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Sunday's Sermon

Obedience to the Dwelling Place of God

Revelation 21:1-7 and Psalm 132

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

We don't know the authorship of this psalm or when it was written. We do know that it was not written by David. Some say it was written during the post-exilic period, after returning to the Land, but the majority consensus is that it was probably written in the time of the united Kingdom, and may have been written by Solomon himself. But it is one of our songs of Ascent and as our author for our series says, this psalm speaks to us of obedience. So let's take a look at that.

When I was in the USAF, after I was finished with basic training in Texas, my next duty station was at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, DC. I had a fairly simple task. My job was to learn Hebrew. So, every day we went to the State Department's Foreign Service Institute, and for the next year, 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, all I did was learn Hebrew. Out of that experience God spoke to me and told me that I was going to be a missionary and would live in the Middle East, in Palestine, and take the gospel there. A dream was formed, a vision was given, and so I began to live to that dream. I became, as Paul says, "...obedient to the vision."

Our psalm reminds of that kind of obedience. It's not an obedience that speaks of right and wrong; do this and don't do that, rather it's the kind of obedience that speaks to "following through." For example, Paul was obedient to the vision he had on the Damascus Road. Where once he only had rules and regulations for all of life, he now found a living relationship with God. He was given a vision and purpose by Jesus and he was obedient to it. All of Paul's years of studying the Scriptures came alive and he could see the real meaning of the Law and the Prophets and the writings and became obedient to them, in much the same way as it is said that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. If we are obedient to history, we might avoid the same mistakes.

Moses' Tabernacle, the one that was given to the Israelites by Moses, had a courtyard surrounded by a wall of curtains. Inside the wall, the offerings were slaughtered and offered upon the altar in sacrifice to God. There was the laver in which the priests could accomplish their ceremonial cleansing and in particular the high priest. Then, there was the "Tent of Meeting" and the priests would go in there, into the "Holy Place," where there was the table of show bread, the golden lamp stand, and the altar of incense. Through the final veil or curtain to the "Holy of Holies," only the high priest would go, once a year on the day of atonement and there he would bow before the Ark of Covenant, to offer prayers for himself and then for the people, asking for God's mercy and forgiveness and blessing.

David's Tabernacle was different than the Moses' Tabernacle. Gone was the curtain surrounding and outer courtyard. Gone was the altar of sacrifice, the bronze laver for cleansing; gone was the holy place. Finally, the last thing was the curtain separating the Ark from the people. Remember in the wilderness, when the Hebrews came to Mt. Sinai, God wanted to speak to all of them but the people were so overwhelmed that they told Moses to go and speak with God and then tell them what He said. Out of that meeting came the two tablets with the Ten Commandments and a written, codified law. David has gone back to that place of everyone having access to God, not just a certain few of a certain tribe. David even had trained, professional singers and musicians who would sing and play, 24 hours a day, before the Ark, and David himself would go in and sit before God.

But over time, as the memory of David's reign dimmed, the people slipped back into old ways. The tabernacle, and then the Temple became as before. Places in which the people could only go so far, and the rest was left to the priests. Once again the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies were encased, this time in a stone building, and their light and glory were sealed off from the people. Now here we are, ascending the heights to celebrate our God and this song calls us to remembrance, to be once again obedient to the vision; and that vision is David's.

This psalm calls to mind the history of the Ark and how it defined God's presence among His people. It was only about 45" long, 27" wide and 27" high, but it was the symbol for the people that God was among them.

The ark was the ever present reminder of their journey from Egypt to Sinai and how God had met them there. It reminded them of their wanderings in the wilderness and that God had been with them each step of the way. The ark was the reminder of their conquest of the land and that God had led them into each battle and given them victory. It reminded them that God was their king and that it was important to always have God with you. But the ark was only a symbol; it was not the reality of God's presence. God did not reside in this box, in spite of what "Raiders of the Lost Ark" would have us believe. When this ark was tried to be used as a talisman, like a "lucky rabbit's foot" there were terrible consequences because God is not a puppet or a magic show. He cannot be controlled or used in that way.

The psalm does not tell the whole history but only reminds them. "Lord, remember David and all of his hardships." It's important that we remember what took place so that we can learn and grow from it and not repeat the same mistakes. Look at our country. When we sing our national anthem or other patriotic songs, they bring to mind all of the struggles and victories of our founding fathers. Just so, when we think of all of the saints that have gone before us, we can remember their glories. But, if we are honest, we also have to remember their struggles, both personal as well as corporate. As we remember these things, we are encouraged because we realize that, as Paul says, "...we have this treasure in earthen vessels," literally "cracked pots;" and the writer of Hebrews also reminds us, "...see how we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us..." To have this kind of rich history is what the Israelites are called to remember and as they remember it, bring to light once again, the vision that led them forward; let that vision become yours and then stay true to it. Become obedient to the vision.

The psalmist then goes on to recall a time when, after conquest and subduing of the kingdom under David, the ark was remembered and brought to Jerusalem. During this time the Ark had been residing in Shiloh and David remembers it. So he gathers a group of men together and they go and bring it up to Jerusalem. There is great celebration and dancing and shouts of Joy as the Ark enters Jerusalem. Remember those times of joy, and worship before God. These are the glory times that will encourage us to keep on in our faith; to encourage us that we can approach God, have a relationship with Him, and boldly, as His children ask of Him what we will. The idea of worshipping at "His footstool," after all, this is all the ark was – a footstool. When a king conquered a people and a treaty was crafted to define how they would live under that king, it was placed in his footstool. His feet upon it symbolized that he had you; that he owned you. The people, bowing before the ark, was a way of saying that yes Lord, we are yours and we are submitted to your will.

Finally the request is made for God to remember His servant David, His anointed one. God did remember and as He swore to David, you will have a descendant upon the throne always; they only had to obey God. The kings that followed were not a great group of people. One by one they descended further and further away from God. But God had a plan. God would remember David and His oath that He swore to David that he would have a descendant upon the throne forever.

Verses 1 – 10 of this psalm are the cry of the people to God and verses 11 – 18 are God’s response to them. What was it that God wanted to bring back to the forefront with this psalm. I think it is the memory of David and what he had learned and of which his life was an example.

David’s greatest gift, his vision, was that God was approachable and that we could have a relationship with God. David was called the friend of God. Looking at David’s life you might argue how he defiled the Tabernacle and things of God. What friend would do this to another? David took articles from the Tabernacle to use as his own. He and his men ate the bread off of the Table of Showbread. Worst of all, David defied the commandments and instead of the High Priest, David went in and sat before God; talking with God. My mom and I had a special relationship and when I was at home, there were things that I could do or say to her because we had a relationship. If I brought a friend home, he would of course be overly polite in speech and action, because he was a guest. I was her son, I had a deep relationship. Just so, David could do those things because he too had a relationship with God, He knew God intimately, so he could boldly go into the tabernacle and sit down before God and talk with Him. David was “in son” at those moments; the priests, by and large, were not, and so their actions were all based upon acting as guests in the home, not as sons, known and beloved by their Father.

And this is the vision that our reading in Revelation gives to us as well. “Behold the dwelling of God is with man.” Jesus came to restore our fellowship with God. He took all of the barriers that stood between God and humanity and with word, and signs and wonders, broke down each one of them. Mental disease; physical disease; gender; identity; law; ritual; all of them. Jesus took and made them new. As He said, I did not come to abolish the law but to “fulfill the law” and that really means, that “I came to rightly interpret” the law. Over the centuries, as life changed and new technologies and ways of doing things came to pass, the rabbis had to interpret and re-interpret the law to fit the new situations. This had become such an obstacle to the people, that no one could obey them. Jesus came to take that away; to take it off of their backs so that they could live and be people of God. Then He did the ultimate act of love – He gave His life to God unconditionally, even if it meant death on the cross as a common criminal. Not My will, but Thine be done.

Then on the third day He rose, declaring once and for all – the victory is won; the way is made open; I have overcome even Sheol, (hell) and the grave. Nothing can hold Me back and as you abide in Me, you will enjoy that same victory. So we keep the vision in the forefront and stay obedient to it.

We then come to this wonderful book, “The Revelation,” and what do we read? “Behold the dwelling of God is with men and He will live with them.” What David “saw” was now the reality. As the first David tried to open the way and demonstrate that it was possible to have a relationship with God, the second David made it the reality. In Jesus, David does have a descendant upon the throne forever. The best part is that David’s vision is now reality. Just as the Ark taught us the importance of God’s presence, so now, in Jesus, we have the reality of His presence for Jesus not only rose from the dead, He also gave us His spirit – that Spirit of God that will lead and guide us into all truth. We have only to abide in Him as branches on a tree and let His life flow through us. Our only task now is to let the Spirit give us again the vision and then be obedient to that vision.

I would also encourage you to re-read this psalm and look for the vision of which it reminds us. The psalm can be beautifully divided into two sections. Verses 1 – 10 are the cry of the people, and verses 11 – 18 are God’s reply to them. In verses 1 – 5 the people cry to God to remember David and his promise to give a proper dwelling to God; verses 11 – 12 are God’s reply that He will establish His place in Zion; verses 6-8 are the cries of remembering the joy that it was when the ark was brought to Jerusalem and to worship at God’s footstool; verses 13 – 15 are God’s reply that He has a place to dwell; verse 9 is a plea for godly priests to lead worship; verse 16 is that they WILL

lead in worship; verse 10, a plea for God to remember His anointed, David; and verses 17 – 18 that God will cause David's lineage to prosper.

Obedience. This is the one thing that Jesus had to learn, even obedience to death on a cross. Through it all He followed through on the vision and accomplished what no other sacrifice could do – breaking the power of all that separates us from God and making an open way to the very throne of God that we might all have the joy of a relationship with Him. As we look at history, we can go all the way back to the beginning, to Genesis, and from then until today, we can, with the writer of Hebrews behold that great cloud of witnesses that calls us back to the vision and reminds us to be obedient to the vision, that we might be faithful witnesses to all that God has for us. Be obedient to the vision.

Amen