

Date: June 7, 2009

Title: Where Is God?

Scripture:

¹ How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty.

² I long, yes, I faint with longing to enter the courts of the LORD. With my whole being, body and soul, I will shout joyfully to the living God.

³ Even the sparrow finds a home there, and the swallow builds her nest and raises her young— at a place near your altar,

O LORD Almighty, my King and my God!

⁴ How happy are those who can live in your house, always singing your praises. Interlude

⁵ Happy are those who are strong in the LORD, who set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

⁶ When they walk through the Valley of Weeping, it will become a place of refreshing springs,

where pools of blessing collect after the rains!

⁷ They will continue to grow stronger, and each of them will appear before God in Jerusalem.

⁸ O LORD God Almighty, hear my prayer. Listen, O God of Israel. Interlude

⁹ O God, look with favor upon the king, our protector! Have mercy on the one you have anointed.

¹⁰ A single day in your courts is better than a thousand anywhere else! I would rather be a gatekeeper in the house of my God than live the good life in the homes of the wicked.

¹¹ For the LORD God is our light and protector. He gives us grace and glory. No good thing will the LORD withhold from those who do what is right.

¹² O LORD Almighty, happy are those who trust in you. *Psalms 84:1-12 (NLT)*

In our scripture for this morning we read how the Psalmist writes of a desire to spend time in the “courts of the Lord.” In the time that this was written the word “courts” refers to the chambers of royalty. The image is of a person who longs to spend time in the place where ‘The Lord’ conducts business. In the courts of the king there would be important people coming and going and the King would consult with advisors and make decisions about what to do about this and that. What the Psalmist is saying is that spending time in the “courts” of the Lord in any capacity; even as a lowly doorkeeper is preferable to anything else he or she could be doing.

Now, since we are in church, I think that there is a tendency to visualize the “courts” of the Lord looking somewhat like a church sanctuary. God is sitting in the place of honor up by the altar, invisible, yet all powerful, all knowing, and all present. And when we say that we long to be in the courts of the Lord if you are like me, you visualize coming into the sanctuary and worshipping God.

But as I thought about this image, something didn’t seem just right about it. I mean when I picture the courts of the Lord as an actual physical place, I just can’t get them to be *enough*. What I mean is that no matter how grand or beautiful or majestic I picture

the sanctuary of God I cannot picture a structure that is grand and glorious enough to fit the bill.

I was an art major in college and I had to take a lot of Art History classes. In those classes I saw pictures of some pretty fantastic architecture. The arches and the flying buttresses of the Gothic cathedrals are amazing. The domes that were built in Florence are amazing. The architecture, the art work in the form of frescos and stained glass, and the enormous scale of the buildings were all meant to bring glory to God and all are indeed a sight to behold, but somehow even the architectural magnificence of these structures does not seem to be big enough or beautiful enough to represent something so grand as the “Courts of The Lord.”

Actually, I have been to a few outdoor chapels where the natural beauty is so amazing that it can take your breath away. The smell of the pines, the wild flower blossoms dancing in the breeze and the coolness of the mountain air can draw me into God’s presence. But even as beautiful and peaceful as an outdoor chapel can be, I still find it to be lacking when it comes to identifying it with the “Courts of The Lord.”

Down in New Mexico in Santa Fe there is a little chapel called the Loretta Chapel. It is a quaint chapel built for an order of nuns in the 19th century. There is a miraculous spiral staircase built to access the choir loft. The place has a mystical presence about it to be sure, but still, I can’t say that the Loretta Chapel is where one could find the “Courts of The Lord.”

No, I don’t think that when the Psalmist is talking about the “Courts of The Lord,” he or she is talking about a place. As wonderful and as spiritual as many places are, the “Courts of The Lord” are somehow simply “more” than a place....more than a place.

So, if the “Courts of The Lord” are more than a place what might they possibly be? What more could they be? I have an idea that may sound a little strange, but see what you think. I think that the “Courts of The Lord” might be a relationship. Now, I know that this may sound kind of crazy because we all know that relationships are messy things. Relationships are hard to maintain, they are unreliable, they are often temporary and to make things worse, it is usually our closest relationships that are the most difficult and most tumultuous. But I am not talking about a strictly human relationship. I am talking about a divine relationship. I am talking about a relationship that goes far beyond this physical existence. Ultimately the relationship that I am talking about is the relationship of the Trinity. That is the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What we know of the Trinity is that it represents to us a perfect relationship that consists of three parts that are so perfectly balanced and connected that they exist as one. One of our hymns calls it the “Godhead three in one.”

How many of you have read William P Young’s novel [The Shack](#)? In that book, Young portrays the Trinity as two woman and a man who could have presented themselves to Mack, the protagonist in any number of ways, but choose instead to interact with him in

a way that will be most beneficial to him. The relationship that exists between the three parts of the Trinity is good natured, free flowing, and natural. When you read the book you get a strong sense of how important it is that one leg of the Trinity does not dominate another in any way but they treat each other with respect and share a common understanding of what their mission is with respect to how they each relate to Mack. Mack is not judged or lectured to as from a higher being to a lower being, he is brought into relationship and given space to be sad, angry, curious and above all, he is loved by God his creator, by Jesus his redeemer, and by Holy Spirit who sustains him not for what he has done but just because he is who he is.

I know this is only a novel but I think it helps us to wrap our minds around a very challenging concept; the concept that the God we worship is a perfect relationship consisting of three in one; perfectly complete in and of itself and yet in it's perfection it invites all of creation to join in the relationship. I believe that it is out of this complete relationship that lacks for nothing; that needs no protection; that is so perfect it can't help but expand and reach out of itself to all of its creation.

The relationship we see in the Trinity is a perfect relationship and I believe that we were created to be a part of that relationship. Adam and Eve seemed to have that relationship when they were in the Garden. They lost it when they ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And we have been trying to get it back ever since. So, what if the relationship that Adam and Eve had but lost is buried in the spiritual recesses of our soul and it what really long for more than anything else? What if more than anything else we long for genuine relationship as modeled for us in the triune God?

I have reason to believe that this is true. I have, over the years, worked with numerous individuals in a counseling environment. I have used a process I learned whereby I ask people what they are angry about or worried about. We zero in on the underlying message that drives the negative behavior by asking a series of questions. The person listens for the message the mind is telling him or her to hear just what kinds of messages and fears are driving the attitudes and behaviors. For example a person might hear their mind saying, "I have to say something to her to set her straight."

To which I might reply, "You have to set her straight, because _____?"

The person might then say, Because, if I don't I will appear weak.

To which I would ask, "And if you appear weak _____?"

To which the person might answer, "If I appear weak, people will take advantage of me."

"And if people take advantage of you _____?"

And so the process leads the person to hear what their mind is telling them about a certain event. But here is the amazing thing about this. We keep going deeper and deeper into the underlying reasons until we get to the bottom of the issue. And do you

know that whenever we are able to follow what the mind is telling that person to the very bottom of the issue, it always comes down to one thing? Finally, it comes down to a fear that if that if she doesn't say what she says or if he doesn't think what he thinks or if she doesn't act the way she acts, she will be alone. And if she is alone, she might as well be dead. I really think that this is what it comes down to for each of us. The biggest fear that we harbor; the fear that is at the bottom of all our hopes and dreams; the fear that drives all of our negative behavior is: "I will be alone and if I am alone, I might as well be dead."

I recently read a story about a man in India who lived with the dreaded disease of Leprosy. The man lived in a clinic that was designed to help care for, feed, and give employment those who had the disease. But this man was bitter and angry because of his frightful appearance and how people with whom he came into contact seemed always to be frightened of him. It seemed that whenever there was trouble, John was at the heart of the problem. The person telling the story said that his mother was drawn to John because it was so obvious that he needed special attention. She shared the Gospel with John and he became a Christian and it helped his attitude, but still John had few friends and kept to himself. One day, John asked the director of the clinic what would happen if he went to church. He wanted to know if he would be accepted there. The director went to the church and asked if John would be welcome. He assured the leaders of the church that John was not contagious. They thought about it some and said yes. "Could he even take communion from the common cup?" They agreed that he could.

When John showed up that Sunday the church was pretty full and John stood at the back of the church wondering if he would be accepted when a miracle happened that changed John's life forever. An elderly gentleman looked up at John and patted the seat next to him to invite him to sit beside him. John humbly took a seat next to the man who did something no one had ever done for him before. He accepted John and invited him into relationship; perhaps it was a small gesture, but it changed John's life forever. From that day forward, John became a different man. He was kind to others and helped wherever he could. After that incident John received a national award from his employer for the most productive worker in all of India.

We were created to be in relationship; relationship with God and relationship with each other. Our model for the perfect relationship is the Trinity. When we get that right all the other relationships are far easier because all fear, guilt, shame are eliminated.

The psalmist says, "*I long, yes, I faint with longing to enter the courts of the LORD. With my whole being, body and soul, I will shout joyfully to the living God.*" Folks, the psalmist is not alone. Every man woman and child longs to be invited into the perfect relationship with God, and we are! We are invited into divine relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, what gets in the way?

I guess the short answer is counterfeit relationships. There are all kinds of voices in the world and inside of our own heads telling us that there is not such place as the “Courts of the Lord. There is no such thing as a perfect relationship. The voices tell us that our only hope is to buy their product or think their way. Sometimes the voices are very persuasive. They tell us convincing lies. But ultimately they distract us from the only relationship that will fill the longing we all have to be included; to mean something to somebody; to have a purpose and know that we really do matter in this world.

The Psalmist says, “Better is one day in the courts of the lord than a thousand elsewhere.” We have about a thousand “elsewheres” to choose from.

Let us choose the courts of the Lord.....let us choose the only relationship that truly fills our souls; a relationship with God, three in one made possible by the sacrificial life of Jesus the Christ. Amen.