

## Good to Go!

Sermon, March 11, 2018

Texts: Psalm 122, John 3:16-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

From our Epistle reading, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* For it is by grace you have been saved through faith.

You may remember the story about a young man who took his lady friend out for dinner on her birthday. When they sat down, he laid an elaborate box on the table, and told her she could open it after dinner. It was a big box, and all the while they were eating dinner, she just kept thinking about this box, wondering what was inside. She could hardly eat. Finally dinner was over. *"Can I open the box now?"* she asked. *"Yes,"* he replied, *"you can open the box."* She opened the box and pulled out ... a pillow. *"Oh, wow, I mean, this is a nice ... pillow,"* she said. She turned the pillow over, thinking that something might have been taped to the backside. There was nothing. *"Well, thank you."* It was obvious she was a mystified and a bit disappointed she got a pillow.

Her boyfriend then got up, took the pillow from her, and placed the pillow on the floor. He got down, put one knee on the pillow, took her by the hand, and said, *"Will you marry me?"* Immediately the odd gift of the pillow took on a whole new significance! In fact, she momentarily forgot all about the pillow. The one who gave her the pillow had now become a lot more important.

The analogy isn't perfect, but the Lord of all the universe has put a pillow on this earth in Jesus Christ and has come to us on bended knee to let us know how much we are loved, how much we are treasured. **That, in a nutshell, is grace.** *"For God so loved the world,"* that in and through Jesus Christ, He embraced us, engaged Himself to us, and He did so that we may do and enjoy *"... the good things He prepared in advance for us to do."* Like the young lady in this story, people maybe didn't understand this "gift" at first, but as we grew in our understanding, and as we learned to say "Yes" to the divine proposal, both the One who gave us the Pillow and the Pillow Himself become a lot more important! That is why many, if not all, of us in this room can echo with the Psalmist, *"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'"* We love to come here to engage the One Who has engaged Himself to us in and through Jesus Christ.

Yes, *"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'"* Another translation has it: *"I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord."* A third translation used in many homes throughout the nation each Sunday morning is, *"Would you hurry up! We're gonna be late for the house of the Lord!"* It isn't always easy to come to the house of the Lord with glad hearts, is it? Sometimes it is something of a hassle to get here each week (especially when we lose an hour to Daylight Savings Time) but for the most part, that's what people of faith do ... we go to *the house of the Lord* for we are grateful for the grace we've received, and we want to discover more of, and learn more about, the good things God has prepared in advance for us to do and enjoy.

Author Eugene Peterson, a retired Presbyterian pastor who served over thirty years in a congregation about our size in Bel Air, Maryland, once wrote, *"One of the afflictions of pastoral work has been to listen, with a straight face, to all the reasons people give for not going to church: 'My mother made me go when I was little.' 'There are too many hypocrites in the church.' 'It's the only day I have to sleep in.'"* He continues, *"There was a time when I responded to such statements with simple arguments that exposed them as flimsy excuses. I noticed that it didn't make any difference. If I showed the inadequacy of one excuse, three more would pop up in its place. So, I don't respond anymore. I listen with a straight face and then go home and pray that person will find the one sufficient reason for going to church, which is God. I go about my work hoping that what I do and say will be usable by the Holy Spirit to create in that person a determination to worship God in a Christian community."*

Like you here this morning, many people do have that determination, the determination to worship God in a Christian community, and you do so faithfully, devoutly, regularly. It is a holy habit, and on those rare occasions such people do miss worship, they feel an aching absence. Psalm 122 speaks about what people of faith do: they gather to an assigned place and worship their God. *"I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord."* Almost everyone who goes to worship does so because he or she wants to, not because he or she has to ... they're glad to go, because they believe it's good to go. Now there are, to be sure, a few who go to the house of the Lord because they are coerced ... children and spouses who attend church because another has decided it is good for them to go, or those who go for morbid fear of some kind of eternal punishment if they don't "endure" weekly worship. But for the most part, I've found these coercions are short-lived. I've known

several men in the congregations I've served over the years who first came to church as self-described "husbands on a leash" who went on to become vital, active, influential and indispensable church members; this congregation is no exception! When we hear the Psalmist say, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go the house of the Lord,' this is a man who really is glad to go, and he really is glad that others are going, AND please note: *He really is glad that he has been invited to go!* "Let's go," this man's friends and neighbors said, and he was glad to be invited along ... and it's a safe bet to say there are many of our friends and neighbors who would also be glad to receive such an invitation. This Psalm goes on to single out three items which were true for worshipping Israelites then and are true for us today.

*First, worship gives us a workable structure for life.* The Psalm says, "Jerusalem, built as a city that is closely compacted together, that is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord." That "closely compacted together" can (and probably should) be translated in the sense of "where things fit together well" or "where things come together neatly." The Psalmist is implying Jerusalem, the center of worship, is a place where things "fit together," or, "a place where things come together." For the worshipping Jew, in Jerusalem all the scattered fragments of human experience were brought together into an integral whole. When you went to worship at Jerusalem, you encountered the great basics: God created you, God redeems you, God provides for you, and God has good directives for you to follow. Also, in Jerusalem all the different tribes came together as a single people. In much the same way, we come this morning from different places. With all our differing levels of intelligence and wealth, background and race, in worship we are gathered as one people, the people of the one God. In worship we find an integrated core to our often fragmented lives; we find a sanctuary. On a related note, I can't tell you how many people over the years who have confided to me that this hour of worship is the one hour of wholeness and sanity and peace in their often chaotic lives ... here in this sanctuary, in your loving company and in the presence of God, they find an hour of wholeness, rest, peace, safety, calm and love where things "come together," and this hour buoys and strengthens them for the week ahead.

*Second, worship nurtures our need to be in relationship with God.* Worship is the place where we (verse 4b) "praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel." That statute, that command, runs right down the center of all our worship. We worship in part because it is commanded; it is a statute. Now, most Christians worship because they *want* to, not because they are forced to. But this does not mean we will always feel like it. Sure, at times it can be difficult and a burden. It can be hard to come into the Lord's house with gladness, say, ten minutes after battling with children ... I like the cartoon depicting a woman saying to her husband on Sunday morning, "Let's switch roles today. You get the kids dressed, and I'll sit outside and honk the horn." To be sure, sometimes we don't feel like going to worship. The Psalmist implies, in so many words, "I don't care whether you feel like it or not: it's commanded, 'Give thanks and praise to the name of the Lord.'" The wisdom here underscores this little fact of human nature: We can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker (and usually more effectively) than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting. Worship is a good act which more often than not goes on to develop good feelings for God. When we "go to good," we eventually find it's **good to go**. The act comes first. When we obey the command to worship God, our deep essential need to be in relationship with God is nurtured. At root, we worship because it is the privilege of a personal audience for us with the Creator of the universe, and enables us to grow in relationship to Him.

First, worship gives us a workable structure. Second, worship nurtures our need to be in relationship to God. And third: *In worship our attention is centered on what is right.* Our Psalm describes worship as the place where "the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David." The "judgment" spoken of here is not judgment in the sense of *condemnation* so much as it is judgment in the sense of *discernment*. Worship is where the standards of discernment and good judgment are enthroned; you go to worship to sharpen and develop your sense of good judgment. Worship is where you learn to discern what is truly good and noble and upright and enduring. I've also heard from people over the years who told me they've benefitted from the heightened sense of good judgment and discernment gained from regular worship attendance, as who've told me their regret of the lack of good judgment and discernment they exercised in years past and what that did to their lives. In short, worship improved their judgment, enabling them to better do and enjoy "... the good things He prepared in advance for us to do."

So, it is **good to go** ... regularly and often! The God who loves us wants to speak to us here, so that in this place of worship, we may find a workable structure for our lives, we might have our relationship with Him nurtured, and that we might focus our minds and hearts on what is upright, noble and good ... and then go from here to live our lives accordingly and do all those good things He has prepared in advance for us to do.

Yes, I am glad when people say to me, 'Let's go!' Because it's **good to go** to the house of the Lord.