

Clinging to God in the Wilderness
Ben Woodward Breckbill
Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship
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Psalm 63:1-8.

A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.

*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.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,^[a]
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
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.*

I

The sun beats down. The fatigue sets in. The food stores are depleted, and there hasn't been fresh water for days. The wind howls, as do the jackals that have been trailing at a distance – better than the king's army looking for your blood. And the doubt sets in: you know that everything is failure. All hopes for your life are crumbling. The psalmist was in this position writing this psalm – a desperate, fearful, and lonely position.

The introduction to this psalm says, “A psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.” How tame! There are a lot of reasons that David might be in the wilderness, after all: perhaps David was visiting his family, or taking in the sights. Perhaps he was taking a retreat, or on a religious pilgrimage. He was a warrior; perhaps he was on a military campaign. There may be any number of explanations for David’s presence in the wilderness. We soon realize, though, that “in the wilderness” signifies more than just a place. “In the wilderness” is also a state of being. The wilderness is a place of great unmet need, and along with unmet need, oppressive fear. David’s life is in extreme peril: if Saul’s army, chasing after him, does not kill him, the thirst will. If not the thirst, then the hunger. If not the hunger, then the exposure. He is trapped in the wilderness. We can imagine the overwhelming fear that David experienced.

We see the needs in the psalm. The psalmist immediately states that he is in “a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Don’t be fooled by the NRSV translation, “my flesh faints for you *as* in a dry and weary land...” The English translators made a simile where there should not be: David is literally in a place with no water. The psalm continues with a series of images based on everything that a weary desert traveler would desire, which might sound familiar if you’ve been on a long wilderness expedition: water – a drinking fountain – a rich feast, literally “fat and more fat” – let’s say a hamburger and French fries – a bed to spend the night in – your own bed – a spot of shade – just a simple tree to rest underneath! In the wilderness, the longer you’ve been without these things, the more precious they become, and the more they dominate your desires. David can think of nothing else to pray about than water, food, and rest.

And in the midst of such great need, David is on his own in the wilderness, with no resources to fall on. With the continued lack of food and water comes a lack of hope: the wilderness does not just separate him from his physical needs. It becomes a spiritual wilderness as well. Perhaps he would never get out of the wilderness alive. Perhaps he would never be safe again. He had such great hopes of becoming King – those could be thrown out the window. He had once gained favor from God, from the King, from the people – where were any of those now?

II

Preparing this sermon *quickly* became a wilderness experience for me – a time when my basic needs were not being met.

My enneagram personality type 5 tells me that my basic fear is being incompetent, useless, or overwhelmed. As I began to write, I immediately checked off all those boxes. I had problem after problem: first, as I began to write, I struggled with the simple act of writing. Everything sounded trite. “God rescued David and will rescue you too.” “Don’t worry about your needs if you have God.” Been there, heard that. Déjà vu all over again. Preaching platitudes is the quickest way to discredit the Gospel, I told myself. All I could think of were the problems with my ideas. Incompetent and useless!

Problem number two: I wrote the sermon for my preaching class earlier this week, to deliver to my classmates and professor, then I hoped to modify it to preach this morning. The exercise was to write a sermon with a very specific form, alternating between the situation in the Bible passage and a specific, analogous situation in the world. Now, if you’ve been around for my previous two sermons here at Berkey, you might remember that I did *not* use creative illustrative stories from the world around me to get my point across. But fully *half* of this sermon was meant to be dedicated to that image, or story, or illustration. I don’t readily go to that storytelling mode – even though I know that a *competent* pastor should be comfortable there.

I don’t collect or remember stories well – and I tell them even worse. I told myself it’s probably because I’m incapable – of getting to know someone, of listening to their wilderness stories. And if I do know someone who has been in the wilderness, how could I be sure that their situation would accurately reflect the one in this psalm? Not only do I have to have the story of someone in the wilderness, God would have to intervene in just the right way to make it a good sermon illustration.

What’s more, all my classmates, for whom I was preparing this sermon, and who were preaching in the same class session as me, were so amazing – I knew they’d have wonderful stories, and great delivery. The direct comparison could not

turn out well for me. If only I had their creativity and poise and charisma! What's more, the congregation I'm preparing for is used to excellent preaching, so they won't let me off the hook either! They will finally see through to my incompetence, if they haven't already. Thanks a lot, Dan and Marilyn.

Then begins the spiral of doubt and fear: I'm used to being pretty good at the things I do in seminary. Now I'll do badly at this sermon. I'm so far beyond my competence! Is my problem a simple lack of creativity, which is so necessary to be a *useful* preacher or pastor or minister? Or maybe I'm just too young! Should I give up on preaching until I'm 50? Is my reluctance to write and deliver this sermon a sign that I really don't want to be a pastor? Do I need to write dry exegetical papers all my life, and hide away in the ivory tower? Perhaps I can't actually claim to be a Christian after all, I've just been pretending this whole time.

I was out of ideas. I was ready to throw my computer across the room. My basic need is to be competent. I was not competent. I was lost in the wilderness.

III

Yet the dire circumstance is not the end of our story. In the middle of David's hunger, thirst, doubt, and despair, he prayed. Lost in the wilderness, David uttered an elemental, soul-wrenching cry: "O God! You Are My God. I seek you" And David's wilderness experience was transformed: God stepped in and David recognized the power of his relationship with God. David's cry to God transformed his spiral of need and despair. It is as though the memory of his relationship with God re-centered the psalmist's agony. Instead of the endless obsession with the water that is nowhere to be seen, the banquet that exists only in his imagination, the psalmist's reliance on God allows him to pray: "My soul thirsts *for you*, even in a dry and weary land where there is no water." In this moment of David's prayer, his need for water is not the same as his need for God: the soul's need is even more pressing. "A person does not live on bread alone, but every word that comes from the mouth of God."

In this prayer, David transforms his obsession with food, drink, and rest, and in the situation of dire, fundamental need, re-centers on his need for the goodness of God: it is not just "I'm so thirsty," it's, "my soul thirsts *for you*." It's not just "I'm

fainting with exhaustion,” but it’s “my flesh faints *for you*.” And when that relationship with God is rediscovered, “My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast.” Instead of exclaiming with joy upon finding a small tree to give shade, David says, “In the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.”

David recalls that he has worshipped God in sanctuaries – and *that* God, *his* God, is the same in the wilderness as in the sanctuary. The power, the glory, the steadfast love of God do not change based on David’s physical or spiritual situation. At the same time, we clearly see that the wilderness will not become less wild when David prays. The hunger and thirst remain, and must be addressed. But even in the wilderness, the soul’s search for God, satisfaction in God, and praise of God *need not* be less.

In fact, the psalmist’s relationship with his God is made even closer in this time of need. Turning to God in desperation, David says, “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.” He also says, “My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.” These two statements work closely together. God’s right hand upholds David long enough to recognize God’s steadfast love; David’s response to that love is worship, allowing him to further cling to God. Recognizing David’s circumstance, at the end of the rope, God provides a solid rock for the failing soul to cling to. God’s right hand – God’s strength and power – supports David through all.

IV

So I sat stewing in my own self-pitying juices, knowing I would never write a good sermon, about to despair, spiraling out of control, when I thought, “maybe I should pray about it.” I prayed. And God had grace on me. God met me in my basic need – In this case, a psychological need. God momentarily lifted the sense that I would never be competent to write this sermon. And God lifted me from the spiral of despair. God handed me a ready-made example of a wilderness experience, perhaps trivial, but no less real for its triviality.

In my moment calling out to God, God put a stop to the spiral of doubt and fear, a rising flood threatening to engulf me. As in David’s case, my most pressing

needs were not finally solved. I fear incompetence. Yet God redirected my obsession. Turning to God, I saw how my soul needed God more than I need to impress my classmates or professor – or even a congregation. I rely on the grace of God to give me the strength to preach; the need is not one I can fill on my own. To paraphrase the apostle, “I come to you in fear and much trembling, and my proclamation is not plausible words of wisdom. I know nothing but Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

I offer this story to you not as a chance to brag about my piety, or to make you feel sorry for me. It is not a moment to prove to you that prayer “works,” in whatever way you think it’s supposed to work. I don’t come here to “fix” your wilderness experience, whether you are in it now or will find yourself in the wilderness in the future. I’m not going to guilt you and say that you should pray harder, or to decide that your other needs really don’t matter. Rather, I share this with you as a testimony that this is living ink: as I turned to God in prayer, I found God having the same interaction with a person – me – that God had with the psalmist those thousands of years ago. David’s prayer in the wilderness became my prayer this week. You, too, may find that this ink lives: perhaps not this psalm, perhaps not this week. But there is ink that longs to leap out of these pages, to meet you where you are. Your relationship with God right now is very similar to one that someone else had in these pages. The word of God is not trapped in these pages, but it does live in these pages, as it lives among us and within us.

My fear of incompetence became a sermon illustration, something concrete to say instead of generalities. My brief swing into the wilderness was a way for God to have grace on me. Prayer became the turning point from despair to rest, from desperation to praise. David’s prayer became mine. Because God’s steadfast love is greater than my competence, my lips will praise, and deliver this sermon. Thanks be to God!