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Psalm 42
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How is Your Soul?

How is your soul? It's a question that I ask people often. But I have to admit that it is an odd question that at first catches people off guard. My soul? What is my soul? If I have one, how do I get in touch with it?

Our soul is that part of us that is eternally and uniquely us. It is that which belongs to God and returns to God someday. When I want to get in touch with my soul, I read scripture. I listen. I reflect. I pray. I journal. Scriptures like the psalms are windows into our soul. They are like waves plunging us deep beneath the surface of our everyday lives.

These are the questions I ask.

How am I feeling? What am I stewing over? What recurring themes keep running through my mind? What am I most joyful about? How are my relationships? With God? With other people? With creation? With myself?

When I ask these questions of other people, I notice that often times they will look away...as if into space...so as to get in touch with that part of themselves which others cannot see.

I may even choose to do some Ignatian spiritual exercises such as consolation and desolation. This is where I journal through what is giving my spirit life, joy, and reason to celebrate. That is consolation. Then I will move into what is giving me agony, grief, or concern. That is desolation. Ignatius believed that God is in it all.

And through these reflections I can get in touch with that part of me which is my soul.

Early in my pastorate, I found that people rarely asked me how my soul was. So following my sabbatical in 2013, I decided to find someone who would intentionally ask me those deep spiritual questions. So I found a spiritual director and former pastor friend who founded this organization that not only provides spiritual direction but also trains people in being spiritual directors themselves.

My spiritual director and I usually meet once a month for an hour and half. Sometimes I take in my "soul work" that I just described and I am very in tune with my soul. Other times I go in cold turkey and just start talking. As I talk and through the questions Morris asks me, we begin to listen to what the Spirit of God is stirring within me. My soul surfaces through this life giving exercise. It is also very vulnerable because this person sees beneath the surface what few others see.

Psalm 42 is a great scripture to reflect upon for getting in touch with one's soul. David models it for us. We can imagine him sitting on a rock, in the

wilderness, with a journal, observing a young deer come to the water's edge for a much needed drink. It's a very vulnerable position to be in, with its head hung low, focused solely on the water before it. And so that image is what plunges David beneath the surface of his everyday life and into his "soul world."

Join me as we hear Psalm 42 for ourselves. And may we ask, "How is our soul today?"

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

This psalm is a window into David's soul. Clearly he feels far away. Not where he would want to be in his relationship with God. God hasn't moved away from David. David has moved away from God and that has caused distance.

The image of the deer at the water's edge reminds David of himself. Perhaps when he was a younger man. When he was fresh. When he was open and more vulnerable before God. When he was so close to God that he felt that God was near.

There is a moment in Genesis immediately following the sin of Adam and Eve, when they hid as God walked through the garden in the cool of the day.¹ A refreshing stroll that they often took with God, to connect, to share, to commune. God was still walking in the garden during that time, expecting intimate connection with his creation. But Adam and Eve hid from God because they were ashamed of their poor choices. They moved away from God, but God never moved.

Lamentations 3:22-23 says "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness!"

We move away from God. God never moves away from us.

Sometimes our souls are downcast not because of our choices, however, but because of other people's choices. David speaks about an enemy who oppresses us. Who tempts us away from God's presence. Who taunts us with questions like "Whats the use? Where is your God now? Why won't he rescue you?" That constant battle can wear on ones soul and lead us further way from God.

Sometimes when we are in the depths of despair, it can be hard to know where God is at the moment. What I find is that it's only as I look back, after I've come out of the funk perhaps, that I can see more clearly that God was with me all along.

In 1936 Mary Stevenson wrote a poem called Footprints in the Sand.

"One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was only one.

This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of

¹ Genesis 3:8

footprints, so I said to the Lord, “You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why when I needed you most, you have not been there for me?”

The Lord replied, “The years when you see only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you.”

I know we’ve all heard this perhaps a million times. But it never gets old.

One of the exercises that David uses to get more in touch with his soul is taking account of his feelings. When I’m with my spiritual director and I’m not sure how I’m feeling, we will pull out a list of feelings and he’ll have me circle the ones that most describe where I am at that day.

As for David in our psalm, he is in agony. “My tears have been my food day and night.” Have you ever cried so hard that you aren’t very hungry? It is easy for people who are in the midst of mourning to forget simple daily functions, such as eating.

Another exercise that David does to get more in touch with his soul is remembering. He looks back upon the times when he felt close to God. When he worshiped God with such joy and abandon that he didn’t care what other people thought of him.

When Karen and I met, we were part of a multicultural church in Kirkland. There would be moments when I would be so moved by the worship music or the choir that I would stand up to clap or dance. It helped that it was an African American church and wasn’t so out of place. But somehow the older we got, the more reserved we’ve become in our worship.

We move. God does not.

Not only does David reflect upon specific moments when he felt close to the Lord, he also reflects upon specific places.

The Promised Land of Jordan.

The heights of Mount Hermon or Mount Mizar. We don’t hear about Mount Mizar very often in scripture but “Some think that Mount Mizar is a small peak or village on the flanks of Mount Hermon, somewhere near the headwaters of the Jordan River.”²

I’ve been to the headwaters of the Metolius River in Central Oregon. It’s amazing to see how those springs of life just bubble up from the ground. David is referring to the headwaters which literally spring up from the ground out of nowhere. The Jordan river gives life to the entire region of Israel.

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Jesus said, “If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within them.”³ Spiritual headwaters would burst out from nowhere.

We know that nearly 60% of our adult bodies are made up of water and at most we can last 3-4 days without it. If our physical bodies cannot survive without water what makes us think that our spiritual bodies, our souls, could last without the spiritual water that Jesus provides? How long can we go without this life giving water before we find ourselves in places we never expected? Where our soul is so downcast?

One commentator wrote, “The dissatisfaction of life is the thirst for God.” Just as our bodies long for water to stay alive, our souls long for God to be back to the place where we once felt close to God.

Another thing that David does as he tries to get in touch with his soul is that he is brutally honest. He knows that his God is big enough to handle his accusations and doubt. “Where are you God?” “Why have you forgotten me?” “Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” “Why are you so downcast, O my soul?” And yet we know that God cannot and will not forget us.

We see David’s honesty throughout the psalms. His words give us license to be brutally honest before God. God can handle it my friends! If God cannot, then perhaps our view of God is too small!

Jesus was that honest before God. When he predicted his death Jesus said, “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour?”⁴

In the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to point of death.”⁵ That is pretty downcast.

The last thing that David does to get in touch with his soul, is that he allows himself to move through his grief. Denial and isolation. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. And Acceptance. Contrary to popular belief, people don’t necessarily move through their grief in this order or process it in the same way.

But what is true, it that unless we allow ourselves to go through grief, our agony will be stored up in our bodies in ways that can manifest itself as undiagnosable medical conditions. Notice how David claims in verse 10, “My bones suffer mortal agony.”

During my hospital chaplaincy program while in seminary, one of the things I had to do was make daily rounds with the patients in the hospital. Typically I encountered people with very diagnosable conditions like cancer and what not.

³ John 7:37b-38

⁴ John 12:27

⁵ Matthew 26:38

Occasionally, I would meet people who were hospitalized for reasons that the doctors had no clue. Usually internal ailments for which they could find no cause.

As the chaplain, my job was to talk with my patients and learn about what was going on in their lives. It was interesting how doctors aren't really trained to do that. They are equipped to solve medical problems. But when I took time to really listen to people's stories...more often than not...they were dealing with some aspect of grief that they hadn't share with their doctor.

Grief stores up in our bodies. Sometimes medical providers forget that they are simply instruments in the Healer's hand.

What I love about the psalms is that they always point us to the truth that eventually we will make it through the dark night of the soul. That God's light does shine through the darkness. And we will be led to worship God in spirit and in truth once again.

Listen to how David closes Psalm 42...

“Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?

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

Sometimes worship must be a choice irrespective of our feelings.

How are we feeling this morning? How is our relationships with God, with others, with creation, and with ourselves. “How is our soul today?”

Ask those questions and see what bubbles up to the surface.

Amen!