

The Sacred Quest

Passage: Psalm 24

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I'm not supposed to be writing this sermon.

When we mapped out the preaching calendar, we scheduled Dan Westman to preach on Palm Sunday. However, Dan ended up with a conflict, so we switched dates.

So, what do I preach? We had no text scheduled for Palm Sunday. Almost immediately, however, I thought of Psalm 24.

Three years ago, right around Palm Sunday, I officiated at a funeral. The family asked that I read and comment on Psalm 24. When I looked at the psalm, I realized that it was an appropriate psalm for Palm Sunday.

Last month I went on a personal retreat and chose Psalm 24 as one of the texts to meditate on. However, as I was reading and reflecting on it, a woodchipper outside my room disrupted my concentration, not to mention my eardrums. Therefore, I went downstairs to a quieter room. On display in the room was a large, old Bible with beautiful calligraphy. When I walked over to it, I saw that it was open—to Psalm 24.

In a sense, then, this sermon is three years in the making. Of course, I consider every sermon I write a lifetime in the making.

What are you seeking?

A friend asked some of us, as we approached the Indian Wells Tennis Garden, if there was anyone who would make us starstruck if we saw him or her. We were there to watch two days of the BNP Paribas Open, a professional tennis tournament.

"Two people," I answered, "Alcaraz and Djokovic": Carlos Alcaraz, the number one player in the world, and Novak Djokovic, the greatest player of all time.

It turns out they were scheduled to practice at the same time, on courts right next to each other, shortly after we arrived. For an hour, from their arrival at the practice courts until their departure, I watched in awe as these two athletes honed their craft side by side.

What motivates them to put in the hours, to beat their bodies into submission, to train their minds? When I got home, I looked for the answer on the internet. The answer didn't surprise me. Greatness. Each of them is seeking greatness.

What are you seeking?

The compilers of the Psalms recognized Psalm 24 as a psalm of David. It includes the notation “Selah,” which calls for reflection, in the middle and at the end. Therefore, when we reach those places in the psalm, pause for a moment of reflection.

The world belongs to the Lord

Psalm 24:1-2

*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,
for he has founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.*

David intensifies the word translated “earth,” which can be any land, with the noun translated “world,” which is comprehensive. Both the parts and the whole are the Lord’s. Everything on the earth (“the fullness thereof”) and everyone who lives in the world (“those who dwell therein”) belong to him.

Why? Because he created everything and everyone.

David intensifies the verb translated “founded” with the verb translated “established.” The Lord not only started creating the world, he also finished creating the world. Unlike a lot of humans, he finishes what he starts.

Seas and rivers are unsuitable for human life and even threaten human life. Drawing on Genesis 1, David implies that the Lord created land for humans.

The world, not to mention the people who inhabit it, is not the product of inexplicable and purposeless forces. No, the Lord created it—and us.

The world—every part of it—belongs to the Lord, not us. He rules over it and those who inhabit it, not us. Therefore, he can do with it, and with us, what he pleases. We are utterly dependent on him.

As I was meditating on Psalm 24:1-2 last month in Point Reyes, I was looking out from a fourth-floor room of an old and unreinforced Victorian house, which had been converted to a church and retreat house, at the San Andreas Fault about a half mile away. I thought something like, “Lord, regarding the world you established, are you sure you established it, because if the big one hits, I’m pretty sure this retreat house is going to collapse like the walls of Jericho?”

Then I returned in my mind to David's intent and reminded myself that no matter what measures we take to protect ourselves, the world is the Lord's, he can do with it what he pleases, and we are utterly dependent on him.

If the Lord created the world for us, what then do we do? Having written of the earth and the world, David narrows in on one part of the world, one piece of land: a hill.

Clean hands and a pure heart

Psalm 24:3-4:

*Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.*

Although the hill of the Lord evokes Mount Zion—where the temporary tabernacle and the permanent temple, holy places—were erected, David's poetry opens other possibilities as well. For example, Mount Sinai, which Moses ascended to meet with the Lord, was called "the mountain of God" (Exodus 24:13). The noun translated "hill" in Psalm 24:3 is translated "mountain" in Exodus 24:13.

Today, the top of the hill of the Lord stands for his presence.

However, not everyone can stand in his presence, neither in David's day nor our day. In fact, in Moses' day, the Lord allowed only Moses to ascend the mountain, and the rest of the people, afraid of what the Lord might do to them, were only too happy to remain below (Exodus 24).

But who meets David's qualifications? In one sense, no one, of course. Who, for example, can say that his hands are clean and his heart is pure?

Were David's hands clean? No, he had blood on them. See: Uriah. Was David's heart pure? No, what did he do when he was walking on the roof of the king's house and saw a beautiful woman bathing? See: Bathsheba. Did David not act deceitfully? No, he deviously arranged for the death of Uriah. See: Joab (2 Samuel 11). David doesn't even meet his own qualifications.

However, the Lord called David a man after his own heart. Why? Not because he had clean hands or a pure heart. No, the Lord called him a man after his own heart because of his capacity to confess his sinfulness. Indeed, the Lord ordained sacrifices in the tabernacle, and later the temple, to address the sinfulness of his people.

Who, then, may ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in his presence?

Some 1,000 years after David penned Psalm 24, a man ascended Mount Zion, arriving in Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. What happened to him a few days later? The sacrifices of old anticipated the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, who on a hill outside Jerusalem gave himself “to purify for himself a people for his own possession” (Hebrews 1:3, 9:13; Titus 2:14). The apostle John writes, “And everyone who thus hopes in him [Christ] purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).

If we acknowledge our sin and accept Christ’s sacrifice for sins, then we meet the qualifications.

What happens when you get to the top of the hill and stand in his holy place, so to speak?

Such is the generation

Psalm 24:5-6:

*He will receive blessing from the Lord
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.
Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah*

With the word “Selah,” pause for a moment and reflect on what you have read in Psalm 24.

The one who ascends the hill of the Lord and stands in his holy place receives from the Lord, who is “the God of his salvation.”

First, he or she receives “blessing.” However else the Lord blesses us when we stand in his holy place, he blesses us with his presence. Think about: those of us who have been purified in Christ have been granted an audience with the king of creation, who founded the world on the seas and established it on the rivers. That’s blessing enough for eternity. Of course, the Lord blesses us in countless other ways also.

Second, the one who is qualified to stand in the presence of the Lord receives “righteousness,” which has multiple meanings. Here, the meaning includes what we would call membership. In Israel, righteousness equated to covenant membership—that is, belonging to the Lord and to his people. Think about it: those of us who have been purified in Christ belong, in the most important sense possible—to the Lord, to his people.

Why do you ascend the hill of the Lord? To “seek” him, even to seek his face—that is, the essence of who he is, because who looks at someone’s elbow to know a person?

Lest we still harbor feelings that we are disqualified to stand in the presence of the Lord, David calls him “the God of Jacob.” If any of the patriarchs was disqualified because of sin, it was Jacob. Indeed, he lived “deceitfully,” in a disqualifying way, but then he wrestled with God and came clean (Genesis 32:22-32).

Seek His face

The pastors and elders recently spent some time practicing silence and solitude. I often find desire well up within me when I simply sit alone and leave my mind alone. I become aware that I want. I become aware that I am seeking.

What are you seeking? Could it be that you're seeking God, even if you're seeking something else or even if you don't know what you're seeking? Could it be that Carlos Alcaraz and Novak Djokovic, in seeking greatness, are seeking God? I mean, if you're seeking greatness, how great is God?

One of the reasons we can surmise that we are seeking God is that if, by hard work or good fortune, we manage or happen to find whatever else we're seeking, the finding is not nearly so satisfying as we had imagined.

The poet Christian Wiman writes, "We are driven ceaselessly onward in this life and are certain of our desires only until we realize them, at which point they seem to dissolve and shimmer farther off, like a heat mirage on a road down which we can't stop racing."

Isn't that the truth?

David writes elsewhere, "You have said, "Seek my face." / My heart says to you, / "Your face, Lord, do I seek." (Psalm 27:8)

Therefore, seek God. Seek his face.

In Psalm 24:3-6, David depicts our journey to the Lord. In Psalm 24:7-10, he depicts the Lord's journey to us.

The King of glory

Psalm 24:7-8:

*Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle!*

The "gates" and "doors" picture the gates and doors of the city of Jerusalem. However, the gates and doors of Jerusalem could not be opened by lifting them up because they opened horizontally, not vertically.

For gates and doors to be lifted up, they would have to be disassembled. The poetry conveys a different kind of opening, an impossible opening. However, the expression “Lift up your heads” conveyed confidence (Judges 8:28, Job 10:15, Psalm 83:2, Zechariah 1:21). Therefore, the poetry also conveys that the impossible is possible.

The impossible is made possible for the entry of a different kind of personage: the King of glory. The King of glory makes the impossible possible by purifying us from sin.

Of course, gates and doors don’t open themselves, so they stand as metaphors for the people of the city. The poetry commands the people of the city to welcome the King of glory.

David asks a question about the identity of the King of glory. Who is he? In asking the question, David makes us think. Who, or what, do we think is the King of glory? Who, or what, would we allow to reign in our midst, to rule over us?

David doesn’t hold us in suspense for long. For emphasis, especially in case we’ve treated someone or something else as the King of glory, David twice identifies the King of glory as the Lord.

David defines the Lord generally as “strong and mighty” and particularly as “mighty in battle.” The Lord fights against his enemies on behalf of Israel, first by defeating Egypt and liberating his people.

But has the Lord been someplace else, and if so, where? The Lord was with his people in their journey from Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the promised land. There, he triumphed over his enemies. David’s poetry evokes not least the time when the ark of the covenant, which represented the presence of the Lord, was finally moved into the tabernacle in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:1-19).

What did David just say? He says it again.

The Lord of hosts

Psalm 24:9-10:

*Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory! Selah*

With the word “Selah,” pause for a moment and reflect on what you’ve read in Psalm 24.

David repeats himself, again commanding the gates and doors to open themselves. The difference this time is that now the gates and doors know who they are opening themselves for (“the King of glory”) and that he is a warrior (“strong and mighty,” “mighty in battle”).

Again, the gates and doors represent the people, especially the people of Jerusalem, so the command presses in on them—and us. Now that we know who we’re commanded to open to, will we obey or disobey? Will we let him in or keep him out—or try to keep him out?

The King of glory is the Lord, strong and mighty, mighty in battle. That raises the stakes, doesn’t it? Do we know what battles he’s going to fight? Can we trust him? Is he for us or against us? If he comes off as for us, is he really against us? Or, if he comes off as against us, is he really for us?

The question presses in on us again so that we might know for certain who we’re letting in: “Who is the King of glory?” The answer comes again, so that there can be no doubt: the Lord. He is further defined as “the Lord of hosts,” or heavenly armies, so that there can be no doubt: we’re letting in a warrior. Apparently, we need to hear it one more time: “he is the King of glory.”

The return of the King

Some four hundred years after David penned Psalm 24, the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of the Lord leaving the temple and Jerusalem because of Israel’s persistent idolatry (Ezekiel 10:18-19, 11:22-24).

Six hundred years or so after that, the King of glory returned—on Palm Sunday. By then he had shown himself to be “mighty in battle,” but not in the conventional sense. He was mighty in battle against the devil and his demons, prevailing against the devil in the wilderness and casting out demons throughout the land.

As he drew near Jerusalem, the King of glory wept over it, because he knew the city would not receive him. He entered the city, through the gates and the doors, no doubt, but the people of Jerusalem, represented by the gates and the doors in Psalm 24, were another matter. He entered the temple, drove people out, and overturned tables and seats.

What was he doing? The King of glory was doing battle with the devil and his demons, who had taken up residence in Israel. That was not the battle Jerusalem wanted him to fight. So, what did the people do? They shouted, “Crucify, crucify him!”

Who is the King of glory? He is Jesus Christ, strong and mighty, mighty in battle. (See Luke 4:1-12, 33-35, 41; 19:41-6; 23:20-23.)

What if you're not finding?

After two days of watching tennis in the Palm Springs area, our group headed out to Joshua Tree National Park. As we entered the park, we listened to the U2 album "Joshua Tree," which features the band's iconic song, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," which, as sermon illustration, is a preacher's dream.

What if you're seeking God and not finding? Keep seeking!

Augustine said, "The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing. What you desire ardently, as yet you do not see By withholding of the vision, God extends the longing. Through longing he extends the soul. By extending he makes room for it." By withholding what you want, even some of the good things you want, even a vision of himself, God stretches out our souls to make room for himself.

If you're seeking God, and you still haven't found what you're looking for, be assured: You're seeking in the right place. In fact, Paschal said, "If you are searching for God, then you have found him." Indeed, those who seek God receive the blessing of his presence, whether they realize it or not.

If you seek God, the Scriptures promise that you will find him (Deuteronomy 4:28, Jeremiah 29:13, Luke 11:19). How can this be so? Because God is seeking you. Listen to Jesus: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

While Jesus encourages us to be like merchant in search of fine pearls, he also informs us that God is like a woman who, having lost a coin, lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and seeks diligently until she finds it—until he finds us, that is (Matthew 13:35, Luke 15:8).

To seek God is a sacred quest.

How, then, do we seek God? Within certain biblical parameters, any way you can! However, the poetry of Psalm 24 offers two suggestions. When the Scriptures give us imagery, use the imagery.

Ascend the hill of the Lord

First, ascend the hill of the Lord: Walk. Move toward the Lord.

If you are able, get on your feet and get moving. You don't need to literally climb a hill, though if you are able, this can be a helpful exercise. Movement is the key. For many of us, movement helps us think, reflect, and pray—or at least think, reflect, and pray differently. Movement often helps me hear from the Lord.

Go for a walk. Or a ride. Or a stroll. Maybe pick a destination and meet with the Lord there. You might have a few things to work through on the way. Make any place a holy place. Exercise not only

your body but also your senses. Feel the ground beneath your feet and the air against your skin. Hear the Lord say, as he said to Moses, “Come up to me . . .” Imagine that you are moving toward God.

The writer of Hebrews in multiple places encourages us to “draw near” to God (Hebrews 4:16, 7:19, 10:19-22). The imagery suggests that it’s possible, among other applications of the text, to apply it literally. Get moving.

Lately I’ve been taking a walk around two corners to a local park. I converse with God along the way, but once I get to the park, I spend more time conversing with God. Often when I go on a bike ride, I pick a destination and meet with God there.

You can get moving not only by yourself but also in the company of others.

On Thursday, women in the church did their version of Stations of the Cross here on the campus, strolling to, and stopping to reflect at, different stations that recreate Jesus’ journey to the cross. Some did it alone; others did it together.

Years ago, when I was doing youth ministry, I took a group of high school students to hike to the top of Black Mountain. If I had been aware of Psalm 24 back then, I would have told them before beginning our ascent, “See that mountain? That’s the hill of the Lord. We’re going to climb it, and when we reach the top, we’re going to meet with the Lord.”

Even so, I pitched our ascent as a spiritual quest and promised them I would take them to my house afterward and make them a steak dinner. I told them, “We’re going to get to the top of this mountain and you’re going to feel so good about it.”

About halfway through our ascent, the protests began to mount. “Scott, why did you make us do this? We’ve come far enough. Can we turn around and go down?”

“No!” I said. “No turning back. You’ll feel so good when you get to the top. Trust me.”

An hour or so later, we arrived at our destination, the top of the mountain. Then back at my house, we celebrated over a steak dinner. Then some of them collapsed on the floor. But all of them thanked me, even the ones who wanted to turn back.

Open the gates of your heart

First, ascend the hill of the Lord: Walk.

Second, open the gates of your heart: Sit. Invite the Lord to move toward you.

Find a comfortable place to sit. Tell the Lord, “I open the gates of my heart to you.” Yes, open your heart so that Jesus Christ, the King of glory, may come in. When you do this, it can be helpful to open your hands as a gesture of invitation. Imagine that the King of glory is coming to you.

Be forewarned, though: The King of glory might drive some idols out of your heart and overturn some cherished notions. He might even make a mess of your life. Why? Oh, because he is strong and mighty, mighty in battle, and he is fighting for your heart. He will fight for your heart not least so that you would seek God.

The King disrupts, and then he entices. He disrupts in the temple; then he entices on the cross. A woodchipper disrupts your peace, and then the Lord shows you a beautiful old Bible. What a beautiful mess he makes!

When I was meditating on Psalm 24 during my retreat, I felt the Lord challenging me to open my heart and let him address some unarticulated pain.

The sacred quest

Seek the face of God by drawing near to him and by opening the gates of your heart to Jesus.

“Such is the generation of those who seek him, / who seek the face of the God of Jacob.”

May we be that generation.

Maybe I was supposed to write this sermon after all. Maybe you were supposed to read it.