

You Who Answers Prayer

Psalms 65

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To go East from Southern California by car we travel through the desert, whether it is the I-10 to Phoenix or the I-15 to Las Vegas. We have our share of driving through desert scenery, the dusty tan land, the Yucca trees—waterless terrain. But, every once in a while, the clouds don't give all they have to the mountains, and the desert is touched by rain. If you are lucky enough to travel on such a day, you can see the barren land explode into color, greens and yellows, orange and crimson, as if the seemingly dead earth was instead patiently waiting for the time when it might come out in splendor to prove the existence of God.

In Psalm 65, we have such a scene of glory. God is in Zion, the tumult of the peoples has subsided, the river of God has watered the earth, so that the meadows clothe themselves with joy and even nature sings out with the congregation this song of thanksgiving.

God is in Zion.

Zion is the name of the hill upon which Jerusalem sits. At the time this was recited, God was in Zion, in all of the city, the holy city. As long as God chose to reside there, the city, her people believed, were protected.

God is in Orange County.

It just doesn't have the same ring of truth. While God can be anywhere, probably there have been days when we have felt God's absence. Not every bit of land is saturated with the longing for God. Irvine Spectrum, a fun place, but not a Godly place. Disneyland is great for families but is not necessarily a place we go to pray. Newport beach has great waves but is sometimes, a place for the young and the restless to hook up with one another, instead of looking up to God.

It is plain that people move about Orange County not necessarily expecting to come face to face with God. Some might even move faster so they don't have to come face to face with the absence of God in their lives.

But there is one place people do come expecting to encounter God. People come to church, people come to Community Church, longing to be in God's presence. Often, people come because they have been too often hurt, feel alone, need something more than what is offered outside. They come seeking the Zion of old, the place where God chooses to reside, the place where they can feel, for a time, protected, loved, and healed.

God is in Zion, the God who answers prayer.

The Psalmist sings out to God, You forgive, You deliver, You silence the roaring of the sea, You make the gateways of the morning and evening shout for joy, You visit the earth and water it, and You crown the year with bounty.

Everywhere, You.

Before the full hymn of praise can emanate from the hearts of the believers, comes first "Here...Here are you, Praise is due to you, O God in Zion, You who answer prayer."

Some of you will recall that those who give voice to this song of grace had lived through the days when they believed God had left Zion. This is the song of a people who returned from having been sent away when Jerusalem fell to Babylon. When Persia defeats the Babylonians some 30 years later, king Cyrus allows the Jerusalemites to return. This small community strongly believes that the temple was destroyed because they had stopped trusting in God alone. When they stopped trusting, God left Zion.

While at the time of the singing of the Psalm the temple had been rebuilt, it is nothing like that of Solomon's time. The community, a fraction of what it once was, lives in broken houses often ransacked by marauders because the wall was also destroyed and had not yet been rebuilt. They worship and live in structures which are constant reminders of the brokenness of the past.

Despite the rubble, they proclaim that God is in Zion. This is the only victory that matters to our ancestors of faith. God is here, they proclaim with one voice. God answers prayer.

What matters most, then, is not the building or the number of people in the community or even personal safety. What matters most for people of faith is God's presence in their holy city. Should it not then matter most to us that God is in what we expect to be holy, in our church? If God answers prayer, should it then be our prayer that God would be present here?

I've spent over 8 years of ministry knowing that I should pray for the church. I have prayed. Most often those prayers are for programs, ministries, people, the day's meetings, and so forth. To pray that God would be here, in this church, almost seems too selfish. Even more, it seems like I might be putting down God. God is here, I say to myself, it is just me who isn't aware. I admit to being uncomfortable with a theology that considers God leaving a place, leaving those who are trying to be faithful, even if we are misguided, to act on our own. But there I go again, arguing with God when the scripture reveals that all I need do is ask, simply ask that God be in this church.

For to assume God is, like the air we breathe, all around us, ready for us to inhale, is to put God, as we do our air on most days, out of mind. Oh, we depend on it, we require it, but we don't often think about it.

Allow me to argue today that if it isn't God we are seeking in prayer, then what it is we are seeking, whatever it is, will take the place of God.

A beautiful building, a community of folk who truly care about one another, weddings, and enough money to get by, these are all good things. Yet if they are the only desire of our heartfelt prayers, we might just allow God to slip away from our midst because we start caring more about these things than about this being a place where God resides. Oh, how the evil one desires that we forget our longing to be in God's presence.

A church is supposed to reach out, to help the poor, the widow, and the alien. A church is supposed to give to the community. Yes our Missions program is active in Mexico, with the Marshallese, and more.

A church is supposed to reach out beyond herself, but only when the church is the place in the community to which someone can come and experience God. We as a church are called to be, first and foremost, the place where

God can break down the walls that keep human beings from using their God given power and purpose to make a difference in the world.

We are called to pray for Community Church, that this be holy ground, that whenever someone walks by the flowers in bloom, peers into the sanctuary, meets in Mertz Hall, enters into the Robin's Nest, shares a meal at Logos, that they will know, without a doubt, that God is here. God exists. God cares about your babies, God cares about your choice to stop drinking, God cares about you, who are just passing by and is waiting for the day when you might enter in.

Praise is due to you,
 O God, in Zion;
And to you shall vows be performed,
 O you who answer prayer!
To you all flesh shall come.

We have every reason to spend time praying that God would be in our church. There are many who are counting on us. And here, I know I'm not the only one that longs to be in God's presence.

In the Psalm there is one more verse before we get to "Happy are those whom you choose and bring near." There is one more precondition before unbroken praise breaks forth from the Psalm. There is one more unique offering found in Zion which marks Holy Ground.

It is the confession of sin.

When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us...

For those who lived in the ruins, I expect that was many days.

When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us you forgive our transgressions.

We experience the holy, not only by God's presence, but by our ability to confess sin and to accept forgiveness. In church, as in the 12 step programs, we announce our sin that our story with God may begin again, and again, and again.

To return to Zion, was to return to God's very presence. Indeed it was to accept the invitation to be invited back into God's presence. Despite the ruins, the people understood in this Zion reunion that they had been forgiven. It is this understanding of forgiveness that gives the Psalm full voice.

That joy is found when we are able to return into God's presence reminds me of a scene from a children's book.

In Beverly Cleary's book *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*, Ramona (a third grader) is in the nurse's office cleaning up, having accidentally cracked a raw egg on her head (for the details you'll just have to read the book). While she is there, Ramona's teacher comes into the adjacent office. Her teacher says to the secretary,

"I hear my little show-off came in with egg in her hair."

She laughed and added, "what a nuisance."

Of course Ramona heard it as her being a nuisance. She comes to believe that her teacher definitely doesn't like her. In response, Ramona stops raising her hand, stops participating, waits simply for each school day to end. Then the day comes when she is given the task to sell an assigned book to the class, a type of book report. She decides to make it like an advertisement on television, going so far to make chicken masks. Her presentation gets lots of desired laughs, the bell rings, and Ramona stays. Still wearing her mask she tells the teacher that she overheard the conversation with the school secretary weeks before. She heard the teacher call her a show off and a nuisance. The teacher responds:

"Why, Ramona, I can recall saying something about my little show-off, but I meant it affectionately, and I'm sure I never called you a nuisance."

'Yes, you did,' insisted Ramona. 'You said I was a show-off, and then you said, 'What a nuisance.' Ramona could never forget those exact words.

Mrs. Whaley, who had looked worried, smiled in relief. 'Oh, Ramona, you misunderstood,' she said, "I meant that trying to

wash egg out of your hair was a nuisance for Mrs. Larson. I didn't mean that you personally were a nuisance.'

Ramona felt a little better, enough to come out from under her mask to say, 'I wasn't showing off. I was just trying to crack an egg on my head like everyone else.'

Mrs. Whaley's smile was mischievous. 'Tell me, Ramona' she said, 'don't you ever try to show off?'

Ramona was embarrassed. 'Well...maybe...sometimes, a little,' she admitted. Then she added positively, 'But I wasn't showing off that day. How could I be showing off when I was doing what everyone else was doing?'

'You've convinced me,' said Mrs. Whaley with a big smile. 'Now run along and eat your lunch.'

'Ramona snatched up her lunch box and went jumping down the stairs to the cafeteria,' [laughing to herself in expectation of the continuation of a joke she had begun.]

If sin is like that which keeps us not wanting to participate fully in the day; if sin is that which causes us to doubt God's goodness; if sin is that which distorts our hearing that we come to believe that perhaps we are just a nuisance, better to be silent than found out, then forgiveness is what enables us to remove the mask, confess our fear before God (which often stems from our own misdeed), believing that God cares enough, has power and love enough to overcome whatever it is that holds us captive.

When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us you forgive our transgressions.

It is God's presence and forgiveness, often first made known here at Community Church, that frees us from the masks of sin.

It is God's presence and forgiveness that leads us to give voice to joy,

Happy are those whom you choose

And bring near

To live in your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the
 Goodness of your house,
Your holy temple.

It is God's presence and forgiveness that we come to see God's smile.

Hear our prayers O God
That you would be here in Community church.

We pray that here we and others might again meet you.
We pray that we might be reconciled to you.

Fill our church with your grace
that all who come near might experience your love
week after week, day after day.

That our masks might fall
and we would bound into the world ready to live, ready to give
out of the joy of our reunion.

We pray in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray saying...

Our Father...