

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, June 22, 2025**

**“For I Shall Again Praise Him”
Psalms 42 and 43**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

In the heat of summer, a deer follows a dried-up riverbed, finding dust where water used to flow and rocks where pools used to be. This is about utter desperation; and like this deer braying for water, the psalmist cries out to God:

“As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God” (42:1).

Our psalm this morning—two psalms that flow together as a single continuous psalm—our psalm is a lament. Lamentation isn’t something we do very well in the church—maybe because we think it’s just about pessimism or gloom. Yet “[f]aithful lament is not about wallowing in negativity” (Rollefson); lament means calling out to God honestly about the brokenness and hurt around us. A lament isn’t merely a complaint: it’s a protest—a protest, in prayer, to God. A lament is a protest for hope amidst despair: as one scholar puts it, lament “give[s] us a way to howl as well as [...] praise, permission to bewail the darkness, and permission to hold on to a vision of light” (Hawkins).

And the lament of this psalm is a glimpse of what human despair looks like. This psalm offers a kind of litany of the different types of despair we can experience. There’s the despair that opens the psalm, which is the despair of want, of thirst, of need, of loss—despair like the braying deer:

“My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?” (42:2).

The psalmist seeks God, needs God, but is left feeling painfully far from God. This is the despair of lacking what we need to sustain us.

There’s also the despair of being so overwhelmed that it feels like punishment. This is, in a way, the opposite of thirst; the psalmist offers an image of being so deep in water that you can’t reach the seafloor below or the air above:

“Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts,” the psalmist prays;
“all your waves and your billows
have gone over me” (42:7).

Or as one paraphrase puts it, “Chaos calls to chaos, to the tune of whitewater rapids. Your breaking surf, your thundering breakers crash and crush me” (Peterson). There’s the despair of thirst, but there’s also the despair of drowning; there’s the despair of too little, and the despair of too much.

The psalmist also gives voice to the despair of yearning for what is lost, the despair of wishing for what used to be but isn’t anymore. This is the despair of happy memories that almost seem to mock us:

“These things I remember,” the psalmist says,
“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” (42:4).

Now that all seems wrong, the psalmist remembers when all was well, recalling the bygone days of a lost joy; this is the despair of memory.

And then there’s the despair that maybe underlies the rest—and that’s a feeling of abandonment, isolation, forsakenness:

“I say to God, my rock,
‘Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?’
[M]y adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
‘Where is your God?’” (42:9-10).

The psalmist feels forgotten by God, left alone without God, while the world makes God seem more absent than ever. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazi regime, wrote in a sermon on this psalm: “Where is your God? That is the question put to us, restlessly, despairingly, or [mockingly]. Death, sin, distress, and war [...]—all these one can see. But where is your God?”

One reason we can connect with this psalm is that it expresses and encompasses all these different forms of despair. There’s a sort of universal reach to this psalm, as the psalmist gives voice to forms of despair that we can relate to, in our own ways: the despair of wasting away and the despair of being overwhelmed, the despair of memory and the despair of abandonment. We all have our different stories and our different struggles, but I think we will find that our stories and struggles are expressed somehow within the psalmist’s prayers.

Yet something that’s remarkable about this psalm is that even as it gives painful expression to these forms of despair—despair never gets the last word. In this psalm, there’s something that

consistently and repeatedly interrupts despair. Three times in this psalm—just when despair is gripping the psalmist—three times, that despair is interrupted by this same refrain:

“Why 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 and my God” (42:5, 42:11, 43:5).

This psalm isn’t only about despair: this psalm is also about hope interrupting despair; it’s about hope cutting despair off mid-sentence. And you know, in the psalm, there’s really no lead up, no gradual progress, no incremental improvement: suddenly, hope appears. And what changes is not that the psalmist realizes that things are better than they seemed; rather, what changes is that the psalmist remembers the faithfulness of God. The psalmist remembers God’s faithful lovingkindness—and then suddenly asks, “Why are you cast down, O my soul?”

As the psalmist remembers God’s faithfulness, recalls God’s love and kindness—suddenly, unexpectedly, the psalmist finds hope. For the psalmist: looking around, there doesn’t seem to be any potential, any possibility for renewal; the psalmist’s circumstances are still bad and the despair is still real. And yet, by remembering the faithfulness of God, the psalmist finds hope—trusting that God can work good even amid this mess.

And the psalmist expresses this hopeful trust by anticipating praise, by looking ahead to future praise: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him.” Even in the midst of despair, the psalmist looks toward a future when there will be new reason for praise. It’s as if the psalmist says, ‘I trust God such that I know the day will come when I will praise God for getting me through this; I trust that I will see the day when I will thank God for kindnesses yet to be revealed; I am in need, overwhelmed, mournful, alone—yet the time will come when I will look back and praise God for God’s faithfulness in these difficult days.’

Even amid despair, the psalmist expects to praise God again for God’s help, even if right now the psalmist can’t see any hint of it:

“Why 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 and my God” (42:5, 42:11, 43:5).

This psalm is honest and real: there’s no pretending that things are better than they are, yet there’s no denying that God is more faithful than we imagine. Both sides are there: the ruin and the hope. And the psalmist’s hope in God is not just a feeling; it’s not just looking on the bright side. The psalmist’s hope is grounded in the knowledge of God’s faithfulness.

I think we can learn from the psalmist what it means to hope—what it means to lay hold of hope even amidst despair. There come times in our lives when it feels like nothing can get

better, like we're stuck in a dead end where there's just loss or grief or anxiety—and that's it. We know what it's like when everything seems to go wrong—and it feels like there's no way to fix things, no way to improve, no way out of that despair.

Yet then we can follow the example of the psalmist. When despair was all around, and it seemed like nothing could improve, the psalmist denied neither the reality of despair nor the reality of God's faithfulness. Then, in the midst of that despair, the psalmist looked forward to future praise; then, when everything seemed wrong, the psalmist found hope knowing that God can work good even into this mess.

Can we do the same? When we are despairing, can we—like the psalmist—can we let hope interrupt our despair by remembering that God is faithful, and—because God is faithful—we will one day have cause to praise God for his faithfulness today?

“Why 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 and my God” (42:5, 42:11, 43:5). Amen.