

Living Room
Psalm 4:1-8

When I was living out east, I sometimes felt I was suffering from some strange form of claustrophobia. That feeling was most pronounced during the latter portion of my naval career. You see, during that time I was living either in Springfield, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C., or in Annapolis, Maryland, on the Naval Academy grounds. So many people live in the Annapolis/D.C. bubble that you're hardly ever alone. The traffic is always intense and the roads are always crowded. And there are buildings nearly everywhere crowding in on every side. No wonder I felt a touch of claustrophobia, living in places like that.

And that sense of claustrophobia was further complicated by other related factors. For example, for several years I worked in the Pentagon in a windowless office, sitting in a tiny cubicle surrounded by other tiny cubicles – packed like sardines in a can – each of us workers staring into our computer screens! Things got a bit better when I moved to the Naval Academy but the Naval Academy is the #1 tourist attraction in Maryland and I quickly learned that those tourists occasionally forgot that my home was an actual residence and not just a tourist attraction. And in their forgetfulness, they sometimes came up on my sidewalk or onto my lawn to gawk at my home. Some even entered unannounced into the homes of my neighbors to get a better view. It was all just a bit unnerving!

So, no wonder I sometimes suffered from a mild sense of claustrophobia. And no wonder I wanted to enjoy just a little more living space. I can remember during those days sometimes singing the chorus to that old Dixie Chick song: "Wide open spaces, room to make a big mistake!" So when I retired, I looked for an appointment out west – a place of wide open spaces! As I explained to my wife, I wanted to live in a place where I could see for miles and not feel crowded. Maybe that's why one of my favorite places on earth is Wilkerson Pass looking out over South Park with its miles and miles of living room! I'm so glad God answered my prayers and gave me an appointment here in Colorado.

Well today I recognize that my desire for physical space really was and is just one expression of a far deeper longing – my longing for interior space. You see, sometimes my interior space seems very, very crowded. Like tourists in Annapolis, various concerns sometimes come unbidden into my internal yard to gawk and clamor for attention. Concern for this church and its future – concern for each of you, for your spiritual, physical, and emotional welfare – concern for my own family – for my wife and my children – concern for my own unmet wants and needs – though I'm embarrassed to confess that I have any given how rich and blessed I really am – all of these concerns sometimes come crowding in with claustrophobic pressure, and I find myself singing once more with the Dixie Chicks – Wide open spaces, room to make a big mistake! Not that I want to make a big mistake, mind you! But I would like to enjoy a bit more living room.

Now all of that would just be my own personal problem, and I wouldn't dare burden you with it, were it not for the fact that you are already burdened by your own need for more

living space. Truth is, some of your lives are far more cramped and crowded than my own.

As I look out over this congregation, there's a long list of you on my heart and in my prayers. There's Lois, needing surgery for severe leg pain, but unable to get it because of an unexplained elevation in her white blood count. There's another Lois who is having trouble with her eyes. There's Rusty, who had surgery to remove some cancer from her face and ended up with more than twenty stitches to seal the wound. There's Marcia, who had emergency surgery this week on her arm – the same arm that hasn't healed well after more than two years of surgeries, treatment, and care. There's Karen, preparing for surgery tomorrow. There's Fred and Beth. Fred recently found out that his cancer has returned and Beth's son-in-law had to undergo a dangerous emergency surgery this week. There's Ilene over in assisted living, and Claire battling breathing issues. There's George and Kerry, battling prostate cancer. There's another man who learned this week that he may have prostate cancer, too. There's still another man with a nodule in his lung, and a woman struggling with leukemia. There's that man dealing with a new Parkinson's diagnosis, and those of you who are dealing with your own Parkinson's disease. There's the man who broke his collarbone this week. There's the person suffering with PTSD and needing a little peace. There are those of you suffering from memory issues and facing the fear of Alzheimer's or dementia. There are those who have lost loved ones recently. There are others struggling, too, with serious employment and financial issues. And there are all those others among you – with needs known only to God.

The list is long and the needs are many. So most of us here know what its like to long for wide open spaces in the face of encroaching troubles. In fact, most of us here have prayed, or are praying even now, for greater living room. And we're not alone in doing this. This prayer – the prayer for living room – the prayer for living space – the prayer for freedom and deliverance – is as old as humanity itself. Nearly 3,000 years ago, the Psalmist was struggling with some undefined troubles, and he prayed for living room – for freedom from the troubles crowding in upon him. In Psalm 4:1 he said, "Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me (now) and hear my prayer."

You gave me room when I was in distress! I think living room is God's desire for everyone. For example, the two most pivotal events in Hebrew scripture are the Jewish exodus from Egypt and the Jewish return from Babylonian captivity. In both instances, God gave his people living room! When the Jews were slaves in Egypt, they cried to God, God heard their cry, and God delivered them, leading them by Moses' hand to freedom in the Promised Land. Centuries later, when they were enslaved in Babylon, they cried to God again, God heard their mournful cry and set them free, returning them once more to the blessings of their home!

Still later, when God came in Jesus Christ to free us from spiritual captivity, Jesus began his ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim

release to the captives...let the oppressed go free.” (Lk. 4:18) Then, when Jesus came to the end of his ministry, he promised to lead his disciples at last into a place of greater space – into a home with many rooms! For Jesus said, “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (Jn. 14:2-3 ESV)

Room, living room, that’s God’s deep desire for us all. He wants to lead us out of all the troubles and trials that crowd our lives – into to a place of greater space – into a place of living room! So, whenever we pray for living room, as the Psalmist did, we know our prayers touch sympathetic ears.

And sometimes the answer comes in an instant and we are delivered. And sometimes it comes in a while. And sometimes it comes only in the end when God comes to take us home to that place that Jesus promised – that place with many rooms – that place of “plenty good room” as the old negro spiritual has it.

So, what do we do while we’re waiting – waiting for living room? The Psalmist seems to answer that question here in this little Psalm. You see, he was in some sort of trouble, and it seems God’s help was slow in coming. “How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?” he asked. “How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?” (Ps. 4:2) In other words, he was not only asking his enemies, but also his God, “How long until I am led from my trials and troubles into open spaces and living room?” And then, after asking that question, he gave this advice, to his own soul, and to the souls of all his hearers: “When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.” (Ps. 4:4-5)

Now I’m not one for formulaic preaching – preaching that reduces complex problems to simple solutions. And we can’t possibly solve the mystery of suffering in three easy steps. But there is some wisdom in what the Psalmist says here. There is some wisdom in his advice to all those trapped in the emergency room of life waiting for freedom from trouble, waiting for some deliverance, and waiting for the gift of living room.

“When you are disturbed, do not sin,” the Psalmist says. You see, it’s easy during difficulty to give way to sin, especially if we feel God has somehow let us down. But doing right is the right thing to do regardless of the circumstances. And doing right is its own rewards, whether or not any other reward is given. So, when we are disturbed, let’s follow the Psalmist’s advice. Let us not succumb to sin. Instead, let us ponder our situation and see what good we can find in it or make of it.

Let me repeat that. When confronted with trouble, let us ponder our situation and see what good we can find in it or make of it. You see, I’m not one to believe that God sends everything that comes our way. Nor am I one to believe that all things are meant for some good purpose. Some things seem simply senseless to me. They seem more the product of a fallen and corrupted world than the working of God’s good will. Nevertheless, I take some comfort from the sentiment expressed in Romans 8:28 that says God works in all things for the good of those who love him. That doesn’t mean that all things are good, in

and of themselves. Nor does it mean that God sends all thing for our good as if God's hand is somehow behind the cancer or any other of the troubles that befall us. But Romans 8:28 does lead me to believe that a good God can bring some good even from the worst of life's sad circumstances. And so, we must do what the Psalmist advises. We must ponder whatever trouble we are in to see if we may discern the good that God is bringing from the bad that's come our way.

In his book entitled *The Question That Never Goes Away*, Philip Yancey describes how pondering in the midst of a crisis led him to some life altering insight. "Breaking my neck in an auto accident in 2007," he writes, "caused me to reexamine my marriage, my faith, and how I plan to spend the years I have left. As I lay strapped to a backboard awaiting word on whether a major artery had been punctured – in which case, the doctor told me, I had mere minutes to live – I could only think of three questions worth pondering: Who do I love? What have I done with my life? Am I ready for whatever is next? Of course, I could have been aligning my life with those questions all along, but it took a traumatic event for me to tune in to what matters most."¹

"It took a traumatic event for me to tune in to what matters most," Yancey said. That often happens to us in times of trial, we tune into important things that we previously didn't see, but it happens more often when we take the time to ponder.

Finally, in times of trouble, we need to offer right sacrifices and put our trust in God. Right sacrifices were, for the Psalmist, the central acts of Hebrew worship. And so, in times of trouble, we also should stay in the worshipping community. It's here, among God's people, in acts of worship and fellowship, that we find strength and help in all our trials. And we must put our trust in God as we do so, believing that he will deliver us from trouble and lead us, soon or late, into wide open spaces and greater living room.

The Psalmist did these things and sooner or later, we do not know which, he was led out of his trouble and given some room. And so, he ended this psalm the way we hope to end our own – on a note of joy and peace. For he said, "You (O Lord) have put gladness in my heart...I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety." (Ps. 4:7-8)

"I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety." (Ps. 4:7-8) My friend, are you feeling claustrophobic? Have troubles crowded in? Do you long for wide open spaces and a little living room? Then call upon God. He'll hear your prayer. He'll come and give you living room – in an instant, in a while, or in the end at last – but he will come and give you living room. Until then, "When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord." (Ps. 4:4-5) Amen!

¹ *The Question That Never Goes Away* by Philip Yancey. Published by Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2013, p.50.