

# Sermons at Christ Church

## *Building Relationships Through Love.*

*Christmas II*

*Rev. Emmanuel Mercer*

*“How dear to me is your dwelling place. My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.”* Psalm 84 is a pilgrim psalm which was sung as praise song by pilgrims who traveled over long distances to Jerusalem. The desire of every Jew and in fact people of faith was to visit the holy city of Jerusalem and to worship at the temple—that was the dwelling place of God. And that was where people of faith desired to be because that was one place that they could build character.

Because of this burning desire, people of faith braced the challenge of a dangerous trip to Jerusalem over sea, desert, wilderness and highways. The pilgrims came from distances far and near. The journey itself spoke more about the human desire, the faithful desire to be in the presence of the holy God than about the treacherousness of the journey.

Why do you think these pilgrims would walk miles and miles and miles to a place they have never visited before, to worship at the temple? What drove these pilgrims to put themselves to such a journey to an unknown destination? Faith in the God who builds character.

Those who made this journey realized one truth, that the journey itself was not about the journey, it was about the joy and satisfaction that came from being at a scared place where they could encounter God, it was about the joy of being at that one place which was above every other place.

It was the satisfaction of knowing that within the temple, the sacred place, they could hear God’s voice and align their lives with the divine will of God and build characters that reflected God’s divine character.

It is in just the same way that our faith drives each of us to this sacred place and sacred places everywhere. And our faith drives us here because we believe that this sanctuary offers more than any place could offer us. We come here week-in and out because we delight in being here, in the presence of God, the center of human meaning and purpose-where we can build a character that mirror God's character.

Listen to C.S. Lewis "I believe in God in the same way that I believe in the sun. Not so much that I can see the sun but because through the sun, I can see everything else" This is the one place where we acknowledge our blindness and are not judged for being blind. This is the one place where we are encouraged to see, to open our eyes and see God's divine work in our midst. So that even if we are shaky in our faith, even if our faith isn't strong enough, we would still commit ourselves to the possibility of seeing that faith mature and grow. The delight in being at the house of the Lord is opportunity to build character.

The fact of the matter is, the temple is dear to the psalmist because no pilgrim journeys to the temple because they are full, pilgrims journey to the temple because that is where our desire to be filled is met. We don't come here because we have been found, we come here to be found. And once we are found, we see other pilgrims who like us, also yearn for a deeper connection with God. We come here because this is the one place where we are encouraged to see ourselves in others-this is the one place where we are always reminded to remove the barriers that we have built against love.

And so, like the pilgrims of old, we also journey to the place of our delight-because that is the place where we can build characters that mirror God's character.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus took this same journey to Jerusalem for the yearly festival of the Passover. The annual Passover celebrated the freedom of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. After the Passover celebration, and after traveling for a day on their way back to their home, they couldn't find Jesus among their fellow pilgrims and so they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After searching for three days, they eventually found him in the temple, sitting among teachers, listening and asking questions. When Mary saw Jesus, she ran to him and with an air of exasperation confronted Jesus over the ordeal he's put them through. But he was indignant, "Why are you searching for me?

The point Jesus seems to be making is that we search for those who are lost. We search for those who have missed their way. We search for those who have been trapped by the power of evil and sin. We search for those who have gone astray. We search for those who have lost the bearings in their lives.

We don't search for those who are in the father's house-the place of human delight. His point is, in so far as you are in God's house, you can never be lost.

It is in this house where we each find ourselves-where each could be seen, each could be heard, and each could speak. This is the place where God assures us that God sees, God hears and God finds us. It is the place where we can build character.

Back in the day when we used payphones, a young teenager stood by a roadside payphone and dialed a number. Sitting quietly on a bench by the payphone was a gentleman. When someone picked the call and said 'Hello' the young teenager responded and then asked 'Ma'am, are you looking for someone to mow your lawn?' 'No. I already have someone.' The woman replied. 'I can do it for less than what you're paying right now.' The teenager shot back. 'I am satisfied with the person I have. The woman responded. The teenager paused and then spoke again 'I'll also sweep the sidewalk and clean the curb and by Sunday, your yard will be the nicest on the street.' The boy said. 'No. thank you.' the woman said.

The boy smiled and gently hung up the phone. It was only then that the person who sat on the bench who was eavesdropping stood up and stepped closer to the teenager. 'Son, I admire your confidence. If you're looking for work, I can offer you a job.' Thank you, sir, but I already have one' the boy said. Out of curiosity the man asked the boy 'Then why were you calling to ask for a job.' ' I wasn't asking for work. I was checking how well I'm doing at the job I already have. I'm the one who works for that lady. That is character-the joy of knowing that you are doing what you are supposed to do.

Fact is, if you have character, you can tell what is missing in your life. If you are in tune with yourself, your purpose becomes even clearer, you can see your path and the journey you are on, and

so long as you stay on that path, you cannot be lost. You may wander like we sometimes do, but you cannot be lost. Others may come looking for you, but it wouldn't be because you are lost, it would be because you know how to teach others the pathways of God's character. You can speak of God's character because you have found and embraced the voice of the God who speaks into you.

Listen to Thomas Merton: "But if I am true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself, and find myself nowhere. I shall be lost in Him: that is, I shall find myself. I shall be 'saved' To find yourself is to be found in God. And to be found in God is to speak of the character of God.

There's a six-year-old boy who was standing in the church lobby staring at a plaque on the wall. It was filled with names with small American flags by each name. He asked the pastor what that meant. The pastor explained how that was a memorial to all the young men and women that died in the service. The little boy stood there silently and very concerned. He finally looked up and said "Was it the 8:00 or 10:30 service?"

On this first Sunday of the year, I give great thanks to God that we have a place where we can call home-where we can delight in God. I give thanks that you and I are pilgrims who can feel God's presence within us and in each other.

But I am also reminded that the loveliness of God's dwelling place is not so much about the beauty of the place, it is about the character of the place, the character of God that has overshadowed that place to the point where that lovely place builds people of character whose only desire is to express the character of God.

At this time of the year, we all make new year resolutions, which are great. I am thankful that we can settle on the changes that we have to make to live more productive and faithful lives of character. But in addition to the resolutions that you have made, I'd like to invite you on a journey as pilgrims of character-the kind of character that is grounded in wisdom-wisdom is to know how to live, know how to relate with God, know how to relate with people, know what is important and what is not important, know what is good and evil, what is true and what is false.

I do not know the path or the journey on which you find yourself this morning, but I pray that your journey may speak more about your faith than the journey itself.

May that journey be one of knowing that you also are a pilgrim whose faith drives you to where you hear God calling you to be. And wherever you are, if you are to find true joy and true delight, it may be about knowing God's faithful character. Happy New Year.

**Amen.**