

“Where is Your God? Why are you here?”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Psalms 42 and 43; I Kings 19:1-15a; Luke 8:26-39

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This morning I will interweave my message and our readings, focusing on the Hebrew Scriptures in which we find the two questions in my sermon title. The questions spoke to me in light of not only the mass shooting in Orlando last Sunday morning, but other tragedies we have witnessed in the last ten days.

When the men’s Bible study group recently studied Psalm 42, I commented about our opening song, “As the deer,” which is based on the psalm. I shared I had always sung the song imagining a pastoral setting, with a deer by the water. Perhaps it was the somewhat lilting tune that had me envisioning a cute Bambi gently lapping water by a stream. Yet, the words of both the psalm and song are more like the tragedy in the Bambi story that makes us think twice about having young children hear it, or watch the whole movie.

The deer of the psalm is not, in fact, by the water, but panting in thirst and craving for a source of water in its distress. And so, reveals the psalmist, “So am I craving you, O God.” As the writer continues, the taunting of others is heard in the question we read in our call to worship, “... as people constantly questioned me, ‘Where is your God now?’” In actuality, in the Hebrew, the word “people” does not appear, so the question is likely rising up from within the psalmist, who is asking, “Where are you, God?”

The psalmist is not questioning God’s existence, and shares an understanding of God’s inner presence, but struggles with what seems to be a void of God’s visible, tangible power. As we continue with Psalm 42, our first question will again be posed.

The psalmist senses God’s presence:

*<sup>8</sup>By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.*

But then the writer wonders at God’s seeming absence, which makes the mockers delight,

*<sup>9</sup>I say to God, my rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?” <sup>10</sup>As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?”*

As we move into Psalm 43, which is best read with Psalm 42, I share two verses in which the psalmist again makes a plea for God to be God in the form of questions caused by the taunting of others:

*Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me! <sup>2</sup>For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?*

How do we answer the question posed to us, “Where is your God now?” It is often posed in a way that sounds like, “What good is your God?” perhaps when a faithful one is struck by a stroke, or receives a diagnosis of cancer, or a child dies, or one who is kind and bright fades away with Alzheimer’s Disease. Where is your God now? What good is your God?

In the light of events of the last ten days, while I have not been asked directly, I can hear the psalmist's questions posed: "Where was your God? Why did God not stop the gunman who killed the singer from the Voice, or the mother of two who was a member of the British parliament, or protect that two year old in Disneyworld, much less exercise the power to jam the gun of the shooter at the Orlando nightclub? And again, "Where was your God?", often means, "What good is your God if unable to stop such tragedy?"

Yet, whether asked of crises in our personal lives, or on the grander scale of national and world events, I find the "Where is your God?" question centered on the image of God as a security guard, or personal body guard, standing with the powers of deterrence and force, assigned to protect us from any evil that would seek to touch us. I mean why believe in God if you don't receive protection from harm – from tragedy, disease, hardship, crises? And is it not made worse when one's enemies gloats it over us, or even friends wonder out loud, "Where is your God?" Yet, this prompts me to ask if we have mistakenly equated divine security with divine protection.

Knowing both the limit and inadequacy of analogies, I tend to think of God, not as a guard to protect but a combination EMT and chaplain, present on site to heal wounds and provide comfort. I recognize this promotes the omniscience over omnipotence, the ever-presence of God over an all-powerful nature of God, but it is a way I can respond to the probing question, "Where is your God?"

The psalmist uses the same refrain three times in our two psalms of lament. It is as if the psalmist is offering a self-probing question, and then responding with the words that distinguishes simply lamenting from biblically lamenting. The psalmist offers up: I will hope, I will trust, I will keep faith, I will praise.

The psalmist's poses a self-directed question:

<sup>11</sup>*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?*

Then the psalmist provides the answer:

*Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

While the psalmist grieves in not being able to respond to taunting enemies, or fulfill a nagging inner longing to identify God's power in the midst of tragedy, there is a deep-seated trust and hope that sustains faith. So too, in a world that craves proof and visible evidence, we may stand by the psalmist, unable to point directly to God's presence, or power. Yet, I would suggest that if we say, "I don't exactly know where God is in all this," it is not a denial of God. It is a denial of God as bodyguard, as one in whom to believe and trust only based on the ability to protect good people from harm, and evidence of the same.

The second question of the sermon title is one posed to the prophet Elijah in I Kings 19, which I will again summarize rather than read. Elijah is probably more desperate and depressed than the writer of Psalms 42 and 43. We recall he is the sole prophet of God remaining. He has called down God's fire on a sacrifice to show God's power over the Canaanite god Ba'al. That was good, but then he also killed 450 prophets of Ba'al, and as a result is on Queen Jezebel's hit list. She has put word out Elijah will be dead in 24 hours, and she had the power and army to make it happen. The prophet was terrified and hightails it out of Israel, south to Judah. Along the way, we read, "*He went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."*"

Well, Elijah's death was not God's plan, so Elijah was fed but not left to die. He was to continue his journey to Horeb, God's mountain, Sinai, where Elijah holes up in a cave. This is where the familiar verses on our bulletin cover take place, which, as noted are preceded by the question, "Why are you here?" The question is asked twice, once before and once after God is not heard in the earthquake, wind or fire, but in the still small voice, the sound – thin, quiet.

Elijah answers the question, *"I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."*

Fear and isolation have propelled Elijah to flee. He was desperate enough that death was a viable option for him. It made me think of two ways we become desperate. We can become desperate and anxious and fearful when our destination, or the source of our need or relief is still so far away we fear not reaching it, or making it there in time. We can also become desperate when we have no clue of our destination or how to reach it, or where we can find that place and source of relief. Both senses of desperation may come at crisis times in our lives, or crises we have experienced as a people as in these past ten days.

Response to desperation can be flight, or simply hunkering down in a secure place. Then, the question comes, "Why are you here?" Elijah, while directed and cared for as he followed his evacuation route, had himself opted to flee. "Why are you here, Elijah? I did not direct you to flee. I do not intend for your life to end. This is not where I sent you. This is not where you can serve me best."

In the end, Elijah moved off the mountain, back down to continue what God intended, which was in part to prepare another prophet to take his place. Next Sunday we will hear about Elisha, and watch as Elijah is taken up into the heavens and sing about the chariots that swing low to carry him home.

I know I am not unlike Elijah at times of crisis, at times of uncertainty, at dark and desperate times when it may even feel like death might be a blessing. I am not unlike Elijah, when the threat is real and there is a temptation to respond with revenge rather than prayer, with hate rather than love, with weapons rather than peace. Fear is powerful, and it is real, but if I can hear God asking me, "Why are you here?," then perhaps I can move off out of my cave of false security and move to the place God intends. When fear drives me to carve out a cave I have sought for my own protection, or to cling to something I believe will assure my security, I need to allow God to ask, "Why are you here? To what are you clinging?"

I was tempted to omit the Gospel reading this morning. It is a strange text that deserves a sermon unto itself, so at risk of giving it short shrift, let me simply say Jesus and his followers have crossed over the Sea of Galilee and stepped off the boat and onto the shore of Gentile territory, clear from the fact there are people tending pigs, a non-kosher meat.

A man named Legion, which means possessed by many demons, calls out to Jesus. Actually the demons themselves recognize and call out to Jesus for they know of his power, even in Gentile territory. The demons seek a compromise to Jesus' option to cast them into the watery abyss. It seems demons don't do well in deep water, but demons need to go somewhere. So, Jesus agrees not to cast them into the abyss, but transfers them from the man into a herd of pigs. But then, the pigs, now possessed by demons, run down the hill into the sea and drown in the water!

Now I need to stop here and tell you that in all my years of ministry, I had never heard what a colleague told me about two weeks ago when we were discussing this text. He said when Jesus sent the demons into the pigs, he invented Deviled Ham.

Now my guess is no one is going to come up to me during the fellowship time, and say, "You know what? Just this morning on the way to church I saw some demon-possessed pigs jump into a pond." The story is a bit beyond our comprehension, or at least it is mine, and frankly, it also seems a bit too neat and clean – demons cast out and gone, man made whole and sitting at Jesus' feet with the townsfolk amazed. If Jesus can do that, why could he not stop the gunfire and tragedies of this week. Where is your God now?

My answer? God is here. God is there. God is present. God is visible, not with mighty acts but in acts of goodness that transcend the norms of human care. God is also present in the ways of the still small voice, the sound that is thin, quiet, but as powerfully present as earthquake, wind, and fire.

God is here. God is there. God is present, but we will miss that presence and power if we hole ourselves up in caves of false security, if we cling to the god of individual rights, if we avoid walking into Gentile territory to bring healing because we know we will not be welcome.

God is here. God is there. God is present, and God is sending us down our own mountains to build the foundations of future hope, not out of the instable materials of fear but of the long-lasting cement of grace.

Why are you here? Why are you here when followers of Christ are called to build bridges of understanding with those they do not know, whether the others are Muslim or gay, advocates of gun rights or gun control, or those who espouse a politics in contrast to their own. In so doing, I think, perhaps, we will become the prophetic witness that will make people say, God is here. God is present in them, and through them, I see their God, I see their Christ, I see their hope.