And at Night God’s Song
is with Me

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 42:8

July 2, 2017
David and I may be a little odd. It was early on a Friday morning and I was in labor. My contractions were five minutes apart and the predicted snow had begun to fall—but we were still home! It was time to get in the car and drive to the hospital. But we did one last thing before we left: we sat at our piano and together sang a song called “As the Deer,” a song based on this morning’s Scripture. I told you, we’re probably a little odd.

We have been the recipients of God’s unmerited, gracious goodness again and again. Like every person in this sanctuary, we have also experienced heartache and grief. Some in the past and some in the present.

So why did we sing that song 21 years ago? It was our offering of worship to the Lord! God had saved David’s life from pervasive Stage 4 cancer. God had allowed us to finally conceive our older daughter after five crushing years of infertility. And so, we sang these words: “As a deer panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after Thee; You, alone, are my heart’s desire, and I long to worship You.”

When I first heard about our church’s summer theme, I didn’t have to think very long about my “Go-To” Scripture. As a child, teenager, even young adult, I frankly wasn’t that interested in the Psalter, Israel’s collection of 150 psalms. How short-sighted of me! Why didn’t I spend more time getting to know what was actually Jesus’ own prayer book? As a faithful Jewish man, the psalms are the very prayers He would have prayed! When I was a younger Christian, it was Paul’s New Testament letters which captured me.

But life got harder. More complex. More painful. I began to discover how powerfully these 150 prayers speak God’s truth and minister to us in every situation life throws our way. And now, if you were to thumb through the Bible I’ve been using since 2009, a gift of David’s parents, you would find that the pages containing the psalms are easily the most scribbled, marked and worn. In the seasons of my life where I’ve been painfully “sidelined” for purposes God has not yet made fully known, I cling to the psalms, and especially to Psalm 42.

So what do we know about the context of this particular psalm? We know it was written by a temple musician, a son of Korah, a descendent from Levi, the only priestly tribe of the 12 tribes. We don’t know exactly
where the psalmist was when he wrote this prayer. We do know that he was far from home near the rising of the Jordan River.

Here’s what we unequivocally know: the psalmist longs for God as a deer longs for water. The psalmist longs to return to the joy of corporate worship with God’s people in the temple in Jerusalem.

Psalm 42 is a psalm of LAMENT. Almost half of the 150 psalms are categorized as psalms of lament! If nothing else, we should speak more frequently about the validity and necessity of prayers of sorrow and grief. After all, we keep company with our Savior, Jesus, who prayed in Gethsemane, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow” (Matthew 26:38).

Haven’t there been times when your life was so painful that you barely made it into this sanctuary? Or maybe your suffering was so severe, you couldn’t even muster the strength to come to worship and to be with God’s people. Or maybe you were away from home on a job assignment, in college, or serving in the military, far from familiar Christian fellowship. Or maybe you needed to be anonymous and actually went to a different church entirely. Or maybe your heart was so heavy it was impossible to sing. That was me this past Christmas Eve. Everyone around me was singing “Joy to the World.” But I could not.

The author of Psalm 42 laments. We will hear what I call the three “D’s” in this psalm. Discouragement. Despair. Depression. Each of these words contains a prefix which negates the meaning of its root noun. So, for instance, “to despair” literally means to be without hope. But, as we’ll see, mercifully, HOPE, not DESPAIR, is the final word. The psalmist is confident that God, his God, is still with him. Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner calls this psalm “sadly beautiful.”

We’re going to project the Scripture onto our screens; but will you please reach for the pew Bible in front of you and turn to this Psalm? I want you to see the psalm in its entirety along with psalm 43. These two Psalms were originally one Psalm with three stanzas of five verses each.
Each stanza ends with the same refrain. I’ll read most of Psalm 42 aloud but will you join me at verse five and then again at verse 11? [If you are reading rather than listening to this sermon, will you please stop and read Psalm 42? Please also glance at Psalm 43.]

One of the reasons I love this psalm is because it is so honest: there are seasons (maybe even years) of our lives that are dominated by questions of grappling faith: “When, Lord? Where, Lord? Why, Lord? My food is nothing but tears.” And yet, we also have hope that our questions, our suffering, our pain, and our laments will not be the final word. You and I sing this by faith: “High King of heaven, my victory won.” Our victory in Christ has been won because He has conquered the grave and vanquished the Enemy. He does reign victorious, and He is coming again.

How does the psalmist’s way of praying help us pray as we very messily move back and forth between lament and hope?

I believe there is a “big picture” answer for us, and then two very practical activities we can do as we pray.

So, first, the big picture answer. We’re going to call this “soul-talk” or “self-communion.” As we read the Psalm, did you notice that the psalmist alternates between directly addressing God and speaking to himself? For instance:
To God: “My soul longs for you, O God.” (42:1)
To himself: “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” (42:5, 11: 43:5)
I think we’re pretty accustomed to thinking of prayer as directly addressing God. But how fascinating that prayer also includes this self-communion or soul-talk in God’s presence, in prayer!

John Calvin opened “The Institutes of the Christian Religion” with these words: “There is no deep knowing of God without a deep knowing of self and no deep knowing of self without a deep knowing of God.”

Similarly, Augustine wrote this: “Grant, Lord, that I may know myself that I may know Thee.”

Friends, it’s important to listen to our hearts. But it’s just as important to speak to our hearts, because our hearts can fool us, trick us, and even deceive us (Jeremiah 17:9). For instance, our hearts may be crying, “It’s hopeless!”, but we can and must speak back to our troubled hearts. We can say something like this to our hearts:
“What or whom are you hoping in? Is it wise to put so much hope in that?” The psalmist asks his soul why he is so cast down. He is listening to his despairing soul! But he also is speaking to his discouraged soul: “Hope in GOD.”

Within this soul-talk or self-communion, the psalmist engages in two activities that we can practice, as well. He remembers. He repeats. He remembers. Look again at Psalm 42 and 43. I told you that there are three stanzas, each with five verses. But these two psalms, originally one psalm, actually contain 16 verses (5 x 3 = 15!). What gives? There’s an extra verse precisely in the middle of these combined 16 verses. Look again at verse 8. Say it with 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.”

Glorious! Right in the middle of these two psalms of lament! Verse 8 says that there is not one iota of the psalmist’s life—not one waking or sleeping moment—where God is not present with him. His isolation, loneliness, grief, despair and longing—real as they are—cannot and do not nullify God’s constant presence with him. Day and night; 24/7.

Friends, God has all of your life in hand. There is nowhere you can be or go; there is nothing you are going through or will have to endure where God is not powerfully, tenderly with you.

Though tears may be your food, God is your Tear-Catcher (Psalm 56:8). Though “weeping may linger for the night, joy comes with the morning” (Psalm 30:5). You are encircled by God’s steadfast love as God literally sings over you (Zephaniah 3:17).

These truths about God are what the psalmist remembers. It’s an active, purposeful exercise of faith in the context of prayer.

His second activity under the big picture umbrella of self-communion or soul-talk is to repeat. The memory experts tell us what we intuitively know or have figured out in our educations: remembering and repeating are intricately connected. I can still quote Latin declensions and conjugations because my teacher, Miss Marcia Fay, made us endlessly repeat them. I can still play scales because my piano teacher, Mrs. Mary
Givens, required them every single lesson. Repeating aids and seals remembering.

The psalmist’s longing for the living God jogs his memory, and so he repeats, three times, the same refrain. There is power in repeating what is true about God. What do you remember about God’s faithfulness in your life? Will you repeat and speak this to your soul?

You and I could be persecuted Coptic Christians in Egypt. You and I could be part of the underground church in China making do with contraband, smuggled sections of Scripture. As we mark the 241st anniversary of the founding of our nation, we are reminded how blessed we are to worship freely.

So with that freedom, in honest faith, join with me one last time as we pray not just printed words on paper bound in a book called the Bible; join with me as we pray the very living Word of God: Psalm 42:5 ~ “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.” (Psalm 42:5, 11; Psalm 43:5)