

In the 27th Psalm, the psalmist proclaims, “I am confident, I believe, I trust that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” Fifty-seven psalms later, this good living is manifested in the house of the Lord. God dwells in Jerusalem’s temple, and God makes room for God’s people, and indeed every created being. Tiny swallows and sparrows find sanctuary; even Baca, an old-dried up creek bed in a hot, arid desert serves as a fruitful canteen, and the rain swells provide abundance and refreshment for weary travelers.

Earlier faith pilgrims like the ones who first sang these psalms found connection to the divine by visiting the Jerusalem temple, and gathering with fellow believers from all around the region. To be in the temple was to experience God’s presence. As time has passed, our connection with the divine is less tied up in our occupying space in a specific Jerusalem, and instead, is more apparent in all the new, little Jerusalems that have been created in our communities.

Sardis Baptist Church is our own little Jerusalem. We have a campus and grounds that helps make us more aware of God’s presence, and of course, these landmarks serve as identifiable and tangible places to gather as believers. And I am proud to say that our property, a certified wildlife habitat, makes room for sparrows, and swallows, and other birds, and deer, and all kinds of creeping and crawling things, too. And occasionally, our meetinghouse has even made room for a bat, and a snake, and other creeping and crawling things. (I emphasize the occasional!).

The summer rains this past week make it hard for us to imagine dry creek beds. But people within our community certainly experience drought – grief, anxiety, illness, loneliness, doubt, disappointment – all of these experiences can empty us. And yet consistently, in the company of one another, bound up in God’s spirit, we find a sense of restoration, of renewal, of sustainment.

The psalmist tells us that faithful communities are heart highways – they offer transport to God’s presence. And in God’s presence is joy, and hope, and love, and collaboration among neighbors that creates a spiritual abundance.

We’ve gathered this morning, as an extended community of believers, to express our commitment to Julian, to make him aware of God’s goodness and God’s presence in the world. We believe that God is revealed in the land of the living, in our living. What we are doing this morning is committing to be a heart highway. This highway is accessible, in any direction; HOV lanes, easy merges from on-ramps, exits with a Waffle House on both sides of the express way; rest stops and scenic overlooks; Hey, tailgaters and horn-honkers, we’ll feed you and hug you, too! This highway of ours has to be one with accessible entry and imaginative, transcendent destinations.

So...Julian, we’re promising to be a heart highway for you, in order that we can help make you aware of God’s constant presence in your life. And, you might wonder, Julian (and all your friends and family and church buddies, too), how do we make such a highway?

King reminds us that the arc of the moral universe is long, but ultimately, bends toward justice. If this is true (and I believe it is!), then we are like pole vaulters seeking to bend a rigid line. We use our long, strong, determined muscles of love with the knowledge that one day, our collective strength and generosity, rooted in God’s spirit, will propel us over and beyond our potential.

I think to build a highway of the heart, and to be a highway of the heart, we must be a community whose lives apply tension to that rigid line day in and day out.

Julian, there may very well be a moment of such clarity in your life, that in an instant, you will know your purpose and calling. It could be your baptism; it could be the first time you throw a baseball or turn a backflip; it could be the first time you offer aid to a friend; it could be some provocative thought or word of encouragement you hear from a teacher or mentor. But if you are like most people, odds are your purpose and calling will be revealed by the thousands of little moments you experience in the village that rears you.

What we promise for you today is a spiritual home. We promise that every time you are in our presence, we will give thanks for the God who has given us the gift of you! We promise to be intentional in noticing your gifts, encouraging your gifts, and always being a safe space for you to express and refine such gifts. We promise to tell you about a God of possibilities. And we assure you we will be eager to hear about the possibilities you discover in this loving God of ours.

We promise that you will always have a dozen people eager to join you in the Halle chorus at a moment's notice. We promise that when you get older, and you have a stressful or anxious week at school, you'll have church buddies ready to listen to you, and to share a Wednesday meal with you, and to find rest in a busy week. When you are a teenager, and you go on the youth retreat, and decide to spray bear mace just for funsies, we can't promise you Jonathan won't get mad, but we do promise we'll still love you.

Julian, like the psalmist, and every other person ever created, you are going to experience the full range of emotions: you'll be happy, and silly, and SO full of hope; other times you'll feel sad, or angry, or frustrated, or just blah; you'll feel safe, and scared, and confident, and shy. Odds are, at some point or another, you'll even feel all of these things in our presence. We promise to let you be you; to be present with you, however you may feel; to help you navigate all the Holy conversations, especially the ones that come with all the feels.

But here's the biggest thing, Julian, the most constant thing. We're gonna put tension on that pole. Yes, there will be days when the world seems dark and dreary. But here at 5811 Sardis Road, and all those virtual addresses, too, we commit to being a chorus of love, where our acts of kindness, one moment at a time, keep bending that stubborn arc toward justice. We want our living, our ordinary but sacred living, to be a window of God's goodness for you.

So, Julian, welcome, my brother! Grab a shaker. Be on the look-out for Krispy Kreme doughnuts and chocolate praying hands. Ask us questions. Sing out loud. Express yourself. Sit with us for a while. Pass the peace. Light a candle. Say a prayer. Hear the stories. Tell them, too! Break bread with us. Laugh. A lot. Cry if you need to. Hugs are free. Fist bumps, too. Love inside these walls and out. Minister to the world. Let it minister back to you. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God. And live with us.

May God help us to be a heart highway for Julian, in order that he might always know God's presence. Friends, may it be so, and may it begin right now. Amen.