens on a note of love and longing, as if it were a romantic poem.

Yet it is not for some human beloved that the psalmist yearns, but for the courts of the Lord, the place where the Lord's presence is especially to be enjoyed, and his face to be sought. Conrad Schaeffer writes, The temple is God's dwelling and a human refuge, surveyed with a shifting scope. Dwelling place, courts of the Lord, birds nesting, your altars, those who live in God's house.

Soul, heart and flesh, representing the spiritual, intellectual and physical aspects, in a word the whole person, desires life from the living God, which the physical condition of finding a home within the temple signifies. The little birds also project the spiritual condition. The psalmist longing, fainting and singing imitate the birds, dipping, soaring and nesting in the temple precincts.

Elsewhere in the psalms the soul is compared to an animal, with its vulnerability, dependence, fear and longing. In Psalm 42 verse 1 for instance, the psalmist compares his soul to a deer panting for water. Here the birds, in their frailty and their mobility, are where he finds a resonant comparison.

The psalmist wishes he could be like one of these birds, who can make their home in the temple. Like a wandering bird the psalmist is looking for a safe nesting place of his own. The temple is the nest that he so deeply desires, a place where he can take shelter under God's wings.

His heart thrilling at the thought of being like the joyful sparrow or swallow singing in the

temple precincts, the psalmist feels both the ache and the release of love. While returning to God's house, the psalmist is like the bird in flight, seeking the place where it can find rest and safety. An insistent word throughout this opening is your.

Your dwelling place, your altars, your house, your praise. The longing of the psalmist is not just for a beautiful place, a place where he feels peace perhaps, but for the Lord's place, the place where he can more fully know communion with and refuge in the God that he longs for. Verses 5-7 are difficult to translate and while their general sense seems to be discernible, there are specific words and phrases that are much less clear.

The pilgrims find strength from the Lord. The path towards the place of their longing energises and impels them as they near their yearned-for destination. The psalmist who has already seen himself in the birds now sees a harmony of creation with the travellers, as if the travellers brought the reviving seasonal rains with them as they passed through the dry valleys.

Similar imagery of the restored way through the wilderness can be found in the book of Isaiah. In chapter 35 verses 6-7, For waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

In the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. In chapter 41 verse 18, I will open rivers on the bare heights and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.

As they walk this path, they go from strength to strength. Some commentators and translations see this as a movement past fortifications, from fortification to fortification. But it might also be a reference to the rising strength that they experience as they feel themselves nearing their destination.

Isaiah chapter 40 verses 29-31 He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted. But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.

They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.

The pilgrims pray to the Lord for their shield and his anointed, the king or the messiah. As the Lord looks with favour upon the king, the whole people will be blessed. The psalm began with longing for God's house, and it ends with expressions of delight in God's house.

The Lord's temple is a place so rich with blessing that a single day within it outweighs years without. The meanest place within it is more glorious than the most elevated place outside of it. The glory of the temple is the glory of the one who dwells within it.

The Lord is a sun, a dazzling source of light and life. The association of the Lord with the sun is similar to his association with the rock. It's a very fundamental metaphor within scripture.

Brown writes, The reference to Yahweh as sun and shield evokes a comparable sense of militant might and protection. Furthermore, the motif of divine wings, widespread in the Psalter, may also bear some connection with a solarised as well as ornithologised depiction of Yahweh. In addition to being a sun, God is like a shield, he protects his people.

The Lord gives his good gifts in a bountiful and prodigal manner to all those who walk in the path of righteousness. The person who trusts in the Lord is truly blessed. A question to consider.

Where else do we see the imagery of birds being used in the scripture? How might it help us imaginatively to fill out the comparisons that the psalmist invites here? Acts chapter 25 verses 13 to 27 Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, There is a man left prisoner by Felix, and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defence concerning the charge laid against him.

So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.

Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar. Then Agrippa said to Festus, I would like to hear the man myself.

Tomorrow, said he, you will hear him. So on the next day, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

And Festus said, King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had done nothing deserving death, and as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. But I

have nothing definite to write to my lord about him.

Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable in sending a prisoner not to indicate the charges against him. In the second half of Acts chapter 25, Agrippa and Bernice visit Festus, and Festus invites them to hear Paul's case, as he would appreciate their insight.

Paul had appealed to Caesar, and so, if Festus is to send him to Rome, he wants to be able to give a clearer sense of the case. Help and counsel from two powerful people closer to Judaism would be very useful in this situation. Herod Agrippa II was the only surviving son of Herod Agrippa I, who had died in Acts chapter 12.

He ruled over north-eastern parts of Herod the Great's old kingdom. He was a faithful vassal, trusted by the Romans, and he was allowed to appoint the high priest by them. He was pious, he was an expert in Jewish matters, and his sister Drusilla was the wife of the previous governor, Felix.

He would later side with Rome in the war, and he was the last ruler of the house of Herod. By asking this favour of him, Festus would also be strengthening his relationship with another key ruler within the land. Bernice is the sister of Agrippa, although it was rumoured that she was also in an incestuous relationship with him.

Later she would be the mistress of both Vespasian and Titus, and is mentioned by several ancient historians for this reason, Dio Cassius, Suetonius, Josephus, and a number of others. As Festus suspects that the case is really about matters of Judaism, these are good people to consult. Paul here is protected by pagan procedure, and by Festus' unwillingness to hand him over.

Nevertheless, we should not take all of Festus' statements at face value. Festus, as commentators like Ben Witherington and Robert Tannehill observe, is really serving his own interests here, and putting a positive spin upon all his dealings with Paul. In the Book of Acts, neither Roman or Jewish justice are portrayed in flattering ways.

Nevertheless, Roman justice is generally the more desirable of the two for Paul and the early Christians. The Jewish authorities don't even plan to administer justice. Their intention is to have Paul ambushed and killed on the way to Jerusalem.

Felix delayed for over two years, while Festus seems to be more eager to deliver justice more speedily. However, he doesn't seem to be able to bring himself to free Paul, even though, by his own admission, there don't seem to be any charges that a Roman governor could reasonably deal with. Relating the case made by the Jerusalem authorities, Festus makes clear that the substance of their case concerned religious questions, which he was not competent to judge, nor were they within his jurisdiction.

Paul had seemingly done nothing contrary to Roman law. The situation is complicated by the fact that Paul has appealed to Caesar. Paul understandably won't go to Jerusalem to be tried before his own people, as there is no justice for him to be expected there.

The Roman governor has a difficult relationship with the Jewish authorities, and can't easily free him, but doesn't feel able to condemn him either. Now Paul has appealed to Caesar, but it isn't clear that he has done anything that should be tried within a Roman court. Festus has got to get a better sense of this complicated case if he is going to inform Caesar.

The following day, they all gather together with great pomp. This is quite the hearing. There are military tribunes, prominent men of the city, Agrippa and Bernice, and Festus, the Roman governor.

This is, among other things, a fulfillment of the prophecy of Christ in Luke 21, verses 12-13. But before all this, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness.

And then also, in the calling of Paul, in Acts 9, verses 15-16, the Lord had said to Ananias, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. Verse 22 raises the possibility that Agrippa had already heard about Paul and was eager to hear him for himself. He was curious about what this man had to say.

Given the opportunity to hear him by Festus, he readily jumped at it. Festus presents Paul to the gathered authorities and dignitaries. He describes the hostility that the Jewish people had against this man, and the way that their authorities had sought a death sentence from him.

Yet he had not found anything in Paul worthy of death. As Daryl Bach notes, this is a second of three declarations of Paul's innocence within these chapters of the Book of Acts. The first is from Claudius Lysias in chapter 23, verse 29, I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.

A similar statement is made at the end of this scene in chapter 26, verse 31. Festus presents the situation as if he knew that he was not qualified to judge the case. It belonged to the area of Jewish law, and so as an act of reasonableness he was going to send him to Jerusalem to be tried there.

However, in the earlier account we see that he was going to grant him to the Jewish authorities, a far less favourable presentation. He knew that he was sending Paul to his

death, that Paul would not get justice, but doing such a favour for the Jewish authorities would be to his advantage. Paul's appeal to Caesar was in part to avoid this situation, in hope that he might find more justice in another court.

The Caesar to whom he appealed here was Nero. It would be absurd for him to be presented before him without some sort of charge, and so at this point Festus is largely fishing for a charge. Even though he's found nothing wrong in Paul, he can't set him free without causing friction with the Jews, and so he's going to send him to the Emperor, but he needs some sort of charge to send him with.

What follows is less a matter of Paul answering specific charges that have been levelled against him, and more a matter of a hearing to ascertain whether there are any charges that he could reasonably be sent with. A question to consider, reading the narrator's description of Festus and his actions, and Festus' own descriptions of his actions, where might we see disparities and tensions? How do you think Luke wants us to regard Festus as a character?