



## **USHERS AND NURSES GUILD DAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, October 28, 2012**

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Memorial Church of God, Denver, CO

**Lection – Psalm 84:10-12** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 10) For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than live in the tents of wickedness.

(v. 11) For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favour and honour.  
No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.

(v. 12) O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Once again, we salute ushers, and for the first time their well-known but rarely lauded partner, the nurses guild. These willing workers are often the first to offer a hand of hospitality and spiritual refreshment as people enter and abide in the house of God. What a difference a smile makes, a warm handshake, a “God be with you,” a “We are so glad you came,” a “Good to see you again,” or an inquiry about your health: “Do you need aide in any way?”

We are all familiar with ushers, and many of us have seen women in white and occasionally men who primarily serve those in the pulpit and/or tend to those who fall ill in services—these persons are nurses guild members. Nurses guilds typically fall under the auspices of usher boards. At the national level, in denominations and related groups, nurses typically also fall within the usher’s department.

As far as I have been able to determine, nurses guilds have been in black churches for about 70 years. Historically, by and large, it appears that they have always operated under the auspices of usher boards and primarily assisted clergy in the pulpit. Occasionally these were former nurses who had retired from working in hospitals. Over time, as more churches gained more than one or two nurses, the phrase nurses guild gained common usage. Also, over time, nurses began to do more than just assist clergy in the pulpit. They were responsible for first-aid stations in churches

and called upon if persons became ill and if they fainted. A member of the guild was ready on the spot usually with smelling salt (we all called it smelling sauce). Youth were even trained to be nurses guild members and were recognized in churches by candy striper outfits similar to those of days gone by that were worn in hospitals by young volunteers.

Although many nurses guild members may not have medical training or be nurses, it is now common for church nurses to be certified in CPR. Finally, although most nurses in hospitals in the United States no longer wear hats, many in African American churches still do.

Today's video features ushers and nurses marching together. Additional videos of ushers and nurses guilds are contained in today's Cultural Resource unit and elsewhere on the Lectionary website.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 84:10-12**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

More and more over the past few years on Sundays, ushers seat and serve the homeless. I have seen homeless people show up in much larger numbers in my church since the economy spiraled downward around the end of 2008. Mainly men show up but, every now and then, homeless women and children do too. All show up carrying their belongings in many, many bags of all kinds—paper bags, plastic bags, garbage bags, cloth bags, and backpacks, large and small. A few arrive carrying suitcases.

Often, homeless people arrive and they clearly have not recently bathed. Some reek of alcohol, and some are mentally disturbed. My guess is this is now a common occurrence for ushers and nurses guilds in most churches. In many instances, it is my sense that ushers and nurses are not quite sure how to handle the proliferation of the homeless. Fellow ushers around the country with whom I talk at our yearly regional and national gatherings, say that their churches do not have good protocols in place, and simply deal with it on a case-by-case basis. My church does the same thing.

As a youth usher, I was taught that all who enter the doors of a church are to be treated with a smile, with respect, and with the hospitality that Jesus would show. Unfortunately, this is not always done for the homeless. From the odors to the belongings they bring with them, typical church members are put off by the homeless, and either want them taken somewhere so that they can bathe, or just want them gone altogether. Most churches do not have ushers or nurses who are trained to deal with the mentally ill homeless nor do they have bathing facilities and clothes closets. All of this means that the homeless are not typically ushered in with a smile, respect, or hospitality. The Church, which should be a refuge for all, becomes one more place where the homeless are not welcomed.

Nurses now have their hands full with addicts who show up at church high, with persons with diabetes who allow their blood sugar to drop too low, and with people with any number of illnesses who are likely to become ill in church due to poor health. Being an usher or a nurse in

the black church brings with it issues that those of us who have worked in these capacities for decades have never seen before and need local and national protocols to address.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The book of Psalms has been called the hymnbook of Israel and is subdivided into five books. Book three (Psalms 73–89) contains our pericope. Psalm 84 is attributed to the Sons of Korah, who are referenced in 10 or more psalms, including Psalms 42, 44–49, 84, and 87–88.<sup>1</sup> According to the 1 Chronicles, the sons of Korah are leaders of worship, including leaders of the choir-guild, established by King David (1 Chronicles 6:31; 26). Psalm 84 might have been sung by pilgrims as they journeyed to the temple for worship, especially during feasts.

Psalm 84:10 is known as the “Usher’s scripture” since it specifically mentions doorkeepers, which is still a name used for ushers. The psalm is not about ushering, but it is claimed by ushers because it includes the word “doorkeeper” and bespeaks the pride and joy that doorkeepers have in the work that they do. It establishes doorkeeping (ushering) in the house of God for one day as work preferred to “dwelling anywhere else for a thousand.” In other words, doorkeeping, which may be seen as a lowly task, is admirable if it is done by believers in the presence of God in the house of God.

The writer of Psalm 84 is longing to be in the temple of God (verse 2).<sup>2</sup> He does not need to be begged to attend church, or have to receive a telephone call from the automated church phone system, or even a text message. The writer carries an inward longing for the house of God. This is what we see from ushers who arrive early, work hard, and stay late. They can’t wait to be on their post because service and the worship of God propels their desire. It is also what we see from nurses guild members who arrive with their fellow departmental partners and work just as arduously.

There are three beatitudes within Psalm 84. The first is in verse 4: “Blessed/happy are those who live in your (God’s) house.” The second is at verse 5: “Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the highways to Zion.” The third is found at verse 12: “O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.”

These beatitudes combine to make patently clear the joy of the psalmist who delights in the Lord and the house of the Lord. Such joy is likewise felt by those who hearts claim and offer praise to this Lord and work in his place of abode (the temple/Church). Moreover, those who are constantly engaged in the work of the household of God, whether ushering, as nurses guild members, or as janitors, all feel fortunate to have been set aside for holy work within God’s house. This is cause to offer praise to God.

Verse 10 says, “For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.” Not a month, or a year, but one day. The psalmist posits, *It is such a blessing; if I can get even one day, I’ll praise God for the opportunity.* The verse continues, “I’d rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than live in the tents of wickedness.” Use of the phrase doorkeeper may be making the position of the doorkeeper too high. Perhaps it is more correct to translate the phrase, “sit at the

threshold.” In 2 Kings 12:9, 22:4, and 25:18; 1 Chronicles 9:19; and 2 Chronicles 23:4, the word is translated threshold. The threshold is a position of humility.

In other words, the lowliest position is better than the highest among the godless. To bear burdens (deal with rude people, crying babies, depressed people, upset people, sick people) is better than working among the wicked. God’s worst is better than the devil’s best. Also, tents are fleeting, but the house of God is a force that the “gates of hell shall not prevail against.” The house of God is the mighty and everlasting foundation.

Verse 11 speaks of God as a “sun and shield.” As the sun, God sees us up close and inwardly and shines on us, revealing to us our sins and our shortcomings. God as the sun also reveals to us our likeness to God as those made in God’s image. As the sun, God is also the one who shows us the way. More importantly, the sun is an energy source for all of earth; thus, it is the perfect metaphor for the psalmist to use. God, as our sun, is the producer of the light that leads us through life and is our energy and life source and force.

As our shield, God is our protector. Just as a shield is intended to cover one from harm, God blocks, guards, and covers the sin and safeguards us from the wicked who would assail us. God as our shield places angels to keep watch over us and places a hedge of protection around us.

As the sun, God shows us our sin and as a shield helps us stand against sin. After God shows us our true selves, God does not leave us without a remedy. As our shield, God covers and protects us, even from ourselves.

The same one who is our sun and shield “bestows honor and favor,” and “no good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly.” Yes, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe makes it rain on the just and the unjust. But, it is only to the believer that the Holy Spirit and life eternal is given.

Verse 12b is the final verse of our pericope and the final beatitude. “Happy is everyone who trusts in you.” This is why ushers and nurses do what they do. They trust in almighty God. Such trust is cause for rejoicing and the motivation to serve with gladness. This makes it their ultimate aim—to present themselves as happy servants of the Lord in the household of the Lord, so that others will in turn experience the hospitality and welcoming presence of the Lord.

## **Celebration**

We lift praise to God for every doorkeeper and every nurse, who serve for the benefit of others because of their love and appreciation of God who is our sun and shield. Thank you for your sometimes undervalued service. Thank you for your sometimes underestimated service. Thank you for all that you do to aid in our comfort and increase the joy of our worship in the household of God. Thanks be to God for your faithfulness.

## **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include, but are not limited to:

**Sounds:** The sounds made by those entering the house of God; the sounds of those who are happy because they trust in God; the sounds of paper rustling in church as ushers hand out programs; the sounds of nurses offering aide to those in need;

**Sights:** The courts of the Lord; the contents of the house of God; the tents of wickedness; ushers uniforms; nurses in uniform; the gloves worn by ushers and the hats worn by nurses; ushers and nurses at their posts; God as a sun and a shield; programs and fans given out by ushers; and

**Colors:** The white gloves worn by ushers; the white hats of nurses.

## **III. Resources That Preachers Can Use**

Please see today's Cultural Resource unit for additional resources.

### **Notes**

1. The Jewish Encyclopedia. Online location: [www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12409-psalms](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12409-psalms) (accessed 24 May 2012).
2. Benedetto, Robert. "Psalm 84." *Interpretation*. 51.1 (Jan. 1997): 57.