

St. Paul's Congregational Church,
August 29, 2018, Proper 16B
Psalm 84
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

On this last Sunday of the summer season and as we look forward to the start of a new program year, let's reflect a little on why we gather here in worship each week, indeed why we are a church – it's pretty basic: we come together to strengthen our relationship with God – through scripture, prayer, music, the Word. We come together in community to support each other on our journey in this lovely place – worship is the center, the bedrock of our life together, isn't it. And worship is first, last, and always about God.

Now, can you remember when and where it was that you first knew deep inside that God exists – that you could indeed be in communion with God – a time when you felt the strength and joy and peace of really knowing in the depth of your being? Maybe there were no words – but a feeling of fullness, of wholeness, even of peace. Think back and go there to that time and place – it brings a new meaning to the psalmist exclamation: how lovely is your dwelling place, O God!

For 60 years the Silver Lake Conference Center in beautiful Sharon, Ct. has been the camp, the outdoor ministry of the Connecticut UCC – I have so many fond memories from my times there, happy thoughts, and a realization as I look back over the years that my first conference back in 1960 was indeed life-changing. That's my special place, reinforced over the years as I graduated to being a counselor, then as dean responsible for conferences of at least 35 children, and then as chaplain for a week at a time during several summers.

Thousands of children and youth have continued to experience that special place called Silver Lake. Every child when they come home absolutely glows when they talk about their week there - in spite of pouring rain or stifling heat, tornado watches and even warnings, mosquito bites, and a variety of minor inconveniences - after all, it is a camp - and the dreadful pangs of homesickness. No matter what, they are ready to go back next summer. And they want to go back for more reasons than for the wonderful homemade bread.

What is it that these kids – now even the 3rd generation – have found at Silver Lake? What is it that keeps us going back as counselors, staff, deans of conferences, as adults? What is it that forges a bond so strong between Silver Lake alums, veterans, and children and youth going to conferences for the first time that isn't ever broken - even after all these years!

That extraordinary bond reaches into real life for years – I remember meeting a woman who worked at the White House for the Peace Corps who told a great story: when she was being considered for her position there was an extremely thorough FBI background check. One of her references was a Silver Laker and an FBI agent came to his place of work as part of his investigation. The agent sat straight and serious and asked, how did you meet this woman?

We met at church camp.

Church camp. Where?

At the Silver Lake Conference Center in Sharon, Connecticut.

The FBI agent smiled and relaxed a little, “You’re not going to believe this, but I went to Silver Lake too.”

Those 2 men spent the next half hour or so sharing memories and talking about Silver Lake. And by the way, she got the job.

Tim Hughes, former executive director of Silver Lake, wrote in the summer brochure: “I’m sometimes asked to describe Silver Lake – it’s a beautiful camp - it’s a ministry of the Connecticut United Church of Christ. It’s a fun place where young people of all ages get to play and run outside and swim and climb and make new friends and be unplugged. All of that is true. And yet the mystery of Silver Lake is that what really happens when you’re here is not so easily described. It has to be experienced.”

“So imagine you are at the Waterfall Chapel at Silver Lake. A rustic setting in the woods with log benches and a cross on a tree at the front. You are surrounded by tall pine trees, perhaps an unseen fawn sleeps in the brush, the sun streaming through the branches. Nearby flows a gurgling stream. There’s a hush that settles over all of us in this place. One phrase that has been used to describe these kind of moments is being in God’s Holy Spirit.

“Some who have been to Silver Lake tell me that in times of struggle, a memory of one of those moments comes back to them, just to remind them that they are part of something sacred and bigger than themselves. That, I believe, is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.”

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.

Our psalm today is a real celebration of God's dwelling place - an expression of real joy in the place where God is and at the same time an anticipation of coming into God's presence. It's a pilgrimage psalm - a psalm of movement - movement toward, movement to God.

We remember in Old Testament times the Ark of the Covenant was the visible sign of an invisible God. The Ark preceded the Israelites in all of their travels - the Holy of Holies - God was present there and that knowledge gave them comfort, courage, in their travel to the Promised Land. And when they arrived at the Promised Land, home, the first thing they did was build a Temple. God's house. The center of their lives. A place to find strength for their daily living. A beloved dwelling where God is present in the place of presence.

And isn't that what all of us are searching for - God's presence, knowing, feeling God's presence right down to our toes. It can be fleeting, can't it but then we want more! And once you've experienced it, you're never the same. It is a life-changing experience. Like the psalmist, our soul longs, indeed faints, for God's presence, for relationship with God. To know wholeness, to know acceptance, to know love. We carry inside of us this vision of wholeness. We carry inside us a search for this - some writers call this a search for home, and it leads us on a lifelong pilgrimage to find it.

Joyce Rupp writes in her book Dear Heart Come Home, "Coming home to God is also coming home to our truest, deepest selves. This yearning can pursue us and not let us anchor down in the small, satisfied, smug, secure lives to which we cling. She continues, "The more interiorly uncluttered and peaceful we become, the more we know our Home that is God."

It's true, isn't it, that we do not always know the way to God...but God knows the way to us. And God will lead us, if we allow it.

We all need a space, I think, to help us in our search for God, a place where it feels safe to let God find us. And as I've been reflecting on Silver Lake and our bond over all these years, I realized again that Silver Lake has been and is a place where it is safe to let God find us. It has been and is a place where children and young people and adults feel, know the Presence of God in a new way, perhaps for the first time. You see, it's OK to name that presence, to talk about that presence, to rejoice in that presence, to really live in that presence. And that place, that community, has provided a safe harbor for years as Silver Lakers of all ages wrestle with their losses and challenges throughout their lives.

Do you remember when, where this happened to you? Maybe some of you have had this experience at a camp like Silver Lake, or on retreat, or

during a worship service. When and where was the seed of faith planted in you? I'm almost positive none of us would be here if we hadn't been touched somehow, sometime, in our lives.

When I was a teenager, we used to talk about the Silver Lake mystique. I've come to realize there's no mystique at all - it's the indwelling, the movement of the Holy Spirit - it's God's grace fully and completely given - there for the taking. And there we take it. We take it, joyfully, sometimes not even knowing we're doing it!

But Silver Lake is only a place - what makes it special, I think, is the fact that people of all ages go there for a day, a weekend, a week in the summer expecting to love and be loved, to accept and to feel accepted, to challenge and be challenged, but most of all, expecting to find God, expecting to experience the Holy Spirit at work - to know grace. To take the risk to let God in and be moved by that - to experience God's grace - to know it's there and real and good - and then to hopefully take that home to daily life. A daily life forever changed.

You know - I have a dream. That this church, can be that for all of us - that place, that atmosphere, where we all come to expect the Spirit to work. Where we expect grace to abound. Where we can build a community of faith, of acceptance, of love, that will empower us to go into the world, certain of God's presence in and through us.

Where do we do start? While many of us might not appreciate the images in Paul's letter to the young church community in Ephesus, we do find tools for us embedded there. Be strong in the Lord and in God's strength! Do what makes you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, overcome the darkness around you. Take the shield of faith - a faith that stands with you, no matter what. Let the Word of God surround you - and pray, pray at all times. We pray for the community to surround us - to help us share the mystery of the gospel. That gospel that creates a bond among us.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all of us here in this church community felt the bond that the Silver Lakers feel? Feel an openness to God and each other - our friends, families, neighbors, strangers sitting next to us in our pews. That our goal is to become a community of faith aware of the living presence of God in our midst and then share it? Why not? We gather this morning for a time when we concentrate on God's presence, on the outpouring of the Spirit - a time when we let the cares of the week, including the cares of the daily operation of this church fall away! - a time when we center ourselves and draw near to God. It's so good to be here, so good to be here together.

We can have Silver Lake right here: we can have the visible sign of the invisible God. It's all here for us - in us - the possibility of drawing near to God, the celebration of God's indwelling right here, right now, in us. What an opportunity we have as we approach our 125th anniversary of our ministry: let's keep these thoughts central to everything we do, everything we are! Let's expect to meet God here, let's expect to find the Holy Spirit at work here.

That's our challenge. And that's our joy. Let us sing with the psalmist: how lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts! Blessed are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Let all of us live out and share that good news. Amen.