

O MY GOD

The writer of the 42-43 Psalm was in no pleasant mood – to the contrary he was depressed – “disquieted” – gloom closed in on him like a thick fog, choking the life out of him – something, something had so lowered the pitch of his soul – that when he woke up in the morning and tried to face another day – all he could say was –

O my God.

O my God

O my God, my soul is cast down within me!

Do you and I understand that mood? Of course we do – if we don’t, we must be among the angels – and ought not to be here anyway. Discouragement? Depression? The low pitch of soul? The cry “O my god, O my god”? Why it’s ubiquitous, it’s everywhere – young and old – saints, sinners, even Presbyterians, every last living one of us –in our pilgrims’ progress or regress as the case may be – find ourselves of a morning in the slough of despond – in the dumps. And that’s the truth.

And in the first place – why? Aye -- and that’s the question. What makes us get down like this? The cause of these low moods (body chemistry, we say and pop an Advil), but the psalmist didn’t have our pharmacy companies’ panacea. Nine times in sixteen verses the psalmist, angry at himself – that he could be so depressed, get so discouraged – asks the inevitable “why? why? why? why? why? why? why? why? why? art thou cast down, o my soul?”

We understand this too – don’t we? This anger at oneself – one’s own weakness is being disheartened too quickly – depressed so easily – dejected so soon – when one ought to be up at least trying – struggling to right whatever’s wrong. Of course we understand it. And as far as the psalmist was concerned – there was something wrong. He wasn’t distraught for no reason at all – the way some of us healthy, prosperous, satisfied saints suddenly feel dispirited over nothing in particular – depressed without any real reason – sorry for ourselves with no obvious cause.

As we said last Sunday, the 42nd psalmist had reason enough for his depressed spirits. He was in exile, held hostage – if you will – in a foreign land – and wanted to go home, home to Jerusalem where he belonged – to see again the sights he loved like life itself – see again the

Temple of his God – worship with his people – not here among these strangers, who laughed at his foreign ways.

And if you read the Hebrew of the 10th verse in a different way (Dahood) the man was also ill, he felt “the assassin (old Hebrew metaphor for death) within my bones”, physically sick, in pain – and it wouldn’t stop.

So—he had reason to cry – “O my God, O my God, O my God, O my God, O my God, O my God, O my God, O my God, O my God.” A right to be “cast down.” His were none of these peeving, petty-fogging, picayune problems that cause us tears – the little nothings we fret and fume and get very grumpy and cross in the briar patch over. This man was in trouble and he knew it.

But he was not neurotic, he was a man of maturity – not once – not once does he moan and grown over what has happened to him – not once does he ask, “Why has this happened to poor little me?” “Why must I suffer?” or “What have I done to deserve this?”

His only question – asked nine times over is – (now get this) – is “Why am I taking it the way I am?” “Why am I carrying on like this?” “Why go I mourning?” “Where’s my pride?” “Where’s my faith?”

You see, he isn’t blaming God or anyone for his predicament (like some of us), he’s just blaming himself for acting so discouraged in the face of it.

Sure – it’s natural to cry when you’re hurt – and he admits it – “my tears have been my meat day and night” – he was hurt and he cried unashamed and it did him good – the strong do cry and should cry – pain like grief has to be expressed – or ... But the fine thing about him – once he had gotten it out of his system he realized you can’t cry forever – you can’t coddle yourself for long – you can’t live, not any life worth living, resentful and sorry for yourself. Self-pity gets you nowhere, you’ve got to pick yourself up and start all over again.

So the next step is – “How?” How to get out of the “slough of despondancy?” The cure?

No sure- fire answers, for some of us – who pout and mope and sniffle over trifles or over nothing – the only cure I can think of for us is a good, old fashioned spanking – whether we are 4 or 40, or what’s your age? Never too old for a spanking – at least the need for one.

When I see and talk to persons in real trouble – and there’s plenty of real trouble in this world – plenty to make us cry our eyes out – to make us yelp with the psalmist: “O my God” –

When I see persons who are in real pain – or in real poverty – or who are treated unfairly, unjustly – or who are trapped by family or personality or physical problems that do not cease – facing “long lanes that will never turn” then I want, speaking theologically of course, to shake the devil out of myself and anybody else who consider themselves bad off over paltry, little nothings – persons who take the joy out of their own lives, their parents – their spouses – their children’s lives, who make everybody just miserable for no good reason at all. Maybe, God forbid, it will take a real blow to shake some sense into our heads.

How many times – I have heard people say “I never knew how well off I was until this happened – God forgive me when I used to complain about nothing.” But when we really do have something to cry over – something to say, “O my God” about – then what?

First of all – let us be as honest as the Psalmist – and admit that our difficulties are not the real cause of our depressions, it’s the way we take them. The Psalmist didn’t blame anybody, even God. He apparently had the good sense to know that nobody living is without trouble and sorrow – that all of us (all of us without exception) belong to the fraternity of struggle and pain. Even St. Paul who had his thorn in the flesh (don’t know what -- aching, blindness, epilepsy, etc) We’re all handicapped persons in one way or another, whether our name is Beethoven, Milton, Stevenson, Longfellow, Gray, Helen Keller, Robinson Crusoe. No man (Jesus wept over the death of his friend, Lazarus) is an island in his fears and defeats – desperation knots us all together – one body, one blood we are in that. The ground really is level before the cross of pain. There is God Himself, as the Book of Hebrews says, “touched with a feeling for our infirmities.” Even Lord God, says in the New Testament, is touched with our common infirmity. God himself suffers, says the death of Christ – whatever else it is – the cross is the central experience.

So – let us face our private hells with the realization that they are not private after all – you hear me – we may have different problems, different pains – but the fellowship of agony (except the pretenders – whose agony is having to keep up the pretense) includes us all.

So – we cannot feel sorry for ourselves and be petulant and peevish as though providence had its foot on our precious neck alone. Indeed only when free of this self-pity – can we concentrate on doing something to alleviate whatever it is that has gotten us down? Maybe all we need is to get out of that house and those four walls that keep closing in on us – take a long

walk in the fresh air – skip church and go fishing (did I say that?) – seek new friends – a different job – a new hobby – or maybe we do need a trip to the clinic – or the therapist – or maybe all we need is a trip to the mountains or the shore – above all to get out of ourselves, helping someone else who needs us. But whatever the remedy is, this I do know – just sitting around looking discouraged and self-pitying will settle exactly nothing. In this life, we all have to settle for second best and make something out of it.

So, get busy – and do something even if it's the wrong thing. For one thing – do something so simple as list – yes, list on paper – all the encouraging things about our situation we can think of and there are encouraging things in every situation, even in church! There will be more than we supposed. Don't say – "Oh, that's silly to make a list – I'm too sophisticated for that" – maybe that is your trouble – too sophisticated. For to see the actual list of what you have to be thankful for in this rough life will help your feelings.

Then – "think on these things!", says St. Paul. Concentrate on the good things, the healthy aspects, the happy side, the fine things, and the kindly memories. Don't dwell long on the disheartening side of life. After all, these present days – as bad as they are – may well be our best days, as sick as we are these may be our healthiest, even as miserable, our happiest. Let's don't spoil them for ourselves and our families by seeing only what's ugly and sad and wrong in them.

And then – like the Psalmist – when we are discouraged – pray – if only to say "O my God" the medieval mystics reduced all prayer to that. Pray and feel the nearness and the sure strength of God. "Remember," as the Psalmist said "His loving kindness in the daytime, and in the night his song." Hear God say as he said to Paul: "the thorn in your flesh will remain, but my grace is sufficient for you." For prayer establishes contact with the power of God as our Father. And this conviction gives us greater courage and calm and confidence within ourselves as we face the issues of the day.

Then – like the Psalmist – there shall arise in us – new hope – "hope in God."

So that whatever our difficulties – no final discouragement is possible. It was written of Christ – "He shall bring

Steel to the will

Peace to the soul

Quiet to the mind.

Therefore: As the heart pantheth after the waterbrooks, so pantheth my soul after thee, O Lord.”

Amen.