

Psalm Twenty-Four

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. *Selah*

Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory. *Selah*

I remember the first time that I attended a worship service at an Eastern Orthodox church. It was to fulfil a requirement of an assignment I had been given, as part of my graduate studies. I was to visit three churches that were as different from my own as possible, and report back on the experience. One of my choices was St. Vladimir's Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which meets a few blocks away from our house.

True to the assignment, it was about as different from my own church experience as I could get. The cathedral itself was a foreign landscape to me. The gold leaf, ornate altar, arched ceilings and brightly-colored icons presented a striking contrast to the plain, unvarnished sanctuaries of my childhood and early adult life.

And then there was the service itself. In an article about the experience of visiting an Orthodox church for the first time, writer Frederica Mathews-Greene describes the first question new attendees most often ask: *What's with all of this commotion?*¹

I remember resonating with her observation. Because the church services I knew were more or less stationary affairs. You entered in, sat, and stood if you were prompted, and the clergy did the same. If you've ever attended an Orthodox worship or wedding service, though, you'll know that there is a lot of movement. Seldom do you sit at all, let alone sit still. The priest is here and there. The sign of the cross is made often, and there is a lot of shuffling and kissing involved, as elements are carried back and forth between the people.

Entering into the world of Psalm Twenty-Four, many of us might find ourselves asking that same question. We see people preparing to go up to a high place (v.3a), and people rising to stand in a holy place (v.3b). Gates are raised in anticipation (v.7a) and doors are flung open with excitement (v.7b). *What's with all of this commotion?*

The explanation comes with the setting for the psalm, which we are told is entrance to the temple. Psalm Twenty-Four is a processional poem. It was meant to stir up images of (and likely to be sung in the midst of) a lot of movement. Reading it, we picture the people of ancient Israel filing through the streets on the way to the festival ceremonies, and we imagine the priests welcoming them, and being here and there, as they lead the rituals.²

Its lines are charged with a sense of God's holiness. God receives and blesses "those who seek him" (vv.5-6), but the God who created and holds claim to the earth and all therein (vv.1-2) is not to be approached casually or carelessly. We are right to pause and examine our hearts before entering in (vv.3-4). Like my experience of stepping into the Orthodox church's service, there is a sense of expectation, and perhaps even excitement, but not a sense of being fully at-ease.

For these reasons, Psalm Twenty-Four has often been used as a call to worship. It functions well in that way, as it invites and anticipates a two-fold movement, more or less dividing the text accordingly. There is the one who is readying to approach God in worship (vv.3-6), and the God, the King of Glory, who in turn is set to enter in (vv.7-10). And so when the newcomer asks, *what's with all of the commotion*, that is our response – that, in worship, we draw near to God, and God draws near to us. (James 4:8a).

¹ <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/frederica/12-things>

² Waltner, Psalms.