

Psalm 122:1

Her name was Erna. I had the privilege of serving as Erna's pastor. About 5 years ago, a car accident that she was in made her realize that it was time to give up driving. Not long after that, her husband got sick and went home to heaven. Then she decided that it would be good for her to sell her home and move into an apartment where she could get her meals taken care of and receive some extra help. And so, because she couldn't make it to church, we would go and see her and bring God's Word and Sacrament to her. At each visit, this would usually happen. Erna, with tears in her eyes, would say how she missed coming to church. Looking back over the last 11 years or so as a pastor, I've had that same conversation with dozens of people.

Those conversations have always given me great encouragement to see the faith of God's people who long to gather around God's Word. But it also has exposed in my own heart how easy it is to take gathering with God's people for granted. It's not a surprise that in America worship attendance has dropped significantly in the last 20 plus years. It's also true that generational churches where you have great grandpa and grandma attending tend to start losing folks 3 or 4 generations later. A large part of both of things come from the fact that it's so easy to get consumed in earthly things – college, careers, family, living life. When life is following a pattern and is relatively going according to plan, our faith can take a back seat. 20 years ago, churches were filled shortly after 9/11, but that certainly wasn't a trend that continued even a few months after 9/11.

I wonder what Christians living in hostile parts of the world would say about us. What would Christians living in Afghanistan or China say about the value we place on gathering with fellow Christians? How about soldiers deployed overseas who can't be in their home churches?

On the flipside, we can also struggle with another problem, and it's a problem that regular churchgoers tend to struggle with. It's easy to lament the fact that Christianity is on the decline at least in America, but what can follow is this sort of self-righteous attitude that looks around and says, "Where is everyone?" Patting ourselves on the back, the Pharisee inside our own heart starts to smile a bit. The first Easter I was a pastor, I remember being excited about all the people who came to church, and the fact that we needed to set-up chairs, but I still remember a member commenting, "Where are these people the rest of the year?" From that conversation, it became apparent that he didn't say those words from a sincere love of souls whom he wanted to see in heaven but kind of like that son in the parable of the Lost Son. The one who was upset that his father showed grace and mercy to his brother who had run away from home.

Which ditch do you find yourself falling into more? The ditch where you take gathering around God's Word for granted? Or the ditch where your self-righteous Pharisee comes out thinking that you're inherently better in God's eyes because of how pious you are? Want to hear my answer? It's both, and I'm guessing the same true for most of you too.

That's why this verse is awesome to hear: "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord." Psalm 122 is a part of group of psalms called The Songs of Ascent. There have been several explanations what that title refers to. It could be a group of psalms that were sung as the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. More likely though they were psalms sung as pilgrim songs as Old Testament believers went to Jerusalem for three major festivals in the OT. Since Jerusalem is on a mountain, you go up to it, and you go up to the temple. There are also references to these songs being sung on the steps leading up to the temple during those three festivals.

Why would David say he was glad to go to the house of the Lord. Why do I need to be here in the house of the Lord? Why do you need to be here in the house of the Lord? Psalm 24 says **Who may ascend the**

mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The answer to that is the one who is pure and clean and holy. If you know anything about David's life, you know very well it was not a life that was always so pure and clean and holy. The same is true for you and me.

But that's why we come? David writes in Psalm 51: **Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God.** I need to be here not to get a spiritual boost. I need to be here not so that I look good outwardly. I need to be here not simply because I need a dose of inspiration. I need to be here because the problems in my life are too big for me to handle.

I need to be here because this week again I failed to be the person God in his law commands me to be. I need to be here because this week again I failed to put God and my neighbor ahead of me. I need to be here because I keep struggling and fighting against the same old sins. I need to be here because the challenges and problems I face in a sin-infected world are simply too great for me to handle.

Because in this place, God's people gather to receive grace and forgiveness from their Savior. This place is special not because it's a beautiful building to worship in. This place is special not because of the pastors who preach and teach here. This place is special not because it's only a two minute drive from your house.

This place is special because Jesus stands with us as we gather. Because his promise is that wherever his Word is faithfully preached and his Sacraments are faithfully administered, he's going to be there. He's going to stand as his people gather and he's going to assure them that their sins are gone, and they are right with God through him.

The other day, someone shared with me a very insightful comment. He mentioned that a few years ago, he noticed something in the Bible. When God's people are scared or frightened, that the Lord will come to them and tell them, "Do not be afraid." Usually, he doesn't simply just remind them of the gospel – don't be afraid because Jesus died for your sins. Instead, very often, the Lord makes it clear to them that he's present with them. So, when Jesus is walking on water, and the disciples are scared, he tells them don't be afraid, and then he gets into the boat with them.

Why don't we need to be afraid? Not only because through Jesus our sins are forgiven and taken away. But also, because Jesus stands with you. He says that where two or three are gathered in his name, there he stands with them. He promises that as a family stands around this baptismal font, and water is applied in the name of the Triune God, he's standing there with them. He promises that as we open God's Word, and we hear and meditate on it, he's standing along with us. He promises that his people gather around his table and receive the Lord's Supper, he's standing there giving them his own body and blood to assure them their sins are forgiven, and they have peace with him.

God's people gather to worship. Don't view this place as a place you have to go to. Don't view this place as a place where only people who have it figured out go to. Instead view this place as a place you not only get to go to but as a place you need to go to. Because in this place, through Word and Sacrament, Jesus stands with you assuring you of his grace and his presence in a world full of so much anxiety and fear. Because he stands with us, we can say with David: "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord."