

“Soul Thirst”

Luke 8:26-39; 1 Kings 19:1-13; Psalm 42:1-6

Mills River Presbyterian Church

Psalm 42:1-6

¹As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and behold the face of God?

³My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”

⁴These 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.

⁵Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help ⁶and my God.

1 Kings 19:1-15

¹King Ahab told his wife Jezebel all that the prophet Elijah had done, and how Elijah had killed all the prophets [of their false gods] with the sword.

²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.”

³Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. ⁴But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree.

He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁰He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed

your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

¹¹He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Luke 8:26-39

²⁶[Jesus and his disciples] arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him.

For a long time the man had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house, but in the tombs. ²⁸When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— ²⁹for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man.

(For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)

³⁰Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. ³¹They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

³²Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

³⁴When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.

³⁵Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.

³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

The Sermon

People had lived in the land where Jesus lived for more than 4500 years before he was born. And even in those unimaginably distant times, they made staples like wine, and olive oil; and to carry and transport those staples—not to mention the endless need for water—they made clay pots and jars in various sizes and shapes.

Much of the ancient writing that has survived from those millennia has been found on potsherds: shards of broken jars and pots that have proven to be amazingly durable, long after the pottery they came from was smashed to pieces.

That was not an uncommon medium for writing during those centuries—the broken shards that had once been usable pottery.

Which is part of the reason why, when an ancient piece of pottery is found still intact and whole after three, four, five millennia, it’s considered to be an unusually “impressive find.”ⁱ

One such find from the Bronze Age was on display last year at the Hecht Museum in Haifa, Israel—near the entrance, and without a glass case around it—when a family including a 4-year-old boy came in.

Curious about what might be inside the jar—what four-year-old wouldn’t be?—the little boy pulled ever so slightly on it, and in an instant, that 3500-year-old jar lay smashed in pieces on the floor.

So much is broken today in the land where Jesus lived.

And here were the shattered remains of what had been, until just moments before, a rare and impressive find.

People looked to the museum's management for blame: you're housing these rare and precious artefacts; isn't this *your* fault, or at least your responsibility?

People looked at the parents: didn't it occur to you to mind your kid in a roomful of irreplaceable, priceless, easily breakable objects?

People even looked at the child: do you know what you just did, even though, obviously, you didn't mean to?

OK, says Jesus, I'll tell you what: anybody who is without sin, go ahead and throw the first stone.

Regardless of where people may place the blame—and reasonable minds can disagree—in the land where Jesus lived, as well as in the place where the magi came from, who first read the indication in the sky that a king had been born in Bethlehem, and not only in Israel and Iran, but in war-torn and terrorized places everywhere, so much has been shattered:

human lives, communities, families, buildings, the bodies of children and adults, the breathtakingly delicate international order, and the always-fragile prospects for peace;

and so much is daily being broken—hearts, spirits, faith in the goodness of humanity, confidence in the willingness of nations to intervene for the survival of human beings just trying to survive and care for their families.

Meanwhile, here where we are, things that generations of Americans have taken for granted are also being dropped on the floor—

our far-from-perfect, but boldly stated, pride in being a nation of immigrants;

the idea that the United States, even in its worst or most naïve moments, wouldn't be threatened with becoming, effectively, a police state;

and I'm sure we could go on and on; I don't need to enumerate all the things happening right now that have hundreds of millions of people on edge these days.

But that on-the-edge feeling is real.

And for all the people of God, the opening words of Psalm 42 reverberate from under our feet, and in the tension of the air, and in the pressing in of a strange kind of heat:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for the living God.*

A lot of things around and within us are broken, and our souls are thirsty, and for the sake of the world for whom you and I are the living body of Christ, as the announcement says before the airplane takes off: in the unlikely event of loss of cabin pressure, the people depending on you need you to put on your own oxygen mask first so that you will have enough left in *you* to help *them*.

A few weeks ago, I was talking with somebody for whom I have an enormous amount of respect, a fellow minister to whom I often go for advice and counsel.

We'd been talking for a while when at one point I realized that I had just gone off on a long and passionate monologue in which I quoted and critiqued half a dozen op-ed pieces from four different major newspapers, offering along the way my unsolicited views about American history, world history, democracy, autocracy, stability, chaos, and who knows what else. Imagine what an absolute thrill it must have been for this guy to get to hear me say all of this!

Anyway, I finally stopped to take a breath, and the guy I was with said, "I think if I could write you a prescription right now, it would be to go sit by a tree.

"And I don't mean that metaphorically."

He said, "There is something in the wisdom of the tree here that's needed, and I don't think it can be talked out.

"And it sure can't be found in the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal *or* the New York Times."

Looking back, I was reminded of the title of a book by the late, legendary newscaster David Brinkley: *Everyone Is Entitled to My Opinion*.

But more to the point, I think I've been looking in the wrong places—including the panic inside my head—for what I most need “for the living of these days,”ⁱⁱ and I don't think I'm the only one.

And maybe I don't always stop to recognize what I need—or what I should be looking for:

Faith

Trust

Optimism

Hope

Strength

Consolation

Courage

A sense of belonging and stability

Love for people—*all* people

Love for the world

Gratitude

A desire to be part of the astonishing things God is doing, even now, in the human world.

I hope it doesn't sound too quaint to refer to Max Ehrmann's timeless poem, “Desiderata,” in which he said,

Go placidly amid the noise and the haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence. ...

Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others,
even to the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons;
they are vexatious to the spirit. ...

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.
 But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.
 Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline,
 be gentle with yourself.
 You are a child of the universe
 no less than the trees and the stars;
 you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you,
 no doubt the universe—
 maybe not American history or world events,
 but the universe—
 is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God...

And whatever your labors and aspirations,
 in the noisy confusion of life,
 keep peace in your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams,
 it is still a beautiful world.ⁱⁱⁱ

Elijah was on the run, scared for his life, and with good reason: he had made a fierce and determined enemy of the very able wife of the king, who by all accounts was a petulant and pathetic man.

So, terrified for his life, Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, and prayed that he might just die there.

He went to Mt. Horeb, the mount of God, and he came to a cave, and after he had spent the night there, the word of the LORD came to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah told the terrible story, the moral of which was: I'm in a world of trouble, and I don't see any way I'm gonna make it.

And the Word of God said, “Go out and stand on the mountain, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

And there was a wind, strong enough to shatter rock and split the mountain.

And then came an earthquake, and those who have lived through earthquakes can tell you there is no experience more terrifying.

And then came a fire like the awful ones that in recent years have decimated Hawaii and Los Angeles and Australia and Canada and many other places.

And God was not in any of those catastrophic, massive, earsplitting events.

And after the fire had finished raging, there was something that defies direct translation from the Hebrew, but as good an attempt as any is in the NRSV: “a sound of sheer silence,” or what the old King James Version called “a still, small voice.”

Elijah wrapped his mantle around his face, and went and stood at the entrance of the cave.

And the voice said again: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

As a deer longs for flowing streams, says Psalm 42, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

Eight centuries later, in the country of the Gerasenes, on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a man from the city who had long since been fighting an uphill struggle with his demons was now living, naked, among the tombs.

The city people had tried to lock him up and keep him under guard, but during his seizures, he would break the chains and shackles, and be driven by his demons out into the wilderness, the backwoods, the wastelands—the tombs of the dead.

Tormented, driven, naked and howling, as soon as he saw Jesus, he came to him.

And Jesus did not howl back,
 didn't summon the vast array of powers at his command,
 didn't use force to put him down,
 didn't call for shackles and chains,
 didn't have his disciples manhandle the guy out of the room.

He spoke with love and kindness and curiosity and mercy.

And after a word from Jesus, where there had been insanity and terror and noise, now there was just a man sitting with Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

And more than anything they had seen before, *that* scared the local people down to the core.

How much quiet power to transform the world does this guy have?

And what is his transformation from chaos to love going to mean for me?

And they asked Jesus to please leave. Which he did, but by that time, it was too late for what they wanted. The Good News was already loose in the world,

transforming with love, compassion and grace even the most insane and threatening circumstances—even in the wild, even in the tombs, even in the driest desert of a human soul, even when it feels like everything I thought I understood is broken.

And so much is broken in the world today.

The militarism, cruelty, and blustering attacks on science and thought and history are not only attacks on human bodies, human communities, and the human order; they are attacks on spiritual stability, including yours and mine.

But the trees and the earth testify in languages we rarely allow ourselves to be quiet enough to hear and understand—

“Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge,” says Psalm 19;
and “All the trees of the forest
sing for joy before the LORD,” says Psalm 96.

And they testify that God’s power still and always dwarfs human power, and replaces populism and cruelty with what Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In the cacophony of cruel wind and shattering earthquake and raging fire, God speaks even louder in silence;

and in the raging of people overtaken by demons who roam fields of emptiness and death, Jesus listens and heals in quiet.

Back in Haifa, Israel, the head of the museum invited that four-year-old boy and his mother back to the museum for a private tour.

And she—the head of the museum—said to a reporter, “[This] museum is not a mausoleum; [it’s] a living place, open to families (and) accessible.” She said, “We are appealing to parents: Don’t be afraid. Things like this happen. We will fix (that jar) and put it back.”

In God’s universe, where God loves you unconditionally and loves humankind beyond any love we can even imagine, it is never too late. Even after that which is priceless lies broken on the floor.

God works through everything, including you and me, to put things back together.

And in our darkest hour, in spite of whatever cacophony may be going on around you or inside you, God always meets the deepest thirst of our souls with cool, abundant, refreshing water.

In prayers published more than forty years ago that might as well have been written this morning, Ted Loder prayed:

O Holy One, I hear and say so many words, yet yours is the word I need.

Speak now, and help me listen;
and, if what I hear is silence,
 let it quiet me,
 let it disturb me,
 let it touch my need,
 let it break my pride,
 let it shrink my certainties,
 let it enlarge my wonder.^{iv}

Beneath the din and fury
 of great movements

and harsh news
 and urgent crises,
 make me attentive still
 to good news,
 to small occasions,
 and the grace of what is possible
 for me to be, to do, to give, to receive....^v

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you disquieted within me?
 As a deer longs for flowing streams,
 so my soul thirsts for you, O God.
 Hope in God;
 for I shall again praise my Help and my God. Amen.

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ⁱ Oscar Holland, “4-year-old accidentally shatters Bronze Age jar at museum” CNN, August 28, 2024 (<https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/28/style/israel-haifa-museum-boy-breaks-artifact-hnk-intl/index.html>)

ⁱⁱ “God of Grace and God of Glory”

ⁱⁱⁱ In Max Ehrmann, *The Desiderata of Faith*. New York: Crown, 1996.

^{iv} “Help Me Listen” in Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace*. LuraMedia, 1984.

^v “I Need to Breathe Deeply,” in Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace*. LuraMedia, 1984.