

MY SOUL THIRSTS FOR YOU  
Psalm 63

No one knows who wrote the superscriptions that begin many of the Psalms. Probably a later editor added these superscriptions or titles. They describe a supposed occasion for that composition. Seventy-three of the 150 Psalms have titles attributing them to David. Whether David actually wrote these 73 psalms we can never be quite sure. An editor has supplied Psalm 63 with these beginning words: “A Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah.”

So when was David in the wilderness of Judah? We know that twice David took refuge from his enemies in the wilderness of Judah, that hot and barren land south of Jerusalem. Once David, the darling of the royal court, fled to the wilderness to escape the madness of King Saul. In the outback David led a guerrilla army dodging Saul’s raiding parties. He survived by his wits and by the skin of his teeth. To survive Saul’s attacks, David rented himself out as a mercenary for the despised Philistines. Times were tough and a guy had to do what a guy had to do. At one point David barely avoided the clutches of Saul in a place later named appropriately “The Rock of Escape.”

The second time David had to flee to the wilderness involved one of the saddest periods of his life. This time he was pursued by his very own son, the rebellious Absalom, the man who would be king. What a personal tragedy this was for David, who loved Absalom and yet feared him. Indeed, feared for his very life. The superscription above Psalm 3 remembers that palace revolt with these poignant words, “A Psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom.”

So twice Israel’s greatest king took refuge in the wilderness of Judah. In both cases, it was a time when he “walked through the valley of the shadow of death.” Not just for David, but throughout Israel’s long history, the wilderness often became a place of last resort, a hiding place. Sort of like the badlands of southern New Mexico in our territorial days.

Elijah fled to the wilderness to escape the wrath of Queen Jezebel and King Ahab. The children of Israel fled to the wilderness to escape from Pharaoh’s army. Jewish Zealots fled to Masada above the Dead Sea to escape the Roman army. The wilderness offered a desperate final option. Few actually chose the wilderness. The wilderness is usually forced upon us.

Yet the wilderness can become a place of revelation, a time for renewal. Psalm 63 paints a picture of restoration. “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” No water, indeed. No food to speak of either. Just rocks and sand and scrub bushes and sun, lots of sun. Withering heat. Merciless conditions. No wonder, the psalmist thirsts and

faints for God. That's what you do in the wilderness. You thirst and faint. You are needy. You are exposed. To whom else can you turn?

But here is the surprise. Precisely in the wilderness, the psalmist remembers those refreshing times of worship in Jerusalem's temple: "So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory." The country western singer Willie Nelson once urged us in a song to "remember the good times." The psalmist, among the cacti and sage brush, remembers the good times when his soul was "satisfied as with a rich feast."

In the wilderness you must above everything else remember the good times: "For you have been my help and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me." In the wilderness you simply must hold onto that "Rock of Escape," the One who is our "refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble."

So to the wilderness we flee as a last resort. It is a place of exposure and danger. One hardly ever chooses to flee to the wilderness. Who willingly faces the hardship and difficulties found there? But of the wilderness, this must be said: it is a quiet place. Very quiet. Sometimes the only sound you hear is your own heart beating.

When you are separated from all the things that make life agreeable and comfortable, you are forced to listen to your heart. And your heart reveals your thirst for the living God, the One whose "steadfast love is better than life." Here we acknowledge yet again with St. Augustine that "our hearts are restless until we find rest in Thee."

And this is grace, amazing grace. The wilderness makes plain what you really need-the living God, the One who covers us beneath the divine wings in a bleak land. The wilderness exposes our hearts to the one thing needful-God's love and mercy. Pursued by our enemies, troubled by our own conscience, listless in spirit and confused about our lives, the desert reminds our hearts once again who we are and whose we are. Here in our need we cry out afresh, "O God, you are my God. I see you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

It was that way for Jesus. In the wilderness he faced the darkness, the greatest test in his life. But he also found confirmation for his calling to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. In that quiet place Jesus found meaning and purpose and direction for his life.

Strip away the non-essentials and there we too find what we really need-the solace and help that only God can provide. Seekers throughout the years have found in the desert a "Rock of Escape" from which flows spiritual drink. As Paul says in I Corinthians 10, we discover that rock is Christ himself, our life and our hope. Christ can find us again in the wilderness and there slake our thirst, our spiritual aspiration for life abundant.

Some years ago Howard Rice wrote a wonderful book entitled **Reformed Spirituality**. In it Rice reports a study done about Presbyterians and their spiritual hungers. Hear what he wrote: "The less control people had over their lives, the

more likely they were to be deeply involved in seeking a personal relationship with God. Women were more likely than men to pray and to view prayer as very important for their lives. Younger and older people were more likely to pray than people in their middle years. Poor people were more likely to pray than rich people, and divorced or widowed people more likely than married people. When we are without the defenses of being able to pretend that we are in charge, we are more willing to let go. We are more open to a personal relationship with God. The experiences of those who have suffered the painful collapse of their carefully constructed world is that they have a new openness to God.”

Rice suggests that we Presbyterians, being mainly middle class folks, cherish control. We want a world that is orderly and predictable. We want a life that offers only a few surprises and none too surprising. Predictability and control-these are few of our favorite things!

But turning to God often happens when that manicured world we all cherish has come unhinged. Then we realize again what has always been the case-we are actually not in control. Not really and certainly not ultimately. Spirituality takes root precisely when we let go of our illusion of control. Prayer is finally an act of letting go and letting God be sovereign at last, as God has always been whether we acknowledged it or not. In prayer we surrender the illusion that we are sovereign over the world. We are not the director and manager of reality. That role has already been spoken for.

The wilderness is a very quiet place where we can look into our hearts and acknowledge our utter dependence upon the living God. Only God can sustain us and only God can satisfy our hearts. We are truthfully not in control of this whole drama. Our times are in God’s hands. Before the great uncertainties facing our lives, we turn to God, who is our strength and our redeemer.

Here at this table, we turn to the One who satisfies our deep hunger for communion and reconciliation. Here we surrender our illusion of control and pray again with the Psalmist: “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Come to this table where God's amazing grace will meet your deepest hunger and your greatest thirst. Come.