

Searching for God

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Psalm 42

April 24, 2022

I'm grateful to be able to offer a pause from preaching for Pastors Cindy and Lauren after the special duties and services of Holy Week. They so much deserve a break. Just be aware, I haven't preached in a long time, so please lower your expectations accordingly.

For this first Sunday after Easter, I've chosen a scripture from the Book of Psalms. Of all the books in the Bible, the psalms have the best opening lines. Of course there's the beloved and comforting opening of Psalm 23 "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.", which is in sharp contrast to the opening of the preceding psalm, Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." words that haunt holy week.

There's Psalm 130, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, Lord hear my voice." To which the opening of Psalm 46 responds "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." These words of faith and hope speak to us across millennia to our own troubled time of war and pandemic.

As powerful and needed as these opening lines are, none of them are as alive as the opening from Psalm 42 that we just heard. "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." Or as I first learned it from the Kings James Version, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul for thee, O God. My soul searcheth for God, for the living God."

In the hymn based on this psalm that we'll sing in a little while, the deer is panting because it's "heated in the chase". So imagine a hunt with dogs baying and hunters crashing through the woods as they close in on a deer that's running for its life.

The hunt is loud and chaotic, a swirl of action. In contrast to this chaos, there are the water brooks, the flowing streams. The deer longs for this place of safety and refreshment beyond the reach of the baying pack and hunters. In this quiet place, the deer will find peace.

Having set the scene, the psalmist brings us into it by telling us that in our own longing for God, we are like the deer longing for the water brooks. Indeed, in our world where there is so much chaos and the news is so frequently exhausting, it's easy to identify with the deer's longing for peace and refreshment. For the psalmist, this is longing for God, and it naturally leads to the question at the end of the third verse of the psalm, "Where is your God?"

That's the question I want us to ask ourselves: Where is your God? Where's mine? I encourage you to think how you'd answer this question for yourself. And please don't get hung up on what you mean or don't mean by God or experiencing God's presence. Such questions are vital, but let's leave them for another time. For now, let's just keep our minds open and remember times when we've felt transcendent mystery or been drawn towards holy wonder.

I suspect that together we'd come up with many examples of such times. I think of years ago in the Boundary Waters. I was lucky enough to be up there camping beside a lake with some friends on a night when the northern lights exploded above us. A friend of mine and I went out on to the lake in a canoe for a better view.

The lake was perfectly still, so we could see the lights dancing in the water as well as in the sky. It was overwhelming. Whatever it means to experience God's presence, that was it for me. We are fortunate that such experiences can come to us in nature, "The Heavens tell of the glory of God." as the 8th Psalm tells us. They also come in the arts, especially, I believe, in music, in the faces of loved ones, in the stillness inside of ourselves, in so many ways. They are all blessings.

There's another kind of experience that answers our longing for God and has a long tradition in the faith. I'll call it spontaneous prayer, times when you just find yourself praying. Not planned, no conscious intent, it just happens.

I often find myself praying like this just before I visit someone in the hospital. I pray for their healing, and I pray that I can find words to bring help and comfort.

One can call it an expression of faith, but the truth is that it just happens. Think about your own visiting loved ones and friends who are ill, or what it's like when you're waiting for your own medical test results. I don't think spontaneous prayers are unusual at all.

Sometimes such prayers come as we and our loved ones face major events in our lives, when we yearn for God with the passion of the deer panting for water brooks. On the other hand, sometimes they come at places and in ways that you would never expect, reminding us that we can find God through laughter, just as we can find God through tears.

In this regard, the oddest such spontaneous prayer I've ever experienced was one that came to me at our younger son's little league games years ago. He hadn't gotten a hit in a long time. I knew it was bothering him, so it was also bothering me. It must have been bothering me a lot because the first time he was up to bat, I found myself praying he'd get a hit. I'm not greedy, I wasn't praying for a home run, just give him a hit, any hit will do. Four years of college, three years of seminary, and my theology had led to praying my son would get a hit. At least it was real.

Was my prayer answered? I won't keep you in heartless suspense. After a ball and a strike, he took matters into his own hands. He leaned way out over the plate, and got himself hit by a pitch. The umpire awarded him first base. Our son's team mates cheered, and he grinned. Not exactly what I was praying for, but close enough, as answers to prayers often are.

Let's return to the question "Where is your God?" The psalmist writes, "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."

What's going on here? Scholars tell us that the psalmist is in exile far away from Jerusalem and is remembering the joy of being in the temple there. The psalmist longs to return home from this exile, to once again be in the house of God.

Of course we don't call this place where we are right now a temple, and this Sunday after Easter isn't exactly a festival Sunday with a throng and a procession,

but these differences don't really matter. Like the temple in Jerusalem, this church in Northfield is a house of God. And like the psalmist, we come here seeking God. Lest we began to feel a little full of ourselves, being like the psalmist and all that, remember that we are also a bowl of Froot Loops, and we're seeking God among Froot Loops. Again, about as real as we can get.

And actually, among the Froot Loops is just the place to be if you're longing for God. Yes, experiences of transcendence and wonder can happen anywhere - from the hospital, to the boundary waters, to a little league ballpark - but if you're seeking God, day in day out, this is the place to be. Here we worship in forms of prayer and music, word and sacrament, that for millennia have been ways that humankind has sought to draw close to God. This is indeed the house of God.

There's more. I suspect that if somebody asked you why you come to this church, you'd likely begin by describing the worship services and how meaningful they are to you. True. I would too. But I don't think you'd finish your answer before also saying that you come here because you like being with the other people here. I know I'd say that.

And I think that's the way it should be. As we learned in Sunday school, the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is the people. One loop doesn't make a bowl; one person doesn't make a church. We need to be together and to worship together. And worshipping together, being with the people, is yet another way that we answer our longing for God.

It's also a way that our experiences of God are translated into action. We draw close to those we worship with, so that when they are hurting, we want to help them. In our helping, which can be as practical as bringing a meal, we express our care. In so doing, we also open ourselves to an experience of God. To paraphrase a verse from 1st John, "You can't love the God whom you do not see, unless you love your neighbor whom you do see."

As we have seen again and again at our church, these actions of caring for other people don't stop at First UCC, Northfield. They extend beyond our walls, into our community, and as we can into the world. Experiencing God means that we do things, try to live out the simple words we pray every Sunday, "Thy will be done." Doing God's will has taken this church on a journey of justice making, which can itself be an experience of God.

Finally, sometimes the reality is that in spite of all the ways God may be experienced, there are times when we come up empty, when our longing for God remains unsatisfied. I think that this is especially true in these difficult times of war and pandemic. At such times, I encourage us all to hold fast to the words of today's anthem to keep hope alive and to the final words of Psalm 42, "Hope in God, I shall yet praise him, my help and my God." May it be so.