FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

*Commissioning of Our Capital Campaign Team Sunday*

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Ever Singing God’s Praise* Psalm 84

Almost every morning, after the sun has risen enough to warm the air a bit, there is one lone bird who comes and perches on a telephone wire across the street from my apartment. When he gets there, he settles himself, and he begins to sing a song to the world. It seems to be singing a song of gladness—for the new day, or perhaps for the world that is its home.

I do not know what kind of bird it is, nor if it is male or female. I only know that the song it sings is striking in its simplicity. There is no melody, and it is not very long. It begins with a couple of staccato grace notes followed by three or four long notes, the last of which ends up a couple of tones higher than the others.

There are lots of other birds in the neighborhood, but they do not even try to compete with this one particular bird, at least not that I have noticed. His (or hers) is the only song I have come to hear each morning.

He sits there for a while, singing his morning song…all alone. I do not know if he is singing to the rising sun or calling for a mate. After a while, he is gone.

I confess that I do not notice him every morning. Although after spending so much time studying Psalm 84 this past week, I believe I will from now on because of the beautiful way the author of the psalm—the *song*—sings of the young birds he remembers seeing at the Temple. That is something to remember: that this really was a song that people sung. This one was mostly likely sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem.

Our singer of Psalm 84 sings, with some envy, of how sparrows and swallows are able to find a cleft or some kind of crevice in the Temple’s façade. In these small spaces that would have gone unnoticed and unused, the birds were able to make themselves a home. The feeling is that the singer would also make his home there in the Temple, if he could.

The singer is a pilgrim who is making his way to the Temple from his home on the countryside. He may also have been from one of the many other places around the known world at that time where Israelites had scattered or living.

The journey he is making would have been one of the yearly journeys he, and many others, would have made. From faraway lands, and from many of the smaller towns and villages, pilgrims came to Jerusalem to observe the high holy days—Passover and Yom Kippur. Like all of them, the singer is on his way to the Temple to worship, and to offer a sacrifice, which will show his faithfulness.

Most importantly of all: the singer is eager to get to the place where God *lives*. He is eager to get as close to God as he possibly can, and that means he needs to be in the Temple. This is the place you would go to find God. And so, with each step, the pilgrim is getting closer and closer, physically closer to God.

Was this the only place to find God? No, the ancient Israelites had a sense of God that was as broad and complex as ours. They also experienced God’s presence in nature. They looked to animals and the environment and saw God’s power and presence in those places, too.

However, the Temple held a special place in the hearts and faith of the Israelites. It was the place where the Ark of the Covenant was housed. This sacred vessel was a chest that held the two stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments. This was the Law, and it established God’s special relationship with the Israelite people. It was their proof of how closely God had drawn to *them*—close enough to prescribe human behavior toward God and each other. The Law described the terms under which God would be glad to be their God. It was God’s commitment to them.

The thought of all of this history with God brings great pleasure and awe to the pilgrim who sings this song. One writer has described it this way:

*It was the place that gave shape for God’s spirit; people drew near to it in order to draw near to God. In Psalm 84 we discover God welcoming sparrows to pack the dirt of their nests, to line those nests with feathers, to brood patiently over a clutch of six eggs … These winged creatures find room in God’s holy place, building nests in the midst of God’s spirit…*

Despite the weariness of the journey and amid the grandeur of the Temple the singer notices the little birds whom God has made welcome and housed. This is why the singer is so overjoyed to return to this place of worship—because it is a place where even the smallest of God’s creatures is allowed a place; a space to call home. It is in this place that the singer knows God will welcome him, too. This makes him glad and grateful, and eager to sing of his great love for God.

This is the psalm that was chosen by the Capital Campaign Team as our guiding Scripture as we begin our mission to gather the resources to repair and renovate our church home—this Sanctuary, the church home in which we are gathered this morning.

Specifically, we embraced verse four which says: *“Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise”* because that seems to be the epitome of how most of us have come to think about this Sanctuary. This is how we have come to love this church-home of ours. When we think back on the many months when we were not able to meet in here because of the pandemic—we know what it is like to be away from a place that holds so many memories and so much of our affection.

And when we look around the room, we know where to look for each of our friends or members of our family. Like the swallows and the sparrows in the psalm, we each have found our own particular place in this Sanctuary where we usually perch. In a way, that place we sit every Sunday is like a place that we know as home.

This Sanctuary is not the *only* place in which we find or experience God. However, it is the place where God has drawn us *together* for so many years so that we may be at home *together*, supporting each other in our faith and our life’s journey. We pray for each other at home, of course, but we also pray *together* here in this place. We sing *together*, here in this place.

This is the place where we have come to witness people being welcomed into the family of God through baptism—sometimes as infants or children, but also as adults. We have listened as they committed themselves to Christ and promised to welcome our companionship on their faith journey. In response, we rose as individuals, but also as one body and promised our love and support of them.

We have seen others begin their new life together as married partners. We have gathered here, under this roof, and celebrated their union, and prayed for their long and happy life together.

This is also the place where we have gathered to say farewell to friends who have died. We embraced their families and prayed for their comfort in the days to come. Through tears and broken hearts, we have also been the ones to *receive* the embrace of friends as they lifted us in prayer after the death of a loved one in our own family.

This Sanctuary holds all of those moments. It is the stage upon which we have lived many important moments in our lives. Here in this place we have celebrated life—all of its joys and sorrows—because like the birds the psalmist sings of: this is the place where we have been at home *together* before God.

However, the most important thing to remember about our Sanctuary is that our capital campaign is not only about the past. God’s glory and faithfulness will be maintained in the physical work that will be done on the building—this is important. However, the true importance of the work we do on the Sanctuary is in the way in which it will continue to serve as a place where we may welcome the broader community—people who may never have come to us until it became a bright, new place for community gathering.

As we repair the roof and strengthen the walls, we do more than physically secure the structure. We also secure the mission God has given us to pursue in the world. *Faith, Hope, and Mission*—these three things.

We will live out our *Faith* with every effort we make to gather-in our neighbors for events that entertain and educate, but which are also infused with genuine hospitality, a foretaste of God’s warmth and generosity. Hospitality feeds—not just the body, but also the spirit. Genuine hospitality makes a place for people and nurtures in them feelings of inclusion and certainty that they—their needs, but also that they, themselves, have been seen and cared for; that a space has been made for them.

If we can do this for even one person we are in partnership with God because this is what makes for *Hope.* This is the way in which *Hope* grows and builds-up lives. This is how love begins—through hope that is grounded in God’s faithfulness to us and our faithfulness to God.

All of this is God’s mission—*Misso Dei—*and this can have tremendous meaning in our community, and also in the world.

One writer described it in this way, from something he observed, not in church, but out in “the world.”

*At the public library I saw a woman hard at work looking for a job, using a computer reserved for that purpose. Her two toddlers were crawling under the table, jostling for the coveted spot between their mother’s feet. I remembered a species of sparrow that builds nests out of whatever material is available, making life out of whatever it can find. Looking at these little sparrows nesting under the computer table, I thought about other nests: tent cities and refugee camps, shelters cropping up in the woods, people who sleep in cars or on friends’ couches or under the doorways of church buildings. God can’t help but pay attention to them. God’s eyes turn toward them.*

As do ours—sparrows and birds of all feathers who may be seen, their songs heard, and their lives received by us here in God’s name. All of this is what it can mean to provide for the repairing and renewing of our church home.

A few moments from now, we will commission a group of members to work on Nu’uanu Congregational Church’s *For Faith, Hope, and Mission* *Campaign.* I pray that you will stand and pray God’s blessing on them as, together, we continue to ever sing God’s praise.

May this be so. Amen.