

Animal Souls

^{NRS} Psa 42:1 <To the leader. A Maskil of the Korahites.> As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

³ My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?" ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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 ⁶ 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. ⁷ Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me. ⁸ By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. ⁹ I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" ¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?" ¹¹ 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.

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” Psalm 42 is a psalm about the soul- the deepest, most interior part of us. This morning we’re going to follow this psalm and talk about how the soul cannot be hidden, cannot be controlled, and what to do when, like the psalmist, we find ourselves with our souls cast down.

So first- the soul is something that cannot be hidden- at least for long. About a month ago we were given a basket of fun stuff for the kids. Two of the things in it that proved the most interesting were these two, furry animal masks. Now, they’re made for kids, but I was actually able to squeeze my head into one. It’s a slightly embarrassing fact, but I have a really tiny head- like William can almost wear one of my ball caps. All

those alien movies all make me a little nervous- you know the ones where the super intelligent aliens all have these huge heads? I'm encouraged that most scientists seem to think that head size actually isn't related to intelligence, but it makes me wonder sometimes. So anyway, I squeezed into one of the masks, and William loved it. He thought it was great. Ella on the other hand. I'm afraid to say that the only word for her response was terror. She wrinkled up her cute little face into a terrible frown and recoiled from me and started to cry.

Now it's tricky to know what was going on since she doesn't talk. Like it's possible that in her little mind she imagined a furry creature all of a sudden sprang to life and was afraid of that. Could be. We don't know. My own theory, though, is that she just didn't like the fact that this thing masked my face. One minute she has her small headed dad, who already has plenty of hair on his face thank you very much. And then the next minute daddy has been replaced by this albeit cute, but very non-daddy looking thing with daddy still looking through it. It's like part of me was there, but now part of me was hidden. And it wasn't fun- like peekaboo. It was scary. She didn't like this covered up, this slightly hidden me.

You know, I think we're a lot like Ella. I mean most of us aren't afraid of furry masks anymore. And yeah, we're excited for Halloween this year. Like every person she sees in a mask is going to be a new adventure in fear. That sounds like fun, right? But yeah, we're like her. We don't like it when people are hiding parts of themselves from us. We don't like it when we can sense that someone is keeping something from us- or isn't quite present with us. We like it when we can sense someone is being real with us- I

mean even if they aren't telling us something good, we still like it when a person is honest with us.

And this is part of what our text is about this morning. This psalm is largely about the soul. And the most fundamental understanding of the soul in Hebrew is that the soul is the deepest, most authentic, most true part of us- the part that cannot be masked, at least not for long.

Now this is maybe a little different than how most of us understand the soul. Most of us have been taught to believe that the soul is the immortal part us- the part that never dies. We've been taught that we're kind of like a peanut- we've got this hard shell on the outside, this annoying thing we have to slough off at some point, and then we've got this good stuff inside. In other words we have this mortal body, this mortal coil as Shakespeare puts it, and then we have this immortal soul inside of us. And so for a lot of us, the most important thing about the soul is that it is immortal, it is the part of us that endures, while the body of course makes it about 250,000 miles or 100 years, whichever comes first.

But this is not how the Jews, how the Bible, think of the soul. They don't make this big distinction between the mortal body and some ghostly, immortal part of us. For them the soul is in the body and the body is tied to the soul. The word for soul in Hebrew is *nephesh*, and it refers to the breath, and sometimes is even translated as 'throat' or 'stomach'. *Nephesh* in Hebrew is very much tied to the body. And so the meaning of the soul in Hebrew isn't between life now and life after death- it's the difference between all the masks we put on for the world, all the ways we are on the surface; and then our

deepest self, our most authentic self. Our *nephesh*, our soul- this is this deep, true self. This is the part of us that cannot be hidden- at least not for long.

Another thing that's true about the soul, and pretty frustrating, is not only is this part of us we can't really hide- but it's also part of us we can't really control. In the Hebrew way of thinking, our soul has a bit of a mind of it's own. A couple of weeks ago Nicole did such a great job teaching us that part of why the psalms are so interesting is that in the psalms we are the ones doing to talking to God. And in this psalm this is true- the psalmist is speaking to God. But there's also another person here the psalmist is talking to, did you notice who it is? It's the soul. It's like the Psalmist has a conversation with their own soul, like it's another person. Calvin notices is this when he writes about this psalm and says it sounds like there are oppositional parties talking here. (Oppositional parties- can you tell he started out a lawyer?) The Psalmist says, "Why are you cast down, within me, O soul? Why are you disquieted?"

And did you notice the image the Psalmist uses for the soul? The image is a thirsty deer, longing for flowing streams- this is what the soul is like here. Like a deer. Like a wild animal. When my grandparents were alive I would remember how they would be up so early in the morning, and often as they would have their breakfast a deer would come up onto their lawn- they lived in rural Western Pennsylvania. And no matter how many times this happened they would get so excited. I used to kind of roll my eyes at this, thinking deer didn't really seem all that wild to me. Then, one day I was walking in the pine woods just outside their house, when all of a sudden I heard this enormous- Shush sound! I nearly peed my pants. I looked up to see a young buck staring at me

before leaping away. It was a buck snort. See, I grew up in the suburbs. I had no idea deer made any noise- and certainly not a noise that would scare the pants off me. And all of a sudden I understand why my grandparents got so excited over these wild things. The psalmist says this is what are souls are like.

It isn't the only time the psalmist speaks of the soul like a wild animal, either. In Psalm 74 the soul is like a dove. In Psalm 124 it's like a bird in flight escaping from a net. And then, probably my favorite image- in Psalm 131 the soul is a fed child, lying, sleeping on her mother. And any of you has raised or babysat a small child- you know there can be something of a wild animal to them, something uncontrollable at times.

You know it would be great if we could make ourselves feel certain ways- if we could control our souls, but we just can't. There's no button you can push to make yourself feel a certain way, to feel happy, or to feel creative, or romantic. Anyone attuned to the soul knows it has a life of it's own. And it will not be forced.

And here, the psalmist struggles with a soul that is heavy, and sad, and troubled. "O my soul why are you downcast, why are you disquieted within me?" The Psalmist says this to his soul two times. And it's an honest question I think, because of what we learn about him. The psalmist has every reason to be happy- every reason to be excited about life. The psalmist is some kind of religious leader in charge of getting all of the people prepared to enter into the temple in Jerusalem. And this is an amazingly exciting job. Temple worship isn't exactly the kind of worship we are used to- there is action going on all over the place. Animals are standing around making noise. Priests are slaughtering some of them, and offering up prayers to God. And there is music- all kinds

of music. Cymbals are crashing and drums are playing and one scholar says entering the temple for most worshippers is more like a parade than a processional.

And so the psalmist is honestly confused here- because everything is going so well, their life is on track, they get to lead people into the temple- and yet in spite of all this, in spite of all these good things, it is not well with the psalmist's soul. "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you disquieted within me?"

But you know I think what's happened here to the psalmist is what has happened to so many of us. The psalmist has given and given and given what he has- and then at the end of the day, there just isn't enough left over.

The psalmist is the mom or dad who has gotten up, taken care of the kids, put the dishes away, taken the kids to school, worked a full day- then comes home and makes dinner, and do you know what they hear? "I didn't want *that* for dinner." Have you ever gotten that? It's like, "Well, good because you're not getting that- I made a bowl full of slugs for you!"

Or more seriously, the psalmist is the person caring for their mom or dad or their spouse in their final days. And every day you see them slip away just a little bit more. The person you once knew them to be falling away piece by piece. And you give every single thing that you have, and you know it's not going to bring them back, it can't bring them back- but you give what you have. And at the end of the day there just isn't much left over. And you think is this what it was supposed to be like? Is this what God was planning for us? "Oh my soul. Why are you so cast down? Why are you disquieted within me."

The psalmist is you and me- the psalmist is able to keep going and do everything they need to do. They lead all these people into the sanctuary- they know how to put their game face on. But then, in the quiet, after everything is over, and the day is done. They are left tired and exhausted and wondering how much longer they can do this?

So what is there to do when we're like this? Well, the first thing I'll tell you is if you find yourself cast down for a period of time- always touch base with a good counselor to rule out a more serious depression. And if you aren't sure where to start with that, please talk with me- I will help you. But when we've done that- then what. Well the psalmist tells us something so helpful here- the psalmist tells us we may not be able to control the soul- but we can control what we remember. And when he finds himself in this barren place, with his soul heading south on him- he tries his best to remember a time when it wasn't like this- a time when God seemed more alive and present to him.

And for him the Psalmist remembers being in a wild place- being at the headwaters of the Jordan. He remembers the waters crashing down all around, he remembers feeling God's incredible, cleansing power, he remembers what it felt like to have God's grace literally pouring over him. When the early church read this part, it reminded them of baptism. St. Augustine remembers that this is the psalm was read when he was baptized by Ambrose of Milan in 387.

Indeed this is actually why we worship. All the time people say to me why do I have to go to church to worship God? God is everywhere, right? I can stay home and worship God, right? And I say absolutely! God is everywhere. No doubt about it! But

one of the reasons we worship together is that sometimes it's nice to have a little help- and so we come to this place, and we see the cross, we see the font, and we see these people we have known, and somehow seeing these things- it can help us remember that if our soul is cast down this morning, we remember that we have known other times as well. And when we remember that God has been with us, we remember it is possible that is with us, and it makes it easier to trust that God will be with us in the days ahead.

Of course sometimes we worship and remember in different ways. In Austin I knew a woman who was caring for her ageing father- she and her husband and made a room for him and were doing everything they could. He was suffering from Alzheimer's but his progression had been fairly slow. But, then, things started to get worse. First they had to take his car keys away- and he was still pretty healthy when they had to do this, and he was angry about it. And that was difficult. But then, after this, he started getting out of the house and walking around. And when the police called them in the middle of the night, and Wally had been found walking along the highway half naked- they knew they weren't even able to care for him anymore. And although it broke her heart, this woman had to put her father into a place where he could get round the clock care.

I never knew Wally when he lived with his daughter; I only knew him in the hospital. And he wasn't an easy man to get to know at that point. He had become a shell of the man he once was. And to make things worse he had moved backwards in time so far. He grew up in Finland, and although he had lived in America for almost all his life, he had taken to speaking Finnish again. Ancient Greek and Hebrew really weren't all that helpful. And there were days I kind of dreaded going to see him, because I knew I just wasn't going to be at all helpful.

But one day I will never forget. I went to see him and as usual he was just sitting on his bed staring out the window into space. I came in and told him who I was and talked to him about the day. And then a nurse came in and said it was music time. And, and this was something I had never seen from him- he turned and his eyes lit up. And so I just followed them down to an open area where a lot of the other residents were sitting around. And honestly it was hard to tell if some of them were even alive. But then they turned the music on- it was mainly swing music from the 40's, Glen Miller and people I had never heard of. And like turning on a switch these people came to life. Their eyes opened. Their faces lit up. Their bodies even started to move to the music a little bit. And for the first time I heard Wally speak English. He would tell me if he remembered a song or not. "Oh, I remember this one," he would say. "That was a good time." "I remember this one- that was a good time." And although he didn't say anything more, I could tell by his smile, by his soul peeking through, he was remembering so much more- he was remembering a time that was better.

Beloved, our souls are like wild animals. And sometimes they roam in good pasture, and sometimes they wind up in dry, barren places. When this happens we may not be able to stop their roaming on us- but like the Psalmist, and like Wally, we can remember. We can remember when God was with us together in worship and we can remember in our own ways times that were better and hope for them again. My prayer for us is that we may all join the psalmist when he sings: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." **Amen.**