

7/24/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl this morning to all of you present here and to those watching on Zoom as well.

We gather to worship God and to witness to the grace and love of God that we have found in Christ Jesus.

May each of you be blessed in this hour of worship, knowing this is also a time of year when many are away on vacation.

Today we will continue with the theme of emotional, mental, and spiritual wholeness. Psalm 42 gives us the image of long for God's presence like a deer craving water.

Eric graciously informed me that what is on the graphic of the bulletin is actually an elk, not a deer. Furthermore, the deer of the psalm is actually a doe anyway, so wouldn't have antlers.

I take full responsibility for bulletin graphic errors. Additionally, I need to warn you that it will be Eric reading the scripture and not Gretchen as printed.

Are there any announcements at this time?

CALL TO WORSHIP – PSALM 126: 1-3, 5

As we enter a spirit of worship, I invite us to read a portion of Psalm 126:

Leader: When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.

People: **Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.**

Leader: Then it was said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."

People: **The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.**

All: **Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.**

INVOCATION PRAYER

God of compassion,

May we bring all of ourselves to our worship today, all of our tears as well as our joy.

Comfort us, renew us, embolden us, transform us, and free us to be able to learn to love and to witness to where love can be found.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Dear God, as these dog days of summer continue we confess that we are tired of the heat and we long for some rain. At the same time we are aware that we are sitting in a cool, safe space and that we have all that we need and more. We are grateful to be together, to offer you our worship, to fellowship together, to honor the Sabbath by gathering here, rather than doing whatever it is we do every other day of the week.

Thank you for each person who is joining in this time of worship. Bless each one and move with your Holy Spirit to give what is needed. We pray for those who are absent from us for whatever reasons. May your Spirit be with them, giving what they need as well.

We pray for Noah Schrag and Peter Voth as they head out to camp this afternoon. Give them and all the campers and staffers a good and safe week as they experience and learn about you in the camp setting. Be also with Delton and Janice, Lynel and Vickie, Caleb and Beth and their boys as they head to Denton, TX this coming week for the Western District Conference assembly. We pray for safe travels and for a rich experience of fellowship and learning for them and for all who attend. May your Spirit be present and moving in their midst. We pray particularly for our sister congregation, Luz de Evangelio as they also participate and worship together.

O God, in the spirit of the psalmists, we continue to bring before you those we know and love who are dealing with health issues. We pray for Diana Schunn as she continues to make progress after her heart transplant. We pray for Steve Banman, for Gene Hastings, for Gloria Yoder, and for others whose bodies are healing, struggling, longing for wholeness. And we know, God that along with that physical struggle there can also be emotional, mental and spiritual struggles. We know too that those can be present whether or not the body is unwell. We pray, Lord, that your Spirit would respond to the cries of grief, anxiety, depression or other illnesses. May what we read and learn from the Psalms give us courage and boldness to bring you our honest prayers. You are our God; you have promised that you are always with us and that we can pour out our hearts to you.

We confess, loving God, that the world often feels hostile, scary and broken. We're afraid for the well-being of our planet and for the delicate balance of all living beings, as you've created them. We pray for leaders in our local communities, our state, our nation and leaders the world over as they make policies and decisions that affect so many. Give them wisdom and compassion. Lord, even in the midst of our fear, we put our hope in you. We trust in your love and redemption for the world and its inhabitants. Give us courage to co-create with you, to take the actions and make the decisions that are aligned with your will and wishes. Give us humility and boldness as we live as your faithful followers. Let us be your light and salt in the world and let those we meet see your love reflected in us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION
(by Joanna Harader, VT 1017)

God of life,
we give these offerings in gratitude,
rejoicing in the abundance
of your gifts to us.
We give these offerings in faith,
trusting that you will provide
for our needs.
We give these offerings in hope,
knowing you can use them
to spread your love in this world.
And with these offerings, we give ourselves;
may we live with generous hearts
and open hands. Amen.

PUT YOUR HOPE IN GOD – PASTOR CALEB
Psalm 42 (and 43)

The Psalms are the hymn texts of the Bible. I don't remember when I first read psalm 42, but it has always felt moving to me. It both poetically describes a deep longing for God and the pain of grief. This kind of psalm connects us with the common human experience of grief. It tells us that it is OK to grieve and to bring that sadness before God.

The psalmist wrestles with his own soul:

“Why are you downcast, O my soul, why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God...”

Somehow this always spoke to me in the times when I felt down. It was among the Scriptures that came to me on one occasion when I was able to finally release some deep emotions I didn't even know I had.

When I was in seminary, each student was asked to memorize a short passage in our Hebrew class. I choose the first half of Psalm 42.

“As the deer craves the flowing streams of water, so my soul craves for you, O God...”

Psalm 42 is an example of a psalm of lament – and there are a lot of these, about one third of the book of psalms. Laments are a genre of biblical literature that unreservedly express grief, feelings of abandonment, hurt, or anger. Biblical lament is prayer language. It addresses God, but not always politely.

Psalms of lament poetically describe inner experience similar to people in grief or struggling with mental health, including the experience of sleeplessness.

For example in psalm 77:

I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.

2 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;

at night I stretched out untiring hands, and I would not be comforted....

4 You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.

Or Psalm 22, words that came to Jesus when hanging on the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

*Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?*

*2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.*

Sometimes there is an unexplained change of tone. Psalm 13 begins by naming feelings of abandonment and grief:

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

*2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?*

But then there is a shift:

But I trust in your unfailing love;

my heart rejoices in your salvation.

The book of Psalms is like the hymnal of the ancient Jewish people, probably not in its present form until after the exile. That means we have to imagine the words of Psalm 42 being sung by a community.

Yet it also seems to be autobiographical, telling the actual life experience of one person at some point in time. For example, we can make that kind of connection with "Amazing Grace." The "I" of the hymn is the author John Newton, describing his religious conversion, repenting from the slave trade and eventually joining the abolitionist movement.

With the psalms, it can be difficult to know when we should interpret the "I" of the psalm as one particular person's story. Quite often there may be a particular personal experience behind a psalm, but over time the words were adapted and it became the prayer and song of the community.

It isn't just one person's story. It is everyone's story. No one would sing *Amazing Grace*, and think, "oh that John Newton, he once was lost, but then became found. He was blind, but then later he saw." Rather we apply those words to ourselves. You think about when you felt lost and how God's grace transformed your life.

Songs can also have a backstory that isn't obvious from the words themselves. The song we will sing later, "Nothing is lost" was inspired by the grief of the songwriter, whose son died at the age of 19 with cystic fibrosis.

If some psalms have a backstory, often lost to us, others may simply be poetry that speaks to the common life experiences for the community that sang these songs. Many psalms are probably both. Psalm 42 probably came to carry the painful experience of exile in Babylon that happened to the whole nation.

We don't have a lot of details to fill in the individual's backstory of Psalm 42, but here's an attempt:

The psalm seems to be the experience of someone who once was a temple singer, able to participate in joyous worship during festivals at the temple in Jerusalem.

[MAP: ISRAEL]

Something happened and the psalmist can't go back there. He (well, probably a "he") is in some sort of exile, way in the north of Israel. The psalm specifically mentions the Jordan river headwaters, and the Hermon mountain range.

In the first part of the psalm, the psalmist gives the image of a doe searching for water during a drought, and this is how the psalmist feels, as he is unable to worship God like he could in those joyful experiences of the past.

He describes intense grief: "My tears have been my daily bread, both day and night..." As well as the mockery of people constantly taunting him: "Where is your god?"

Where is your god? is a way of saying, "if the god you worship is so powerful and cares about you, why are you in this situation?" The mockery probably comes from people who don't worship Israel's god. It hurts.

The psalm goes on: "*These things I remember and pour out upon me in my soul...*" The language of "pouring out" implies a torrent of emotion or weeping.

What he remembers are the experiences of worship back at the temple: "... *For I was once walking along with the great throng to the temple of God, shouting and giving thanks along with the crowd as we celebrated the holy festival*" (NET Bible)

[SLIDE: PILGRIMAGE WALK]

This is probably describing a procession at one of the major festivals with lots of pilgrims in the city. The photo on screen is from the 1977 church directory. Maybe some of you that were

around then remember this. At least at one time, this church has had something like a worshipful procession.

These flashes of memory seem to come to the psalmist the way that a person in grief has a flash of memory of a happy moment in the past that you can't return to.

Then we have a refrain that repeats one more time in Psalm 42 and again in Psalm 43. The two psalms are clearly a single song.

*"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. (NIV)*

[SLIDE: THREE PARTS OF THE PSALM]

The refrain neatly divides the song into three parts, and the parts can be roughly characterized as oriented to the past, then the present in the second part, and finally the future in what became Psalm 43. The final part expresses hope of eventually returning to the temple worship that the psalmist longs for.

In part two, the psalmist describes remembering God from the land of his exile. The psalmist is still complaining. The imagery isn't crystal clear, but the psalmist seems to be comparing his sadness to torrents of overwhelming water threatening to drown him in grief.

[SLIDE: WATERFALL]

There's even a possible location here. The largest waterfall in Israel is near the Hermon mountain range. The day I proposed to Beth, we were at a similar waterfall in Ecuador called the "Devil's bowl."

"Deep calls to deep" makes sense when you are at a thundering waterfall. They are a force of great beauty, and you wouldn't want to slip and fall into one.

Here in this literal or symbolic waterfall, the psalmist is changed.

God is not just back there in the past. God is in the present. God is in the roaring of this frightening waterfall. God is in the overwhelming flood of grief. One has to be brave enough to watch the waterfall and trust that you will not be swept away.

Maybe signaling this change, the psalmist briefly switches to a more hopeful note:

By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me— a prayer to the God of my life.

[BLANK SLIDE]

I like to think about life as consisting of experiences of both *ascent* and *descent*. Ascent experiences include milestones like graduation, getting married, having kids. It includes achievements in school, sports or work, finding an identity in a career, and finding your place in the community. It's everything life is supposed to be.

But few of us avoid experiences of descent at some point. You lose a job. Your health suddenly changes, or your loved one's. You go through the grief of losing a loved one. Or maybe a mental health crisis or spiritual struggle.

For many people, the latter stages of life represent an experience of descent, as you experience multiple losses, changes, and loss of ability that pile up on each other.

Sometimes descent experiences are no fault of our own, and other times they might represent a moral failure, which only amplifies the shame.

Either way, experiences of descent are disorienting. We think "this isn't how I wanted my life to be."

Sometimes God seems far off, as the psalmist complains, *"Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"*

I don't believe that God is the cause of these experiences of descent. Rather they are a part of being human that we tend to deny. The disorienting times force us out of superficial faith and to look deep for strength, for an anchor point, for God's hidden face.

We are not without guides.

These are moments when we need community. What a blessing when we have trustworthy companions who will sit with us in silence, who will offer a shoulder to cry on, who will assure us we are not alone. We want to be independent, but we must know when we need to ask for help.

The psalms can also be a guide. They can be a companion, reminding us that we share the human condition and are not so different from folks thousands of years ago.

The psalms teach us that we have permission to grieve and to express that grief to God with honesty. In our culture, we are often taught that you should "get over it," "move on," and "be positive." Counterintuitively, we need to grieve in order to heal. There is no way to heal or transform pain without feeling our pain.

We can't think our way out of it (though I still try), and if we bury our pain, it comes out in other ways and has the potential to hurt others. It is true that we can tell ourselves lies or believe distorted thinking that may create unnecessary pain. But true pain has to be felt.

Once again, the psalms can be our guide and companion. The biblical Psalms offer a model of bringing pain and joy into the sacred space, bringing one's deepest feelings into the presence of God.

Even desires of vengeance are brought to that space. Though not all psalms show resolution or explain what resolution came about, when pain is freely expressed in the presence of God, God can work.

Victor Frankl is a psychologist and holocaust survivor that wrote about how human freedom can be found in adversity: *“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the people who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way. . . .”*

We can’t always change our circumstances, as much as we are conditioned to think we can. The way forward may mean giving up the fight against reality, and instead discovering that God’s love and presence are in the place we didn’t choose to be.

Along that way to accepting what we cannot change, we have permission to grieve what we wish would be. Don't be ashamed of what your heart needs. Grieving doesn't mean you will fall apart or never heal. God’s presence is large enough to hold your pain or grief.

May we each find spiritual freedom, support and opportunities to give support in God’s love.

BENEDICTION

May you be empowered to put your hope in God,
through whatever pain you face.

May God’s light and truth lead you to the sacred space of God’s healing presence.

May you be light and hope for one another.