13th Sunday of the Pentecost

**“Returning Home”**

Psalm 84 / August 22, 2021

**Returning Hometown**

There are two major national holidays in Korea when large numbers of people travel across the country. It is ‘Sul’, which is Lunar New Year, and Chuseok. ‘Sul’ is a holiday to celebrate the new year after sending the old year away, and ‘Chuseok’ is a Korean Thanksgiving Day to appreciate the harvest earned during the year. Since it is a custom derived from agricultural culture, both holidays still follow the lunar calendar date. Because of the importance of the holiday, the Korean government is considering designating a long holiday for 3-4 days to go back to their hometowns and spend time with their families.

Around the 1970s and 1980s, Korean society rapidly shifted from an agricultural society to an industrial society, and many people left rural areas and moved to large cities. They worked really hard, non-stop, and diligently. The driving force behind the rapid growth of today's Korean society must have been their unremitting efforts. There are times when people who have been working so hard without a break suddenly stop doing what they are doing. It’s Sul and Chuseok. People stop everything to go back to their hometowns and see their parents.

Two things are prepared for these holidays. One is to book an express bus or train ticket, and the other is to buy a gift for one’s parents in their hometowns. On the day of the holiday, people wear ‘Hanbok’, which is Korean traditional clothes or the nicest clothes they have and leave for their hometowns with excitement. There are few places where there are no traffic jams on highways and local roads because there is a lot of movement at once. It also takes five to six hours to get to a place that normally takes one or two hours. Still, the people going back to their hometowns are happy to see their parents.

One day, I felt a sense of majesty and emotion as I saw the huge procession of cars crawling like turtles in jammed packed cars headed towards everyone’s respective hometown for Chuseok. The mysterious phenomenon of migratory birds flying tens of thousands of miles back home came to mind. I felt the huge car procession as a strong determination that even if they lived in places away from their hometowns, they could not give up on going home, and that they could not give up seeing their parents no matter how important it was to make money. I thought of this as a kind of ‘spiritual phenomenon.’

**Returning the Temple of Jerusalem**

Do you know that there has been such a large-scale migration of people returning home from a very long time ago in Israel? The hometown of Israelites was Jerusalem, or to be more precise, the Temple of Jerusalem. The people of Israel left their places to worship God three times a year, namely, the Passover, the Pentecost, and the Tabernacles, and started a great national migration toward Jerusalem, the hometown of their souls. Because there was no transportation, it took several days or weeks to walk, and it was a tough journey with the whole family carrying luggage in their hands.

However, with the joy and excitement of being able to see and worship God in the Temple of Jerusalem, they were willing to endure the difficult journey. From Psalm 120 to 134, the fifteen Psalms were poems, prayers, and songs that the Israelites sang by mouth while they were on their way to the Temple of Jerusalem. When we read these psalms, we can find the expressions of the pilgrims’ earnest hope and expectation, and the overwhelming excitement and joy of seeing God.

Today’s text is a song sung by a pilgrim who finally arrived at the temple of Jerusalem after a long and difficult journey. Let’s take a moment to see how the pilgrim is singing. **“How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.” (1-2)** You can fully feel how much joy the pilgrim possessed, which has arrived after a long pilgrimage.

**“Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young-- a place near your altar, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.” (3-4)** The pilgrim likens himself to a sparrow and a swallow nesting on the walls of the temple. This means that he has now built a nest in the temple. The pilgrim also expresses his envy, saying that the people who always dwell in the temple, those are the priests and Levites, are blessed.

The most impressive passage of this psalm is this. **“Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.” (10)** In this confession that a day in the temple is better than a thousand days elsewhere, and a doorkeeper in the temple is better than a wonderful house of a bad person, we can see how much the pilgrim loves God and the happiness of being close to God. We can feel that he is longing for God desperately.

Why did Israelites miss Jerusalem so much? Why did they love the house of God so much? I think the reason is the same as why Koreans visit their hometown with joy even under such difficult conditions. It is because of the divine instinct to return to the original place engraved in all human beings. So, not just Koreans, not just Israelites, all of us have the divine instinct to return to our hometown, to Jerusalem, and to God, that is our original place.

**Returning God**

There are a lot of people who don't have their hometowns today. They have no parents in their hometown, and no longer have brothers and sisters living there. Perhaps the modern society is one in which the “hometown” has disappeared. Also, there is no longer a temple of Jerusalem where we can make a pilgrimage. The old temple building is now used as a mosque. We can travel to Jerusalem today, but the pilgrimage is no longer possible. So, how can we return to God, our spiritual hometown? How can we make a pilgrimage back to our original place?

I have lived close to the church all my life since I was born. It was natural and familiar to attend Sunday worship. But it hasn't been long since I learned that it means more than attending a church service at a set time on Sunday. Although our hometown has disappeared, we are regularly returning to our soul's hometown through worship every Sunday. Although the temple of Jerusalem does not exist, we are making a pilgrimage to the temple of God through worship service.

Worship Service is not just a religious ceremony that begins with the Prelude and ends with the Benediction, but a sacred moment in which our souls return home regularly every Sunday. When we worship God, the place where we stay is not just a chapel building, but a real temple where God lives. In an era where sacred symbols and sacraments have disappeared, we need to deliberately reflect these meanings on our minds whenever we worship. We must make worship more valuable and meaningful.

Good worship doesn’t just depend on high-quality preaching, touching praises, and well-organized forms of worship. The most important factor that makes worship genuine is the heart and attitude of the worshiper. We learned what it is through Today’s text. **“How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD almighty!”** We need this kind of longing heart. **“Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.”** This confession must be ours.

Korean people who returned from their hometowns were revived and lived to their fullest abilities. The Israelites, who returned from sacrificing to God in the temple of Jerusalem, lived faithfully in their place again. Our worship service should be a place for such spiritual recharging and recovery. Let’s return home. Let’s go back to God, our spiritual hometown. Let’s do that through our Sunday worship service. I hope your life can be restored and revitalized through this precious spiritual pilgrimage that repeats every Sunday.