

July 14, 2024

Psalm 42: The Message

A white-tailed deer drinks from the creek;

I want to drink God, deep drafts of God.

I'm thirsty for God-alive.

I wonder, “Will I ever make it—arrive and drink in God’s presence?”

I'm on a diet of tears—tears for breakfast, tears for supper.

All day long people knock at my door,

Pestering, “Where is this God of yours?”

These are the things I go over and over, emptying out the pockets of my life.

I was always at the head of the worshiping crowd, right out in front,

Leading them all, eager to arrive and worship,

Shouting praises, singing thanksgiving—celebrating, all of us, God’s feast!

Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul? Why are you crying the blues?

Fix my eyes on God—soon I’ll be praising again.

He puts a smile on my face. He’s my God.

When my soul is in the dumps, I rehearse everything I know of you,

From Jordan depths to Hermon heights, including Mount Mizar.

Chaos calls to chaos, o the tune of whitewater rapids.

Your breaking surf, your thundering breakers crash and crush me.

Then GOD promises to love me all day, sing songs all through the night!

My life is God’s prayer.

Sometimes I ask God, my rock-solid God, “Why did you let me down?

Why am I walking around in tears, harassed by enemies?”

They’re out for the kill, these tormentors with their obscenities,

Taunting day after day, “Where is this God of yours?”

Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul? Why are you crying the blues?

Fix my eyes on God—soon I’ll be praising again.

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This reading is from the *Message* version of the Bible. It was Eugene Peterson who translated the Bible using modern language and idioms and expressions that we would use today. Instead of translating word for word, he translates thought for thought. It took him a decade to do it! One person who noticed his translation and loved it was the lead singer of the band U2, Bono. Bono loved it so much he asked to meet with Peterson. (And it was kind of cute because Peterson had no idea who Bono was — and even when he did find out he said no, because he was too busy and had too many deadlines. Eventually they did meet. I want you to listen in to part of their conversation that took place at Peterson’s house.

<https://youtu.be/-l40S5e90KY?si=blq1xW92EWsuKk1h&t=749>

When I was a young woman in my mid-twenties going through seminary, I did a Clinical Pastoral Education unit as a chaplain at the Scarborough General Hospital. I was assigned two units for the summer — the long-term care unit and the ICU. They were

very different units. The long-term care might be how you would expect hospital visits to be. I would connect with patients and visit with them and pray with them. I got to know many of them because many were there for a long time. The ICU however was a whole different ballgame. The Scarborough General is a major hospital. I rarely connected with the patients in the ICU because they were usually on life support. Whether there from a car accident, an overdose, a major stroke or cardiac arrest, attempted suicide, or some other kind of trauma, the patients were all struggling to live. My role was to be present for the families. I was there not only to learn about how to do pastoral care in challenging situations, but also to learn about myself. Part of the day was working on the units and the other part of the day was writing verbatims and reflecting on them in a group with others in the program. You learn about how you respond to things and why. That's important, because you bring yourself and your baggage into these situations. And that's okay, even good! But if you are not self-aware, it's harder to help another.

I have a lot of memories from that time. I remember once meeting with a man whose father had come in after having a sudden and massive stroke. His father was not going to live. He was healthy and enjoying life one day and on life support with only hours left the next. I remember talking with this man, and somehow the longer we talked, the more we were laughing and making jokes about things. Then I had a little self-awareness bubble. I thought to myself "Oh no — he's like me! He deals with pain through laughter!" I'm a number 7 on the Enneagram and I'm someone who likes to avoid pain at all costs. I suddenly realized he probably was too. Everyone deals with pain and grief differently, and that's okay ... but I knew in that moment that he needed me to help him face and not avoid the pain. Somehow, I managed to move the conversation directly into the pain and the loss. As I did, the tears came, and the fears were named. I said a prayer with him. I didn't solve his problems, but I was able to sit with him in a place of pain.

I remember another time when I was paged to come to the ICU and when I arrived on the floor, I heard wailing. I checked in at the nursing station, but I knew what they wanted me to do. A family had just received word that their loved one had died. A large group were in a little family visiting room, wailing at the top of their lungs. Scarborough General is a very multicultural hospital and this family reflected that. I have to admit I wasn't much use. I sat and stayed with them. I resisted the urge to say "Oh, there goes my pager, sorry gotta go!" I was overwhelmed by the number of them and the level of their expression of pain. Truthfully, I don't think they really needed me. I think the nurses needed me to deal with them, but I don't think they needed me to help them in their grief and time of loss. They knew what to do. They came together and they openly and honestly expressed the excruciating pain of their loss. It could be that I needed them.

Individuals and cultures deal with pain differently, and over the years I have come to appreciate that memory and that way of grieving. Not only appreciate it, but wonder

what we are missing by not knowing how to grieve? The white western culture likes to approach every aspect of life rationally — you know, stiff upper lip— but very little about grief is rational. It feels more like being hit by a giant tidal wave than an organized process. Experiencing loss is inevitable. Our whole life long we experience loss. Some losses are small, like moving from high school to college, university or the workplace. Some losses are huge — like the death of someone we love or the breakup of a relationship or the loss of home from wildfire, flooding or war.

Richard Rohr said an interesting thing: that for the most part *we humans, especially in the west, would rather be angry than sad.* We really don't like tears and pain and we move quickly try to control and to fix things. But there are some things that can't be fixed. Even if there are steps that might be taken to prevent a future similar loss, you still can't change what happened. *He shouldn't have died. It shouldn't be this way.*

This week Skibicki was found guilty of first-degree murder in the killing of Morgan Harris, Mercedes Myran, Rebecca Contois and a woman known as Buffalo Woman. They found that he deliberately targeted vulnerable indigenous women who were living in homeless shelters. How do we respond to this? Instead of fixing and controlling, we need to **start with acknowledging the pain.** How is this possible? It shouldn't be this way. *My God!*

A congregation member I was talking with this past week told me that when they read the Psalms they think of Ukraine and they think of Gaza. I do too. I think that's exactly where the reading the Psalms should take us. Hearing the news of the attempted assassination of Donald Trump yesterday is front of mind too. It just feels like a powder keg. We'll talk about anger and enemies and revenge in the Psalms next week, but this week we reflect on the Psalms that dare to cry out: *"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?!"* If I were to use one word to describe the Psalms, it would be **honesty.**

One author I read during my doctorate talked about the Blues — as in the music genre — and he said that **"the essential ingredient of the blues is not sadness, but honesty."** (The Jazz of Preaching by Kirk Byron Jones, Location 173.) He added that our task as preachers and as Christians is to reflect a "Holy Honesty." The Psalms give us permission to be honest with God and to tell God and the world what we are really feeling. Sometimes that's where we are, and *sometimes we place ourselves in another's shoes and cry out with them and for them.* We stand in the shoes of a grandmother in Ukraine and cry with her from Psalm 74: *"You walked off and left us, and never looked back. God, how could you do that? While your people were at worship, your enemies barged in, brawling and scrawling graffiti. They set fire to the porch; axes swing, they chopped up the woodwork, beat down the doors with sledgehammers, then split them into kindling. ... Mark and remember, God, all the enemy taunts, each idiot desecration. Don't throw your lambs to the wolves! After all we've been through, don't forget us! Remember your promises! The city is in darkness, the countryside violent. Don't leave the victims to rot in the street; make them a choir*

that sings your praises! On your feet, O God — stand up for yourself! Do you hear what they're saying about you, all the vile obscenities? Don't tune out their malicious filth, the brawling invective that never lets up." (Psalm 74, selected verses)

Here's the thing. If you are not honest about the pain inside of you, then it is incredibly difficult to move through it and to heal. That pain will remain and likely fester and come out in harmful ways. **If you are not honest about the pain and the injustice in the world, it will continue to wreak havoc.** Why is it so hard to lament? *Lament* means to give expression to pain and loss. It can feel like too powerful an emotion. It can feel like the grief will overwhelm us and threaten to drown us. Again, our society often doesn't help us. Even our *churches* often don't help. We lean towards wanting to be "shiny happy people" or "happy, clappy chappies." But our lives are messy.

A woman who dearly loved this church and attended weekly before she passed told me that the church was her safe place. Her husband was abusive. Every week she would dress up her children (and she had a mitt full!) and bring them to church. Eventually she had the courage to leave him, which wasn't easy. I asked if she had shared this with people at church and her response was "Oh no!" Every week she would put on a brave face and come. I am so grateful that this was a place of refuge for her, a space that felt safe physically — but I wish it was a space where she might have felt safe sharing the reality and the pain of her situation at home. It might have helped her to get out of the situation sooner. It might not have. Sometimes we can't fix other people's pain, but I'd like to think she would not have felt so alone in the middle of it if she had felt safe to share. I would like to think that it's a little better today. We have created more of a culture of saying "We all have hurts and challenges. You are not alone."

The Psalms give us a vessel, a container in which to hold our pain. We read them and know we are not alone. Journal, sing, join a support group, get counselling. Read the Psalms and feel the emotions. Give expression to your grief! **Jesus** used the vessel of the Psalms to help him through his time of spiritual and physical agony on the cross. It is likely that he wasn't just quoting Psalm 22 ... he was probably singing a hymn. Jesus was using the Psalms to call on the community of saints to weep and rage with him: "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me!*" Did he really think he was abandoned by God? Probably not. But I am certain that is honestly how he felt. Jesus wasn't afraid to name it and cry out — and in so doing he remembers that he is not alone. Others have felt this pain. Jesus in that moment also knew the pain you are experiencing today and the pain of a wrecked and bleeding and broken world.

Now let's listen to a song written by Bono based on Psalm 40. As he sings "How long to sing this song; How long to sing this song?" we hear the lament that things are as they are, but we also hear a trust that God is present. "I will sing, sing a new song." Because that is the promise. In your grief you won't go back to how things used to be ... but God will carry you through and bring you to a new place and give you a new son.

Thanks be to God. Amen.