

“Longing for God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Psalm 84

“My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord.”

Where do you find your soul longing for God? Is it in a particular location that is familiar and meaningful to you – say in nature, in the mountains, at the beach, on a lake, or in the woods? Is it in the company of people who enliven and feed your soul – long-standing friends, family from near and far, colleagues from work, or classmates from school? In those locations or with those people, do you feel a desire “for your heart and your flesh to sing for joy to the living God?”

When do you find your soul longing for God? Is it in times of joy and pride – when your child has a great accomplishment; when a family member is full of happiness; when a friend invites you to share in his or her great joy and gratitude to God? Is it in times which are both uncertain and hope-filled – when a loved one faces illness with an unknown prognosis; when a friend struggles in his or her marriage; when you are uncertain as to what your purpose is in life? In those moments or with those people, do you recognize that in moments that are both joyful and uncertain, “Even the sparrow finds a home at the altars of our God and King, for happy are all those who live in God’s house?”

I believe one of the challenges of living the Christian faith is the ebbs and flows of our souls longing for God. We will go for stretches where our souls are very much in-tune with longing for God’s presence, and we are aware of God’s presence in the places we visit, the people we interact with, and the moments we experience. Then we will go for stretches where our souls become indifferent to longing for God. Perhaps we experience a stretch of everything going our way in life, so we relax in our spiritual disciplines or awareness of God’s presence. Perhaps we experience a tragedy – an illness, death, or crisis of some sort – and we turn away from God, becoming angry that God would allow such a terrible thing to take place. The Christian journey could best be compared to one of those roller coasters you ride at the amusement park: there can be great highs and great lows in our souls longing for God.

The roller coaster will always be a part of our lives. But perhaps what we strive for in our deepening, maturing faith as Christians, is for the highs and the lows to not be as drastic. Instead of our spiritual roller coaster having the greatest heights and deepest lows, we find the more moderate ebbs and flows that offer longer-lasting sustenance and stability, especially when the difficult times arise.

How is that achieved? I believe the psalmist offers us a glimpse of what longing for God truly embodies. When our soul is always searching and attuned to our Creator, then we find our strength in God, and God supports us through all the journeys of life (84:5-7). When our soul is always searching for God's presence, we sense that God hears our prayers, and looks on our faces as one of his anointed (84:8-9). When our soul sees God's face in the faces of those around us, then we yearn every day to serve our Lord in all that we do. "For a day in God's 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" (84:10). When our soul centers itself on God and God alone, then we recognize that "God bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly, who put their trust in God" (84:11-12).

As I heard the news this week about former President Carter and his cancer diagnosis, I could not help but think of the psalmist's longing for God. There has been no doubt that Mr. Carter has had a lifelong commitment to Christ and an unquenchable desire to deepen his knowledge of and faith in the one true God. That life of discipleship has been even more evident in the decades since he left the White House. And so, when he called a press conference on the same day he would begin treatments for the cancer that had spread to his liver and brain, I heard the words of faith of a man whose soul has perpetually been longing for God.

"I'm perfectly at ease with whatever comes," he said. "I do have a deep religious faith, which I'm very grateful for." At first, he felt he had just a few weeks left after the diagnosis of the cancer metastasizing. "But then I was surprisingly at ease," he said. "I've had a wonderful life, I've had thousands of friends, and I've had an exciting and adventurous and gratifying existence. Now I feel that it's in the hands of God" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/us/jimmy-carter-cancer-health.html>).

Mr. Carter's reflections and words echo the psalmist's belief that, "Happy are those who live in your house, O God, ever singing your praise." When our soul is grounded in God's love for us in Jesus Christ, we can even see the most hopeless of situations in a positive light. A lifetime of his soul longing for God has prepared Mr. Carter and his family for what awaits him in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

We have never been promised that the life of faith would be easy, without great challenges or deep sorrow. The life of faith can be full of great highs and great lows, the roller coaster effect, to be sure. But through the disciplined, constant, faithful practice of longing for God in our lives, the life of faith can become less dramatic in its ups and downs, and can provide for the deepest of foundations when the greatest challenges arise. It is in the spiritual practices of prayer, reading God's Word, engagement in fruitful conversation, and discernment of God's presence that we deepen our longing for God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

The psalmist says that he "would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness" (84:10). What does it look like to

be “a doorkeeper in the house of our God?” Does it mean to literally stand and hold the door for people as they enter the church? It could! It also could mean what we are inspired to do in response to our soul longing for God. Too often, I believe, we feel guilted into serving in the church. We agree to assist with a task or program not out of our own willingness, but out of a sense of obligation or duty. When we begrudgingly serve as a doorkeeper in God’s house, we are not serving out of a deep longing for God. The time we give, the money we donate, the talents we share – for them to truly be used for God’s glory, they need to first be given out of a spirit of deep longing for God.

What are you being called to do as a doorkeeper in God’s house? What is your passion? Where is your energy emanating from the deep longing for God in your life?

I’ll tell you one thing that excites me about our life as the church right now, and that is our youth ministry. As a parent, I am incredibly grateful for my daughters to have a vibrant, active, diverse group of teenagers to form relationships that deepen their knowledge of God’s love for them in Jesus Christ. I am incredibly thankful that this congregation sees the youth not as secondary-class members of the church, but as full and active partners in ministry. I am so excited that our church stepped out and took a risk of faith two years ago and hired Tom Markey as youth director. That faithful risk has turned into a flourishing relationship that over the next two years will provide Tom a place to grow in preparation for his career as a minister in the Presbyterian Church.

I am motivated to be a doorkeeper in the house of God in order to see the youth ministry at John Knox continue to flourish and grow. I will respond and assist with my time and talent whenever Tom or the youth need a helping hand. I will give of my financial resources so that this ministry can be supported in staff and programming. I will encourage others – parents, youth, members, friends – to be fellow doorkeepers in God’s house, so that these young adults are given the strongest foundation for their lifetime of faith. I will give thanks to God every day for this blessing our church has been given, and continually long with my soul for God’s presence in my life.

What is your passion in the church? Where is your energy centered? Is it the youth? Is it in worship? Is it in mission? Is it by welcoming others? Is it in prayer and spiritual nourishment? Does that passion arise out of your deep longing for God? If so, then follow that passion and energy as a doorkeeper in God’s house. And if you’re not sure where your passion is, or you feel like you have nothing to offer, then let’s talk about what it means to long for God. Because there is no question in my mind that God’s desire is for us all to be, “Happy (as we) live in God’s house, ever singing God’s praise.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.