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"Deep Calling," a sermon on Psalm 42 preached by Rev. Abigail Henderson at First UCC in Northfield on Nov. 10, 2013.

I was raised on National Public Radio. Like Marcel Proust and his madeleine cookie, the opening bars of "All Things Considered" transport me instantly to a specific time and place from childhood. I can be anywhere, doing anything--driving in my car, cleaning the kitchen--and in a flash, I'm about ten years old. I'm in the living room of my family's cabin in far upstate New York--virtually Canada.

Through the large bay window, I can see the late-afternoon sun shining across the wide St. Lawrence River. Thanks to the cabin's open-air design, my parents and I are all together under the pine ceiling. My father is making supper. My mother is at the kitchen table, working on an art project. My sweet old cat is purring against me, and I'm reading a book. The memory isn't idyllic, exactly. In fact, I distinctly remember Linda Wertheimer's even keel as she reports on the civil war in Somalia. I don't really understand what she's talking about, but I do know this: the world out there is dangerous, but for the moment I am safe and sound.

My remembrance is so real--the smell of cedar trees and sauteed onions, the sound of the river lapping against the shore, the melancholy tones of the "All Things Considered" theme. And it's all gone. Well, that's not entirely true: the river is still there, and hopefully will be for a long time. But my father has died. The cabin was sold a few years ago. My ties to that to that landscape--to that entire region of the country--are severed.

(Even Linda Wertheimer has moved on to be an NPR senior national correspondent.)

I must say, I'm not generally a nostalgic person. I don't long for childhood, and I love my adopted homeland of Minnesota. I'm pleased to be right here, in this place and time. But "All Things Considered" will always evoke in me the most intense yearning, almost beyond words. It's a profound sadness co-mingled with love, co-mingled with shock at the passage of time and the changing of circumstances.

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

The psalm writer probably didn't have NPR theme music in mind when composing those verses. But that's the beauty of the psalms: they are rooted in historical context, yet remarkably translatable across space and time.

Psalm 42 is a vividly painted portrait of longing. It is the story of one who feels abandoned by God, written by someone in the depths of their despair. Biblical scholars imagine a Job-like figure behind these words and images: a faithful man of God who has fallen ill, who can't go on pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem, whose naysayers assume his suffering is a form of divine retribution. The God who appears elsewhere in the Psalms--"the ever-present help in times of trouble"--is nowhere to be found here.

I think it can sometimes be challenging for post-modern, progressive people of faith to relate to the agony of this psalm. We don't necessarily take God for granted the way our spiritual ancestors did. We are trained to be critical thinkers; to question; to explore; to debate the very nature of reality. For some in this sanctuary--including myself--it is more radical to speak of a present God than an absent one. A God who is real and palpable. A God who is indeed still speaking.

Whether you experience God as near or far, or both, I do suspect that we *all* know what it means feel abandoned. To be left in the dust. To feel as if something is missing, that the world is not how it should be, that something is terribly broken.

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?'

We've all been that thirsty deer. (Incidentally, I don't want to carry that metaphor too far, as I heard on MPR yesterday that deer hunting season just opened.)

The point is, we've all known profound yearning. Some of us know it intimately, right now.

It can be tempting to rush to quench our thirst. To skip ahead to another, happier psalm, a song of praise and thanksgiving, to words that reassure us that everything is OK. But if we do that, we might overlook that this psalm of lamentation *is also* a psalm of thanksgiving. There is profound gratitude to be in these verses. And let's be clear: the psalmist isn't giving thanks for his suffering. He's not saying, "Wow, this is awful, but it's making me a better person," or "God must be trying to teach me a valuable lesson." No! The psalmist is miserable! It's not good!

What the psalmist is grateful for is remembrance: the memory of being among a throng of worshipers--leading them, in fact!--and singing praises.

> *My soul is cast down within me;*
> *therefore I remember you*
> *from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,*
> *from Mount Mizar.*

It is as if those memories--however distant, however removed from the current situation--carve out the possibility of hope in an otherwise desperate time. The memories make space where there wasn't any before.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we simply turn to our good memories in times of trouble. For one thing, individual memory is flawed and mutable. For some, the ability to remember--to recreate the past--diminishes with age and illness.

But in the world of the psalms, nothing is individual.

Let me explain; when I read the psalms, they are written with such raw honesty that I can forget they are not diary entries, private confessions. On the contrary--they are the exact opposite. The psalms are hymns, meant to be experienced collectively and musically in worship. So in other words, the expressions and actions of the psalms happen in community. We yearn, together.

We tell our stories, together. We remember for ourselves and for each other, together. We are all in this, together. Our most beloved sacrament--the communion of bread and cup--is an act of remembrance that no one person can accomplish by his or herself.

In this day and age, Christianity is no longer the civic religion; we could easily choose to spend our Sundays differently. We could get more sleep, more work done, more recreation, more time to ourselves. But deep yearning calls us into this sanctuary instead. And remember what the psalm tells us: deep calls to deep. Our yearnings draw us toward one another, and toward that thing we name as God. The shape of our yearnings tell us something about the shape of our God.

For me, the experience of God has *something* to do with the wide St. Lawrence River and North Country Public Radio, although I may never experience the two in combination ever again in my life.

What are your tenderest spots? Your bittersweet losses? Your pangs and poignancies?

What might they have to do with God?

What does God’s song within you sound like?

Amen.