



Fred Mollon, Elder

SERMON

As the Deer... So My Soul

Psalm 42; Luke 8:26-39

June 19, 2016

Skyline Presbyterian Church

As I was preparing this week's message that last chorus we sang, which is based right off of the first lines of our Psalm, kept ringing in my head and I had to stop and ask myself, "do I long for God?" What am I longing for? Not long after I moved here I secured a really good job. My longing at the time was to complete my time at the company, retire, and then be able to travel and have more time to do the things that I really enjoy doing. Then God came on the scene and those thoughts have changed.

What are you longing for? What really drives and motivates your heart? If you listen to TV or radio, our longings should be for the latest car or cell phone; the newest laptop or tablet; the latest fashion in clothes or the fanciest eye glasses. Maybe, if you are so inclined, it's the newest exercise program "to get that body you have always wanted."

For what does the deer long? The deer longs for water; he longs for that one thing that will keep him energized and alive. This is how the psalmist describes his desire for God. It's not a whimsical crying out, "Yes, lord I want you." It's the deepest desire of his soul. "As the deer longs for water..."

One time a friend and I and about 8 or 9 of our Palestinian friends went on an overnight hike through the Judean wilderness, from Bethlehem down to the Dead Sea. We had a friend drop us off at a spot just south of Bethlehem and then we hiked all day. It's called a desert but not in the traditional sense of the word. It's not like the Sahara or Arabian deserts. It is truly a wilderness with large beige rocks for as far as you can see and scrub brush here and there. There are a lot of wadis or canyons that fill up with water in the rainy season to replenish the underground reservoirs, but they become bone dry by the time summer comes. Hiking in this kind of topography, in the blazing heat...you get pretty thirsty. I remember we had been hiking for a really long time. Finally we found some shade and stopped and got the water out. Water had never tasted as good as at that moment. It was the most satisfying and delicious thing we could imagine. At that moment we wanted nothing else.

This is what the psalmist is talking about. This psalm is set at about the time that the kingdom of Judea has been conquered; the population has been taken captive and is being taken away to Babylon. The psalmist is quite obviously hurting from this – the realization that all he has loved is gone. The one thing that is left to him is God and his faith in God.

As we read the psalm we see the alternating language of hope and despair. He starts by saying that his soul longs for God and then falls into despair as he talks of how his tears have been his food. His enemies taunt him with, "Where is your God now?" I can

imagine that the new rulers of this kingdom, that boasted of its powerful God and is now beaten and conquered, would very likely taunt them in this way. Sometimes we feel that way too. Sometimes we feel so defeated and bruised by life that we wonder, as the psalmist does, “God, where are You? Why have You left me and deserted me?” I’m sure the folks in the Midwest have felt this way after all of the unrelenting rains and seemingly endless tornadoes; or the people here that lived through the devastating fires that destroyed so many homes and lives. I’m sure that at times they wondered, “God where are You? Why are You letting this happen? Why don’t You stop the rain? Why don’t You let them get control of the fires?” But then the psalmist comes to his senses and challenges himself by asking, “Why are you downcast my soul? Hope in God!”

Then he sees what is behind it all – God’s love. He says “by day the Lord directs His loving kindness...” This is grace; God’s grace. Even in the midst of our darkest night God is there ready to bring relief and to BE the relief that we need. It is not that He will get us out of the despair or anguish in which we find ourselves, but rather that He is there with us, walking with us and so we are able to offer prayers to the God of our life.

Just as Jesus said, “you are in the world and you will have some really hard times hit you; but fear not. I have overcome the world.” It’s not that God is going to take the hard times away. Oh no, the hard times will come just as it says, “time and chance happen to every man.” The secret is that we know the One who rolls the dice. He will always be here with us. He has sent His Spirit to teach, to comfort, to guard and to guide us. And so the psalmist ends his song. After considering everything he again poses the question, “Why are you downcast, my soul?” and answers, “Hope in God! I shall yet praise Him.”

Now we come to our gospel for today. Jesus has had a time of teaching and ministry and one day tells His disciples, let’s go to the other side of the lake. (*The Sea of Galilee is really just a lake – 13 miles long from north to south and about 6 ½ to 7 miles at its widest point.*) They set out and the first thing that happens is a storm comes up and while the disciples are trying to keep the boat afloat they wake Jesus who calms the storm. Then they arrive at the other side and are immediately met by a man possessed by demons.

“Possessed by demons?” What does this mean? Today we might say he has some kind of mental illness for which we have fancy words like paranoia, schizophrenia, bipolar, etc. In my opinion I think that the term “demon possessed,” though it sounds primitive, really gets to the heart of the matter much more clearly. When someone is so distraught so as to experience this kind of spiritual, mental and soulful anguish and anxiety, you really are possessed by it. Try as you might, you just cannot find any way to free yourself from it. I remember a number of years ago I was diagnosed with severe clinical depression. Try as I might I just could not pull myself up. I was unable to even begin to do something that might help me. I was possessed by this depression. And like the psalmist, all I could do was think about how I used to be; or remember the things I used to enjoy doing, but there was no way I could do them any longer. I just did not have it within me.

This is the condition of the man that meets Jesus. I’m sure that inside his mind he did not want to be this way. I believe that there were times in his madness when things got a little quiet, that for a minute or two he remembered how he had been. Maybe he even

remembered, like the psalmist, the times he had spent with God. But then the rage and anger would take hold once again. All he could do was become so violent that he broke the chains that tried to restrain him. Now he meets Jesus and what does he do? He falls down and begs Jesus not to torment him.

Sometimes it feels this way. We know that we need God, but as we try to get close to Him, it feels as though he's tormenting us when in actuality He's simply shining His light on that which possesses us. He is simply trying to get us to acknowledge our guilt and responsibility. Being in God's presence can become so overwhelming that all we can do is run back to the tombs, and find what we think is some respite but which is really the chains and shackles from which we have been trying to get free. Jesus asks the man for his name and he answers "legion." A legion in Rome was a division of the army of about 6,000 soldiers. It can seem that big at times, as though there are thousands of things inside of us that are trying to control us.

Jesus exorcises the demons from the man and allows them to go into a herd of pigs. They have begged Jesus not to send them to the abyss, (Gehenna, hell). When they enter the pigs the swine become so crazed that they run down the hill to the water and are drowned. The demons meet their demise either way. At that moment the man is returned to his right mind; he finds some clothes and puts them on and finally, perhaps for the first time in many years, he sits down; he's at peace; he is at Jesus' feet.

This, too, is where we will find our peace, at the feet of Jesus. This man longed to be free; now he finds his longings answered – he has found Jesus. This makes the people of the town so upset that they ask Jesus to leave their country. Can you imagine that? This man who has so terrorized the countryside to the point of being chained, of living alone and only finding peace in the tombs, with the dead; this man who was a social pariah is now witnessed here in his right mind and this upsets them. It's almost as if they had become so comfortable with him being crazy and possessed that they can't even imagine having him back in his right mind.

Isn't this like us? We become so accustomed to things being as they are and out of whack, (things in ourselves, in the church, or society) that we can't imagine it being any different and so rather than embrace a "new way" and try a new experiment, we run out of town the very person or persons who tried to get us to try this new thing. I remember in my depression that I could not imagine being any other way and sometimes the thought of being changed scared me because I had been this way for so long. As I began to come out of it, I remember that it was a day by day, step by step walk and always wondering if I was going to fall. This was new; it felt good; but it was still scary until little by little I became used to this new way.

We are also like this former demoniac. We have this wonderful experience with God and we are made entirely whole. We are so enjoying the time on the mountain, so to speak, that all we can think of doing is staying with Jesus, and as Jesus starts to leave we cry out, just as this man did, "Let me come with You!" We don't see the greater need of those who have chased Jesus away. They still need to hear the good news. So Jesus tells us, "No, you can't come with Me. Where I am going you cannot yet come. Go back to your city, your home, and tell them of all that God has done for you." It's interesting that as

you read the book of Acts, this is one of the regions to which Peter and the others go because of all of the believers who are here. One man is freed from his demons and made whole in his mind and body, and look what happens? In just a couple of years there are now many believers to whom the apostles come to teach and encourage.

So we have to ask ourselves the question again, for what does your soul long? Do you have a burning passion to know Him (God) and the Power of His resurrection? Does your soul long to be filled with His Spirit, as the deer longs to be filled with water to quench its thirst, to quench its deepest longings?

It is only as we let this kind of longing quench the real thirst of our hearts that we will, like the man in Gadara, find our peace, sitting at the feet of Jesus; and it's only then that we will be able to go to our homes, our city, our families and friends and really share the bread of life to hungry believers that need to be fed as this man did.

I think it would be good for us to consider the question for a moment. Bow your heads with me and consider the question, "For what does your soul long?" Does it long to be in complete fellowship with God? Pray with me, Lord, create in me the longing and desire to know You in all of Your fullness. Fill me with Living Water to quench the thirst of my soul. Say with the psalmist, "As the deer pants for the streams of water, so my soul longs after You. Why are you downcast oh my soul, hope in God...and praise Him." Let God touch those deep recesses of your heart and mind and draw you to Him and give you that Living Water for which your soul longs. Amen.