

**First Congregational Church
of the United Church of Christ
Boulder, Colorado**

Thirsty for God

Text: Psalm 42

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There is an ancient tale from India about a young man who was seeking God. He went to a wise old sage for help. "How can I find God?" he asked the old man.

The old man took him to a nearby river. Out they waded into the deep water. Soon the water was up just under their chins. Suddenly the old man seized the young man by the neck and pushed him under the water. He held the young man down until the young man was flailing the water in desperation. Another minute and he may well have drowned. Up out of the water the two of them came. The young man was coughing water from his lungs and still gasping for air.

When they reached the river bank he asked the old man indignantly, "What did that have to do with my finding God?" The old man asked him quietly, "While you were under the water, what did you want more than anything else?" The young man thought for a minute and then answered, "I wanted air! I wanted air more than anything else!" The old man replied, "When you want God as much as you wanted air, you will find God."

This is the kind of yearning for God we hear in the psalm for today. The psalmist thirsts for God – for the living God. It is another way of expressing what Augustine said centuries later when he cried, "Our souls are restless until they find their rest in thee, O God."

Clearly the psalmist is familiar with God. It is clear that he has known the presence of God in his life in the past. It is clear that he has had what we might call "mountain top experiences," times when he was filled with a sense of the joy of God's presence, times when he would be a part of the throng going up to the temple and they'd be singing songs of praises as they went. But that is not the song he's singing now. He's not on the mountaintop; he's in the valley, and he doesn't know where God is.

Worse yet, all of his enemies taunt him asking, "Where is your God?" Maybe he's taunted by his own mind asking the same question. Lots of us have this kind of conversation in our head when life falls apart, when we are in the desert thirsting for answers to our suffering. "So where is God anyway? Why is this happening to me? Why did God abandon me? Maybe it's something I did. Maybe I'm being punished. Maybe God's trying to teach me something."

I've met many people who ask themselves these questions when life is difficult. It's a normal human response to think like this when we are in the desert-places of life, when we can't seem to experience God's presence. We start questioning everything. When we can't feel the presence of God it's easy to question God's existence; it's easy to believe the suggestion that God doesn't exist, or that God has left you, abandoned you. "Where is your God?"

This is the question and cry buried in the heart of any human being who has ever suffered or been exposed to the suffering of the world. I know of no one with any years on them, or with much life experience for whom that question has not appeared in some form or another.

The question is not, "Are we going to experience the absence of God?" but rather, "When we are feeling God's absence, what are we to do?" Perhaps some of you will remember Dave Dravecky, the famous pitcher for the San Francisco Giants, who lost his pitching arm to cancer. In his autobiography, *When You Can't Come Back*, Dave says that he learned through his suffering that "**the wilderness is part of the landscape of faith**, and every bit as essential as the mountaintop. On the mountaintop we are overwhelmed by God's presence. In the wilderness we are overwhelmed by God's absence. Both places should bring us to our knees; the one, in utter awe; the other, in utter dependence."

Perhaps we can learn from the psalmist and what he did when he was experiencing God's absence. First, the psalmist *remembered* and then he *chose* to hope in God.

First, he remembered a time in his life when God was very present to him. For the psalmist, this was a time when he went up to the temple with the grand procession, singing and giving God praise and thanksgiving. So perhaps when we are feeling as though God is absent from us, we could try to remember. Remember a time when you did experience an answer to prayer, a time when God did see you through, a time when you did experience the joy and peace of faith.

There have been several times in my life when I have been very worried about one of my children. It seems so often as parents we are only as happy as our least happy child. I will have to admit, over the years it has been all too easy for me to become obsessed with one or another of my children's problems and wonder, "Where is God?"

I remember for many years when my daughter was an active alcoholic asking the question, "Why isn't God answering the cries of my heart which have been going up day after day for several years now on my child's behalf?" In those times, one of the things that still allowed me to hope and not give up praying was remembering back to a time when I was desperately worried about my son, and how I did eventually see the answer to prayer. I would think about that time and how beside myself I had been then, and I would remember, looking back, how God had been there and did answer my prayers. Not in my timing, but in God's.

When I remember, like the psalmist, I can hang in there and also say as the psalmist does, “By day God commands God’s steadfast love, and at night God’s song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.” It is a promise that I have experienced in the past; I can trust it will come again, though I might not be feeling it right now.

But what about those who have not had such experiences? Where there’s no memory to draw on? That is where the community is so important, and the community’s story of hope. We can remember for one another. The community can remember for us. There will be someone present who can remember a time when God was present and prayer was answered. We need each others’ stories to give us perspective.

We also come together to tell the story of our faith, the remembrance of our ancestors. We “remember” who and whose we are as we hear the sacred texts of our tradition and sing and pray and commune together.

I can remember after 9/11 one of the things that sustained me and gave me hope was listening to your stories. One told me of being in Honolulu during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Another told me of serving in World War II as a young man. Their stories of living through horrific times and “coming through” helped me remember that God is always present, though we may have forgotten.

When I come to church and see so many of you who have shared with me your stories of how God has been present in your life, my own faith is buoyed up and it helps me once again choose hope. I can believe again. Sometimes you carry the memory for me. Sometimes I carry it for you. We see that the psalmist remembers going to the temple, not alone, but with the throng, the multitudes keeping festival.

Today we will come to the table together, like the throng in procession, as the psalmist remembered. And sharing in the bread and cup is also a remembering that helps us choose hope. “Do this in remembrance of me,” Jesus said. In the breaking of the bread we remember Christ’s body broken for the world, and we remember our own brokenness and the brokenness of the world. In the cup that is poured out, we remember Jesus’ life poured out for the world and remember how we are called to pour out our own lives to help repair the brokenness of the world.

In the act of communion we re-member – that is, our members are put back together again, individually and as a community as we also remember the possibility of new life that Christ’s resurrection proclaims. This is a feast of remembering and of resurrection. It is a symbol of the great banquet of God’s abundance to which all are invited and none are turned away. In the ordinary elements of everyday food and drink, we remember that there is a God who created us, who loves us through and through, and that nothing can ever separate us from that love.

So come to the table. Like a deer thirsting for flowing streams. Come thirsty for God. Come to the living water. Remember. “Hope in God, for we shall again praise our help and our God!”