

**“How Can I Keep from Singing: Home”**

**Joseph J. Clifford, D.Min.**

**Text: Psalm 84**

**Myers Park Presbyterian Church**

**November 17, 2019**

***Psalm 84***

*<sup>1</sup>How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!*

*<sup>2</sup>My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*

*<sup>3</sup>Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.*

*<sup>4</sup>Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.*

*<sup>5</sup>**Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.***

*<sup>6</sup>As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.*

*<sup>7</sup>They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.*

*<sup>8</sup>O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!*

*<sup>9</sup>Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed.*

*<sup>10</sup>For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.*

*<sup>11</sup>For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.*

*<sup>12</sup>O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.*

Where is home for you? How many call Charlotte, “home?” For how many is home someplace else? I’m not sure where home is for me. I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, moved to the Washington, DC area early in life for primary school, went to high school in Tallahassee, Florida, and spent most summers of my life growing up with my grandparents in Denton, Texas. After college in Auburn, AL, I lived in Nashville for six years, Atlanta for twelve, Dallas for ten, and now I’m in my fourth year in Charlotte. Where is home? That’s a great question. For some it’s hard to answer.

It wasn’t hard for the ancient Israelites. For them, Jerusalem was home; not just Jerusalem, but the Temple in Jerusalem. Psalm 84 could be called a homecoming song. It’s a pilgrim song likely sung by those making their way to Jerusalem, making their way home. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD...Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise... For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”

Can you see a pilgrim making their way home to Jerusalem singing this song? When the Hebrew scriptures were being assembled as we have them today, the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. This was a song of the good ole days. Since exile, this has been a homesick song, for the home for which they long is no more.

Where is home for you? Perhaps the question is better posed, “What is home for you?” “What does home mean to you?” Willie Baronet asked this question of hundreds of people experiencing homelessness. He was haunted by what to do when coming upon people with signs begging for money at intersections. Sometimes he wouldn’t make eye contact. Sometimes he would nod politely, smile

and drive off. Sometimes he emptied out the change in his ash tray and went on his way having paid his “guilt insurance.” Then he had an idea.

One day he encountered a man standing at the intersection with a sign he had obviously spent a great deal of time creating. Willie rolled down his window and said, “Excuse me, sir, can I buy your sign?” “My sign?” said the man. “You want to buy my sign?” It was a wonderful reversal, asking the man who usually begged for money if he could give him money for his sign. “Yeah, how much do you want for it?” replied Baronet. “\$10?” the guy asked. “That sign’s worth more than that—you put some time into it. How about \$20?”

This led to a go-fund me initiative that enabled Willie Baronet to travel from California to New York engaging people begging for money along the way, buying their signs, and having conversations with them about their lives and how they wound up where they were. He bought hundreds of signs and put them together in an art display in New York. Along the way he asked those from whom he purchased signs, “What does home mean to you?” We have a clip, a few minutes from the documentary made to tell the story.

What does home mean to you? When Willie Baronet finished his project, he entitled the exhibition, “We Are All Homeless.” What he found after engaging in hundreds of conversations about home is that at a deep level, we all long for so many of the things articulated by the people Baronet interviewed. We want security, safety, warmth, a place to rest, a place of welcome. We want a place where we are known, a place where we’re not invisible. He learned that homelessness is not simply a state of those who have no physical place to lay their heads. It’s a spiritual reality of the human condition. Theologically, we all live in an exile of sorts, longing for home.

In her book, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, research professor, Brene Brown wrote of this longing for home, for a place of true belonging. Her quest began with a quote by Maya Angelou that haunted her. Angelou said, “You are only free when you realize you belong no place—you belong every place—no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great.”<sup>1</sup> When Brown first heard it, she thought, “That’s just wrong. What kind of world would it be if we belonged nowhere, just a bunch of lonely people co-existing.”<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the world can certainly feel like that. Brown’s book explores her journey to understand what Angelou meant. She discovered the key to home is found in developing a sense of belonging within ourselves, in our own skin. When we feel at home in ourselves, then home can be found anywhere we are. I believe God can help us feel at home within ourselves. Of course, it’s much easier said than done.

Faith offers a path to finding that sense of belonging within ourselves. The life of faith is a pilgrimage of sorts, a journey toward God, toward God’s tomorrow. As such, we have a restlessness within our souls. As Saint Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” James K. A. Smith teaches philosophy and theology at Calvin University in Holland, Michigan. In his book, *On the Road With Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts*, he asks the question, “What if being

---

<sup>1</sup> Brene Brown. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, (Random House: New York, 2017,) p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

human means being a cosmic émigré—vulnerable, exposed, unsettled, desperate, looking for a home we’ve never been to before?”<sup>3</sup>

“Looking for a home we’ve never been before.” “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” The only place we can ever really belong, that is feel at home, is within ourselves. We begin to find that home within ourselves when we find our home in God. A closer look at Psalm 84 reveals home is not simply the temple of God, rather the home the pilgrim seeks is in God. “Happy are those whose strength is IN you,” sings the Psalmist. This is a call to find our home in God. When we find our home in God then even going through the valley of Baca—that is a desolate, dry place—we find springs of life and home. As the Psalmist writes, “Blessed is everyone who trusts in you.”

I loved what people wrote on Willie Baronet’s art display in response to the question, “What is home for you?” Home is where your story begins, wrote one person. Home is a place of welcome. Home is where I go to cry. Home is where I find security, safety, welcome, rest. Do we not find all these in God? Indeed, our life’s journey is lived toward God, hoping for the home we’ve never been to before. Or as Psalm 84 puts it, “Happy are those whose hearts are highways to Zion.”

Every now and then in life, by God’s grace we get a taste of home. What makes Willie Baronet’s documentary, “Signs of Humanity” so powerful for me is that in hearing those who have no home articulate what home means for them, in hearing their descriptions and recognizing how similar we really are, in seeing in their eyes, in their hopes, and their longings something of our own hopes, seeing in them the same image of God imprinted on our own souls we see our brothers and our sisters in God’s family, we get that taste of home, of that place where we are one, where poverty is no more, where all God’s children know safety, security, welcome, rest; and we all have a place to call home.

Sometimes we get that taste of home in a moment in worship when we feel deep communion with God. Sometimes in a Bible study or Circle or comforting a friend at a funeral, or celebrating the joy of baptism, or holding a hand around a hospital bed, or offering an ear to just listen. It’s those moments when we get in touch with our deepest humanity, with who we are created to be, and we know that blessing of those whose strength is in God, we taste springs in the midst of the valley of Baca, we go from strength to strength, and a day in that place—that taste of home, that moment in the home we’ve yet to get to, well it’s better than a thousand days any place else.

How lovely is thy dwelling place O Lord of hosts... Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion...As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs...blessed is everyone who trusts in you. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> James K. A. Smith. *On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts*, (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, 2019,) p. 42.