

## The Art of Regathering

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*Texts: Psalm 84 and Hebrews 10: 18-24*

What a joy to see everyone back again, gathered and *re*-gathered, for many of us in 3 dimensions no less! And it feels different this year than in the last two years. Less unsure and afraid, I hope. More settled. Less concerned about keeping our distance. More able to sink into the delight of this space and one another's company. In her book *The Art of Gathering*, Priya Parker reflects on the often-overlooked power and potential of gathering. She says "Gatherings consume our days...in both intimate and public realms. Gathering –the conscious bringing together of people for a reason – shapes the way we think, feel and make sense of our world!" She notes that "In democracies, the freedom to assemble is a foundational right and it's often one of the first to go in countries descending into authoritarianism." "Why?" she asks. "It's because of what can happen when people come together, [share stories], inspire one another, and [try] new ways of being together!" Parker is no Martha Stewart-like hospitality guru nor is she an event planner. Interestingly, her training is in conflict negotiation, facilitation, and organizational design. It's not about what's on the table, or the fancy house, or the extroverted, charismatic host. The "art of gathering" is first and foremost about understanding and acting on why – and the why behind the why behind why – why do people come together for different moments. She offers helpful insights and guidance that places like this and so many others badly need to hear. Far from being yet another meeting or coming together, artful gatherings "crackle" and "nourish" and they sometimes confound. They "strive to create a temporary alternative world." They make room for what she calls good controversy. They are attentive to how they begin and how they end. They leave people asking, "What of this world do I want to bring back into my other worlds?"! It's a good book. I hope we can learn some things from it together as we regather this community in our hybrid, or "mixed presence," world. It also reminds me a lot of another good book, *the Good Book*, which has been offering some of the same wisdom and guidance about the power, purpose, and art of gathering for generations.

Before we go there, I want to ask us all Parker's question: why? Why do we gather? Let me guess what first sprung to mind for some of you. For the music! Be honest. You know who you are who went there first! It's all good. Our music is amazing! What about others? For connection? For the sense of community? For your kids? For the quiet? To worship God? All of these are wonderful answers, and ...if Priya Parker heard them she would keep pressing. Yeah but, why? Connection, music, worship, yes but those are more categories than purposes. Why do you really gather for these things? What human needs do they touch inside of you and how specifically? Hold these thoughts and questions!

Let's turn to our scripture for some grounding, because after all, we aren't the first to gather in places like this. First, Psalm 84. It's a song of joy and confidence suited for pilgrims in every age entering into temples, gathering to celebrate their fall festivals. Sound familiar? Thank you, once again, Patty for so powerfully setting these ancient words to music, and as part of a cycle of new compositions for each psalm, no less, a gift that keeps on giving! And thank you in advance to Audrey Bellinger, from whom you'll be hearing shortly, who is also today sharing a premiere of her own, in visual art, related to a series of collages she's created for each of the psalms! If you haven't already, turn to your bulletin to page 5, you can see how she captured the themes of the psalm. We are overflowing with blessings in this

community. And both Patty and Audrey, in song and art, give us different ways of experiencing the Psalmist's sense of anticipation of a profound and communal sense of homecoming. Ask the psalmist why gather...they might say: because we all need a place to belong! That longing and gratitude, of joy and confidence, when we are coming home, like a sparrow finding shelter or a swallow gently landing in her nest! Try sinking into some of this feeling now and see if you can experience it yourself, right here, right now, for how lovely it is if we let ourselves pause in wonder about a place of warmth and welcome beyond where we lay our heads, an opportunity for connection - with each other, with our bodies, with sensual beauty and delight, and the presence of God upholding and surrounding us now. Robert Alter has a helpful liner note in his translation that may bring it home all the more... He writes "the image of the bird [here] provides the most poignant focus for the speaker's longing. Small birds such as swallows may well have nested in the little crevices of the roughly dressed walls that constituted the Temple facade! The speaker, yearning for the sacred zone of the Temple, is envious of these small creatures happy in the Temple precinct, whereas he, like an unrequited lover, only dreams of this place of intimacy with the divine. "Sing gladness" in the previous line, our verse 2. may have been the associative trigger for thinking about the birds! Glad songs indeed! And that yearning ... is what I know so many of us felt especially when we were scattered at screens during our Covid-induced diaspora.

Amidst what I know for many has been an especially full and fast-paced week of flying around, in this season of so much swirling chaos in our wider world, this language helps us begin to answer our question doesn't it? Why do we gather? Because now more than ever, we need spaces of grounding and rest and belonging like this, places where we can gently land for a time, in a crevice of quiet, intimate encounter with what is real and holy and precious and true and beautiful and good. How lovely, Lord, how lovely is your abiding place and our gathering place! Amen?

Our second passage is from the letter to the Hebrews and is equally rich and timely. Here, we find a communal exhortation to faithful endurance, and with it a helpful reminder that the dwelling place of God, the sanctuary, that same great Temple about which the Psalmist was just speaking, ought not be set aside for those in high places alone but it is there for everybody. It's to be a tabernacle which literally translates to a "tent of meeting!" The author of Hebrews was keenly aware of those temple curtains that would too often exclude people from those so-called sacred zones. He sees Jesus as one who flung them wide, who would have gladly sat amidst a "priesthood of all believers," as later Protestant reformers would call it, such that access to God's presence was available to anyone who longed for God. No need for mediators, for fancy houses or special hosts! But the Hebrews writer encourages - we *do* need to gather and gather with unambiguous purpose! The writer clearly spells it out! Keep meeting together - don't lose the habit of it as some have done - but keep gathering, and here's the kicker, for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds and encouragement of one another! Now we are talking! Why are we here? Why come back to the nest, week after week, year after year, century after century? To ground ourselves, yes, and find rest and nourishment but why do that? For the sake of what? - to spark love and good deeds. We come into this gentle nest, this soft container, the Spirit has waiting to hold us whenever we gather with intention, whenever we come to our spiritual centers, and communities. Come and be nourished, be watered, be fed. And let your love be sparked! Get crackling together and then bring and be this change you see into the world.

Rather than explain why we are let me invite us to try a little exercise that I hope invites us to experience all the more the purpose of our gathering. I've encountered this a few times, though in different smaller group settings, so bear with me while we try it together in this delightfully large congregation - across space, and even across time for those who may be tuning into a recording later. It's an embodied

grounding exercise, an invitation to center ourselves, together in several dimensions of our life together. Here goes:

First, close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. Take a deep breath, maybe the deepest you've taken all day. Take it in. Let it out. We start with a vertical dimension - think of it as a line connecting earth and heaven, but better not to think and instead notice your spine and the back of your neck and take a moment and stretch and straighten it as your able. Pull your head up high and ease your shoulders back a bit. Feel your length, and your height, and as you do, receive an awareness of your God-given dignity. You are uniquely, fearfully, wonderfully, beautifully made. You are beloved, just as you are! So, sit, stretch, straighten and find your vertical stand in that! Feel into and know the height of your dignity and find rest and home there!

Now, feel into your sides a bit, if you're like me maybe a little or a lot of pudgy - all good, still sitting tall, and if you have room without elbowing a neighbor, maybe slide your hands down your sides and feel your width and now consider that width extending out to those who surround you - could be a loved one by your side right now, if you are home alone, use your imagination and conjure family, friends, your people. It could be a sense of community in which you feel some solidarity. I hope for many it is or could be a sense of this powerful spiritual community here, regathered -in person or online - together. Feel into and know the width and breadth of that community and solidarity and find rest and home there!

Now, your backside and front. First, notice your back and consider those who have come before you, maybe it's your parents or grandparents, or mentors or elders, or even some particular inspiration from history. These may be resources who literally had and have your back! There may be some pain and some harm that comes up there as well, it's ok, it's important to include them too but let's be sure to tap into those benevolent ancestors, including spiritual ancestors, teachers and guides from within and beyond our Christian tradition. Lean back in your chair or pew or wherever you are feeling all that's behind you that's brought you here and now lean forward and consider those who come after you, your children or grandchildren, or those who your legacy or actions will touch. Lean forward for a moment into that sense of continuity and future. Feel into and know this depth of spiritual and ancestral lineage past and future and find rest and home there!

Come back to center and let's hold it all here, together - the proud and true heights of our God given human dignity, the breadth of our companionship and community, the depth of our spiritual lineage - benevolent ancestors encouraging, sparking us to be better ancestors - grounded together, a sense of home for everyone, a space of grace for all.

Open your eyes. Welcome and welcome back. How lovely it is to be gathered and regathered again! Even if we are still wondering, curious about our whys and what it means and where's it all going this fall, consider if you will, God knows why each of us are here, and knows our needs better than we do.

As we continue into the fall, I encourage us all to be ever more caring and curious as we gather and regather - asking of ourselves and each other and God - how we can be more intentional and purposeful! How can we consider each moment of encounter as a crevice set apart, as a place of gentle landing and encounter, and how can we can nourish and crackle and spark God's love in each other and in our world in our every meeting? May it be so. Amen!