

Psalm 42

Introduction:

Today's passage is one of the most quotable psalms we've got. Lines from this psalm show up on calendars, in songs and hymns, inspire art. It's powerful poetry, full of images that stick in our minds.

It says it was written by the Sons of Korah, or the Korahites. These were people charged by David to write Psalms, to be the Worship Leaders and praise band for Israel (cf. 1 Chron. 6).

Today we'll talk about this Psalm, about its relevance for those who first wrote it and sang it, and about its relevance for us, today.

Let's pray first!

Prayer:

Book Context:

Let me start with this: In some Hebrew manuscripts, Psalm 42 and Psalm 43 were connected. This makes complete sense if we were to read these two Psalms together, and it's hard to know why what makes up Psalm 43 was divided from Psalm 42, but over time it was.

Psalm 43 is a psalm about how the speaker is mocked

for trusting God, how they feel God's absent from them, how much they long to be back on Mt. Zion. It's short, and has no introduction. It ends just like Psalm 42:

***Why, my soul, are you downcast?
 Why so disturbed within me?
 Put your hope in God,
 for I will yet praise him,
 my Savior and my God.***

Psalm 43 totally is a chunk of Psalm 42. Why it got divvied out, who's to say? If you're really bored, you can read all sorts of theories. Let me reread Psalm 42, though, in case we couldn't hear it or couldn't focus last time around:

Reading Again:

***1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
 so my soul pants for you, my God.
 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
 When can I go and meet with God?
 3 My tears have been my food
 day and night,
 while people say to me all day long,
 "Where is your God?"
 4 These things I remember
 as I pour out my soul:
 how I used to go to the house of God***

***under the protection of the Mighty One[d]
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.***

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

***Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.***

6 My soul is downcast within me;

***therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.***

7 Deep calls to deep

***in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.***

8 By day the Lord directs his love,

***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 go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”***

10 My bones suffer mortal agony

***as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”***

11 Why, my soul, are you downcast?

***Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,***

***for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.***

You know what? I'll keep going into Psalm 43:

***Vindicate me, my God,
and plead my cause
against an unfaithful nation.***

***Rescue me from those who are
deceitful and wicked.***

2 You are God my stronghold.

Why have you rejected me?

***Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?***

***3 Send me your light and your faithful care,
let them lead me;***

***let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.***

***4 Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.***

***I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.***

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

***Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.***

Social Location: Far From Home

When the Psalm was written isn't as relevant as the

situation, the place in life of the psalm and its author. That said, if you want to know about when it was written all that stuff will be online at the end of the message.

We can tell that the psalm is written from a future time when at least this author, if not the rest of Israel too, can't get to the Temple anymore. He's across the river, far to the north of the Sea of Galilee, far from Jerusalem, on the border of Syria and Lebanon on the far side of the Jordan, to the east of Jerusalem.

The House of God, Mt. Zion, Jerusalem, the Temple: whatever language you want to use here, he's far away from it.

Social Location: Far From His People

And twice, the author writes that people around him taunt him, antagonize him, saying "Where is your God?" Because of course, if your God was with you, you wouldn't be here--you'd be home, worshipping God with others.

And to be surrounded by these people is to not be surrounded by his people, right? Assuming this is written by a fella, and it almost certainly was, he is writing in an "us and them" mode. In fact, he's experiencing the not-fun side of that "us and them." He's the them; he's the outsider; everyone around him is the us, they are gathered together in antagonism.

He's isolated and displaced. He's isolated and displaced. Not only from the people who he worshipped God with, but most powerfully, as the psalm reveals it, from God.

Social Location: Far from God

This sense of God's absence is the emotional heart of the psalm. Whatever else is true--and there are true things, the psalmist is far away from Jerusalem, the psalmist is far away from his advocates--but these truths are weaker than this great truth.

This is the lament that drives this Lament Psalm. A lament is just an expression of sorrow, of grief. It's passionate, it's authentic, it's full, but it's sorrow given words. And the great sorrow that drives this Psalm is the very real belief that God has abandoned the psalmist.

Hypothetical Responses:

Our gut, if this was someone we loved, would be to step in and tell the person some things. We'd speak truth.

"God hasn't abandoned you." We might say. "You're not alone." We might tell them.

Some of the more sensitive among us, or the professionally trained, might take another tack; but

even then, we can default to factual reminders.

There is something about lament that makes most of us deeply, deeply uncomfortable. For some of us it's about control: one thing we can almost never control is another person's heartache, and particularly if we care about that person, or if we're used to controlling them, their grief can cause us a deeply frustrating sense of impotence. For some of us it's about fearful self-protection: Our own sorrow is so close to the surface of our lives, is something we have done such a poor job of attending to, that to be close to another person's grief causes our own to be too real to us. We just can't handle their sorrow, because we've never handled our own.

For others, it's the same stuff that comes up when any intense emotion comes up: We were taught that to grieve loudly, publicly, unconsolably is just more or less immoral. It's bad or weakness or a failure. Regardless, the person lamenting in front of us becomes not a person, but an object to be scorned, derided, avoided. Less than a person.

It's easier, in any of these cases, to remind the person of some facts that prove their experience wrong. The problem is that for every single person who has ever lived, experience win over facts.

You might be surprised to know--I'm kidding, you'd

guess this probably--that 20 years ago I was an emotional mess, just totally a mess. I remember sharing with one of my closest friends during a moment of deep misery in a season of deep depression, about how terrible I was feeling, and the person replied that what I'd just said was "A lie straight from the Devil." And I remember choking out "But it's real to me."

The truth is that what matters most is what's real to us, not what's true, and if those things don't line up, truth always loses to the palpable experience of sorrow.

I think, frankly, the medicine for this soul ache isn't truth, it's presence. The cure for a deep believe that God is absent from us is the presence of someone. In the best case, it's someone who loves us, who will simply be with us, who loves the Lord, too, and in solidarity offers their own experience of trust, embodied in their life, for us to lean on. In the worst case, we seek out cheap sex or its approximation to make us feel less alone, because all that matters in the moment is feeling less alone.

If what we see in today's psalm is displacement, isolation, and a sense that God is absent, then let me ask this. We could ask these questions about others, but let's ask them about ourselves:

Do you feel displaced right now?

Do you feel isolated right now?

Do you feel as if God is absent right now?

Displacement:

To feel displaced is, frankly, a privileged position compared to the millions of people who are actually right now physically displaced--leaving homes, languages, cultures, with nothing except themselves because of war or poverty. We are living in a time of great human migration, and we aren't insulated from it. I could talk at length about this. (If we were, "illegal" wouldn't be shorthand for a type of person, and there wouldn't be our current national policy of taking children from their parents and putting them in kennels alone.) But most of us, frankly, aren't physically displaced; we are emotionally, psychologically displaced. Our interior world feels strange to us.

New jobs, new roles, new homes, new stages of life, new responsibilities, any of these things can cause us to experience a sense of displacement. A global pandemic that has impacted every single one of our relationships, communities, and society has caused us to feel a sense of displacement. What was familiar isn't anymore, and no matter how wonderful the present is--and it isn't always wonderful--we can remember the past with fondness, regret. With lament.

When it comes to our interior lives, our sense of displacement is subjective. For some of us, a grand change is no big deal; for others, it's a terror. The problems come, or at least are compounded, when we don't allow ourselves to grieve our displacement. The Psalms are our prayerbook, they are our songbook, they're a gift from God for us: and this Psalm says to us that it is okay to grieve displacement. If the words of the Psalms give voice to what's most true about being a human before God, then realizing our displacement costs us, is lamentable, is something humans were meant to do.

So in what areas of your life are you feeling displaced, feeling like you don't belong, and somehow things have shifted around you? Have you owned this experience and lamented it?

Isolation:

There's two, oh, types of isolation in this psalm: Isolation from, and isolation by. The author is isolated by this group of antagonists, made to be an object of scorn and ridicule, and reminded how alone he is.

And the author is isolated from a particular group of people: those who he worshipped with, who knew him, who shared a culture and self-understanding as God's People. He was a Korahite, had for generations played a critical role in the life of his community, and was

known for it.

We are embedded people. We are people embedded in communities. Our society is built on the fiction that we aren't, that the best way to discover our identity is to escape from others and find it. The psalmist realizes that this is self-deception at best, a dehumanizing lie at worst, and it's in the community of people that we're a part of where we know and discover ourselves. And that community of definition, that community of people who let him know who he is, is what he's been isolated from.

What communities of people are we embedded in? What communities of definition are we a part of? If we're feeling isolated from others, what is the reason? Because now is an isolating time. Insofar as we can engage with others, what is lacking in our relationships that leaves us feeling isolated?

And it may not be something lacking in our relationships, I guess; it may be something else. But our world is more than our interior sense of it; we're a part of communities that shape and define us. This guy who was writing what he wrote really was alone, facing antagonists. If we're discover that we're in a community of people who care for us, and we are our great antagonist, then I can only encourage us to share this so we can begin to discover ways to get out of our own heads. A sense of isolation is subjective;

being isolated from others is objective, factual; if we're experiencing both at the same time, it's a sign of a need in our hearts that we must give voice to to someone who can lovingly hear us.

God:

To talk about feeling as if God is absent is in some ways to bring out into the open a great secret many, many Christians are too embarrassed to share.

For a hundred reasons, we feel ashamed when we don't feel God's presence with us or love for us. Because of course, we should. Right? We should; we should all over ourselves when it comes to our experiences of God. We can each "should" all over ourselves.

I want to talk less, for a second, about what we should feel than what we do so often feel. Here's one thing: So often, if we take a moment to take stock of our experience of living, we realize that we don't feel God's presence much at all. In that sort of case, it's a symptom of the noise of life, the flurry of activity, and the endlessly urgent things that pile up upon that keeps us from noticing how little we feel God's presence. It doesn't seem as if this is the Psalmist's case. It seems as if he's made room for God, likely done all the tricks and techniques that you and I have been taught and encouraged to do that open us up to God's presence with us: habits of reading, of praying,

of gathering with other believers, of fasting and, for the psalmist, offering sacrifices and taking up Sabbath.

What's most difficult is what we see in the psalm today: Praying, reaching out to God, while believing God is absent from us. Given an Israelite view of the world, I don't think that the Psalmist will feel completely as if God is with him until he's back at the Temple with God's People. In fact, Ezekiel, that crazy book so influenced by the Babylonians who had destroyed Jerusalem and taken its people into exile, in the book the Prophet Ezekiel has a vision of God leaving Jerusalem in a mighty chariot and coming to be with his people in Babylon. Israel needed that vision, needed to know that God was with them even when they were far away from Jerusalem, needed to remember that God was God of the whole world, and not just of a tiny little place way far away from us in the room.

There's something true about the fact that we know about love by having experienced love. We know about God by having experienced some moment or season of God's faithfulness to us; to experience God's absence is first of all to have experienced God's presence, no matter how rarely or long ago it might have been. For the Psalmist, who didn't live quite so much in his head as we do, it was the memory of those times in Jerusalem with God's People that he

longed for again. Given our circumstances, we might long for the same thing. Or we might long for the good feelings we had in the past. The great trouble in this, of course, is that a bad lunch or week without great sleep can tank our emotions no matter how close God has drawn to us.

In a season of feeling as if God is absent, I think the best thing we can do is invite someone else to be present with us. To pray for us when we can't pray. Love us when we don't believe in love. Practice solidarity, a commitment to us no matter what, when we feel as if we've been abandoned. All the better if they can say to us that they're doing it because they love us, and because they want to be God--be Christ--for us until we can remember the salvation that we've forgotten.

This feels a little lame; I'd rather offer us some great trick, sugar or caffeine, that makes us feel like God is with us and we can just roll with life. But I think the only fundamental solution to an absence is a presence, and the surrogate presence of someone who loves us, even when we don't love ourselves or our situation, can fill a gap until we experience the presence of God again.

And often we discover, some years down the road, that God was with us all along, present in the one who loved us.

Conclusion:

Any one of these things--isolation, displacement, a sense of God's absence--is significant, and can cause a great crises in faith. All three together are crushing. The self talk that the psalmist gives voice to, this question:

11 Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

***Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.***

It's not hope, but it's hoping to hope. That's no small thing. We could read all sorts of other psalms attributed to the Sons of Korah that give voice to joy, to praise, to contentment. But a human emotion is sorrow, because human experiences are experiences of isolation, of displacement, and of God's absence.

And yet, to hope for hope, to allow our self-talk, what we say to our souls, to be words of encouragement to keep on keeping on in the midst of these difficult moments is no small thing. In the final analysis, it's a triumph of faithfulness. It's what it means to persist, to stand, and after everything, to remain standing.

I hope that when we find ourselves isolated, displaced, or feel as if God is far from us, we might tell ourselves

to hope. We might do the one great act of faith the Psalmist still has left, which is to remind himself of God's past faithfulness, to us and our loved ones. It's why we take time to share prayers and the way God meets them as a congregation; it's why we come together during the week: to remind each other, to turn our minds again to God, when everything else has turned us away from Him, or we're feeling as if God has turned away from us.

If we find ourselves in these places now, remembering the good we've experienced may be no small thing; finding someone who will simply be present with us may be an even greater good. I pray in our displacement, our isolation, and our belief that God has abandoned us, we can do both.

Extras:

Book Context:

In terms of the Book of Psalms, Psalm 42 starts the Second Part of this Five-Part Book, which runs from Psalm 42 through Psalm 72.

Psalm 42: When?

Psalm 42 is written post-David, after the Temple has been built. We read, for example:

4 These things I remember

***as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.***

This is a Temple-centered regret. The author, this “Son of Korah”--possibly one of Korah’s own children, or, say their apprentices, those who took up his family’s task for Israel--this author is writing from a place of loss, remembering when he and others would go to the Temple and worship God together. It’s been suggested that this isn’t written simply after the Temple was built, but after Israel was removed from Jerusalem, sent into Exile, which would make it a Psalm written closer to the time of the prophets.