

An Invitation

Psalm 42:1-5

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Part of life is learning about ourselves...and sometimes other people help us with that. When John and I got married, one of the first things he brought to my attention was that I took a lot of ibuprofen. I didn't notice it when I was the only adult living in a house with two teenage boys...I guess I assumed everyone in that situation took a lot of ibuprofen. One morning John, watching me pop Advil, said, "Ibuprofen again? You sure have a lot of headaches." I told him that I wake up with a headache almost every day. And then I take Advil and it goes away, only to return in the afternoon. John said, "You need to stop taking all that medicine and drink more water." Because we were newly married and I thought he was the smartest person I had ever met, I took his advice. He was right. My headaches went away when I drank more water. I was under hydrated and hadn't even realized it. For a long time, I had been treating the main symptom, headaches, but not treating the cause which was not drinking enough water.

Doctors say that by the time we recognize we are thirsty, we have been under hydrated for a while. When I was experiencing headaches every day, it didn't even occur to me that I needed to drink water...I didn't feel thirsty, but my head sure hurt. This experience came to mind this week because I had a similar experience not long ago. It didn't have anything to do with physical thirst, but instead was more about "spiritual thirst." And because I don't love "church-y" metaphors, saying "spiritual thirst" is a stretch for me. Let me see if I can explain it so it doesn't sound so weird, at least to my own ears.

As I was leaving for vacation a couple of weeks ago, about an hour into my drive to Illinois, I realized that I really felt awful. My symptoms included extreme lethargy, anger at the world, sadness---to the point of daily tears, and I had been feeling really alone, even when I was in a room full of people. It wasn't until that moment that I realized how bad I felt, alone in my car, not answering emails, not working on a sermon, not visiting someone in the hospital or sitting in a meeting, not doing "all the things." Until that moment, if someone had asked me how I was, I would have said, "Great!" But, I wasn't. As I thought about why I might be feeling this way, it wasn't hard to name the things happening in the world that contributed to my feelings of general crappiness. It also occurred to me that if I was feeling this way without even really realizing it, maybe some of you are too. And really, I've seen your anger, sadness, and frustration on social media and I hear it in our conversations. Many of you are experiencing symptoms just like mine.

Here we are, a room full of people who care deeply about the world; who make their lives educating young people, serving non-profit organizations, saying the unpopular things in northeast Oklahoma, seeking justice for the ones who are vulnerable, caring for family and friends, and doing all of the required "adulting" things. I stand up here Sundays and talk about living out our faith through service to others and most of the time, I am literally and figuratively "preaching to the choir." You love people very well. I don't think we realize the toll life is taking on us...we just keep poppin' ibuprofen, worrying about our neighbors, and caring for the world. This *way of being* is what I mean when I talk about "spiritual thirst." Just as physical thirst is quenched by a cold glass of water, "spiritual thirst" needs refreshment as well. The bottom line is, if we are going to be light, love, and hope to this hurting world, if we are going to be healthy people, if we are going to be a church that embodies God's love, that draws people into relationships with us and with God, we need to connect with God and each other. Does that make sense?

Some of you may have already recognized that I've borrowed this metaphor comparing physical thirst with spiritual thirst from Psalm 42.

The psalmist wrote:

*As a deer gets thirsty
for streams of water,
I truly am thirsty
for you, my God.

²In my heart, I am thirsty
for you, the living God.
When will I see your face?

³Day and night my tears
are my only food,
as everyone keeps asking,
"Where is your God?"

⁴Sorrow floods my heart,
when I remember
leading the worshipers
to your house.
I can still hear them shout
their joyful praises.

⁵Why am I discouraged?
Why am I restless?
I trust you!

And I will praise you again
because you help me,

⁶ and you are my God.
I am deeply discouraged
as I think about you
from where the Jordan begins
at Mount Hermon
and from Mount Mizar.

⁷Your vicious waves

have swept over me
like an angry ocean
or a roaring waterfall.
⁸ Every day, you are kind,
and at night
you give me a song
as my prayer to you,
the living Lord God.
⁹ You are my mighty rock.
Why have you forgotten me?
Why must enemies mistreat me
and make me sad?
¹⁰ Even my bones are in pain,
while all day long
my enemies sneer and ask,
“Where is your God?”
¹¹ Why am I discouraged?
Why am I restless?
I trust you!
And I will praise you again
because you help me,
and you are my God.

This is a psalm of lament where the psalmist uses images of water to pour his heart out for and to a God who seems distant. One of the things I love about the psalms, in general, is the raw emotion and honesty they demonstrate. They remind me that the ones who came before us were sometimes sad, angry, disappointed, and desperate and they weren't afraid to talk about it. None of what we are feeling today is new, even though it feels like it to us. This psalmist is honest about his pain and disappointment and points his finger right at God, “Your vicious waves have swept over me like an angry ocean or a roaring waterfall...Why have you forgotten me?” The writer also points to the

taunting of other people as a source for his pain, "...my enemies sneer and ask 'Where is your God.'" I think that's a good question. Where is our God while children are imprisoned without their parents? Where is our God while millions go without healthcare? Where is our God while environmental protections are rolled back and while Christians hunt endangered animals for trophies? Where is our God when members of the LGBTQ community can't be who they are in our churches and communities? Where is our God as racism and xenophobia are normalized and name-calling in the public sphere is a thing? Indeed, where is our God?

Today we begin a sermon series I hope helps us answer these questions coherently. Because I'll tell you what, alone in the car on the way to Illinois, my answer was an angry and very sad, "Today, I have no idea." I could have probably answered the question, "Where is God in the midst of suffering?" I know in my head the answer is, "God is in the people who show up to enter into the suffering, to help the ones who are imprisoned, hungry, sick, homeless, discriminated against. God is always with the ones who are vulnerable. When human beings build walls to keep people out, God stands on the other side of the wall." So, yes, I can answer the question, "Where is God?" But being able to say the words sometimes isn't enough. Sometimes I need to remind my heart that this is the answer. And that's why I think this sermon series is important for us.

Through this series, I want us to treat the cause of our thirst, which I sense is a disconnection from God, and from our truest selves. I hope we will reconnect with God in some new ways and some very old ways. I hope it will teach us to slow down, if only for a few minutes, a few days a week, and connect with the energy/the light/the hope that life has a way of causing us to lose sight of. I hope this series draws us into the parts of life that are hopeful...maybe learning from the psalmist, who, even in the midst of his despair, the psalmist wrote, "Every day

you are kind...You are my rock...I will praise you again because you help me, and you are my God.”

In the coming weeks, I plan to explore spiritual practices or holy habits in my sermons. These practices are not meant to be one more thing to check off of your “to-do” list, but to be life-giving ways of connecting each of us to the Source (with a capital S) of all that is good in the world. And I hope in reconnecting to that good energy, we will flood our lives and our neighbors’ lives with good, with light, with a desire to be who God created us to be individually and as a community.

I know you are busy. But I am asking you to commit to trying these practices on your own. Just try...even if for only 5 minutes a week. Try. See what works for you and what doesn’t.

***This is your invitation** to take the rest of the summer to do something for your thirsty soul. I’m asking you to be open to mystery, open to your own spirituality, open to change. In their book *Who’s Got Time? Spirituality for a Busy Generation*, authors Teri Peterson and Amy Fetterman describe engaging life spiritually as “...adding the God-connected, divine seeking self to your list of identities.” For most of us that list includes friend, student, parent, partner, co-worker, sibling. I am asking you to add *mystery-chaser* to your list. Spiritual practices can nurture our souls and hearts for service to others. They empower us to be the change we wish to see, to embody the God we long to serve, to be one with the Mystery that is among us and beyond us,” the Mystery our hearts seek, even when we aren’t aware of it.

Each week in the sermon, I will introduce a spiritual practice or sometimes more than one. Together, we will explore it, learn about how others use this particular practice and how we might use it in our own lives. And then every Wednesday evening, at 7:00 pm, you are invited to gather here at the church to practice and talk about what we are learning. These Wednesday gatherings are not meant to be a

burden. If you don't have time or want to come, don't. And you don't have to email me or message me about why you can't come. It's ok not to come. But if you feel like engaging in these practices with others would be a good thing for you, join me!

While I haven't introduced a specific practice this week, I have extended an invitation to you to embark on this journey with me. We will still begin our Wednesday night gatherings this week. This week we will practice silence. Through the persistent prodding of a dear friend, I have come to believe there is value in silence (even for this "out there" extrovert)...no music, no phone, no talking, just listening. We will gather in the sanctuary for 30 minutes of silence and then have a brief discussion about how that felt, what we heard while silent, and whether this is a practice we might find useful as we seek to connect more fully to God, ourselves, and others. You are all invited.

Please pray with me.

Holy One,

In a world filled with to-do lists, noise, calendars, news broadcasts, and social media snarkiness, we come to you thirsty for hope, peace, and love. Use this time and this invitation to draw us close to you. Create in each of us a desire to be different, to show the ones watching us that there is joy and comfort in following Your ways. Show us that it's okay to be angry about what's going on in the world, but that we can't be driven by our anger. We must be driven by love for all of creation. Speak to us through the holy habits we choose. Encourage us to share our experiences and our wisdom with one another. Thank you, for the gift of community as we are better together. Remind us each day that love is bigger than anything in its way. Amen.

