

Psalm 130 Psalm 42

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

²Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

⁵I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

¹As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

²My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

³My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

⁴These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

⁵Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help ⁶and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you

from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

⁷Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

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

⁹I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”

¹⁰As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

¹¹Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Our lives are lived on a certain level – lots flowing in and lots flowing out of our minds and hearts; plenty to keep us busy most of the time; many kinds of stimulations keeping a level of predictability among the sometimes seeming chaos. We watch documentaries or read books in order to learn new things – learning is good. We relate with family and friends. When we cannot be with others, the telephone is a wonderful tool to keep in touch with those we care for – to be in relationships with others – particularly relationships of love and caring is good. Many of us have occupations which take quite a bit of energy and focused attention – and apart from supporting our families with our work, to be productive seems to be a positive thing for the human spirit – to work is good. The preparation and consumption of food is something which is presented to us with incredible regularity. Not only is eating important and necessary, it is also a time when people can be together for a while and share something in common. Some people find the preparation of food to be a delightful way to spend time – they can be creative and try to make the experience enjoyable – it is a way that they can present a gift to their family and friends. To prepare food and to eat it is good. And so is

gardening. Perhaps it is easier to buy all our produce, but there is a delight and healthy diversion in spending time in a garden. For some who have to live off of what they grow, it can be hard work, but for both the serious and the hobby gardeners, to grow food is good. Much of what we spend our lives doing is good. It would seem that it is a rarity for those of us who are in this room to intentionally do evil – wanting to harm someone else – to hurt others. There are people like that, but likely it does not describe most of us. Perhaps it does not even describe most people. Most of us spend much of our time doing what is good. In the way we order our lives, we usually fill up our days and weeks and years doing good – things that bring satisfaction and meaning to our lives and to other people's lives.

But every once in a while, for some people, and perhaps occasionally for most people, there comes a wondering about what else there might be to life. While we can point to all the good and individually satisfying things our lives are filled with, there can still be questions about what is deeper – why are there question marks? – why are there some dissatisfactions? – especially when we can think of all the ways in which our lives are good? When we take the time to ponder, perhaps we may become more aware of the deeper mystery which lies under it all and which surrounds all of life. We who believe in God will know that that deeper mystery is God. The mystery of that which is God is attractive to us and we can find ourselves drawn to God, but at the same time, to throw ourselves into the mystery can be frightening.

It is like being on a large boat in the ocean – occasionally we can go to the edge of the railing and look out into the deep ocean – wondering what all is out there and what all is under there. We can see the ocean. We can know a lot about the ocean. But still we hang tightly onto the railing. Occasionally there are times in people's lives when tragedies hit and their lives are turned upside down. The normal routines which have filled their lives are no longer enough to bring that sense of well being and satisfaction. It is stripped away. Perhaps that is like being cast into the ocean – a very different way of experiencing the ocean – and even with a life jacket, it would be a very shocking and fearful way to experience the same ocean. Most of us would not choose to experience the ocean in that way.

If the image of the ocean is anything like the deep mysteries of God, we are all aware that those mysteries are there; but it is most secure to experience God at a bit of a distance – in the little cracks which appear in our lives – at the times when we take a few moments to pray and read about the mysteries of God. When the mysteries begin to seem too deep or too frightening, we can always close the book or turn back to the task of living and doing the good things which describe our lives. But the deep mystery is still there. Some get plunged into it against their will – thrown into the depths of God. Some are terrified. Others find a whole new world that they only imagined could exist.

The Psalmist (42) writes:

Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows have gone over me.
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

We have no control over the possibility of being thrown into the depths when it is against our will. But we do have a choice at those times when we see that glint of mystery sparkling out of the corners of our lives, when we pursue the beckoning mystery that is too deep to know, but which is close enough to touch, and we find ourselves compelled to try to move into and live in the deeper mystery of God.

That is the start of a journey which can be both an incredible joy and an awful bewilderment. So often, when we enter into the deep, we are hoping that the skills which we have so well perfected – skills in relationships and gaining knowledge and in the tasks of living – that those skills will help us in our desire to come close to God. But those skills are sometimes seemingly useless in traveling and surviving in the depths of the mystery of God.

In a contemplative relationship with God, we are forced to have to relearn how to see – we have to relearn how to hear – we have to relearn about relationships, because as we enter into the deep ocean of God's love and presence, all we can see is a vast nothingness that can go on forever, and all we can hear is the sound of the water and the wind, and all we can taste is salt. To be able to survive in such a different

experience we need to relearn so many of the skills of living which we have taken a lifetime to learn. When we enter into the vastness of the mystery of God, it can be like walking into a completely dark room with no sound. We hope God is there – when we enter into the vastness, we assume God is there – that is why we had entered in – but then we find we are just swallowed up into a realm where we can feel absolutely lost. When people feel the call to set themselves apart and sit in quiet, listening, and expectant prayer, what they end up finding is only a silentness and a stillness – a stillness where the thoughts of their own minds end up being so loud as to be distracting – and they wonder how anyone can sit in the silence and pray because it can feel like nothing is there. That can be terrifying. The God they had hoped they would meet and trusted they would meet in their quiet sitting seems to be either very quiet or not even there. That can bring disillusionment. Those who are more dedicated and have more patience than the rest of us can sit in the silence – hoping to meet and be touched by the presence of God – but often even for those people, there is the deafening silence. It can be discouraging to feel we are entering into the presence of God and yet to feel so alone. It is no wonder that most of us quickly head back into the world which we can understand – conversations, books, learning, eating, visiting, caring, working, gardening. It is safe. When we reflect on our short journeys into the mysteries of God, we might be filled with a touch of sadness that while we attempted the journey into being still with God, there still lingered within us some confusion because God did not seem present. The Psalmist in Psalm 42 wrote: "I say to God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?' " The Psalmist in Psalm 109 wrote: "Do not be silent, O God of my praise." The Psalmist in Psalm 88 wrote: "But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?" St. John of the Cross would call those times the "dark nights of the soul" – when we enter into the mystery of God and all we receive is the quiet – the seeming emptiness.

But perhaps there is not truly an emptiness. Perhaps when we experience such things, we have not yet learned how to see. Perhaps when we experience such things, we have not yet learned how to hear. How do we learn to see? How do we learn to hear in the mysterious depth of the presence of God? Perhaps it is with time and

patience and with a touch of confidence that God is present – with a belief that maybe God is even speaking – that God's voice is a whisper which we might finally be able to hear once we have learned to recognize it in the stillness.

There is a story from the Japan of long ago. It is of the mighty lord who realized that he was coming to the end of his life. He had one child – a daughter – Lady Yumiko. The father was saddened because his daughter still had not married, and he feared that he would not live to see the day of any of his grandchildren. He asked her why she kept turning away the many men who had come asking for her hand in marriage.

Lady Yumiko assured her father that she would marry, but first she wished to fashion a drum of silk, which would be stretched over a bamboo frame. "The man who hears the note when my fingers strike the drum, that man I will marry."

The old man felt that that was foolishness. "A silk drum does not make any sound." He felt the discouragement of that which seemed hopeless. But the beautiful Lady Yumiko insisted, and so the drum was made. Many young men came to listen to her drum, wishing to be fortunate enough to marry Lady Yumiko. But when she played her drum, none of them were ever able to hear any sound. The months and seasons passed, as a long procession of suitors came and went. The aged lord nearly gave up.

Then one day, into the courtyard came a young and handsome man. He had about him the air of one who had traveled long and far. He made a deep bow to the aged lord; and a gentle bow to the Lady Yumiko who sat with her silk drum at her side.

"Where do you come from, youthful stranger?" asked the father.

"From beyond the mountains and the seas; from far, far away," replied the youthful stranger.

"And for what, may I ask, have you traveled such a great distance?" asked the father.

"My lord," said the young man, "I have come to marry your daughter."

"She is only for the man who can hear her silk drum. Do not tell me that you have heard its sound in your far-off kingdom, across the mountains and the seas?"

The young man answered, "You are correct, my lord, I have not heard the sound of the drum."

"Then, stranger," said the father, "be on your way, like all the others before you. Why do you even linger here?"

"Because, my lord," said the stranger, "I hear its silence."

And the Lady Yumiko smiled and put away her silken drum, since she had no further need of it. (Edward Hays in "A Guide to Retreat" by Rueben P. Job, pp. 28-29)

There have been and are those souls who can hear the silence – they can hear the silk drum. Distance and time are of no concern to those who can hear the silence. We know of those great saints – living and dead – who listened to a different drum – who were able to listen in the silence. Perhaps in our own spiritual lives, we might too often be more like the long line of frustrated suitors who were wanting to love God, but strained to hear the divine voice – and were only disappointed. (Edward Hays) The drumming by the loving fingers had been playing on the silk drum, but we did not know how to listen in the silence.

In the journey of our lives, we will necessarily live in the realm in which we are most familiar and confident – that of relations and learning; of friendships and food; of occupations and hobbies; of conversations and love. Certainly, they are all good. They are all very good. But there is more and it is all around us – around us in apparent silence. Because of the apparent silence, we can fill our lives from our rising in the morning until we lay down at night – with lives filled with good things – but yet, missing the deep mysteries of God which are all around us – beckoning to us – calling us to come into the silence – into the deep ocean of God's love. And one by one, there are those who somehow know that there is a rich world in the deep – and to enter might be fearful at first – to enter might be terrifying at first – but to enter is to encounter God. And in time we can learn to listen in the silence, and in what can seem to be an endless void, the person of spirit can learn to see and to hear. The person of spirit will be able to understand. And then, maybe someday, in the great ocean of faith we will be able to swim in freedom and playfulness like the dolphin. Amen.