

August 22, Ordinary 21B (Psalm 84)

In Psalm 84, an expectant swallow makes her nest in the temple.

by [Austin Shelley](#) in the [August 11, 2021](#) issue

After the death of his beloved wife, Florence, Tom vowed to live the remainder of his days to the fullest. Nearly 90 years old, he began hosting tailgating parties, so named because he used the tailgate of his golf cart to deliver party food and beverages to his backyard guests. Tom's family chipped in to buy a full-sized, fake palm tree adorned with Christmas lights—a festive centerpiece for his soirees. Plastic fronds cascaded over guests like a mother hen gathering chicks beneath her wings. Twinkling lights on the branches illuminated partygoers' faces while mirroring Tom's joy at having brought them together.

Like the velveteen rabbit from the children's book, the artificial tree came to symbolize more than the sum of its manufactured parts. Its whimsy reflected not only Tom's generous hospitality but also his renewed attention to savoring each day of life as a gift. It's no surprise, then, that when Tom died, his family could not bear to part with the tree. But neither could they find an indoor space to accommodate its broad canopy. So Tom's son carted the palm home and placed it on a second-story porch, where the tree remained untouched for several years.

But that's not the end of the story. Last spring, just as the pandemic shuttered public gathering spaces, Tom's daughter-in-law, Nancy, noticed a couple of birds regularly visiting the tree. Unperturbed by the plastic branches, the Christmas lights, or the close proximity to humans, the pair of finches built a nest in its faux foliage. One by one, eggs appeared, dappled and blue—sure signs of hope in a season devoid of good news.

Nancy was enthralled by the expectant finches, as were many of us who followed her social media posts documenting the devotion of Mama and Papa Finch as they readied their nest. Hunkered down at home in my own makeshift nest of Zoom church meetings, virtual school, and pandemic puppy training, I tuned in online to

witness the everyday miracle. I became downright invested as hatchlings struggled to emerge from their shells, opened their gaping mouths heavenward for sustenance from their parents, and grew from indiscriminate, fuzzy-headed balls with beaks into feathered fledglings, ready to fly.

But that's not the end of the story. Over the course of two springtimes, several clutches of finches have hatched, grown, and flown, all carefully chronicled by Nancy's lens. Thanks to her faithful witness to this new life, my heart has become attuned to birdsong. Whenever I hear it, my thoughts turn to Psalm 84:3: "Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God."

Biblical scholars typically classify Psalm 84 as a song of Zion—a pilgrim's outpouring of praise and awe upon arriving at the temple in Jerusalem. One might imagine that after a long and difficult journey, the psalmist cries tears of relief and joy; to abide in the presence of the Holy One of Israel is to fulfill a deep longing to commune with God once more. The pilgrim's overwhelming gratitude at glimpsing God's house is matched only by the breathtaking beauty of the image that follows—birds nesting in the temple, fully trusting their lives and the well-being of their offspring to the God who made them.

Both pilgrim and swallow sing praises in the shelter the temple provides. Perhaps the most beautiful poetic element of this psalm is the personification of the birds, which joins the animation of the pilgrim so that images of the two are intertwined. Weary pilgrim and searching bird alike are characterized as "happy," for they "sing for joy to the living God," find strength in God's presence, and trust in God's steadfast protection and provision. All three actions could apply equally to the pilgrim or to the birds, whom the pilgrim envies for their ability to live in God's house rather than simply visit.

Though we might undervalue the term *happy* because of modern connotations of a shallow or fleeting contentment, the psalmist's word choice signals a deeper, intrinsic joy. The word harkens back to Psalm 1, in which *happy* is used to describe those whose "delight is in the law of the Lord" and are therefore "like trees, planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither." This is no short-lived or superficial happiness; nor does it ignore the inescapable reality or pain of life and death. Rather, it is the mark of those who have journeyed long, who have loved and lost and somehow remained open and

vulnerable enough to love the world again, perhaps one faux palm tree at a time.

At first I thought I was watching Nancy's finch videos to cheer for the baby birds as they mustered the courage to take those first faithful leaps. As it turned out, I was drawn to the birds by a mixture of delight, pride, and unavoidable heartbreak—the same swirl of emotions I'd soon feel as I prepared to send my firstborn off to college. Perhaps on a broader scale, the birds served also as daily hopeful reminders that a world which seemed suddenly more hell-bent on death dealing still held the capacity for beauty, wonder, and life.

But that's not the end of the story. The end of the story Psalm 84 tells is this: no matter where we imperfectly choose to nest along the way, God is our longing, our home.