

Sermon, March 10, 2024
Psalm 42:1-9

“Deep Calls to Deep”

The Psalms are poetry, and it is one of the two Old Testament books most quoted in the New Testament- the other being the Book of Isaiah. They display a wide range of human experience in relationship with God. In the words of one biblical scholar, “The psalms speak of God’s work of creation, judgement, and salvation. They speak of the glory, mystery, and misery of the human condition”. They sing praises to God. They also cry out for God’s help in times of trouble, and for those times when God seems to be nowhere around. They express an awareness of God’s light, and lament hours of spiritual and emotional darkness.

This morning’ psalms are known as psalms of lamentation; they are a cry for God to make Himself known in a time of distress. Psalm 42 begins with the statement, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God; for the living God. Perhaps we have all known those times when we have felt a yearning to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, a connectedness to something that gives a feeling of purpose and meaning to our lives. I think you will find that in most people. You have no doubt heard people say, I am spiritual but not religious”. This tells us that even those who have no affiliation with the Church, or any form of organized religion, still feel the desire or yearning for that greater something. For me, and I assume you as well, that greater something is God - but not just any God, but, as the psalm reads, “the living God”. “When shall I come and behold the face of God?”, the psalmist laments, which we might interpret as a longing to know “the peace that passes all understanding”.

The psalmist refers to that yearning as thirst. Just as the parched body cries out for water, the soul cry’s out to the shepherd who leads us beside still waters, which in this case we can think of as a sense of the presence of God.

This psalm was written at a time when the Israelites were surrounded by foreign powers who had no regard or belief in that living God. “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually “Where is your God?” This is later echoed when Jesus hangs on the cross and he is mocked by others standing there, saying, “He saved others, let him save himself, if he is the Messiah of God, the chosen one.” It is so easy to doubt in the face of tragedy, suffering and pain! The writer of this psalm feels downcast because others are mocking his faith, but I’m sure there are times in our own lives, when we may feel overwhelmed by circumstances, and we find ourselves asking, ‘where is my God?’

In verse 5 the psalmist remembers times when there were great celebrations of the living God there in the midst of all things, and, so, he asks, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" Undoubtedly, we can remember times when we felt like all is well with the world, and that God was with us, but then circumstances change, and we begin to doubt. Verse 9 reads, "I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me?" Again, this echoed from the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Even Jesus had those moments when God felt a million miles away, or had turned his back on him, so to speak.

In verse 7 we hear, "Deep calls to deep". In biblical terms the 'deep' can refer to times of disaster and great disaster, but I think it can also refer to that deepest part of ourselves calling out to the great spiritual depth that is God. The medieval mystic, St. John of the Cross, wrote extensively on what he calls 'the dark night of the soul', a time when we feel ourselves totally disconnected from God or any sense of the sacred. But such a time is not necessarily a bad thing. As Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote, "Often it is when we are in the dark that we grow the most". It is a time for deep self-reflection, maybe a time to confront our own inner demons, forces within that may blind us to the sacredness that surrounds us. It's not always easy, or pleasant. As Dag Hammarskjöld wrote, "the longest journey is the journey inward". We might think of that journey as a long dark tunnel that eventually opens to that brilliant divine light that Psalm 43 calls for.

I'm not sure why, but in this time of year I seem to get caught up in all things Irish, and of late I have spent some time reading about Celtic spirituality, which informs us that we must open ourselves to the fact that the sacred is found in all things, particularly in nature. As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in perhaps his best-known poem, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil..."

Sometimes I think we allow our feelings or emotions to get in the way - but faith is ultimately not an emotional state, but a simple trust that the living God is with us, and for us, regardless of what we may be feeling. Sometimes it seems to be like a toddler learning to walk. At first a parent holds her hands as she strives to find balance, but then the parent lets go allowing the child to stand and walk on her own. This does not mean the child is now all alone. The parent is still present, and if the child falls the parent is there to help her to get back up. Likewise, God wants us to find our own balance and strength, to walk through the world with confidence, yet mindful that God is not far off and ready to help us up when we fall. We are also invited to open our spiritual eyes and see the grandeur of God that surrounds us! Amen.

Let us pray: Grant, O God, that the ears, which have heard the voice of your song may be closed to the voice of clamor and dispute; that the eyes which have seen your great love may also behold your blessed hope; that the tongues which have sung your praise may speak the truth; that the feet which have walked your temple may walk in the region of light; and that the bodies which have felt your loving presence may be restored in newness of life. Glory be to you, O God! Amen.