

PSALMS 42 & 43 (p. 452)

JUNE 19, 2022

1 KINGS 19:1-15a (p. 285)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

As we study your Holy Word this morning, Father, we ask you to guide our thoughts, and quicken our spirits, so that we might come to know you that much better. Bless us with your Presence, so that we will boldly declare that you are our God! We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“PROPHETIC MOOD SWINGS”

You know sometimes, when I open up the Lectionary texts to start working on a sermon, they don't seem to match-up with one another at all. There is no apparent theme, or thread, that weaves between them. At least not one that's easy to see. I have to search, you know, really try to discern what God is saying. At other times though, the lessons dovetail nicely. And then there are those times when the connections actually echo, reverberating off one another in perfect harmony! Like today! I mean these texts both clearly address the “Perceived Absence of God”, don't they! Hungering and thirsting for the Lord! It's obvious, right! The only question is, “Can you relate?” “As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God”!

Have you ever been there? Has it ever felt as if “Jesus has left the building”? Or at the very least, left your heart? This is a Lament, a passionate expression of sorrow and grief! We hear a deep, heartfelt longing, a visceral desire! You can almost feel the despair in the Psalmist's words! Which is what he wants, for you to feel it!

Picture a toddler reaching out to a parent on a very long walk, beseeching them, “pick me up”! Think of being thirsty, really thirsty, parched, beyond anything normal! If it helps, imagine eating a whole box of Saltine Crackers, with absolutely nothing to drink! I want you to feel it too!

Imagine being famished. Not like when you’re two or three hours late for lunch. More like after days and days of not eating anything at all. Not intentionally either, like with a Fast, but simply because there isn’t any food! That’s a difficult image for those of us in the West to get our heads around. We don’t actually have any idea what it’s like to be hungry! So, maybe go back those Saltine Crackers. Close your eyes if it helps.

Several years ago, we were at a Pot Luck Dinner at Skip and Mary Lou Noble’s. Skip was sharing some slides of his deployment to Saudi Arabia during his Navy days. We saw Bedouins out in the desert, people who spend their entire lives clustered around an Oasis of water, or driving their herds from one Oasis to another. We saw dust storms blowing across the road. The hot, scorching sun beating down on the hard-packed sand!

Everyone was wrapped up in robes and headdresses just to survive! Skip told us that no one would even think about traveling without at least five gallons of fresh water per person! Imagine! Back to those Saltines. Try to fathom what it means to truly thirst! “As a deer pants for streams of water,” says the Psalmist, “so my soul pants for you, O God”!

For me, Israel comes to mind when I think of thirsting. We were there over twenty years ago, but I still remember it as if it were yesterday. We took a one-day excursion out into the Judean Wilderness. It was one of the most desolate, lifeless wastelands you could ever imagine! Our intended destination was the Desert Fortress of Masada, where a couple of hundred Israelites faithfully held-off Legions of Roman Soldiers for well over three years! To say the environment there is hostile, would be a gross understatement! The heat is just plain nasty!

We “tourists” really wanted to experience it though. But our guide told us that to walk up the mountain trail, even with gallons of water, would be to certainly perish! That’s actually what he said, we would “Certainly Perish”! It was one hundred and fourteen degrees outside. Worse up on the mountain! Even if you could muster a bead of sweat, it would evaporate in seconds! And those cliffs, standing before us, were hundreds of feet tall!

Needless to say, none of us attempted the climb. We all rode up on the Cable Car instead, just like everyone else. But in order to get a taste of the experience, we decided to make the trek back down on foot. I mean, how hard could that be? We had plenty of water bottles. We drank our fill up at the top, soaked our hats, and scarves, and bandanas. We then set out, down a gentle switchback trail. It wove in and out of the shade. It couldn’t possibly be that bad. Besides, the entire journey was downhill, right!

We stayed together, just in case, you know, to share water if necessary. And we could see the air-conditioned busses sitting right down there in the parking lot below, right next to the modern-day bathrooms, with the ice-cold drinking fountains. And we were young too, just barely forty! And yay, that seems young right now! This was going to be a piece of cake! Not to mention a once in a lifetime photo op! And a great sermon illustration, I might add! But I have to tell you, we almost didn't make it!

The stark, dehydrated air, sucked the moisture right out of our bodies! The scorching heat radiated down around us, and bounced back off the rocks with such force! Our clothes were drenched with sweat in seconds! And then, almost as fast, bone dry again! Our tongues began to stick to the roof of our mouths, literally! People became light headed and dizzy! Everyone was flushed! You simply cannot imagine the thirst we all felt, even with drinking constantly! It was like nothing I have ever experienced before, or since! I can't even put it into words! "As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God!" Try to imagine that longing!

The Psalmist lived in, or very near, that same desert wasteland. Believe me, he understood what it means to thirst, far better than we ever could! And he had most likely seen deer panting with thirst. So had all of those who would have heard his Psalm. Which is clearly why he chose that particular image to describe being spiritually dry! "My Soul thirsts for you O' God, for the Living God. When can I go and meet with God!"

Can you feel it, that longing? Can you picture that hunger, that craving for God? “My Soul is downcast within me! My bones suffer mortal agony! My tears have been my food, day and night! Why have you rejected me, Lord?” Like I said, it’s a Lament, a passionate expression of loss! Utter Barrenness! So, have you ever thirsted like that for God?

The Psalmist is feeling the complete absence of the Lord! So, I’m wondering if you’ve been there, totally separated from the Spring of Living Water? Maybe you are there right now in fact, bent over in a dry desolate place? You feel abandoned by God, or ignored by God, or worse, rejected by God? Imagine reaching up your hands to be picked up into His loving embrace, only to sense that He is not there!

We love the Mountaintop experiences, don’t we, those times when we bask in the Lord’s Presence, when we feel completely connected, surrounded, powerfully and joyfully by His Spirit! I know I do! And the Psalmist has obviously experienced those times too, otherwise this present moment wouldn’t seem so bleak! But right now, he is on his knees. Prostrate maybe, with his face to the ground. Down in the valley. Deep in the Valley of the Shadow. He is spent, emotionally and spiritually. Depressed. Maybe Clinically so. And in his agony, he cries out to Heaven!

Did you know that the forty-second and forty-third Psalms are actually combined in the Hebrew Bible? They constitute one long, depressed wail—a single cry of loneliness—one solitary plea for help! The Psalmist is boldly declaring the perceived absence of the Lord!

He is completely spent! Used up! Empty! Parched! Currently thirsting after God! Craving to be refreshed! So, I want to ask one more time. Have ever been there? Can you relate? Has your soul ever, like a deer, panted after those streams of refreshment? Because if so, I want you to take heart. You are not alone. In fact, it happened to one of my favorite Prophets.

Elijah is possibly the best-known Prophet of all time! He is a spiritual giant, a Hero of the Faith! Elijah first comes on the scene out of nowhere, from the backwater region of Tishbe, in 1 Kings 17. He then immediately confronts the wicked king of Israel, Ahab! His issue is, Ahab has turned away from Almighty God! Maybe you remember the story.

After King Solomon died, the Nation of Israel split in two. The Northern Kingdom was made up of ten tribes, and the Southern Kingdom of two. Both Israel in the north and Judah in the south had a succession of kings after that. Judah had nineteen in fact, eight of which were pretty good. And their kingdom lasted for 345 years. Israel lasted slightly more than half of that, two hundred and nine years, and went through twenty-two different kings, all of which, Scripture says, “Were evil, and refused to follow the Lord”.

Seven of these kings were assassinated. One committed suicide! And Ahab, according to Scholars, was possibly the worst of them all! He married a Syrian Princess named Jezebel. You’ve probably heard of her. And he invited her to bring her so-called nature god, Baal, to Israel, to be worshipped by everyone! Can you imagine!

So, Elijah, on God's behalf, storms right into the palace and stares King Ahab down! "As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve," he says, "there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years, except at my word!" In other words, "**By God, there will be no rain!**" God wants to get their attention! So, He sends them a drought!

Elijah is bold—a sort of Rambo type, coupled with the Terminator, and John Wayne, all rolled into one! Elijah is gutsy! You can see why he is one of my favorite biblical heroes! He didn't die, by-the-way! Elijah was taken up bodily into heaven, in a whirlwind, with horses and a chariot made out of fire! He is such a hero of Israel, in fact, that at every Passover celebration an extra place is set at the table, just in case Elijah stops by!

The Prophet Malachi predicted that Elijah would come before Messiah, before the great and terrible day of the Lord! Many people thought John the Baptist was actually him, reincarnated! Elijah, along with Moses, talked with Jesus at His Transfiguration! He is said to be one of the two great witnesses in Revelation at the end of time! He is awesome, amazing, powerful, faithful, and great! You can't get a more perfect role model, as a witness for God, than Elijah!

After cursing this draught into existence, God sends Elijah out to a quiet brook and tells him that he will take care of him. God sends Ravens to bring him food, every morning and every night. And the water in the brook is cool and sweet.

And when the draught moves into full swing, and the brook dries up, God sends Elijah to Zarephath in the north, where he is told a Widow will take care of him. She doesn't have much food though, so God miraculously provides again! He keeps her flour jar full, and her olive oil bottle topped off! Her son even dies while Elijah is there, and the Prophet, through the power of God, raises him to life again! God clearly is present with Elijah! God clearly has taken care of him! God has absolutely called this Prophet, and provided for his every need! If you were Elijah, you'd be on a spiritual high right now, wouldn't you?

Then, three years into the drought, God sends Elijah back to Ahab, to once again get in his face. Maybe you remember this part? It would make a great action movie! Elijah tells the wicked king to call together all 450 prophets of Baal, his so-called nature god, and all 400 prophets of Asherah, another pretender deity! He says bring these servants of your false gods here, to Mount Carmel, and let's just see who really has the power!

The prophets of Baal and Asherah build an altar, and Elijah gives them first choice of sacrificial bulls. They do their thing, petition their false gods for rain "from morning till night" it says! But absolutely nothing happens! No fire appears to consume their bull! Then Elijah builds his altar to the Lord, and places his bull on it. And then for effect, he has the people pour four large jars of water over it! Then he has them do it again! Then he has them do it a third time! If these jars are the same size as the jars mentioned at the Wedding in Cana, they would have held between twenty and thirty gallons each!

So much water is poured over the altar that it fills the ditch surrounding it! Everything is drenched! And then Elijah prays to the Lord, for Yahweh to demonstrate that He really is God! Immediately fire pours down from heaven, and consumes everything in sight; the bull, the wood, the stones, and even the dust! And then, just as God promised, it begins to rain! How would you feel if you were Elijah, God's messenger? I think I might be a little cocky! I wouldn't want to be! But in all honesty, I don't think I could help it! God has done so much for him, and through him—used him mightily as a witness to His Holy Name!

And remember what happened immediately after that confrontation? King Ahab headed back to the city in his Chariot, but Elijah stayed on the mountain to pray. And when he was done, 1 Kings 18:46 says, "The power of the Lord came on Elijah, and tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel"! I looked it up. Scholars estimate the distance to Jezreel at between 17 and 30 miles. And according to Google, Chariots in that day could travel between 35 and 40 MPH! "He ran ahead of Ahab, all the way to Jezreel!"

Who wouldn't feel on top of the world! How awesome would that have been! Elijah has zealously served the Lord God Almighty! It says so, right in today's text! Look at the miracles! Look at how God has been Present with him! And yet, a single verbal threat from the upstart queen Jezebel, which we hear about in today's reading, takes the spiritual wind right out of his sails! "Elijah was afraid," it says, "and ran for his life"!

Elijah has been described as “A Bolt of Judgment against Israel”. He is the man who would later anoint the future King of Israel, and the future King of Aram, as well as his own successor, Elisha, as a Prophet of God! But today we see him running scared, hiding away in the Judean wilderness, not that far from where the Fortress of Masada once stood! The greatest Prophet of all time has lost his courage, and his strength, and apparently his faith as well! All because of a threat! Our hero, in fact, crawls up under a Broom Tree, a scraggy little bush, and prays that he will die!

So again, have you maybe been there? Have you stood in Elijah’s sandals? Think about it! After doing great things for God, doing great things with God, achieving something only God’s power could achieve, you panicked, just a moment later, over virtually nothing! After being taken care of, provided for, for a very long time even, you suddenly start to worry about what will come next! After spending time on the mountaintop, in the Presence of God, talking with God, all of a sudden, the valley looks scary! Talk about Prophetic Mood Swings!

Here, in the valley, in the midst of the shadows, God provides again for Elijah. God gives him a powerful audio-visual display, which carried a message he needed to hear! There was a tremendous windstorm, powerful enough to split rocks! Then came a mighty earthquake, followed by a roaring fire! But the Presence of the Lord was not in any of those things! That would have been far too easy, don’t you think! Instead, God displayed His Glory in a gentle whisper! And fortunately, Elijah was still enough to hear!

“Take a break,” God said. “Eat something and drink something and get a little rest.” God then pointed out that Elijah wasn’t alone, that there were actually thousands of others who were also faithful to the Lord. He gave Elijah what he needed, a chance to catch his breath. And some encouragement. Go ahead and rest! Even Prophets need that from time-to-time! But then, God said, get back to it! “Elijah, what are you doing here hiding out? Go back the way you came. I have more work for you to do.”

Part of the “take home” here is, there are going to be times when we are down, and maybe even out. That’s okay! It’s actually normal. So, take a break. It’s good to do so from time-to-time. God will take care of you, in both the good times and the bad. But don’t stay there, for Heaven’s sake. God has “more” for you to do. So, go back the way you came!

There is a lot that we can glean from the life of Elijah, a true Prophet of God! The most obvious of which might be an echo of Romans 8; “If God is for you, then who can stand against you!” But I wonder if there is another lesson here as well. Maybe one that comes from the question Elijah asked the people of Israel, after the contest on Mount Carmel: “How much longer will you waver,” he asks, “hobbling between two opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow Him! But if Baal, or the world, or anything else is your god, then follow that! But stop wavering!” And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we often run and hide when what you really want us to do is step up boldly in your Name and make your Presence known. Like Elijah, we get down sometimes, allowing joy-suckers to rob us of the Blessing that you have so lovingly placed within our heart. We even get depressed Lord, and crawl up under a Broom Tree somewhere, waiting for you to take us Home. It is then Lord, at that moment that we need you most.

Nourish us Father, and quench our thirst. Provide the rest we need, and then send us forth once more. See to our provisions Lord, as we trust in you, and then go where you call us to go. And please, help us to share life, wherever we travel.

Some of us come before you today Lord refreshed and ready to serve. And others of us come a bit stumbling, needing a little rest. Still others of us Lord are parched right now. We thirst for your Presence, and long for your Peace. So please, come to each of us right where we are. And in your Providence, give us what we need.

We also ask you Lord to come to those we lift up before you in prayer this morning. Please be with..... Fill these loved ones, and Bless them in truly amazing ways! And cause us to Bless them as well, nurturing and caring for them as you have taught us to do. And hear us Lord, as we pray both silently and aloud, and with the prayer that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...