

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Psalm 42

Sermon Title: "Not Staying Thirsty for Long"

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It is an ancient literary pattern. It is a pattern that is as old as time. You can pick up a Greek novel, written in 200BC, and you can pick up a copy of Harry Potter, written in 2007AD, and you will find they use the same pattern of writing that is familiar to us all. Without this pattern we would not read stories. We would not tell stories. In fact, this pattern is so much a part of our lives that we cannot think of ever living without it.

This literary pattern, as old as time, is described as the move from orientation, to disorientation, and then to reorientation. Every plot of every book follows this pattern. Our very lives follow this pattern.

Let us take a character from a book, any character from any book. We read about her life, how wonderful it is, how innocent and perfect that character seems to be. This is called orientation, what the character is used to. Even if her life is terrible, she is used to this way of living. She cannot think of living any other way. The character goes on for years living a certain

way, but then a crisis occurs. This is called disorientation. Something happens to disrupt the normal pattern of her life. If her life was perfect, now her life is in a tailspin, plummeting toward some deep abyss. If her life was not perfect, then it really stinks now. It has really gotten worse. It could be a natural disaster that brings about disorientation. A crime, a disease, a broken relationship: any kind of bad news will bring disorientation to the plot. In some novels, the disorientation lasts for pages upon pages, chapters upon chapters. We wonder where the author is going with the story. We hope and pray that the book will end on a positive note.

Most novels do. We get to the last chapter, or the second-to-last chapter, and we face what is called reorientation. Something happens to solve the problem. The crisis is finished. The character wins the day. However, the character herself is a different person. She has changed in some way. She is wiser, stronger, better off than before; but she is also damaged in some way from the disorientation she had to face. The crisis has caused damage, possibly permanent damage, to her that she can never escape nor relieve. Yet, once again, in reorientation, she may be damaged, but she is a better person. She is better off than how she was in the first chapter of the book.

This literary pattern is ancient. Every human being has experienced it: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. It doesn't matter what the story is, it will always start with orientation, quickly move toward disorientation, and somehow make it to reorientation. We love this pattern for life, because it makes for interesting stories. It makes for a good life, knowing that we can get through anything and somehow come out on top.

However, when we experience disorientation in our lives, when a crisis occurs that turns our normal, comfortable worlds upside-down, we don't like it. It is one thing to read about it, but we sure do not want to go through it ourselves. Leave it for the books, but leave us out of it.

None of us likes disorientation. Whatever the crisis is, we are not happy. We are not hopeful. We may become miserable and depressed. We yearn for that crisis to go away, and go away now! A college student graduates, which is a happy achievement, but now he has to pay back all those loans. He cannot find a job and has to work in some fast-food joint just to keep his head above financial waters. A couple gets married but they realize they cannot have a baby. They want children at some point in their lives, but they cannot get pregnant. A gentleman has never

visited a hospital in his life, but now he has heart problems, breathing problems, weak legs, weak stomach, dizziness, sleepiness. A girl goes from one school to another, and now she has no friends. She had to move because of her parent's job, but she cannot get use to being in a different place where nobody seems to care for her.

In disorientation, we are highly uncomfortable and highly motivated to change our situation. We want to move away from the crisis as quickly as possible, and resume some normal patterns in our lives. We struggle to get back to orientation, back to the way it was. We cannot go backward – “orientation” as we knew it is gone, vanished forever. So we try to push through the disorientation as quickly as possible. But we cannot move any faster than we are moving. So we become impatient. We become angry. We don't care what people say or think; we are suffering and we need help. So, our time in disorientation becomes more stressful than it needs to be.

So if we think we are stuck in disorientation, we may think we should remain in disorientation. We try to improve the present tense by our own will. We will just stay here in the middle of the chaos, because life can never get better for us. Might as well stay depressed and hopeless. It is like the Israelites in the

wilderness: “Let us just make our homes here, and stay in the desert for the rest of our lives. No point in moving forward.”

We do not know what the crisis was that had caused the writers of Psalm 42 to feel so depressed. We don't know what the disorientation was that made the writers begin with, “As a deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for you, O Lord.” When they say they are panting for God, they mean that they are out of breath. They cannot catch their breath, and so the breathing becomes even harder. The other day I was cutting down a small tree in our side yard with a handsaw. When I was finished I was gasping for air, and had to concentrate on regulating my breathing.

The authors of Psalm 42 are having a time with it. They are out of breath. They also say their tears have been their food day and night. What a striking image. All they can do is cry and cry. It seems that is all they do the entire day. Their faces are beet red, their eyes are puffy, and they have used Kleenexes sitting around the house. And when they think they cannot cry anymore, they look for God and do not seem to find him, and they sink deeper into misery. Whatever the disorientation is, it has put them in a terrible spot, in which their spirits are cast down and their hearts

growl and mourn and remained troubled.

And yet, whereas we might try to make a home in our disorientation, our misery, the Hebrews sought the Lord through singing and worship and prayer. Whereas we might allow the crises in life to overtake us, the Hebrews would write psalms.

The authors of Psalm 42 are breathing hard, trying to catch their breath amid the pain, but they are not breathing hard because of the pain. They are breathing hard, because they are running after God. It isn't the crisis that has taken their breath away; it is the rapid movement toward getting close to God. "As a deer pants for the waters": it doesn't pant after the crises. It doesn't feel yearning for the disorientation. The deer goes after that which will give it nourishment. So if a deer is going to pant after water brooks, we are going to pant after our God and Savior.

When the tears flow and dry up our faces, the living God is going to replenish our thirst for him. "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."¹ Every time we read about God being the living God, we know that we are dealing with the God of life. We think vitality. We think charisma, energy, movement, progress. God is the living God, moving us through every situation

¹ Psalm 42:2.

toward our final goal of heaven. With the living God, there will always be action. With the living God, we can and will move from orientation through disorientation, and finally to reorientation, in which we will become more perfect human beings.

The writers of Psalm 42 will move through the disorientation. They will not make homes there, because God does not make a home there. God meets us in disorientation, giving us the waters we need to make it through. God meets us and move us into reorientation. We might be damaged in some way by the disorientation. We might bear some scars. But even the scars are redeemed by God. Even the pain is lessened, and lessons are learned, and we are made better people, better than when we have first begun.²

I once hear a pastor say in his sermon, “You know, the other day I was reading John 11. John 11 tells us the story of Lazarus coming out of his tomb. Jesus was delayed in seeing him when the sisters of Lazarus called for him, and when Jesus finally arrived Lazarus was already dead. His body was then stuck in a tomb forever. And, you know what? I have read this story so many times that I finally came across something that I had not seen before. When Jesus approaches

² Consider the last verse from the famous Spiritual, “Amazing Grace.”

the tomb, he stays outside the tomb. He never goes in. He never goes in to collect Lazarus from the tomb. Jesus stays outside and calls Lazarus out.”

You know, when we are in the middle of disorientation, we want Jesus to join us in our misery. We want Jesus to come into our tombs, and make a home there. We want Jesus to get comfortable in our tombs. We want Jesus to have a Bible study in our tombs. We want Jesus to form care groups in our tombs. We want Jesus to bring in a couch and listen to all our gripes in our tombs. We want to have fellowship and worship in our tombs. Jesus will not come into our tombs. He will stay outside and he will call us out. He will convince us to leave our tombs, our disorientation, and enter the light of reorientation.

“Jesus doesn’t like tombs. Jesus dislikes tombs so much that he didn’t stay in his for long. He got out. He wants us to get out, leave disorientation, leave behind the chaos.”

Every story follows the ancient pattern. When the plot of the story goes into disorientation, eventually it must arrive to reorientation. This pattern is the rule that every story must follow. It cannot disobey. Life must obey the pattern as well. God designed it so. God moves his people through deserts to promised

lands. God calls people from tombs to new life. God heals and perfects, and makes his people better people.

“Why 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.”³

³ Psalm 42:11.

