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Psalm 42
September 14, 2005
Goodson Chapel, Duke University Divinity School

I THIRST

"My soul thirsts for God" —צמאה נפשי לאלהים לאל חי—"for the Living God." For Christians, that is one of the most deeply resonant lines in all of Scripture. Hanging on the cross, Jesus echoes the psalmist's complaint: "I thirst" (John 19:28). At the last, our Lord is consumed, not by human hatred simply, but more deeply by desire, by thirst for the Living God. It is apt that this line from the psalm should reverberate through that Friday afternoon on Golgotha, the time and place that for Christians epitomize mark, in all human history, God's most notable absence. So our psalm should echo on Golgotha, because this is a prayer to a God missing in action—not a prayer to an unknown God. The ancient Near East knew prayers of that sort—unfocused cries of pain thrown upward and outward into the cosmos—but our psalm is quite different from those. The psalmist knows precisely to whom he is praying. He has a personal relationship with the One he names "my God," "my Rock." Perhaps you can be deeply disappointed only in someone with whom you have a personal relationship: "I say to God, my Rock, why have you forgotten me?"—forgotten me when murderous enemies press me down, when they revile me, "when they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (v.11).

צמאה נפשי לאלהים—"My נפש, my throat, my soul, my whole being thirsts for God." Thirst is one of the elemental metaphors of the Bible, and for good reason. For large stretches of the year in most places, the land of Israel is hot and dry. Anyone who has walked through that land knows that by the time you feel thirst, you have already been too long without water. In that semi-arid landscape, thirst is a sign of trouble. Extreme thirst such as our Psalmist feels is a harbinger of death. Paradoxically, that is why thirst is such a fitting metaphor for the craving for God. Because deep thirst may be the common experience that awakens most powerfully our instinct for life. If you don't eat, you may after a few days become lethargic and even lose interest in food. Not so with thirst. Thirst does not subside with deprivation; it intensifies. It concentrates our energies on satisfaction. It drives, propels us toward the source of life.

So the central image in Diane Palley's panel is the deer craving water: head thrust forward, scenting out with a sure instinct the river on which life depends. "For with you [God] is the source of life—מקור חיים , "the fountain of life" (Ps.36:10), says another psalmist. Here in the panel, the river is visibly the source of all life and blessing. In its flow are eighteen beautiful fish, representing the Eighteen Benedictions that form the core of the Jewish liturgy: eighteen beautiful prayers praising the generosity, the beneficence of God as the One who gives knowledge, forgives sin, hears prayer, heals the sick, redeems Israel.

The beneficence of God is the bedrock reality of life, and our Psalmist does not doubt it for a moment. Yet everything she is experiencing right now seems to testify against that reality. The enemy is asking for evidence: "Just where is your God?" And

right now, all our Psalmist is feeling is loss, absence—and terrible, insatiable thirst. No wonder she is thirsty. "My tears have been food for me day and night." If you are swallowing salty tears….(we've all done this, haven't we? trying not to cry, conscious that someone is watching—maybe not an enemy, but hardly a friend, and we know they are expecting us to swallow our grief and get on with it)—if you are swallowing tears, then you are getting thirsty. And the psalmist knows that only one thing, only One is going to satisfy that thirst. This, then, is a psalm about letting your *tears* lead you to the Fountain, the Source of all life. A good friend of mine, an English priest, says he has trouble with the psalms, even though he prays them daily. "They are so whiney." What can I say? The psalms were written not by Englishmen, but by Israelites. Muted public affect is not a cultural value for them. Our psalmist is holding onto God with her tears.

"My tears have been food, לחם, bread for me"—tears as sustenance. As I have dwelt on Diane Palley's design, now over some months, it is her interpretation of that metaphor that has most captured my imagination and changed my thinking. See, she has depicted those tears as raindrops falling from the clouds into the fertile soil and bringing forth growth. In a schematic yet accurate picture of the fruitfulness of the land of Israel, she has filled the terraced slopes with crops, the seven fruits native to that land: wheat, barley, figs, grapes, dates, olives, and pomegranates. "The seven fruits of the land of Israel" is a traditional theme for Jewish art, but what is freshly revealing (I'd call this "Visual Torah"[1]) is the way Diane Palley has developed the psalmist's insight that tears are a necessary part of fruitfulness. To be more specific, tears are necessary to bring forth the full fruit of faith.

My first seminary Dean, Fred Borsch, gave me the key to understanding that. In his first sermon to my entering class, he said something that puzzled me, so I remembered it until I could begin to understand it: "If you don't shed some tears during your time here, you will have missed the point." A true theological education occasions and requires some of our tears, and not primarily because it's only the third week of the term and already you are 1200 pages behind in your reading. No. If tears are not just tolerated but *required* of us from time to time (and that is one thing that may distinguish us from the other professional schools in this great university), it is because the thirst for God that brought each of us to this place has at the same time drawn us into the very center of a sustained conflict.

Simply stated, we have been drawn into conflict with everything that is opposed to God—including everything (and it is much) in ourselves that is opposed to God and God's way with our lives. Theological education is in no small part a matter of becoming sensitized to all the ways our world and our own inclinations, our habits of mind and heart, are set in opposition to God. That increased sensitivity is painful, even if it is what makes it possible for us to participate in Christ's ministry of reconciling the world to God (2 Cor. 5:18-19). It may be unlikely that Christ's work of reconciliation will be completed in our time here (though I'd like to be wrong about that). More likely, even the internal aspect of the conflict will not be fully resolved for any of us, no matter how extended our stay here may be. No, if we are faithful to our baptismal covenant—and Augustine read this psalm as the charter for the baptized life—then for the rest of our lives in this world we will be engaged in a struggle with all the forces and influences and powers that are inimical to God. That is wearying, often discouraging and worse. So a

great part of our obligation to our sisters and brothers in faith is to sustain one other when the conflict becomes especially acute, in our individual lives and in the common life—when we are assaulted with despair, the enemy of the God of hope; when we are facing off against death, the last enemy of the Living God for whom our psalmist, and Jesus on the cross, thirst.

Thirst for God draws us into conflict. And of course, the conflict gets more intense, the closer we approach to God. When you think about it, this makes perfect sense—although it is still hard to accept. For does not Scripture over and over represent the place closest to God—be it Sinai, Jerusalem, the Sea of Galilee, the foot of the cross—as the epicenter of a storm? The psalmist says, "Your waves and your billows overwhelm me"—and Diane Palley shows us the waters of God, at the same time tumultuous and life-giving. If you drink from that stream, you will get buffeted; you can nearly drown. This is surely the hardest experience of the life of faith, and there is much evidence for it in the experience of faithful Jews and Christians over centuries and millennia. You know it is thirst for God that has brought you to this place of intense conflict, this place where the buffeting itself seems to come from God. "*Your* waves and *your* billows overwhelm me." Nearly drowning in the torrent that flows from God—can we say that this is what Jesus experienced (and surely for Christians, Jesus is the definitive pray-er of this psalm)—isn't that the experience of Jesus, when he shed tears in Gethsemane, when he thirsted on Calvary? I am buffeted, overwhelmed; I am brought very low—and still, "I thirst for you" (cf. Ps.63:2), for the Living God.

Thirst not yet satisfied, tears not yet dried—those are realities of the life of faith. But the bedrock reality is the beneficence, the incredible generosity of God. Our altar table stands at the center of our chapel—it should be, of our life—as testimony to both sides of our lived reality. (Remember, the other side of the table reads, "Alleluia.") We are drawn to it by our thirst; week after week we are drawn back to it. We come, trusting that in this place we are slowly being healed of our own opposition to God. We come, praying to be strengthened to endure the opposition we will surely encounter, year in and year out, in God's service. We come, seeking the humility to recognize when we ourselves are opposing those who would serve God. Often we come with a thirst we are too ignorant to name, dimly perceiving that the undercurrent of all our healthful longing is, astonishingly, God's longing for us. Dare we imagine it: the God who is all-glorious, the Source of life and blessings without number, reaching out toward us, even now, and saying, "I thirst"?

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[1] The phrase "Visual Torah" corresponds to the traditional Jewish terms, "Written Torah" (Bible) and "Oral Torah" (rabbinic tradition).