

I

Early on in my ministry career, a man showed up in my office one afternoon and introduced himself as the newly appointed pastor of the local Methodist church. Where as I was young and green as the summer grass, he was (and still is) a wise and seasoned pastor. Before he left my office that afternoon, he invited me to join him and another local clergy colleague for breakfast later that week, and thus began a regularly weekly breakfast fellowship among three pastors.

At first, our conversations were typical small talk as we were getting to know each other, and the same kind of shop talk as I'm sure happens among colleagues in every profession. But then, one day, my friend looked me right in the eye, and he said, "Ryan, how is it with your soul?"

II

That's a different kind of question than, "How are you?" or even "How are you feeling today?" When it comes from a sister or brother in Christ, from someone who obviously knows us and loves us, that's the kind of question that causes us to pause in the middle of breakfast and do a little soul-searching.

III

And that's precisely what is happening with the psalmist in our text for this morning. This summer, we are preaching our way through the Book of Psalms. As we've said all along, the Book of Psalms isn't a book in the classical sense, but rather a collection, an anthology of prayers and poems and songs that were developed over a long period of time in biblical history.

We aren't preaching all 150 psalms this summer, but rather taking a sampling, and today, we come to Psalm 42 – wherein the psalmist is doing some soul-searching. So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God 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.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

How is it with your soul? The psalmist who penned these words in Psalm 42 would answer with a single word: thirsty.

Did you notice all of the imagery around water? As a deer longs for flowing streams. My tears have been my food. I pour out my soul.

The climate in the land of promise is largely an arid one. But far north of Jerusalem, high in the desert mountains, lies the source of the Jordan River. And as the water springs forth from the rocks and cascades down the canyons and rocks on its way south, it roars through the valley. And the trees and vegetation that grow along the banks are as green and lush as anything you'll find along similar mountain streams in the Blue Ridge.

How is it with your soul? We don't know how or why it got this way, but the soul of the psalmist is, in a word, thirsty.

IV

And I suspect that yours might be the same, my friend. The events that have transpired in 2020 around the world, around the country, indeed, right here in our city, are enough to leave anyone panting and breathless and parched.

And as we try to think about the months to come, as we try to think about how to safely return students to classrooms and whether and when to resume important events in our community that we've previously taken as a matter of course, as we try to find a balance between public safety and economic well-being, well, it's enough to wear anyone out.

As our face masks trap the Georgia heat and humidity against our mouths and noses, as the acrid smells of tear gas and spray paint linger in the air, as our nation approaches its 244th birthday still struggling to live into its founding ideals that all people were created equal by God and endowed by God with inalienable rights and are therefore entitled to equal protection under the law, as yet another election season fills the airwaves and our social media feeds with bitterness and enmity, well, it's enough to make one pass right out from exhaustion.

How is it with your soul, my friend? If the answer is "thirsty," you're not the first child of God to feel that way. If the answer is, "my tears are my food," well, you're not alone. If the answer is, "my soul is plum poured out," then maybe Psalm 42 has a word for you.

Where do you usually go when your soul is feeling parched? For the past 11 years, my family and I have been gathering at the beach with five other clergy families. Those days every year there by the ocean, those days of sharing and laughing and playing and praying with those pastors and their spouses and children, those are days that every year

that fill me up. Those few days at the beach with dear friends every year renew me and refresh me and give me strength and energy to keep on laboring in the vineyard of Jesus Christ.

But this year, because of the pandemic, it just didn't seem wise for 12 adults and 14 kids from three states to share a house for a week. And so we canceled this year, and we hope to pick up where we left off in 2021.

What about you, my friend? Where are the places that you usually go when you're feeling dry? Where do you go when you are panting like a breathless deer, longing for the presence of God? And what do you do when circumstances beyond your control prevent you from getting there?

Do you get angry? Do you get frustrated? Do you get bitter? Do you despair? Those are all understandable responses.

But the psalmist invites you to do something else - to remember. To remember the places where you have found the flowing streams of God in the past. To remember the places where you have heard deep call to deep, when God's billows and the waves have washed over you and the sound has filled your ears. To remember the sound of the throng, the great multitude in procession, keeping festival, singing praises to God.

The kind of remembering the psalmist invites you to is not nostalgia, my friend. This is not pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye. This is the kind of remembering that is foolish, maybe even dangerous, because it dares to say, "Yes, this is how things are now, dry and parched and dying of thirst, but this is not how things were meant to be, and it's not how they shall be in days to come."

One of my favorite movies is *The Shawshank Redemption*, which tells the story of a man named Andy who was falsely accused and wrongly convicted of a double homicide and sent to prison. At one point, Andy manages to lock himself in the prison office and to broadcast a beautiful piece of classical music over the prison's loudspeaker system, and for his stunt, he is punished with a month in solitary confinement. When he returns, his fellow inmates ask him about his time in the "hole," and he says, "It wasn't too bad. I had Mozart to keep me company." And his incredulous friends say, "They let you tote that record player down there?" To which Andy replies, "No, it was in here. It was in here."

And he looks at his friends and says, "Don't you have something deep inside that they can't get to? That they can't touch?" And a friend says, "What are you talking about?" And Andy says simply, "Hope."

Hope in God, says the psalmist. For I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

My friend, if your soul is feeling parched like I think it is, I hope you'll remember what it's like to drink deeply from God's well. Not with nostalgia or sentimentality, but with brave, fierce, faithful hope that you will drink again. My prayer is that you will remember who and whose you are, that you are God's precious child, and there is nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation that can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

V

And as we look around together, as we live and move and have our being as First Presbyterian Church, there are some thirsty souls out there. There are some parched people on these streets. Jesus says that blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Jesus says that when we give so much as a cold drink of water to these who are our sisters and brothers, we give it to him.

So let us remember, friends. Not with nostalgia or sentimentality. Not with rose-colored glasses. Let us remember who and whose we are. While we wait and long for the day when we can join the festal procession again, the prophet Micah reminds us that we don't need festivals and ceremonies to know what is right. The Lord has shown us what is good. And what does the Lord require of us, in season and out, in times of drought and in times of flood, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

So let us remember who and whose we are, friends, not with mourning and despair, but with hope.

Hope that is not placed in any human institution or group or candidate. Hope that is not placed in our own human capabilities.

But with hope that is in God, in whom deep calls to deep, whose billows wash over us, hope that acknowledges that our souls may be downcast and disquieted and thirsty and dry, that mourning and crying and pain and death are real, but they are not and never will be the final things for those who are in Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.