

From Strength to Strength
 Reading from the Prophets: Isaiah 58:11-12
 Reading from the New Testament: Hebrews 10:19-25
 Reading from the Psalms: Psalm 84

Before there was this ... *swipe* ... there was this ... *click – whrr*.

God bless those friends of the past with a passport, their treasured *Nikon 35mm SLRs*, and their *Kodak Carousel Projectors*. Admit it, you envied their travel Zen, but you dreaded their invitation to dinner. Come on over Saturday evening. We'll whip up some lasagna and then show you some photos from our recent adventures in Italy. Bless 'em, Lord!

I mean the sites they visited were architecturally stunning, even in the grainy pre-digital mismatch of focus and screen. But by about the third cathedral... you start thinking evil thoughts, like "Hey, not to wish anyone harm, but if our loquacious friend could get a little surprise migraine, he'd have to cut this interminable travelogue short and we could get out of here!"

Of course, you know what comes next. One more *click/whrrr* and the screen turns gloriously white. And you think ... *Thank God* ... but before you can get tuned up for the *Hallelujah Chorus* ... he pulls out a

second carousel! *Oh, the humanity!* And by this time even your hosts get confused and start to arguing ... *Here's the fresco on the ceiling of St. Sophia's ... No, dear! That's the floor in the Chapel of the Holy Innocents!*

I truly love visiting sanctuaries, and have visited quite a few of those noted among the heralded and historic: St. Paul's in London; St. Peter's in Geneva; St. Patrick's, and St. John the Divine in New York; St. Giles in Edinburgh; the St. Louis Cathedral; the Hagia Sophia; the National Cathedral; the Abbey at Iona; San Chapel in Paris and even Notre Dame before the fire. Impressive places all. Yet, it wasn't until I went to Westminster Abbey that I truly came to discern and feel the distinction between walking through a sanctuary as a tourist and worshiping in a sanctuary as a congregant.

You see, when in London we decided that instead of doing the standard tour of Westminster Abbey, we would come in the waning afternoon to attend an evensong service, and I have to say, it changed everything about our experience of the abbey. It was a small crowd, small enough to sit in the beautiful choir loft divided by the elegant diagonal black and white tiled aisle across which William and Kate

walked on their way to the altar. It was a glorious setting, so rich with history, but what made the setting resonate in my spirit was the act of worship: hearing the scriptures read; navigating the antiphonal liturgy; hearing a choir from, of all places, Houston, Texas who were in residence to proclaim the Word in song. We recited the creed and exchanged the familiar words that invoke our gathering here each week – *The Lord be with you ... And also with you*. In that setting, worshiping with others, the space became sacred, the Spirit of God descended to connect hearts to the music, the architecture, and the spoken Word. It was powerful and poignant and real. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.”

Without worship, we would have experienced it as tourists buzzing through another museum. *Selfie with the virgin Mother ... Why, Myrtle, is that a baptismal or a bathtub?* I’m reminded of John Calvin’s counsel on the sacraments. If the Spirit is lacking, they have all the effect of the sun shining on blind eyes.

What truly inspires my love of church sanctuaries is being able to connect it to or experience it alongside the life of a worshipping congregation. Some of you remember an evening some 12 years ago, when we were in the initial stage of planning for the construction of this sanctuary. My friend Jody came and facilitated an exercise in which we were asked to describe the image that came to mind with the mention of the word, sanctuary. To a large extent, those present described the floorplan and architecture of the church of their formative years.

Hearing their responses, my first thought was *Holy guacamole, Batman, we'll never get these folks to agree to a plan!* But the more I thought about it, I realized that their responses reflected exactly what we were seeking to build, a sacred sense of place, not just for this generation but also for generations yet unborn.

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God ... Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you, **in whose heart are the highways to Zion** ... They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.”

“In whose heart are the highways to Zion...” That is a powerful image and central to what we’re seeking to do here, some 12 years into this effort – connecting the whole of the heart to the presence of the Lord we experience in this sacred space. Psalm 84 is known as a pilgrimage psalm, part of the liturgy of Israel's pilgrims as they made any of the three traditional annual journeys to the Temple in Jerusalem, the Temple representing the very presence of God.

Though your bucket list may not include a spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Iona in Scotland or Chartres Cathedral in France, or the El Camino de Santiago in Spain, you probably know something about long awaited, anxiously anticipated pilgrimages to Disney World or Fenway Park or Yosemite or maybe the annual rite that continues even during this surreal summer of social sequestration, the El Camino de Brunswick. also known as Highway 74. Jump on the highway outside of Monroe and you'll notice them, particularly on Saturdays – SUVs and minivans stuffed far beyond capacity with Yeti coolers, towels, umbrellas, boogie boards, board games, grandpa, luggage, all anointed with the aroma of SPF30, sliced cantaloupe, and Oreos. East of

Whiteville they'll diverge to their sacred shrines in Topsail, Holden, Ocean Isle, or Wrightsville.

God bless the extended road trip. As a parent, you're thinking, "Can we just get there, already?" The hope of a nap far surpasses the yen for bodysurfing. We tend to forget the experience of a kid. Sure, the long drive is not without complaint, but the excitement over the destination seldom abates, particularly as you draw within a half-hour to 15 minutes of arrival. There is an impressive and very noticeable rise in energy, so much so that they may even break out in song. Once the car stops, anything as slow as a walk is nigh impossible. Hopping and running are required. We're here! Let's go to the beach, the amusement park, the mini-golf place ... right now! At the same time!

The excitement builds the nearer you get to the goal of the pilgrimage. Can you remember that level of excitement? That's the kind of excitement the Psalmist gives voice to here. The escalation from energy to exultation. C.S. Lewis said, "In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him." Exultation and exaltation have a symbiotic relationship in worship. The Psalmist celebrates here that even in the journey to and the anticipation of worshipping in the

presence of the Lord, the heart and the spirit are strengthened. “They go from strength to strength,” the Psalmist declares. In fact, the psalmist suggests the building excitement is infectious, actually feeding, enlivening, healing the environment around us as we draw nearer to God. "As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools." Consider the image offered by Isaiah: The Lord will "satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden."

Here we encounter the lifeblood infusing, breath giving presence of our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer; the sovereign power of the universe. “O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.” I love how my OT professor, James Luther Mays, explains that presence we share together here. Here we celebrate and are fed by “the one who makes all things cohere for the life [we] have to live.” And here, we provide a sacred space where this and future generations will discover and map the highways of the heart that lead to and are sent forth from the One who makes all things cohere for the life we have to live.

These are challenging days for us, for the *here* I describe is not *here* yet, and prudence says that the *here* we so want may not come for some time. Yet, past experience with the faithfulness of God fuels our confidence that the day we are here in this very place together is coming. In the meantime, God's providence is such we are able to remain connected through a new medium that ten years ago we could not have believed would become so integral to all we do as a congregation. Yet, the manner in which our connection has continued to remain strong, gives me confidence that proper social distance will again be replaced by proper social embrace.

One of our members told me this week that as he and his wife participate in worship via livestream, he imagines himself sitting in the pew in which he worshiped pre-pandemic. As such, he can still perceive in his mind's eye the people that he would usually see within his field of vision on a Sunday morning. I do the same thing. In order not to feel like a news anchor delivering the nightly news in a television studio, I imagine you here with me.

I can see you, panning from left to right, Hilreth, the Galatis, the Zagoras, Gina Sandee, the Goetzes. I can see the Gosnell family up in

the balcony, and when Guy is by himself, he's sitting right down front in the second row. I can see Tom Massey leaning in to capture the joy of the children gathering down front and the power of the music from the choir. I can see the youth up in the balcony; the Morgans, Claudia Wallace, the other Morgans, Metzlers, and Gaines to my right. It is such a powerful reminder to me of what we share in this place.

Today, we dedicate our pledges to the *Strength to Strength* campaign, seeking to complete the challenge we took on when we constructed this sacred space to the glory of God. And when debt maintenance is transformed into mission focus, watch out! Just imagine what the Lord may have in store for our contribution to the needs of the larger community and our mission partners. We're so close! We can and we shall do this to the glory of the One who make all things cohere.

...In November, we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the first day of Sunday worship in our sanctuary. Yet, that was not the first worship service to take place in this sacred space. One day earlier, a community of family and friends gathered for the celebration of the covenant of marriage as two of our newest members exchanged their vows in the presence of God in an atmosphere of worship.

In the years that followed, on two separate occasions, those same family members crowded into the front pews as the young couple presented their children individually for the sacrament of baptism, and we as a congregation in covenant with God and these parents, promised to provide an environment such that each time these children entered our sanctuary, they would know they had been claimed by God and loved by God's people.

One of these children has already stood in our chancel with the children of Vacation Bible School, singing a song of praise to our Lord. What will the coming years bring? The songs of the Hosanna Choir? Offering liturgy in worship? Confirmation? Youth Sunday? Senior Sermon? Christmas Eve candlelight? And who knows, maybe a wedding in the same spot that their parents exchanged their vows.

This is where we worship as a community, but this is also our home, where we are most at home, celebrating the marker events of our lives in the presence of the One who creates, sustains, and redeems all life; the One who loves us the most; the One who makes all things cohere for the life we have to live. "Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself."

Separation is challenging, but by God's grace it is sustainable for now. We will cope with this, knowing that in Christ our reunion is sure. That day's a-coming and I can't wait to share that day with you. God is faithful, and by God's grace, we will meet the challenges before us. Whether we're talking about retiring the debt on the sanctuary or just being able to laugh with each other in the hallway and pray with each other in the pew, the Spirit of God shall lead us on, and we will meet here yet again. "Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion." Amen.