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Byron United Methodist Church
Sermon: 11/2/14
Series: Fall Reflections: A Look at Some Psalms
Scripture: Psalm 43



When God Seems Absent



For the next few weeks we are going to be reflecting upon a few Psalms. The Psalms are a beautiful collection of prayers, poems and songs full of glory and grace and praise and sorrow. All emotions are expressed – pain and despair are there alongside thanksgiving and hope.

Today we are reflecting upon Psalm 43. Let's listen to it first ...

<Psalm 43 NRSV>

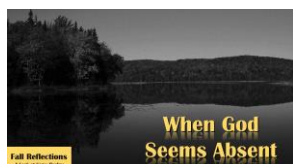
*¹ Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from those who are deceitful and unjust
deliver me!*

*² For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because of the oppression of the enemy?*

*³ O send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling.*

*⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God.*

*⁵ 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.*



"Vindicate Me, O God" is the cry of the Psalmist. Vindicate me. Uphold my claim. Clear me from suspicion. Defend my cause from the ungodly and the unjust. "Bring me to your holy hill." To the place where you dwell. Into your presence. "Why have you cast me off?"

The Psalmist is feeling cutoff and abandoned. God seems absent. And those are the feelings I want us to reflect on today. **What do we do when God seems absent? How can we hear God's leading when we are spiritually absent from God's presence?**

We do not know specifically what the Psalmist's plight is. The Psalms are songs and poems, and calls and responses, but we do not always know when they were first written or for what worship occasions they were used or where in the service.

We have a midweek small group studying the Psalms and this was one of the things we were talking about this week: Reading the Psalms is a bit like having a bulletin insert without the bulletin that it goes in; or a PowerPoint slide without the rest of the presentation.

We can let this Psalm stand on its own, or we can accept that Biblical scholars say that it really is part of a bigger song and belongs as a single poem with Psalm 42. We can see what we can glean by reading them together. Without Psalm 42, we start in the middle of the story.

So ... we are going to backtrack and read Psalms 42 and 43. <congregation read the refrain in bold>

To the leader. A Maskil of the Korahites.

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

*² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold
the face of God?*

*³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"*

*⁴ 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.*

***⁵ 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 ⁶ 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.

⁷ *Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.*

⁸ *By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.*

⁹ *I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”*

¹⁰ *As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”*

**¹¹ *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.***

¹ *Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from those who are deceitful and unjust
deliver me!*

² *For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully
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³ *O send out your light and your truth;
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⁴ *Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise you with the harp,
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**⁵ *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.***



The first thing we notice about Psalm 42 is that it starts with a superscription identifying something about the author. In fact it is one of the clues that the two Psalms are related because Psalm 43 does not have a superscription.

To the leader. A Maskil of the Korahites. OR "For the music leader, an instruction of the Korahites." The Korah were a Levite clan who led the singing and music in the temple. Not all the Psalms were written by King David! So it sounds like the author of this Psalm was a Levitical Temple Priest, probably a musician. He remembers playing his harp and participating in Temple processions. Now, he finds himself far from the temple. Perhaps it is during the exile when the Israelites were carried off to Babylon, or maybe he is experiencing a spiritual exile or some other absence from the Temple. Now as well as missing the worship, perhaps he is without his livelihood.

Psalm 42 talks about thirsting for God, as "deer longs for flowing streams" of water (42:1), and the psalmist expresses separation from "the face of God" (42:2). And he is taunted by those around him saying, "Where is your God now?" There is a longing to be in the presence of God. But God is absent. This psalm is a song for those moments when one doesn't feel like singing. Or for when atheists challenge us saying, "See! God does not exist." It is a poem of faith for those cold nights when one doesn't feel the flames of faith flickering too warmly in one's soul. It is a psalm for those times when one feels separate from God. And what person of faith hasn't felt like that? How can we hear God's leading when we are spiritually absent from God's presence?



This Psalm is what we call an individual lament Psalm, a Psalm where one person is complaining and crying out to God, expressing their emotions. I like these Psalms. Our separation from God may not be the same as the particular Psalm-writer, but that doesn't seem to matter. The Psalmist is expressing thoughts about a journey that we are all on. The longing for God – as a deer thirsts for the water transcends time and place. Yesterday was All Saints' Day, a time when we think about the cloud of witnesses that have gone before us. And it is powerful to me to think of generation upon generation who have prayed the Psalms and how God has spoken powerfully into that thirst through all times and places.

The Psalmist does three things that I'd like to point out.



FIRST. These are bold words that the Psalmist prays. Vindicate me! Uphold my claim. Clear me from suspicion. Defend my cause from the ungodly and the unjust. The Psalmist demands that vindication. He is suffering and he is being taunted and his soul feels wounded. And to cap it off, there is an apparent silence of God in the face of his troubles. And yet the Psalmist refuses to give in to despair. He invokes God's covenant promise. The covenant between God and God's people has obligations on both sides. The Psalmist is sure he has kept his part. And so he doesn't just lament, but he demands some action. He has the expectation that God will listen

and do God's part. The Psalmist is confident that God will end this exile, and that God's presence will be available.

Such questions aimed at God are not the sign of a weak faith or an absent faith. Rather, such questions are typical of the tenacious faith of the psalmists. Indeed, such challenges to God should be understood as one of the characteristic marks of true biblical faith.

And so the Psalmist speaks a bold imperative and does not give in.



SECOND. The Psalmist remembers and leans into the memories. "These things I remember" he says, as he recounts the processions into the Temple and the songs of Thanksgiving, and the throngs of people on festival days. He remembers his homelands and the deep waters and the cataracts or waterfalls around the region where the Jordan River begins. And he imagines again going to the Temple and praising God on the harp and the joy that will bring him. Even in this time of exile the joy of the Lord overwhelms him.

Our remembrances are important. Making memories and telling our God-stories in the good times gives us something to sustain us when the going gets tough. The experiences we have with God today will be the rocks that we cling to and give us hope in the future.

As part of my ordination training, I had to take some chaplaincy training and I worked in a hospital part time for 9 months. While I love ministering to people wherever they are on their faith journey, one of the things I found really hard during that time was talking to patients whose faith had been dormant for years. Folk who had been brought up in church, maybe even went to church as an adult but had not step foot in a church for years. Now they were experiencing a health crisis, but at the same time their faith was taking a shaking and they felt God was far away or non-existent. And as we'd talk and I'd ask some questions to try to tease out those past God-experiences, there was nothing there for them to pull out and name. Our experiences worshipping God in the good times Sunday after Sunday are building us up so that we have resources to draw on in the bad times. That's one reason why one of the questions on the commitment cards that you are being asked to complete for next Sunday is "How do you plan to worship God in the coming year?"

"These things I remember," said the Psalmist.



THIRD. The Psalmist verbalizes continually the hope that he has. You all read together earlier the affirming refrain words that the Psalmist used. There's power in repeating those words. A power that comes from continually affirming and telling ourselves to 'Hope in God' because are going to be reunited with God and find our thirst quenched and praises on our lips once more. We live with the tension and pain of exile and with the hope of a future within God's presence.

I remember the powerful hopeful feeling I got when I first saw this picture on the United Methodist News Service just after Hurricane Katrina. A stark picture of a t-shirt emblazed with the words "Hope in God" that someone had laid on the ground on some steps in amongst the rubble and devastation.¹

With nobody else to offer encouragement, the psalmist encourages her or himself. And the source of that encouragement is neither therapeutic nor personal -- it is theological. It must come from "outside of the self." Hope in God because God has been faithful in the past and the day is surely coming when praises will once again be heard, even words of exceeding joy.



The sense that God seems absent is a stark reality that we all face from time to time. It is easy to respond that **God is always present and that we have exiled ourselves from God.** This borders on the trite however especially to those walking through long suffering and painful experiences. The human condition is not so black and white. Our pain and suffering may make the presence of God as we have known God, difficult to find.

Finding God's presence anew amid our pain and suffering is a response of faith. And few of us can summon this faith without the support of the community around us, without the clouds of witnesses, the saints of today.

The Psalmist tells us to have hope amid the despair for in the future we will return from exile and find ourselves praising God:

*⁵ 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.

Let us pray ...

As the deer pants for the water so our souls long after you. And yet there are times when you seem absent. In the company of the clouds of witnesses this psalm is our prayer too, in our moments of exile. May we be as bold as the Psalmist in our requests to you for vindication. May we recall with thanksgiving your blessings on us and look forward with joy to more good times ahead. May we remind ourselves and know deep in our innermost being that hope is to be found in you. We praise you, our help and our God. AMEN.

¹ <http://digitalassets.umc.org/assetbank-umc/action/viewAsset?id=8456&index=106&total=180&view=viewSearchItem>

Resources

Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year A, Volume 4. Louisville: Westminster John Press, 2011.

Jacobson, Rolf. "Commentary on Psalm 43" in *Working Preacher Blog*. St. Paul: Luther Seminary, October 30, 2011.
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1083