

The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

An Uncommon Faith Psalm 42

The 12th Sunday of Ordinary Time

June 19/20, 2010

The African American poet James Weldon Johnson captured the cadences and rhetoric of the folk preachers in his poetry. Johnson pictures the preacher praying, interceding before God on behalf of the people:

*O Lord, we come this morning
Knee-bowed and body-bent
Before thy throne of grace.
O Lord—this morning—
Bow our hearts beneath our knees,
And our knees in this lonesome valley.
We come this morning—
Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,
With no merits of our own.
O Lord—open up a new window of heaven,
And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
And listen this morning.¹*

Johnson's preacher finally and fundamentally has only one thing to ask of God:
*O Lord—open up a new window of heaven,
And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
And listen this morning.*

The preacher has some things God must listen to, and it has to do with the situation of the people about their being "*Knee-bowed and body-bent.*"

The preacher describes the people's situation and lays a claim on God:
*We come this morning—
Like empty pitchers to a full fountain.*

"*Like empty pitchers to a full fountain*": surely the psalmist who wrote what we name as the 42nd and 43rd psalm would have understood. This psalmist speaks of his own thirst for God:

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

¹ James Weldon Johnson, **God's Trombones** (New York: Viking Press, 1927), p. 13.

The psalmist is thirsty, like an empty pitcher coming to a full fountain, but the psalmist finds no overflowing fountain but asks instead,

When shall I come and behold the face of God?

The psalmist knows about being an empty pitcher and understands about God being an overflowing fountain, but instead of cool water for refreshment, the psalmist finds the bitterness and saltiness of tears.

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

The psalmist thirsts for God and finds no comfort. Worse still, the psalmist remembers that it hasn't always been that way:

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.

The psalmist remembers festivals, times of feasting and fatness when thirst was unheard of and hunger unimaginable. The psalmist remembers celebrating the steadfast love of God in worship, remembers the bold affirmations of God's goodness echoing in the worship of the faithful people of God. We recognize these celebrations in the Book of Psalms. Psalm 118 sings:

O give thanks to the LORD, for God is good;

God's steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say, [that is: let Jewish people say]

“God's steadfast love endures forever.”

Let the house of Aaron say, [let the priests of Israel say]

“God's steadfast love endures forever.”

Let those who fear the LORD say, [let the gentiles say]

“God's steadfast love endures forever.”

Let everyone say “God's steadfast love endures forever,” because that's what we say in worship. That's what the psalmist of the 42nd psalm wants to say in worship, “God's steadfast love endures forever,” but the psalmist honestly has something else to say instead. The psalmist wants God to listen to something other than a song of praise:

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

The psalmist carries on an interior dialogue. This psalmist is not just talking to himself/herself but rather is carrying on a conversation with a character that has been formed by the worship of the people of God. Worship shapes us to say “God's steadfast love endures forever” and the psalmist knows that and the psalmist believes that, but the psalmist also experiences real pain, real abandonment: “Why are you cast down, O my soul.”

The psalmist measures human experience against divine hope: “Why are you cast down, O my soul... Hope in God... my help and my God.” This psalmist will not lie

about real pain but neither will the psalmist lie about deep and authentic faith. The psalmist wants to talk to God about both things: pain and faith, faith and pain.

The psalmist reassures himself:

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Then the psalmist goes on to survey the situation and candidly announces, “Well, dammit, my soul is cast down!” At least that’s a translation proposed by Pat Miller, who taught psalms at Princeton Theological Seminary.²

The problem is not that I don’t have faith, the problem is not that I don’t hope in God, the problem is that I do trust that “God’s steadfast love endures forever,” but that “steadfast love” seems so far away. “My soul *is* cast down,” I am cast down, and I want God to listen.

Some would object, “Preacher you can’t talk that way in church.” You’re not supposed to say such things. Here in our worship we announce, “God’s steadfast love endures forever.” We don’t talk about that other stuff. But the psalms do talk about pain and loss and anguish and abandonment and the psalms won’t be quiet about it. They want God to listen. They **insist** God listen.

Biblical scholars tell us that all the cultures of the ancient near east had pretty much the same theology. “The common theology,” they call it. Whatever god they worshipped they “addressed in exaggerated and flattering prayer and praise” as “the only God” even if they worshipped many gods. Walter Brueggemann explains “This god is claimed to be effective in all realms of history, nature, and morality. This god is regularly characterized as both just and merciful, as the object of both fear and love. This god, in any culture, is one who punishes those who offend him or her and rewards those who please him or her.”³ That is “the common theology” of the ancient near east: God is enthroned untroubled in heaven and on earth everything is settled. Whether you were a Hittite or a Moabite or an Amorite that was “the common theology.” We can see this theology in the Hebrew Scriptures, but *we see something else too*, something surprising and unsettled, something unparalleled in other literatures and other cultures.

Among the psalms there are “psalms of lament.” They complain that “the common theology” does not adequately account for human pain; they protest that God is failing to be a God of steadfast love. Brueggemann declares, “The laments are Israel’s primary and distinctive departure from the common theology.... They are not self-pitying meditations on trouble; rather they are addressed to God. They... force a new connection between the Lord of Life and the troublesome reality of life, where Israel must live. In this dramatic exchange, [the Lord] is recharacterized as the one who must take account of the trouble. God is no longer a trouble free God, and the trouble is now recharacterized as something that now is the proper agenda for [the Lord].”⁴

Psalms like the 42nd are unsettled and unsettling challenges to the smoothly settled arrangements of “the common theology”; they are **an uncommon faith** that calls upon

² Patrick D. Miller, Lecturing at the Omaha Presbyterian Theological Seminary School for Pastors, July 16, 1996.

³ Walter Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation,” **Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme and Text**, edited by Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 5.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain,” **Old Testament Theology**, p. 29.

God to be God. Precisely because the psalmist believes “God’s steadfast love endures forever,” the psalmist insists, demands that God be a God of steadfast love.

One might say that what distinguishes the uncommon faith of the Psalms from the common theology of the ancient near east is *chutzpah*. Chutzpah is bold speech, bordering on insolence, spoken by people who know themselves to be in a relationship that cannot be harmed by honesty, nor ended by truth telling.

It was chutzpah when Moses, leading the Israelites out of Egypt, was finally worn down with their whining and moaning, and Moses turned to God and said, hey, this exodus was not my idea. Did I give birth to these people? They’re not my people, and I’m not their nursemaid. Lord, they’re your people! You need to do something about them, and if you’re not going to do something about them, I’d just as soon as you strike me dead. [Num 11:11-15]

It is chutzpah when the psalmist addresses God saying, have you heard how people are talking about you? They’re taunting me, “Where is your God?” and you know, I’ve wondered myself, where are you, Lord? Where is your steadfast love that endures forever?

It is chutzpah when the psalmist raises his tough questions, “Why have you forgotten me?” I haven’t forgotten you, Lord, I’m right here in worship asking questions. I’m keeping up my side of the conversation of faith, and I expect you to keep up your side too.

Why? the psalmist asks. “Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?” Why must I “be cast down, O my soul” “because of the oppression of the enemy?” We don’t know what enemy was oppressing the psalmist, but the great thing about the psalms of lament, the feature that has caused them to endure for long centuries among the people of God, is they invite us to fill in the blanks. What enemy oppresses us so that our souls are cast down? Is it cancer, arthritis, prejudice, depression, loss, grief, pain, the job, your boss, retirement? Fill in the blank and ask God to listen.

The uncommon faith of the psalmist raises questions: Why? Where? Some would object. Oh, we don’t ask questions here, we just preach answers. We don’t have questions; we have faith. Think of that smug bumper-sticker: If God seems far away, guess who moved? That’s just more common theology, common as dirt, my Aunt Polly would say, but the psalms invite us to embrace **an uncommon faith**.

This psalmist has questions, tough questions, questions that cannot be answered in the normal course of things, questions that the world knows about but has no vocabulary to ask, questions that the world does not know where to ask, who to ask, questions to which the world cannot imagine a response.

After the death of his wife Joan Neil Simon had a whole lot of questions:

"I wanted answers from God, as we all do in times of great loss, but I knew I was not about to get a letter in the mail from the Almighty... (which was too bad, since I also wondered what kind of stationary He used...). ... God does not have time to answer questions made by individual request. Still I hoped there would be something in my mailbox."⁵

⁵ Neil Simon, **The Play Goes On**, Simon & Schuster, 1999, p 63.

We all have questions, and the psalmist's candor in voicing aloud his questions invites us to speak our questions before God: Where is your God? Why have you forgotten me?

The questions the psalmist raises do not so much ask for an answer—after all, what answer, what explanation could account for or comfort us in the difficulties we are forced to endure—rather the questions ask to be listened to, they ultimately ask for God:

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

The psalmist wants to be heard. In voicing the anguish there is hope. Like James Weldon Johnson's folk preacher, the psalmist entreats,

*O Lord—open up a new window of heaven,
And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
And listen...*

Refusing to sit in silence with despair and anguish, the psalmist gives voice to the hurt and thus begins the process of healing.⁶ Karl Barth wrote: "to clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

This was Martin Luther's favorite psalm. The old German Reformer said:
"This is my psalm, my chosen psalm. I love them all; I love all Holy Scripture, which is my consolation and my life. But this psalm is nearest my heart, and I have a familiar right to call it mine. It has saved me from many a pressing danger, from which nor emperor, nor kings, nor sages, nor saints could have saved me. It is my friend; dearer to me than all the honours and powers of the earth."⁷

Martin Luther feared God, and this psalm gave him the words and gave him the chutzpah to speak frankly and fearlessly before God.

Speaking the thirst provides refreshment of its own. The psalmist knows something is terribly wrong and the psalm testifies to hope that everything might again be made right. The psalm buoys our hope as it teaches us how to speak what cannot easily be spoken. James Luther Mays comments, "The advantage of the psalmist is that he knows what is missing (42:4). He understands that the dissatisfaction of life is the thirst for God."⁸ This divine dissatisfaction, this holy hunger howls to no one else but God. We are not alone with our pain, this psalm reminds us

We are not alone with our pain, this psalm reminds us. With James Weldon Johnson's folk preacher and with the psalmist we can take our pain and cast down-ness before the very Throne of Grace and say, "Listen!"

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⁶ Samuel Terrien, **The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today** (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), p. 148.

⁷ Martin Luther on Psalm 43, in Rowland E. Prothero, **The Psalms in Human Life** (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co, 1903), p. 94.

⁸ James Luther Mays, **Psalms**, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p.173.