

In Praise of Christ the King
Psalm 100 and Colossians 1:9-20
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With the arrival of Thanksgiving this week, many folks will be heading over the river and through the woods to Grandma's house for the big day and the even bigger meal. This week is typically the busiest time of the year for travel, with airports and roads jammed with people trying to get into or out of the city. It's a time that stretches our transportation infrastructure to the brink, but with a little luck and a lot of patience we will eventually see the skyline or the city limit sign of our destination. When going home, we know that a certain view, a certain exit, a certain landmark means that we're almost there.

That landmark, for most people in the old world of Europe, Asia and the Middle East, was a gate. Nowadays, when traveling to a major American city, the only gate you're likely to encounter is at the airport or at a tollbooth. For centuries, however, old world cities were almost uniformly surrounded by defensive walls dotted with gates that limited access to the city and, in many way, gave the city its character. While the walls of many of those cities are gone, or are now monuments to the past, the great gates remain as a testament to the universal joy of coming home to a safe and familiar place. When you arrived at those old cities and went through the gate, it was a moment for rejoicing.

Consider some of these great gates and their meaning for the people who used them. The Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany, was built by Prussian monarchs in the 18th century, but became even more famous in the late 20th century as a symbol of peace when the dividing wall between East and West Germany came down. Families who had been separated in some cases for decades were finally able to have joyous reunions.

The Buland Darwaza or "The Gate of Magnificence" was built in 1601 in India by the Mughal Emperor Akbar to commemorate a military victory. The large, ornate gate took 12 years to build, and an inscription on its face testifies to Akbar's religious tolerance. Interestingly, the inscription reads, "Jesus, son of Mary said: 'The world is a Bridge, pass over it, but build no houses upon it. He who hopes for a day may hope for eternity, but the World endures but an hour. Spend it in prayer for the rest is unseen.'" That's not actually found in scripture, but it is a beautiful sentiment, nonetheless.

And then there is the Middle East, where the fortified gates of Cairo still stand and the gates of the Old City of Jerusalem still remind travelers of the grandeur of the city during the various stages of the city's history. Whether they were built for defensive or ceremonial purposes, all of these old gates represented the difference between being outside and being inside, between security and vulnerability, between being home and being away.

The gates of Jerusalem had a still deeper meaning, however. For those pilgrims traveling to the city from faraway places, entering the gates meant entering into the holy city and the temple, the dwelling place of God. To enter the gates of Jerusalem, then, was to enter into the very presence of God which was cause for great songs of celebration like Psalm 100. The heading of the psalm is "A Psalm of Thanksgiving" but, in this instance, coming home for Thanksgiving was more than a family get-together. It was an act of worship and praise.

Psalm 100 is one of the most familiar of the songs of praise in the Bible and the source of some of our best known and most beloved songs of worship. The hymn tune "Old Hundredth" which we sing every week as the Doxology, pays homage to this psalm. The words of the psalm invite the gathered congregation to sing: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into God's presence with singing." A "joyful noise" was the appropriate greeting for a monarch in the ancient world, and in God's case, it is "all the earth" that cries out in joy at the presence of the Creator. It's the kind of joyful noise we might make when we enter the front door of the family home after a long absence; the excited cry of being home at last. When entering the gates of the Lord, those excited cries turn to songs of worship.

Here at Calvary we talk a lot about this place, this sanctuary where we worship, as our church "home" and we refer to each other as family. So, these opening verses have a lot to say to us.

- Do we make a "joyful noise" when we come to worship, or do we settle for sighs of distraction or boredom or the sharp sound of gossip or complaint?
- Do we worship the Lord with gladness or do we do so out of obligation?
- Do we come into God's presence with singing, or are we largely silent?
- Do we prepare ourselves for an encounter with God or do we just check a box?
- Do we enter this sanctuary expectantly, eagerly or simply as a matter of course?

If worship is designed to praise God in God's presence, it ought to be joyful! Entering through our church doors should be a cause for praise and thanksgiving and celebration. When we worship, it is a noise that should shake the whole earth!

Verse 3 of the psalm offers the reason for our worship. "Know that the Lord is God," says the psalmist. "It is he that made us and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture." Entering the gates of the Lord's dwelling place, just like entering the doors of our childhood home, reminds us of who we are and from whence and whom we come. Outside the gates we are busy trying to make a name for ourselves, making up our identity from our vocation, our friendships, our accolades and accomplishments. But inside the walls of God's presence, we remember who we are and to whom we belong. We are "the sheep of the Lord's pasture" and it is God's presence that provides us protection and care better than any defensive wall ever could. Worship reminds us that our identity begins and ends with God, the one who made us, knows us and loves us.

In shaping our identity, worship also shapes our worldview. If God is the one who made us all, then we also find our identity with the people "of all the earth." Worship can and should push us beyond the boundaries of race and nationality, and yes, political affiliation, and help us recognize that we are not called to be at home with just *our* people but with *all* God's people. The gates of God's presence are wide open to a multitude of travelers coming from all over the place, all made to focus on and reflect the common identity of God's image within them, rather than focusing on their differences. They're called to join in making a joyful noise, a cacophony of sounds in many languages, but all giving worship and glory to God. Worship is the universal language of God's world, and no matter where we call home, we're called to join together in thanks and praise.

That is the command of the next line of the psalm, verse 4: Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name." And why do we offer thanks and praise? "For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations." (v. 5) We praise God because God is good, and we give thanks because God's love, grace and faithfulness have extended across the generations, even when God's people sometimes forget their identity. When "the sheep of his pasture" are wandering, God is still the shepherd who will keep searching until all of them are back in the fold. The gate remains open because the gatekeeper wants the sheep to come and live the abundant life he has prepared for them.

Raymond Edman was a missionary, a college president, an educator, an author and a friend to countless Christians and seekers alike. Billy Graham once called him the most unforgettable Christian he had ever met. Edman served as chancellor of Wheaton College for many years. He died in 1967 in the most appropriate setting imaginable—though it must have been traumatic to those who were there. He passed away while preaching the chapel service at Wheaton. And his topic that day was worship.

That morning, Dr. Edman shared with his listeners a personal anecdote. It involved his meeting with the king of Ethiopia some years earlier. In order to have an audience with the king, he had had to observe strict protocol. If he didn't meet and follow through on each criterion, he wouldn't be judged worthy of coming into the king's presence. Dr. Edman then drew a parallel with attending the weekday worship services at Wheaton. "You have an audience with the King of Kings," he told the students. The ruler of Ethiopia or any other nation would fall on his face and cast his crown before the presence of the Almighty.

Dr. Edman wondered aloud if the students in the audience really comprehended the awesome act of worship. He went on to offer practical suggestions of how to make their chapel services more meaningful, of how to come to a better realization of being in the transforming presence of God. And just like that, in the midst of his wise and godly counsel, the college chancellor and preacher spoke his last word and took his last breath. This man, whose very life had been spent in worship, went through the gate separating this life from the next and in his death, was instantly worshipping in the presence of God. It was the last and greatest sermon illustration Raymond Edman ever shared. Now, that's an exit.

Many of the great gates of the world are now more historical or ceremonial than they are main passageways in and out of the city. The gates into God's presence, however, are still wide open for business, inviting God's people to come and worship. Do we grasp the great privilege we have of worshipping our creator? We are invited into God's presence and that's a great reason for thanksgiving no matter where your travels take you this week. Amen.