

Old Testament: Psalm 42  
New Testament: Luke 8: 26 - 39

Please join me in prayer. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In the 42nd psalm we have an opportunity to listen in on something that so many of us rarely ever have the chance to do so. Even a decade ago, and therefore all the years before, a preacher would've spoken of what the writer is speaking about as despair. Despair was, in modern times, a rarely spoken of feeling. I cannot put my finger on exactly why, as I am more a child of post-modernity, but I can speculate based on what I have learned. Modernity, the era in which many, if not all, of you grew up in was a time of unbridled enthusiasm. Good and evil were clearly defined and good had conquered evil in WWII and was well on its way to defeating the new evil of the dreaded communism. We were still emerging from the great depression, as it still existed in living memory, and so there was every reason to believe that you all would have it better than your parents and your kids would have it even better than you! The civil rights era was rough but the long arc of the universe was bending towards justice. There were a few speed bumps along the way to be sure, but generally, things were better and there was social pressure to keep thinking positive! "The Power of Positive Thinking" became a kind of de facto civic religion which many still adhere to to this day. In this cultural ethos or milieu "despair" became, if not a dirty word, something people didn't talk about in polite company.

Thus many of you may be asking yourself, what is "despair"? Simply put despair is hopelessness. So I get why people coming out of the great depression and "the war to end all wars" would want to only think in positive terms and not go back to those hell on earth times. Now you might be even further confused because the scriptures talk about hope, not hopelessness. Why is there a full chapter, or two because Psalm 43 is pretty despairing too, dedicated to a human working through his hopelessness, his despair? Friends, the bible is not just about who God is, but it is also about who we are as humans. And the bible is certainly about how the God of the universe and we humans interact with one another. Though God is our constant abiding hope that never fails, we humans fall into despair at times. In the last decade we have started naming this as depression. Though God is our constant abiding hope that never fails, we humans can be depressed; and there is no shame in that. It is precisely *because* God is our constant abiding hope that never fails, as witnessed to in the bible, that we *can* talk about being depressed. The psalmist can talk about doing his due diligence to *remember* God's goodness when he despairs because he cannot feel the abiding presence of the Divine, and he can even talk about failing in his remembrance. Why?

Because none of this, nothing in our fallen humanity, changes who God is. This is why we need not fear because that which torments us does not change who God is; does not change the hope that God has secured for us through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. Even when that which torments us would threaten to drag us down into a depressive pit of despair, we need not fear because God's love and hope abides. "He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead."

In our passage from Luke, for our purposes today, we can take the story at face value though there are many layers of it to be explored at a later date. Here we can view the demons, plural the demon names itself Legion for they are many, as any number of afflictions that torment humans and humanity on a regular basis. The man is physically tormented. We are physically tormented in innumerable ways. Cancer. Heart disease. Muscular dystrophy. Lou Gehrig's disease. Broken bones. Strained muscles. Arthritis. The list goes on and on. We need not fear these tormentors because John has seen a vision of a new heaven and a new earth in which there will be no pain anymore and this hope is secured. The man is socially tormented as he is controlled and ostracized from society. We have more hate groups than we have love groups. People hate Jews. People hate Christians. People hate black people. People hate gay people. People hate Muslims. People hate immigrants. Some men hate women. Some women hate men. Now, some Republicans hate Democrats and other Republicans, and some Democrats hate Republicans and other Democrats. Again, the list goes on and on. All of this hate compels these various hate groups to try to control one another as they seek to either physically remove one another from society or at least eradicate their societal influence. We need not fear these tormentors because John has seen a vision of a new heaven and a new earth in which God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and this hope is secured. The man is tormented by being manipulated. In a day in age, outside of the physical confines of Israel where only YHWH held sway and power, in which gods and demons were believed to be in regular and constant conflict as they wrestled for control over humanity and the world, this man was the epitome of being a pawn in a much larger game. We are constantly being manipulated by forces larger than our individual selves. Sometimes it's one of the aforementioned hate groups. Sometimes it's pundits. Sometimes it's advertisers. Sometimes, tragically, it is religious charlatans; pretenders claiming falsehoods about God to be true. Jesus refers to these kinds of manipulative tormentors as "wolves in sheep's clothing". Jesus liberates the man from his manipulation by his many tormentors and he is freed. In his freedom he desires to follow Jesus but Jesus gives him a much more important task: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you". We need not fear these manipulative tormentors because God in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit liberates us from them. God enables us to see them for what they are and we are tasked then with proclaiming how much God has done for us.

Fear not your tormentors. You have been set free from all which would threaten to do so and your hope for eternal freedom has been secured. Now go and tell of how much God has done for you. Amen.