

Luke 8:26-39
Psalm 42
June 22, 2025

Infinite Longing

“As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.” Thus is the striking refrain at the beginning of the 42nd psalm.

It is part of human experience to have a longing for God, even if it is not known by that name. Sometimes it is mistaken for other things. It shows up in the desire for peace and security, for friendship, or for success or pleasure; a cure for emptiness and despair, a concern for other people, even just the desire to feel good. We *want* to feel good physically; but even more, there is the desire for inner peace, to quiet the storm of anxiety within; to be liberated from guilt; to experience life as *meaningful* rather than meaningless.

We long to face the day with a hope grounded in something more powerful than we are, and the world is, higher than the self. Call it what you will, let us agree with the psalmist, it is the longing for God.

It is a taunt in the 42nd psalm, that the psalmist hears from his neighbors all day long, “Where is your God?” It seems to be one of the universal messages of the world in every time and place, to express the experience of God’s absence in the wrenching question asked of the faithful, when things are not well, “*where* is your God.”

It is not surprising. Even the faithful ask it of themselves. It was asked of Jesus when he was on the cross. Even Jesus asked it, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.”

It is certainly the question of the modern age, with all of its technology and seemingly advanced knowledge, and not even the sky is the limit aspirations. In the greatness of our times, the illusion is taken for reality that human beings have become the masters of their destinies, that they have overcome nature, are able on their own to quench this thirst.

The result is that, in the worst of times, when things go awry, the question arises how a good and powerful God could allow such pain and suffering as we know. And in the best of times when everything seems to be going well, the temptation arises to believe one can achieve fulfillment, yet the emptiness persists.

Perhaps, these questions are stressed more intensely in modernity than in antiquity, but we do find evidence of them in the past. The longer I see it, the less confident I am. Perhaps things have *not* changed so much in the last 2,000 years as we think. People are still tempted to drift, and to question faith, to despair over God’s absence, to think more highly of themselves than they ought.

It is also seen in the story in gospel reading this morning. Jesus has landed on the other side of the lake known as the Sea of Galilee. It is the land of the Gentiles, Decapolis, the ten cities populated by people

from both the east and the west, many of them European no doubt.

Upon his landing he was encountered by a man who is so torn within himself that he is out of mind, naked, living among the dead in the graveyard. No chains could bind him. Possessed. Immediately there is a conversation between Jesus and the spirits that have taken up residence in his being. They know that Jesus has authority over them, and plead to be allowed into a herd of pigs, to which Jesus agrees, and thus the possessed pigs rushed down the hill into the sea.

In the aftermath the man is restored, healthy again, able to return home and resume his place among his family and friends in the neighborhood. *The people in the town ask Jesus to leave.* They seem less impressed with how the man was healed than threatened by the fate of the pigs. *The man wanted to go with Jesus.* He has been encountered by the Lord, his life has been given back to him. He wanted to stay in that presence.

Let me suggest three ways of understanding the life as experienced. Not absolute categories, just a framework for understanding our reflections this morning. There is the painful side characterized by suffering and trials and difficulties. The Bible is honest about this aspect of life. It was written in the difficult times of the decline and fall of a civilization and the hardship of cross and sacrifice.

Life also has a sublime quality, characterized by beauty and friendship, love and peace, compassion and empathy, joy and hope, you know the litany. For good measure there is an in-between that is neutral, a boring middle ground which really entails the willful readiness to be unaware of the other two; the painful and the sublime; the willingness to sacrifice the latter at the risk of the former, to give up the possibility of abundant life in exchange for some kind of guarantee that the suffering won't be too great.

The stories told about Jesus in the Bible, including the one about the Gerasene Demoniac, reflect these two poles and the space in the middle. Stories are told about Jesus and his encounters with people, some of whom are undergoing hardship, some of whom are experiencing the blessings of life more intensely; like the Rich Young Man, and some are in positions of influence and high regard, like the Pharisees and the Scribes, all of whom shared, most assuredly, the intense experiences of suffering, joy, and boredom.

The message is that when met by Jesus, life happens. there is a quality that makes us want to add some adjectives; abundant, healthy, eternal; in this case the healing of a man's inner life. The same is also true generally, that we all live all our lives in blessed but also threatening situations. We suffer the vicissitudes of life along with its blessings; the central and most important feature is the presence of Christ who beckons us.

We are summoned by God into relationship. Our stained-glassed portrait, as we have noticed before, speaks of this feature, Jesus standing at the door, knocking. The right response is to open the door, to accept the invitation, to acknowledge our place under God, with gratitude, and then to live responsibly as free *servants* of God.

The psalm recognizes the dual nature of our lives, and speaks of what he calls a downcast soul. But it also speaks of determined faith. He confesses his thirst for God. I am not sure if this longing is something we nurture, or something that resides within and we learn to acknowledge; He then concludes;

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

When the man is healed, he wants to travel with Jesus. Both the psalmist and the man exhibit a longing to be with God. The theologian Paul Tillich addresses it as something to nurture, to pray for. In reflections about two texts, one from 2 Corinthians and one from Galatians which refer to the New Creation;

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed and the new has come,” and, “neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a *new creation*,” he exhorts and teaches us,

“*have as having not*, that is the right attitude towards everything great and wonderful in life. But it is not the right attitude toward the new creation . . .; towards it, the right attitude is *infinite and passionate longing* . . .”

When the person longing for God meets Jesus knocking at the door, the miracle happens, grace happens, healing and liberation, forgiveness. It is a new start, the implications of which may take a lifetime to understand. Embrace the longing,

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

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

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