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Psalm 63 and Mark 1: 4-13

Our Psalm opens with searching, seeking, trekking to find God, to the point of fainting and exhaustion. The psalmist searches because the psalmist knows God, has a history with God. Oh God you are *my* God, I seek you. I yearn for you, my body faints from the search. We might read this metaphorically. But read it literally, searching spatially, moving about to find something in a vast landscape. The superscription of the psalm places it in the wilderness of Judah, the same region where Jesus goes from being baptized to being alone for forty days and nights, alone in the wilderness of Judah.

Now if the psalmist is groping about the wilderness looking for God, how will the psalmist know when she has found God? Is it an emotional experience or a moment of perspective or clarity. That is typically how we might conceive of this language. For the psalmist, there is one clear answer. One knows they have found God when one finds water and provisions. Think Psalm 23, you are the good shepherd who leads me to the fresh water and the patches of vegetation. There is an association between God's presence and help with God's provision through food and water. And when finding water in an arid region, it is there, but you have to look, to move about, to seek, to move your body to the place where you might find his help.

It is a different experience than living in a place where water is all around, or where you just turn the tap and it pours forth. It is different from living in a place where you've always had everything you need, when God feels present all the time and you've never had to search and seek. The wilderness experience in the bible produces a different kind of relationship with God. Think Israel journeying forty years through the wilderness learning to trust God to provide and protect each day. Think of Moses' training in shepherding out in the land of Midian before he was ready to lead God's people through a desert. There is a clearer sense of one's need for God, keener awareness of the regular daily need and search to find him.

Now the psalmist has known God in different places and in different ways. For, "I have looked upon you in the sanctuary," meaning the psalmist has known God's presence in the temple and in power of sacrifice and worship there – "beholding your power and glory. / Because your steadfast love is better than life, / my lips will praise you." The psalmist is probably familiar with the more watery regions

and the sense of routine and comfort such places bring. The psalmist hasn't always had to work so hard to find and connect with God.

But the psalmist has also known God in dry places where one needs help to get by. "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. There is a sense that without help in the desert, one does not make it. We need God.

In my recent years of fly fishing trips, I have become a fan of Wyoming, which has a geographical diversity just as the land of the bible does. Meaning, in order to get to the northwest corner of Wyoming that is full of streams and mountains and melting snowpack, one has to drive many hours through long arid stretches where there isn't all that much there. It is dry and windy. You cross over these "streams," as marked with signs over the bridges, and yet there is no water in them. Imagine crossing that on foot, needing to gage where you are and how far you can walk so that after trekking many miles you actually end up at a place of water and vegetation, and not dying of thirst in the middle of a barren stretch.

Like Wyoming, Israel has very fertile areas in the North around Carmel, the Sea of Galilee and north towards the slopes of Mt. Hermon – here there is arable land, consistent rain, streams, lakes, green hillsides, snowcapped mountains in the distance. Here you find farming, dates, figs, olives, and such. But the further south you go, especially as you move south along the Jordan river, it gets much more arid, and below the dead sea turns into desert conditions. It is in these reaches where shepherds drive their sheep, rather than have the sheep trampling through the good farmland. It is here that we hear terms like wilderness and steppe-land.

And in addition to being a region for shepherding, it is to the wilderness one goes also for rites of passage or moments of transition. It is where one proves themselves. You go out into the wilderness, endure some rite or succeed in some challenge in order to come back and be ready. Maybe it is a transition to adulthood, now able to be seen by others as an adult, or being appointed as a leader.

In ancient Assyria, there was a tradition called the Royal Assyrian Lion Hunt. When someone was in line to become a king or a ruler of some sort, they would be sent out beyond the boundaries of the city or villages, out into the wilderness to hunt and kill a lion. And that ability to be out in the wild, apart from civilization, and to conquer this symbol of chaos and threat proved that this person was able to lead and protect the people against such threats and forces of chaos. So, he would return to the people, to the city, with a new status, a new identity, a new title, a

person the people could view as a leader. One could find similar parallels in other traditional cultures or even native American cultures.

And while it is rough parallel, there is something going on in the gospels, that when it is time for Jesus to step into his ministry, it begins with a rite of passage, baptism, in the Jordan valley, and a season of forty days in the wilderness enduring challenges. Temptations.

It is a place where, like the psalmist, one does not sit passively by but is active in seeking to encounter God, moving about. It is a place absent of other distractions, a place where one is aware of their needs and desire for God, as well as the experience of God's help and satisfaction. And it is a place where one proves themselves by enduring certain travails.

Now Jesus does not have to kill a lion out there or anything so dramatic. But he does have to maintain his reliance and connection to the Lord in the face of various offers for power and food and spectacle. Now Mark summarizes the time in the wilderness very briefly Luke's account goes into much more detail. But, when you are struggling and someone offers you a quick fix, a fast track to all that you might take a lifetime to achieve, it is hard to resist. These are the kind of tests that Jesus endures in the wilderness.

Just as the Assyrian city needed to know their king can fight off threats and forces of chaos, God's people need someone who in all the stress and disorientation that comes with expectations and power structures and attempts to sway or steer the messiah's ministry in different ways, or even attempts to kill him – that Jesus is able to find God in this midst of these hard places, of this strain and struggle. That Jesus is able to find his comfort and satisfaction only in the help that God provides, not in the deals to be made along the way. That Jesus can stay rooted in that identity bestowed by God in the words that floated down with the dove at his baptism: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

When Jesus emerges from the wilderness, he is ready to begin his ministry.

And just as Jesus is baptized in the Jordan valley, so this will become a ritual by which others will go out to edge of society and will undergo. And by undergoing this ritual of baptism in this liminal place, they announce their own change, their own repentance, their own willingness and readiness to be new and different, ready to seek the messiah as diligently as the psalmist seeks after springs of water.

As people who spend a lot of time in places of comfort, who have grown complacent with the readily available water in your taps and car washes, and food in every grocery or convenience store. As people who are offered many a deal for security or satisfaction, perhaps every so often we need to get back to the place of seeking and searching, where there are less voices, and our search for God is more central. Where we prove again that we can seek and find God, that we can listen and remain reliant on God. Where we might emerge again with the sense and confidence that we are a new people ready to serve. We are new people ready to be faithful, to give ourselves to the purposes of our messiah, who calls us to follow, to go deeper in our connections to the Lord, deeper in our service to others.

I chose to have Liz read our poem at the end of the sermon today. For it speaks of this annual New Year's turning of the page. A moment when we become cognizant of time and of purposeful changes, and the ongoing morphing and transforming that goes on over the course of life, sometimes purposeful, other times against our wills or awareness. But the poem is a willing engagement in that process, a willing engagement with renewing our sense of identity, with who we are becoming. And as people following Christ, as people on a spiritual journey, we engage this process of becoming intentionally, seeking to be formed in the likeness of Christ, seeking to grow closer to the Lord, to find peace, to be of use to God's purposes and so on.

So let us listen to these words of the poem this morning.

Psalm 63

Comfort and Assurance in God's Presence

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

- 1 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.
- 2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
- 3 Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
- 4 So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
- 5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
- 6 when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
- 7 for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
- 8 My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.
- 9 But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;
- 10 they shall be given over to the power of the sword,
they shall be prey for jackals.
- 11 But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism of Jesus

(Mt 3:13–17; Lk 3:21–22; Jn 1:29–34)

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Temptation of Jesus

(Mt 4:1–11; Lk 4:1–13)

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.