

“Where is Your God?”

Psalm 42

Well, I guess since I didn't scare you away with last week's outrageous sermon, we'll just keep moving on through the Psalms and see what else they have to say to us.

This week, as we turn our attention to Psalm 42, we see that it starts off by painting an idyllic picture in our minds with its very first line. We can imagine a deer slowly dipping its head toward the water, slowly lapping up some water while the sun is shining at its back and the birds are singing a joyous song. With the very first line found in Psalm 42, we get the impression that everything is peaceful, everything is right with the world. With the very first line, we assume that life is in balance, life is good. This psalmist has no problems.

Or so we would think. Sure, we have this idyllic image of a deer slowly sipping water from a stream but if we take another look, we realize that there is something wrong with our picture. This deer is not simply lapping up the water. It is sticking its head in, totally submerged. It is guzzling up a storm. This deer is dying of thirst. It is desperate for some water to quench its thirst.

As we take a step back and see the bigger picture, we realize that this deer has wandered into the desert and has been wandering aimlessly for a long time. It is anxious for just a bit of water to restore its soul, to save its life.

No longer does Psalm 42 paint an idyllic picture by letting us imagine Bambi standing in a field of clover next to a flowing stream. Rather it paints a desperate and disturbing picture. This deer is on the brink of death. It needs that flowing stream for survival. It needs to find water, a lot of water soon so that it can live another day. No longer are we in the middle of a peaceful scene. Rather we find ourselves in a struggle between life and death.

Now don't worry. I am not going to depress you like I did last Sunday. But as we take another look at this deer's struggle for life, we can't help but admit that sometimes we too find ourselves in similar situation. Sure, maybe not to such extremes but when we experience those long dark nights of the soul, when our heads and hearts are so full of doubt, when we find ourselves in the middle of a spiritual drought, it really does feel like it is a life or death struggle for our souls.

In those moments, our hearts are very much like that deer. Our hearts long for something that will save our lives and restore our souls. We long for God's presence. We long for that living water Jesus talked about at the well in Samaria. We long to end the spiritual droughts that we are in as people of faith.

Unfortunately, in those moments, in those dark nights of the souls, sometimes we do find ourselves no longer in the middle of an idyllic picture of peace but rather we are in the midst of a struggle, a struggle between doubt and faith. We find ourselves in the midst of a very dry place spiritually and we can't help but wonder "Where is our God," just like our psalmist does today.

I invite you to turn in your pew Bibles to Psalm 42.

(Read text)

Phillip Yancey, a well known Christian author, has shared that when people who are disillusioned with faith, come up to him and ask him how he can be so sure about his belief in God, he simply responds by challenging them to find a single argument against God, whether ancient or modern, a single argument against God that is not already included somewhere in the books of the Bible. Yancey goes on to say that "I have such respect for a God who not only gives us the freedom to reject God but who also gives us the arguments we can use to deny God's existence as well." Yancey shared that instead of being angry at our questions and doubts, God welcomes them, God encourages them because it is only way out of our spiritual droughts. It is through our learnings on this journey out of the desert that we really discover who we are and whose we are.

Hard to argue against that one, isn't it? Every time we think we are the first to have such doubts, to have such questions, to have such arguments, to wonder if

God really exists, we realize that somewhere, someone down the line has already had the same experience and they wrote it all down for us in our Bible. It is all right there, just waiting for us to read about, to discover, to use on our journeys of faith, just like we are today. So that is what we are going to do. We are going to be honest and admit that there are times we don't feel God's presence. We are going to be honest and admit that there are times we do question God's existence. We are going to be honest and admit that there are times we experience spiritual droughts in our lives and we long for the waters of God to come down up us to restore our souls, to lift our spirits once more.

Let's be honest and say that sometimes church doesn't do it for us. See, I'm not mad. The walls aren't falling in us. We aren't being smitten by God. We can be honest and say that sometimes we feel as dry as a prune left out in the sun for three days and nothing, not church, not prayer, not faithful conversation, can help restore our souls. That's okay but we can't end the conversation there.

Being in a spiritual drought is easy. Admitting it and coming out of it takes courage. Wandering around and complaining about not being fulfilled is easy; doing something about it, like drinking from a cactus to crawling on our bellies to a nearby stream, takes courage and inner strength.

In a drought, we can give up, lay down and die, all because we lose hope. We can say it is not important. We can say there is no purpose to it all. And the

landscape of the spiritual desert is scattered with people who have done just that, people who have lost hope, people who said, “why go on?”, people who have said God isn’t here or worse, God doesn’t exist.

But if they had only gone a little farther, no matter how difficult the journey may have been, they would have found a flowing stream of living water that would have quenched their thirst. If they had only gone a little farther and not given up, they would have found an oasis that would have restored their souls.

Getting out of the spiritual droughts takes work and sometimes we as people of faith don’t like doing that. We like our routines too much and by doing so, we get stuck in the desert and become as dry as we can get spiritually.

Over and over, same style of church service. Over and over, same music. Over and over, same Christian authors and theologians. Over and over, same pew. Over and over, same prayers.

That’s the dangerous part of our spiritual droughts. We fall into the trap of simply going through the motions of our faith that they no longer inspire us, open us to God’s presence in our midst, nor do they push us out of our comfort zones. Sometimes, we get so deep into our spiritual routines that the Holy Spirit just can’t break in, all because we won’t let it.

Now please don't hear me say that I'm inviting you next week to try another church. I do hope that we all find something here that helps restore our souls and lift our spirits.

But maybe it is time we admit that our spiritual lives just can't be based on coming to church on Sundays, whether this church or any church. Maybe we need to do more than that. Maybe it is time for us to step out of routine and realize that the Holy Spirit is trying to find ways to pull us out of spiritual droughts but because it isn't happening on our time, on our schedules, or even in the pews we sit in week after week, we say it is the church's fault. We say we aren't being spiritually fed. We wonder where God really is in our lives.

Well, let me give us all a hint. We are spiritual beings. We are spiritual beings, twenty four seven, not just for an hour on Sunday mornings.

Sure that hour on Sunday morning can be a time to reconnect with God, to hear God's word, to be a part of a community of faith but that doesn't end because the clock strikes 12 or we leave this building. We are spiritual beings on a journey of faith that is for all days, for all time, for all of our lives.

We just need to remember our Bible stories to once again remember that this is true. God didn't create the world in one hour. God worked throughout the week to create the world. God continues to work through the week to pull us out of our spiritual droughts.

So maybe our question shouldn't be, "Where is God?" but rather "How can I open myself up to God's Spirit's all the time?" In the psalm, the deer works tirelessly to find that stream of water, and we are called to do the same thing. We are called to work tirelessly to find our God, to search for the living water to restore our souls.

God has been there all along, offering us the living water to restore our soul. We may just have to do some work to get us there to the well, to the stream. We may just have to break out of our routine to take a drink!

AS we take a look at Psalm 42, sure the psalmist is asking the age old question, "Where is our God" but he doesn't blame God for abandoning him. He even admits that at one point, he was right there, leading everyone in worship, singing praises to God but now not so much.

So what he does as an answer to his question is instead of complaining, instead of giving up and dying of thirst for God, he takes a step back and reviews what he knows about his God. God was there in the beginning, calming the chaos, moving over the waters, creating land for God's creation. God has been there in the past, filling his heart with joy. And God will be there again. He just needs to have hope in God. He just needs to break out of his routine a little bit. He just needs to realize that sure spiritual droughts end but not on our time and not without some work on our part as people of faith.

The psalmist has to do some leg work. He has to do some searching. He has to maybe wander aimlessly for a bit until he finds his answers.

That's okay, because in the end, the psalmist knows that one day, maybe someday soon, he will be able to praise God once more. And we know the same thing. Even in the midst of our spiritual droughts, we can praise God because we know that God is there, waiting for us, to come home again, where God will welcome us with a cool drink of water once more.

As our hearts long for the flowing stream of God's peace, we know that one day we will praise our God once more, the God who is our help, the God who is our hope, the God who gave us the questions, who gave us the arguments. We know that this God is also the same God who encourages us, welcomes us, and strengthens us while we search because it is only in the searching do we discover who we are and whose we are. It is only in the searching that we truly become the people that God created us to be.

May our hearts always long for our God and may we never stop searching.
Amen.