

“FOR SPIRITUAL DOUBTS”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
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(transcribed from audio file)

The scripture today continues to explore the depths of spirituality in the Psalms. Today Psalm 42 and the subtitle is Longing for God and his Help in Distress. Listen now to God’s Word.

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
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.
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.
My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your torrents;
all your waves and your billows*

*have gone over me.
By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”
As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
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. NRSVue*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

My first year in college it came time to fly back home for Thanksgiving break and there just weren't a lot of flights available to get back with the tight window that I had for Thanksgiving break, so I had to take a very early morning flight out of Newark Airport at 7:00am. The problem was that the shuttle service that ran from the university to the airport, which was really the only affordable way to get there, well they stopped running at 10:00pm and didn't start up again until 7:00am so there was no way to take the shuttle. To take a taxi from central New Jersey up to Newark, that was not going to work so, what do I do? Then the naïve little mid-western boy in me thought, I'll just go to the Newark Airport the night before and stay the night there. Nothing could go wrong! And so I did.

I got in the shuttle at 10:00pm, took the last shuttle to the airport. Got there. Went down to my gate cause it's the 90's and we don't have the kind of security we have now-a-days. I just walked down to my gate. Sat down and thought, well I'll get comfy here and then I noticed all the stores were closing up. I thought, huh, oh well, I've got snacks. I'll be okay.

Then a very nice police officer came by and told me, "You have to leave the gate area" because we weren't in St. Louis anymore. In St. Louis you could stay down by the gates all night long back then in the 90's, but no, Newark was a different thing. They closed down the gate area so we were asked to leave the airport, or at

the very least you could hang out in this very narrow kind of, I guess you could call it lobby area, ticketing area. It was small. It was November in New Jersey. I'm not hanging out outside. So instead, I just started pacing back and forth in that area.

It's not a friendly place. It seemed like all the police officers just left. I didn't see them at all. It turned out that Newark Airport is the place where people who didn't have a place to go, well they would go at night. And so I was naïve and I was scared and I just kinda kept walking around thinking, well Rob, this is a dumb idea and in case I didn't think it was a dumb idea, the cop who escorted me from the gate area let me know it was a dumb idea.

“What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I've got a flight in the morning. I just thought I'd stay all night.”

He was like, “That's a bad idea.” Those New Jersey cops are real friendly and easy going.

So, I get out there. I'm just walking around there are people coming up to me and talking to me and asking for me to give them things and I was just really nervous and then I saw this big group of people at the coffee shop. Now I had abandoned the coffee shop because they closed that thing down. It wasn't open at all, but there was a big crowd of them, and they all had gray colored tops and gray colored bottoms. It was a group of 25 students from West Point. All a foot taller and 10 times stronger than little skinny 18-year-old Rob Dyer. And I thought, I know where I'm hanging out. So, I went into the middle of all of them and I just sat down on the floor in Newark Airport and that's where I remained all night long.

And there were plenty of people to let me know that it was a dumb idea what I had done. I had a voice inside my head that was telling me it was a dumb idea. The funny thing is that voice sounded just like Joyce Dyer, my mom. And when that voice would fade away, I would hear Julia Zimmerman, my grandmother. “Robert, what are you doing?”

But you know what? I had a ticket. I knew I was going to get out of there and I knew the morning would come. I just had to get through that period that was scary and was full of uncertainties, but it would be all right.

Psalm 42 is speaking to us about those very types of times in our lives. It's speaking to us when we're in a point where things seem really dark, really scary, really

uncertain. Maybe at the point where we even start to doubt that God is even paying attention, that God is even noticing us. Maybe even that God loves us or maybe even that God is there at all.

When you are in one of those deep, dark spaces sometimes we can begin to think that like, oh but I'm a Christian, I shouldn't think these things. I should always be joyful and celebrating life. But Psalm 42 is the permission slip that we all need to get because sometimes the day is bad. Sometimes this is a dark space, and you know what? It's okay. It's okay to be in that space. It's what you're feeling in the moment. It's real. But you weren't meant to stay there. It's like an airport – wonderful to go to, but you never want to stay there. You always want to be on your way to some other place filled with hope and goodness and love.

The psalmist is trying to deal with this feeling, and they never quite make it out. That's what I appreciate about Psalm 42. In Psalm 42 the psalmist never quite makes it out of that feeling of darkness but finds a way to endure within the darkness. It starts off speaking those words that have become the song, As the Deer which we sang today, like a deer that's thirsty, that's panting for flowing streams, that's how I need this connection with you.

This is not a story simply like, oh I can't wait until I get to go worship again, or I can't wait to feel connected with God. This is spiritual dehydration. This is being at that point where all you can think about is the need for that type of loving connection and you don't have it in that moment. That's the way the deer pants for flowing streams and that feeling of God, why are you so far away? When is the moment when I can meet with you?

The psalmist takes time to acknowledge this is what I'm feeling and then pulls out the secret weapon and that is remembrance, its memories. To remember the times when I did feel connected with you God. To remember the times when it wasn't quite so dark and I know that is possible so I'm going to pull upon those memories that I have. Meanwhile I'm taunting myself with doubts and there are others around me.

I don't know if you have any of these people in your life who when you're down, it feels like their goal is just to push you a little farther. When you say, "life is just terrible", they're like, "yeah, it is." "I just sometimes feel like I don't even feel a connection with God anymore." "Yeah, I mean, I don't even go to church anymore." Just pushing you down, more and more.

The psalmist is reflecting on what it's like to have those people around you. Right? It's like a New Jersey cop telling you you're stupid. You feel it and that accent really makes it land, I'm telling you.

But out of that feeling of self-deprecation and the deprecation that others seem so freely to give, the psalmist says, but you know what? There will be a day because my hope is in you, God. There will be a day I will praise you. I will praise you again.

But I want you to hear very clearly, this is a future tense. This psalmist is not in the space or the moment where they can do that praising or they can feel that connection with God. They are still in the muck of it and in case you doubted, they went for a verse 2 which was just a repeat of verse 1 cause the second half of the psalm is just a repeat of the same stuff all over again. I don't feel my connection with you, God. I feel abandoned. Where are you? How could you abandon me?

I mean I remember these things and these connections I have, but others are taunting me and I'm taunting myself, but I know there is hope in you. My hope is in you, Lord and I will praise you again.

If you think that maybe the psalmist was able to get out of that funk, that darkness, that valley, the second half of the Psalm goes, no, no, no, no, I'm still there. I'm still feeling it, but they knew there were better days ahead.

Maybe better than an airport analogy I should tell you about this place. It's just around the corner of where I live. It's the intersection of Old Collinsville Road and Lebanon Avenue. Anyone who has to drive near that intersection, there's a Dairy Queen there. There's a dead spot. There's a hole in the universe that sucks up all the cellular signals. So I know if I don't pick the song I'm listening to before I leave my house; that if I try to pull up new music when I'm anywhere near that intersection, it can't make the connection. If I'm trying to talk on a voice call it often drops right there. There is a hole in the universe. Right next to a Dairy Queen.

I've gotten to the point of maturity where I know this is a place of darkness, a valley of shadow of death where I shall not have any connection to thy Wi-Fi or thy cellular signal, and I know that. So, I've gotten to the place in my maturity of faith where I just go, alright just wait, Rob.

But there are people around who obviously are not used to this. I see people in their car next to me moving the phone trying to get a signal. Maybe if I press against this

window, I'll get a signal. My first thought is, maybe we put the phone down. I mean that's just a starter idea. I see them at that intersection trying to get signals that just aren't there. God bless them for not giving up, but sometimes you just have to go through dark spaces and eventually the light will change and eventually you get to moving.

Sometimes it takes an action on our part and so I think these words of the psalmist are not just words to hear what they were going through, but they're words to us today to know that when we're in those dark places we do the same thing. We start with saying, this is a dark space. This is terrible. This is a bad feeling. It's okay to acknowledge that and to say to God, where the heck are you? I don't feel you here. This is terrible. And you're not a bad Christian for saying that or thinking that. You're a human being.

But then, but then comes a time when we need to move beyond the feeling which is real and we acknowledge, and to use our thinking and our doing to put on some type of either the behavior or words like the psalmist who simply declared to his soul, you have a reason to have hope. And so, you say to yourself, I know there is a reason to hope. I know that this darkness can be met with the love of God. I know this because I remember the times when God has blessed me. I remember the goodness in my life. I remember that there is love. I don't feel it now. I'm in a dark hole but I'm gonna at least say the words, maybe do the actions that connect me with people who are part of that loving, care circle that I have. That I take some action and then I declare there is a hope ahead. There is a cellular signal just 2 blocks away. There is a flight that will get me out of here. There is a friend or a church family or a pastor, community of faith I am a part of and there is a God. All of these things are there for me and if I just reach out, I know, I know that there is hope even if I just can't feel it today.

This is what Psalm 42 gives us. It gives us the permission slip to feel like that ugh that that day is, but it also is the place to remind us that we can remember the goodness of God. We can remember the blessings that we have. We can remember that we are not alone and that is the moment that we can start to turn and we can project out and can say, I will declare that there is goodness ahead for me. I will believe in that, and I will be ready for it when that opening comes and take it, because I've got the ticket.

The ticket is the hope that we have for Jesus Christ. I've got the ticket. It's the love of God in my life and I've got the ticket. Life is filled with beauty and love and blessings. I just need to be reminded.

Before I close the sermon, I want to share with you something that happened at the 8 o'clock service. At the end of the service one of the people there walked up, and they said they were the ones who had put in the prayer request for a friend who was dealing with suicidal thoughts. They have a friend who is in a very dark place. The good news is they are getting help for that but these dark thoughts are surrounding them, and they don't see a way out and this person said, "I'm going to take Psalm 42 with me when I go to visit them and I'm gonna take that song that Mat sang. I'm gonna take a little bit of today's message and I'm just gonna be with them today.

That's what you can do too, to take the hope that you have, the love that you have and maybe you can be part of that light for someone who is in their own dark valley. I know there is someone in that 8 o'clock service who is about to be an incredible blessing and a part of God's hands and feet in this world and I bet there is someone in this room who has a place to go or who has a person to be with, so you could do that too. Let's be that.

To God be the glory.

Halleluiah and Amen.