



“Thirsting In The Flood”

a sermon by

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Psalm 42

I had a different scripture and tone for our first Wednesday Worship back together all picked out for today, but in light of all that this past week has held, the Spirit was insisting on something else.

This should give you a glimpse into the preaching life - just when you think you have something all figured out, God's got something else to say. It figures. It is a message that hearkens back to our season last year, but it is worth recalling as we begin anew. So our scripture lesson for this afternoon comes from Psalm 42. "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?" These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock, "why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?" Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

In his poem, "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," Samuel Taylor Coleridge summarized the primary human experience expressed in this Psalm when he wrote, "Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink." While the reality he describes is that of a sailor out to sea, what immediately comes to my mind when I hear these words is the painful image of our neighbors in New Orleans evacuated to rooftops, flailing their arms to summon help, surrounded by a flood, and dying of thirst. It is this visceral, physical experience of thirst that the Psalmist recalls for us today as he tries to make a tangible connection in a few verses of song to the intangible, existential craving in his soul as one who is longing for God. Like the deer at the banks of a dried up riverbed whose life is utterly dependant upon the rains to come or clouds to break loose on one region rather than another, so the Psalmist is totally dependant upon God. Written during the time of exile for the Hebrew people, the Psalmist speaks for the community when he laments being a resident alien in the land of a people who equate the suffering of a nation with a sign that God has turned his holy back on his chosen ones. Driven out of their land and place of worship, the taunting of those who ask so "where is your God?" only compounds the sorrow of those who long to reconnect with the presence of God in their temple, who thirst to experience again the living God. It is not that God has gone anywhere, mind you, as the Psalmist pleads to him as his rock, and reminds himself that "by day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life." It is just that it is hard being a part of a society and circumstances that do not support faith. It is easy to feel forgotten when you are in hostile territory, and it is painful to see how quickly one can lose their spiritual way in a world that does not affirm that human life is utterly dependant upon God.¹ And doesn't this sound familiar? We may not be a people in exile,

¹ Keck, Leander, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1996, p. 854.

but we are certainly a community of believers struggling to claim and proclaim our faith in a culture that doesn't really want to hear it. We try to witness to the promises and power of God in the face of radical destruction. Trying to comfort even just ourselves with assurances that we believe in our heads and recall celebrating in our own temples of worship but now have a hard time transferring to our hearts when we hear numbers like 90,000 square miles of tragedy and estimates of 10,000 lives lost. We grapple to claim our Christian confidence in the face of shock, perplexity, and helplessness. And in the day to day, we strive to recall that we are set apart and saved only by our dependence upon God in a society that preaches self-determinism and the bottom line. I'd say that is a strange sort of flood that we find ourselves in - overwhelmed by all that promises fulfillment, but left thirsting for that which will truly satisfy. And so the refrain is a familiar one, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" Is it really any wonder?

And yet the Psalmist does not speak only of despair. While he may be exiled in a hostile land yearning in his soul for connectedness with God, there is a distinct if not stronger note of something else that threads through the verses, that rises above the anxiety, over the voices that mock and taunt, above all else is hope. Hope that nourishes. Hope that lives in the memory of the presence of God like a bounty of living water, "My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from [the land of the mouth of the Jordan] ... Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his steadfast love ..." It is hope that calls the Psalmist back to the assurance of the presence of the Lord, and recalls that his life depends not on the whim of an oppressor, but on the living God. Thirst may be for a moment, but the promises of God last a lifetime.

I've shared this story with a few of you, but a friend of mine recently went to a conference geared toward spiritual retreat in the mountains. She had been anticipating a week of quiet respite and reconnection with God between lectures and workshops on Christian living and creative expressions of faith. But the conference was planned by a bunch of extroverts and she found herself in a sea of over-programming - bouncing without a break between seminars on the Sabbath and making quiet time for God. There's a sermon in there somewhere. Finally, in a bit of a frazzled state she snuck away from her workshop on Christian commitment and sought out the lake on which the main lodge sat - which was renowned for its quiet waters and their ability to reflect the majesty of the mountains high above. Her energy was spent, and her soul parched for some quiet time with just herself and God. But as she arrived at the lake her hopes were dashed when she discovered that the conference planners neglected to take into consideration that respite for spiritual retreaters just might be inhibited by the fact that the lake was being drained and cleaned that week. Where still waters once stood, there was now a gaping hole in the ground. Heavy yellow machinery was cranking and grinding away as it dug out and hauled off mounds and mounds of mud and stinky sludge. Her hope for serenity was crushed by the reality of a very messy chaos. Refusing to abandon her quest for renewal, my friend sat down under a tree at the edge of the lake and closed her eyes - thinking that at least some fresh air would do her good though the noise of the equipment was almost overwhelming. She sat there for several minutes when a strange thing happened. She heard music. Above the loud hum of the backhoe and whirring of tractor wheels, and the scraping and churning of gears rose a quiet singular note. Almost inaudible at first, the note slowly rose, and then became accompanied by another. Two

notes now making a strange, high harmony. Two pure pitches ringing louder now that were then joined by another, and then another. She looked around in perplexity when she suddenly realized the source. While the violent and obtrusive sounds of the equipment echoed and were amplified off the walls of the basin of the lake they were creating an overtone. A pitch of music that is the byproduct of several lower tones being played together - or, in this case, thrown and ground together. Out of the angry noise of the machinery a pure and parallel tone rose high above the crater of the lake and evolved into an unexpected and unpredictable, yet perfectly tuned symphony. A heavenly sound produced by the loudest noise the industry on the ground had to offer. And in this strange sound she found her heart happy and her soul filled up even in the absence of the quiet waters she had longed for, for she realized this music was a gift for those who were willing to stop and listen.

And so it is for the Psalmist and for us, that rising above all the noise and chaos of our lives is hope. Hope born in the promises and presence of our God - who himself was born in Jesus Christ, not outside of the harsh and noisy reality of this world but right in the midst of it. Hope that quenches our thirst for God in ways we do not always expect and when he is not always immediately evident, for he is surely always there. Hope that requires us to stop and listen but offers great reward to the willing. God does not promise us quiet waters, but he does promise himself.

What draws you to the riverbed today? What rising waters do you fear? In what way do you find yourself yearning for something a little more real than the reality we face each and every day? It seems that in our world the Psalmist's voice, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" is almost an anthem for our times, for there is certainly enough around us to disquiet even the most tenacious spirit. But even though we cannot escape the disquiet, neither can we escape the steadfast love and faithfulness of God who, in Christ Jesus manifests his unrelenting desire to lead us back to himself, to fulfill the deepest longing of our hearts, to quench our thirst by pouring himself out for us even unto death so that we may have life and have it in abundance. So won't you come, and seek that which will truly satisfy. The banks of the Spirit are overflowing, and there is plenty to drink. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

Amen.