

## *Going from Strength to Strength*

Psalm 84     Luke 19: 1-10

I was feeling pretty good about the amount of money we had saved for a family vacation. It typically takes several years to put the money together, and it's been nearly 5 years since we've been able to get up to Cape Cod to visit my mom, my sister, brother-in-law, and niece.

I felt this way until I looked up the price of airfare which has certainly increased a lot since the last time we flew up there. It will take more time (or better saving) before we can actually make the trip.

I started looking online for a decent place to stay. For a one week stay, it makes sense to rent a home. Going in May before the busy summer season starts usually produces some manageable rental rates. Yes, there were plenty of places within the amount budgeted.

On the site I use, it's very convenient. It maps the location of the property and provides over 20 pictures of the place – inside and out – along with a description, amenities list, and restrictions as well as a calendar availability. You get a pretty good idea of what you're going to get.

Most pictures show the rooms, the beds, the furniture, the bathrooms, and the outside features and any special vistas near a lake or a beach. Not much in my price range has any scenic features, but that's okay.

Two things were noteworthy as I looked at dozens of possibilities.

First, it was remarkable how many times I could look through a whole set of pictures and never see a TV set. One listing mentioned 3 TVs in the description, but I could only find one in the pictures. Where are these TVs? Many listings had lovely interiors, right down to granite countertops and upgraded appliances in the kitchen, but no picture showing a TV in any room.

On one, I saw a hutch where a TV would be expected, but there wasn't anything there. Do they avoid showing the TV locations as an anti-theft measure? They always showed the fireplace, like a typical summer renter is going to have any use for a fireplace. They show the barbecue grills on the patio, but not TVs. If they don't have TVs, do they imagine every renting family is continually engrossed in compelling conversations? Or do they imagine we're all watching TV on our laptops and tablets since all these listings have wifi? In any case, it seemed really strange, like they were missing a great selling point, or strangely hiding them.

The other item was that these same renters who clearly spent a lot of money on upgrades to make them attractive, bright, and comfortable didn't think to do more with the beds. One listing had the bedspreads rippled and rumpled, like they had tossed the

bedspread on over an unmade bed and however the bedspread dropped was okay. Clearly, this was a stupid man taking the pictures; that seems obvious. But a number of the listings showed beds without any pillows, or even worse with lumpy, misshapen, or flattened pillows you would expect to find in a fleabag motel. I'm sure that Hotel 6s have better pillows. Here, the men can only take so much responsibility for the failure in picture-taking. There is shared fault for those contemptuous blobs being passed off as pillows. Really, granite countertops and dead, lumpy pillows? No one in my family is going to spend 8 hours daily experiencing a granite countertop on vacation, but every night they're going to experience a lumpy, lousy pillow for 8 hours.

All of this is to say, we always want to be in a nice place, the best place possible. What that means is going to vary from person to person, but there are certain universals, like a decent TV and a decent pillow for two things, that most everyone wants. There are a host of other things that offer value. It isn't only in a vacation place, but in where they reside, and not just physically in a residence, but in whose company and under what conditions. Let's get moving to this best possible destination.

In Psalm 84, we have a pilgrim psalm, a song that might have been sung by those who journey to the Holy City, Jerusalem, to come to the great Temple, to come before God in the place where God is believed to reside, where God meets the faithful.

The opening verse is the kind of exclamation from a pilgrim who, as they approach the city, recognize the towering and magnificent Temple, declaring: *How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*

The pilgrim knows that it's a place of welcome for the faithful one who has made the journey. It doesn't matter who you are. Even the smallest of faithful servants finds welcome there. The psalmist says: *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, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God.*

The way of the pilgrim's journey is one of transformation. The psalmist uses metaphor, testifying that the desert environment of the stark Baca Valley is renewed by their faithful presence and determination. The dry valley is made into a place of springs and rains producing pools of blessing, all made new and fruitful and abundant by the march of the faithful toward their rendezvous with their God in Jerusalem. Unbowed by the rigors of the journey, in their faith, *they go from strength to strength*, not deterred or weakened, but strengthened and inspired.

Then there's a transition in the psalm as the pilgrim enters the sacred space of the Temple saying: *Hear my prayer, O Lord God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob.* The pilgrim is delighted and confident of the presence of God before him. *Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than a paid greeter at Walmart.* No, actually it says: *than dwell in the tents of the wicked.* Notice that "the wicked" apparently don't have a permanent

dwelling like God and the ones who come into God's presence; they dwell in mere **tents** by comparison, no matter how grand the mansions of the wicked may be.

Blessings come to the faithful - *For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those whose walk is blameless.* And finally, the psalmist writes: *Blessed is the one who trusts in you.*

That phrase *going from strength to strength* stuck with me. It's the walk of the faithful who discover new strength on their journey. They may indeed labor and tire, may feel discouraged and thwarted, may doubt and endure dark times. But faith is their strength and in that faith, they're led to discover new strength, new spirit, as they aim to surmount obstacles and forge ahead with their goal imprinted on their spirit, to come before God to offer praise, prayer, and service to the Kingdom of justice, peace, and new life.

When we return to Luke, we find Jesus is the pilgrim now, journeying to his destiny in the Holy City of Jerusalem. He is passing through Jericho, about 10 miles east of Jerusalem. Jesus is a celebrity of sorts at this point and word has gotten out that this mystery man is coming. They may not care whether he is a prophet like Elijah, or John the Baptist whose ministry was not far away on the banks of the Jordan River. Some may want to see a Messiah, even though many others claimed to be the Promised One. Perhaps he truly is a miraculous healer, or else a teacher of great spiritual wisdom and truth. Regardless, it isn't every day that a celebrity comes walking through town.

The story of Zacchaeus the tax collector describes what happens when faithfulness takes priority, and routine complacency simply has no place any longer. Let's remember that Zacchaeus is rich; he's the chief tax collector. But we're told that he's also a short fellow. Jesus draws such a crowd that short Zacchaeus can't see. Like the preceding parable of the blind beggar who cries out incessantly for Jesus – a totally different character from Zacchaeus the wealthy tax collector – here Zacchaeus is also determined to see Jesus and maybe get his attention.

His determination is really pretty funny. Imagine that a celebrity comes to town and one of the town's wealthiest citizens runs down the road ahead of the celebrity and climbs a tree to see him. 'Look, Larry Roberts is running down Main Street and climbing a tree to see this celebrity!' Right. Normally, the wealthy, powerful and prominent are introduced to the celebrity in a very deliberate manner. Not here, and that format of the privileged getting their due won't work with Jesus. But Zacchaeus doesn't let his small stature deter him. Jesus is here and Zacchaeus realizes that this is the time to act.

Not only does Zacchaeus climb a sycamore and gain Jesus' attention, Jesus stops and declares that he wants to stay in Zacchaeus's house. Notice how Zacchaeus has actually been called by Jesus, singled out for a privilege and blessing. Zacchaeus may have been flustered at first, but he must respond to this call.

Being tax collector for Romans, Zacchaeus is despised. People mutter about Jesus giving honor to a contemptible sinner, just as the earlier crowd by the blind beggar was

dismayed by his noisy shouting. But while they're busy sneering, Zacchaeus responds to Jesus.

Apparently Zacchaeus knows all about Jesus' teaching. Zacchaeus makes a stunning commitment showing how he, too, will follow Jesus. He pledges to act righteously and justly; to give half of his possessions to the poor, and to repay four times the amount anyone had been cheated in their taxes. Believe me, most everyone got gouged on taxes. So, he's made some outrageous commitments!

Remember, Zacchaeus had wealth, power, and prominence. He could have dismissed Jesus and gone on with life unchanged. But instead, he heard from his Lord this summons to seek life's fulfillment in faithfulness and obedience to God. Zacchaeus, the sinful, hated tax collector, could actually gain the blessing of God's grace, peace, and new life, worth more than all his money could buy.

Zacchaeus responds enthusiastically, and sacrificially. His response must be faithful, yielding his usual, self-serving practices. There's nothing faithful or obedient about saying, "Lord, Lord," and then doing business like Jesus never existed, or as if Jesus was inconsequential.

Zacchaeus found himself in the presence of the Lord, and found in him a new strength, a new spirit, that brought him to an exceptional place. While the pilgrim Jesus had touched the life of one who was regarded as sinful and contemptible, Jesus enlisted a new pilgrim – a spiritual pilgrim since we don't hear that Zacchaeus followed Jesus like the blind man. Zacchaeus traded his former strength in wealth and prominence in exchange for faith, for a dwelling place among those blessed by Jesus.

If we want to find the right place, the blessing place that works for us, then we'll find it in the place where we meet and discover God and strength of the Spirit of God meeting us. For the psalmist, it was the pilgrim's journey to the Temple of the Holy City. For the pilgrim Jesus, it was the surprising encounter with a little rich man who gained strength and blessing in committing to a new and different path for his life.

On your journey, too, seek out the blessing of the presence of God. It will require determination and sacrifice. It means going from strength to strength in faith that overcomes the obstacles that face us on our spiritual journey, on our own pilgrim journey to the place of blessing. It's even better than the place that has TVs that are big screens and where pillows are nice and plump. Better even than that!