

## **My Soul Thirsts for the Living God**

**Essay 7 in the series “Encountering the Presence of God”**

As the psalmist composes Psalm 42, he is downcast. He feels forgotten by God. He goes about in mourning. He is oppressed and taunted by others. His bones suffer mortal agony. He remembers how things used to be when he was able to go up to the temple in Jerusalem, how he “used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.” Perhaps he writes from exile. Perhaps he has been carried off by raiders or slave-traders. What he feels most, however, is the God-shaped hole in his heart, and so he gives voice to the powerful thirst that we all feel apart from God.

“As the deer pants for streams of living water,  
so my soul pants for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
Where can I go and behold the face of God?”

The psalmists knew this feeling. In Psalms 63:

“O God, you are my God,  
earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you,  
my body longs for you,  
in a dry and weary land  
where there is no water.  
...  
On my bed I remember you;  
I think of you  
through the watches of the night.  
...  
My soul clings to you;  
your right hand upholds me.”

Your right hand holds me up; that is, I lay in your arms, embraced by you.

And so these ancient Hebrew poems address this thirstiness, this hunger, this desperate ache of being human. And it’s good that they do because the church traditionally has had very little to say about this powerful life urge. It has traditionally denied this whole area of longing and unsatisfied desire, or dismissed it as dangerous. It still tends to write off the body as evil, and for far too long, since the time of Church Fathers like Augustine, it has held a grimly joyless view of sexuality.

And so we are mainly left adrift – seeking satisfaction in all the wrong places. I think again of a poem by Vincent Byrne titled “Isn’t It a Remarkable Thing?” You have to follow it closely, but here it goes –

Isn't it a remarkable thing really  
when you come to think about it  
that despite all we learn  
from our own hard won experiences  
and that of our close friends  
and indeed of lovers through the ages,

of the inevitable mutations –  
mostly for the worse  
that are bound to take place  
in the texture of the connection  
with our one and only,

that we will  
at the slightest whiff  
of reciprocated love  
from a fresh beloved  
develop instant amnesia  
and gambol and pant  
after our new inamorata  
with all the noisy generosity  
of a St. Bernard in heat

We may not catch all of Byrne's turns of phrase, but we do, I think, catch this picture of us panting after what it is not ours to have with all the noisy generosity of a St. Bernard in heat. It's a funny image. And sad.

But understanding the human condition begins, I'm quite sure, with realizing that we are all so needy, so hungry, so thirsty, so thirsty. In the words of The Boss, "Everybody's got a hungry heart." The truth is we each yearn to be wrapped up in a love we can trust, a love that heals us, comforts us, assures us, adores us. And we'll do practically anything to get it. We spend our lives looking for it. Many of us didn't get it from our parents; they were hurting too. So maybe we marry, and now we expect this perfect love from our husband or wife. Or maybe we've found the perfect friend, a dream friend. Now we'll be fully loved. But it doesn't happen, because they're as hurt as we are. So maybe we get angry or bitter. Some start blowing things up. More likely we in this country get guarded and protective. Maybe we look to be filled up at work, or by the guys at the bar or the girls at the club. But it doesn't happen. So we build walls around ourselves, or we numb ourselves, with something to make us forget the pain for a while. Or we look for love in all the wrong places. People do it all the time. Seeking to feel alive again, to quench their thirstiness, they have an affair, or they get trapped in a pornographic black hole, maybe lose themselves for hours on the Internet because momentarily it gives them a thrill and relieves the pain. But of course all of this is like going to the hardware store to buy a quart of milk. To draw on another poem by Vincent Byrne, "The Hardware Store":

They don't sell it there,  
but still we  
drag ourselves back, again and again  
to the same hard shop  
to ask for the milk  
we know in our hearts  
they don't keep in stock.

And we keep doing this because we still have these powerful yearnings, this desperate thirstiness, and sometimes we'll do almost anything to get some satisfaction. But, remember, the hole in our hearts is God-shaped, and only God can fill it.

– Dale Pauls