

Sermon: Sunday, June 19, 2022 – Psalms 42 and 43
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

A good story – whether it's fiction or non-fiction, an oral tradition that has been kept alive for generations or an off-the-cuff recounting of what happened to you five minutes ago – is one that has a point of contact with the listener/reader. It may touch on shared experiences that the recipient has also had, or it may just be told in a relatable way.

Today's reading from Psalm 42 and 43 – considered by most Bible scholars to actually be one continuous poem that for reasons unknown got separated into two – has significant relatability, some of which will be welcome, some not. Prepare yourself for both.

Psalm 42 draws us in immediately, with the image of a deer thirsting for water as a simile for the writer's desperate desire to be refreshed by God. We live in a place where we don't have to imagine what deer or elk (or, recently, grizzlies) look like, they are part of our common daily experience, so this opening image from nature invites us to reach in, to something we *know*.

How many of us, at some level, feel extra-close to God in nature? Whether it is one of these massive, majestic protrusions of rock that make us feel amazingly small and impermanent... or wee little creatures that nestle into the damaged bark of a tree, or tiny shoots that push their way through the soil... or the sound of rushing waters, the scent of evergreens, the thrilling variety of birdsong... or things we need to be wary of, like big creatures and noxious plants and sudden changes in weather and sharp cliffs... in all of this, there is something about the complexity and diversity of nature that affirms a notion of sacred presence. That connection between the Divine and all living things may be central and integral, as in the traditions and sacred stories of Indigenous Peoples <insert invitation here, to the Tuesday night presentation/workshop with Gloria Snow in which she will share some of the Stoney Nakoda spiritual tradition> or it may take the form of stirrings of the soul, a sense of being at home, or in the midst of harmony, or part of the circle of life, when in natural surroundings where things are living and dying and being renewed. Shaped in so many ways, touching our bodies, minds and spirits at so many levels, there is something about nature that we recognize as Holy.

This also underlines why stewardship of nature – our careful use of natural resources, our protection of wildlife corridors and endangered species, our caution about what goes into the atmosphere and the water and the soil, even our generating solar power on the Church roof – are spiritual issues. If we truly sense God's presence amidst the flora and fauna of these beautiful lands, how could we possibly imagine desecrating those same lands?

As a child growing up in the United Church, some of the most beloved Children's Hymns were those that sing of the ways that God's presence is revealed in nature, and we sung one of those at the beginning of today's service ("This is God's Wondrous World" - Voices United #296). Just because it's Father's Day, please indulge me as I share the male-gendered words of the second stanza as I first learned them (The Hymnary, 1930, #589):

"This is my Father's world, The birds their carols raise,
 The morning light, the lily white, Declare their maker's praise.
 This is my Father's world, He shines in all that's fair;
 In the rustling grass I hear Him pass; He speaks to me everywhere".

That sense of God's presence in birdsong and wind and flowers nestled into my young heart, even as a city kid who spent very little time in the wilds. "In the rustling grass I hear God pass" – what a beautiful image of a very present God, and what a lovely way to connect to a

child's sense of wonder. Through poetry and hymnody, the presence of God the Creator, God the Earthmother, is connected to the elements of nature and the rhythms of the seasons.

One of the places where these Psalms may come a bit too close for comfort, is the way that the image of water flows through them. This past week we've been watching the water levels, and for those who experienced catastrophic water flows nine years ago in the flood of 2013, this use of water imagery might not be the happiest thing you could hear right now. Fr. R.A.F. MacKenzie, in his commentary on the Psalms, muses on the seasonal water flow in Israel and how that helps us understand these Psalms. For part of the year, there's a significant snow-cap on some of the higher mountains, like Mount Hermon (7300 ft) which is referenced in the Psalm; in winter, many streams are rushing torrents; and in summer, when the temperatures are high and the water levels are low, a deer would literally be panting after the refreshment of water, with many creek beds bone dry at that time of year.

Again, both from our recent up-close experience with snow melt and variable water levels, and with our ability to picture an animal seeking fresh water in dry season, this further clarifies and hones that first image in the Psalm: as a deer pants after water when the streams are but a trickle, there are dry times in our lives when the search for God is challenging and acute.

For some, this past two years has included a significant amount of spiritual rest and refreshment, perhaps even the freedom to try out new spiritual practices. For others of us, including me, it was pretty dry. While I didn't struggle to write sermons and preach them for our YouTube services at the height of the pandemic, I found personal prayer incredibly difficult. Thank goodness we had our Tuesday morning prayer group, and I was always welcome at the Healing Pathway prayer group as well, because when I had to initiate prayer without someone else giving me the starting point, I would come to the river, and the river was dry.

Such dry times are not unusual in one's spiritual life. They can be weeks long, or even years long; these are not "abnormal" things. There may or may not be a specific event that triggers the dryness, and there may or may not be a clear path out of it, though, thankfully, the dry patches do tend to come to an end.

We find this ebb and flow in the structure of the dual Psalm we're looking at this morning. Peter Craigie outlined in his commentary the pattern of these Psalms, going back and forth between lament and a statement of faith, and portrays this as the writings of a person of faith who is hashing it out in their own mind. First they remember (42:2-5) with longing, how great it was to be worshipping in the Temple and they lament that they cannot do so now. Whether the author is in Exile or imprisoned or in some way cut off from Jerusalem is not clear, but what is clear is that they loved being in the holy Sanctuary where they felt the Spirit of the Living God, and that they cannot be there now. A bit later in Psalm 42 (verses 7-11), the author brings to mind special places where they had known God – places in nature. At the Jordan River, at Mount Hermon, and at a mysterious rise of land called Mount Mizar, which nobody can place with certainty, the author compares the great likelihood of finding God in those places, and the despair at not locating God anywhere right now. And then in Psalm 43 (verses 1-4), the internal debate about these things gets turned outward, as the Psalmist reaches out to God in prayer, seeking assistance in their present circumstances, and reassurance that God is listening. And at the end of each of these three sections (42:6, 42:12, 43:5), is a statement of faith, "Wait for God! For I will again give thanks to my God for God's saving intervention" - as if the author is saying to self, "snap out of it! The God who was present before will be present again!" There is longing for the temple, then a glimmer of

faith. There is longing for sacred places in nature, then a glimmer of faith. There is a reach-out to God, a message tossed into the heavens with hopes of reply, then a final glimmer of faith, and a plea for God to remain present.

That to-and-fro motion is often how it goes in our spiritual lives. In the same way that other important things might have ebbs and flows – friendships, job satisfaction, even a marriage – so does this yearning to be close to God. Sometimes things are open, the flow is there, contemplative solitude with God can be found and it is enlivening; at other times it is strained, forced, even artificial. And while there is no easy fix to get back on track, I share these words from the Dutch spiritual guide Henri Nouwen who wrote about a change in perspective that can often show us the path back to God:

“For most of my life” he wrote, “I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life—pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures—and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair.

“Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not ‘How am I to find God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be found by him?’ The question is not ‘How am I to know God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be known by God?’ And, finally, the question is not ‘How am I to love God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be loved by God?’ God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home.”

Perhaps that needs to be the final word in answer to these ageless Psalms, and their description of our yearning for God. There are aspects of our spiritual journey that do involve seeking, doing, trying to find that life-giving water. But that doesn’t tell the whole story: in addition to our seeking, God desires to find us, God urges us to open up even as we seek. It’s not just that I need God to feel personally fulfilled, it’s that the spiritual sum total in the Universe is less than it should be if I am disconnected from God, and from other people, and from the earth, and there is a holy urging that wants to unify.

So may you seek the Divine presence, as a deer pants after flowing water; and may you open yourself to God’s presence, whether that is found in nature or in relationships or when we gather in this sanctuary. May you be found even as you seek to find. Amen.

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