

Psalm 63^[a]

A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah.

- ¹ You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.
- ² I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
- ³ Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.
- ⁴ I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
- ⁵ I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.
- ⁶ On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.
- ⁷ Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.
- ⁸ I cling to you;
your right hand upholds me.
- ⁹ Those who want to kill me will be destroyed;
they will go down to the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁰ They will be given over to the sword
and become food for jackals.
- ¹¹ But the king will rejoice in God;
all who swear by God will glory in him,
while the mouths of liars will be silenced.

There are some events that take place in the world around us that are so momentous that for the rest of our lives we or others will ask, “Do you remember where you were when this happened?”

9/11.

The assassination of JFK.

The moon landing.

And for me, the seventh inning of Game 5 of the American League Division Series in 2015.

Do you remember where you were?

I was home from seminary that week, eating dinner at my home church before our Wednesday night programs. The game was being shown on the projector – it was the final elimination game between the Toronto Blue Jays and the Texas Rangers, and the people of Jubilee Fellowship CRC weren’t going to miss it. So we watched while we ate, glancing up from time to time, mostly paying attention to our conversation with the game on in the background.

Until the seventh inning. When all eyes turned to the game.

It started at the top of the inning when Russel Martin, the Blue Jay’s catcher, casually threw the ball back to the pitcher, only the ball hit the outstretched bat of the Ranger’s Sin-Soo Choo, and it bounced into the field. The runner at third ran home, the ump declared it a dead ball, the Rangers manager appealed, the umps reviewed, declared that the run did in fact count, and total chaos broke out at Rogers Center for a solid eighteen minutes, because no one had seen this before. Turns out by some obscure rule buried in the baseball playbook, it was a fair play. The score was 3-2 for the Rangers when the Jays came up to bat.

And then things just got crazier. Thanks to three straight errors committed by the Rangers, what should have been three easy outs ended with the bases loaded. The Rangers get their first out throwing out Dalton Pompey on a forced run home. The Rangers switch out their pitchers, and Josh Donaldson hits a ball that again should've been an easy out but gets away from the Ranger's Odor, allowing for just one out on this play, and for the tying run to come home.

So now the score is tied, it's the bottom of the seventh, there's two outs, we've already been in this inning for more than half an hour, and José Bautista is up to bat. Programs at Jubilee should have started twenty minutes ago, but no one is walking away from this baseball game. We are glued to the screen. The crowd at Roger's Center is beside themselves, yelling, cheering, throwing things on the field, on the very edge of their seats, eyes fixed on the field, eyes fixed on "Joey Bats," one of the greatest hitters in the league. The anticipation is immense.

And what does Joey do? He hits a home run deep into left field, and with a bat flip heard round the world, he runs the bases and brings in three runs, giving the Jays a lead that ensured them the victory.

You don't need me to tell you that the crowd lost its mind. All the emotion and energy of this inning, the unexpected turns, the crazy outcomes, the never-before-seen plays, it all erupted in this moment.

I've rarely been a part of something where there was so much anticipation, so much pent-up energy, so much expectation. We were waiting – waiting to see what would happen, waiting to see how it would all play out. And doing so on the very edge of our seats.

It's this kind of anticipation, of expectation, that we need to hear in the psalmist's words in Psalm 63. This isn't a sweet and gentle prayer. There is fervour here.

"You, God, are my God, *earnestly* I seek you. I *thirst* for you, my *whole being* longs for you."

We don't know who this psalmist is – the credit above it indicates it could be David in the wilderness, on the run from Saul – it could also be a worshipper many years later using that imagery to describe her own wilderness journey, her own plight. But whoever it is, they need God. They describe having enemies who want to kill them, liars who slander and persecute them. Again, this could be literal or it could be hyperbolic. But whatever the case, the psalmist is in trouble. There is real danger here, real darkness, a very real sense that they are at the end of their rope and they need God. So they're on the edge of their seats. They're waiting for God to show up, eager for God to show up, desperate for God to show up.

Their eyes are peeled. Focused. Attentive. They are waiting. They are watching.

We often think of waiting as a passive thing, a frustrating thing. Most of the time we can't do anything while we wait, so we just sit back and watch the minutes slip by, distracting ourselves on our phones. When I first arrived in Kitchener I had to apply for all sorts of new paperwork – an Ontario Drivers License, an OHIP card, a new phone number. I spent a lot of time waiting. And there is nothing more wearisome than waiting in line at a Service Ontario office, wondering when it will finally be your turn. There's a sliver of hope when you first arrive that perhaps things will move along quickly enough. But after forty-five minutes reality sets in and you resign yourself to being there for the long haul.

But the kind of waiting our psalmist is doing isn't passive. There's no resignation here, no hopelessness here, no trying to fill the time. This waiting is active. The psalmist is leaned forward, eyes open, mind alert. She isn't waiting for God to do something *someday*. She's watching to see what God is going to do *now*. Waiting for something imminent.

This is a waiting built on trust. Trust that God *will* do something. Trust that God *is* doing something. Trust that God *is present*.

Why does the psalmist trust? Because past experience has shown God to be trustworthy. The psalmist talks about his experience in the temple, in the sanctuary. In ancient Israel the temple was the center of divine presence – this is where God's glory dwelt among the people. Specifically God's glory rested in a room called the Holy of Holies, on top of the ark of the covenant in between the wings of the two cherubim. It's perhaps this that the psalmist references when he says "Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings."

The psalm continues: "I cling to you; your right hand upholds me."

It's back in the book of Exodus that we first hear about the power of God's right hand. The Israelites have been enslaved to the Egyptians for generations, and after a long, drawn out ordeal, God finally leads them out of Egypt, parting the Red Sea so they can safely cross, before bringing the waters back together, destroying the pursuing Egyptian army. On the other side, free at last, Moses, the people's leader, leads the people in a song of praise to God. "Your right hand," they exclaim, "was majestic in power; your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy."

To refer to the right hand of God is to refer to the God who delivers, the God who rescues, who saves. Temple worship for the Israelites was filled with recitations of God's mighty acts in history. In worship the people recounted how God saved the Israelites from the Egyptians,

how God led them to the promised land, how God defeated their enemies, how God established Israel as a small but mighty nation.

In worship the psalmist would have heard the story of God leading the people across another body of water, across the Jordan, into the land of Canaan. In Joshua 3, which recounts that story, God tells the people, “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.”

Through worship, the people are told, are reminded, over and over again that God has been active in their story, is in fact *writing* their story, and their God is one who delivers and leads them when they are in a place of darkness, when they themselves do not know which way to go.

So the psalmist has seen –through worship in the temple – that God is present and active and good. The big story that God’s people are all a part of, the story leading up to this present moment in the psalmist’s life, is a story filled with action on God’s part.

And so, like a crowd at a baseball game, on the edge of their seats because they know that the batter at the plate has a history of homeruns and they’re eager to see if he’ll do it again, the psalmist knows that God has a history of showing up and delivering, and is on the edge of his seat to see – not *if* – but *how* God will do so again.

Our lives are filled with wildernesses – places of unfamiliarity and uncertainty - of some kind or another. Sometimes those wildernesses are exciting, a place of possibility and growth and discovery. We’ve moved to a new place, or started a new job, or begun a new

relationship, and we can't wait to see how it all unfolds, how we'll change and grow, what new opportunities await us.

And sometimes our wildernesses are places and seasons of trial, of fear, of worry.

We or someone we love gets sick, and the future suddenly looks very uncertain.

A loved one dies, and our whole world changes – we're faced with a new normal that feels anything but.

We go to school every day and keep our head down, trying to be invisible, trying to stay out of the way of the students who take great delight in making fun of us.

We're pivoting and adjusting how we do church and school and business constantly in the face of a pandemic.

We're wrestling with our identity, with our sexuality, with our body image, with the reality of aging, trying to feel at home in ourselves when everyone and everything around us tells us we should be different.

It's fair to say that on this side of the New Creation, we're all living in a wilderness. The world is not as it should be. There's heartache and pain and darkness all around us. One day Jesus will return and will make all things right. But until that day, we're waiting. Waiting in a wilderness.

But like the psalmist, our waiting is not passive. It is not a hopeless, resigned waiting, hunkered down in our homes trying to avoid the wilderness as much as possible while we wait for Jesus to come back.

We wait on the edge of our seats. Engaged. Alert. Paying attention.

Because we know that even as we wait for the New Creation, God is present in *this* creation, and is doing something *new* now.

We know that God is active in the wilderness.

Because God didn't stay in the temple. Didn't limit his presence to the Holy of Holies.

God stepped into the wilderness.

He joined us, became like us, became a human, walking around in all the dust and grime and uncertainty of life. The Message translation of the Bible says, in John 1, that in the person of Jesus, God "became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." And so we have seen "the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son."

And then God did something that nobody had never seen before. When the people were waiting, when his disciples were waiting, hiding, in an upper room, three days after Jesus had been killed by the very people he had come to save, Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus showed up in that upper room, to the great astonishment of his friends and followers.

And even when Jesus ascended back into heaven, even when he was no longer here in flesh and blood, he left his Spirit. God is yet here among us – God is yet here *within* each of us.

How can we trust that God will deliver us, will uphold us, will be active in our lives, even in the wilderness? Because our lives are part of a story, and that story is one of God being present, God delivering, God coming near, God listening, God comforting, God leading his people, God doing something new, again, and again, and again, and again. Because of the love of the Father. Through Jesus the Son. By the power of the Holy Spirit.

God steps into our wildernesses and comes near to us.

He comes to us as a doctor bringing news of a new and promising treatment option.

He comes to us as a friend showing up at our door with a warm dish and a bottle of wine.

He comes to us in the phone call from a grandchild who's just checking in.

He comes to us in the afternoon sunshine streaming through our windows on a cold winter's day.

He comes to us through the person in whom we confide about our struggles and questions and who looks us in the eye and says, "Yeah, me too."

He comes to us in every moment of goodness and beauty and truth and joy that comes our way. Those things may not seem like much in the face of our wilderness. The pastor and theologian Tish Harrison Warren says this:

"Beauty doesn't take away the pain of suffering or vulnerability. It's not like cicada song or good coffee make it hurt any less to lose a spouse or a friendship, or even just to have a hard day. But in the times when we think anguish and dimness are all there is in the world, that nothing is lovely or solid, beauty is a reminder that there is more to our stories than sin, pain, and death. There is eternal brilliance. It's not quite enough to resolve our questions or tie anything up in a nice metaphysical bow, but sometimes it is enough to get us through the next hour. And in enduring a mystery, we need just enough light to take one more step."

We need to see just enough of the ark of the covenant in the Jordan river, just enough of the presence of God, just enough of the face of Jesus, to take one more step.

And so the life of a follower of Jesus is a life of eager anticipation. Of sitting on the edge of our seats, of paying attention, of looking around us, expecting to see Jesus. Expecting God to do something new. Part of our discipleship then, part of what it means to be a follower, is to train ourselves to better see Jesus.

Tish Harrison Warren continues: “Christian discipleship is a lifetime of training in how to pay attention to the right things, to notice God’s work in our lives and in the world. Through long practice, we unfix our gaze from distractions and fears in order to attend to that which God attends. We learn to watch. Silence, stillness, and attentiveness are in short supply in our increasingly loud, digitized, and frenetic world...[but] the church’s task is to learn to keep our eyes peeled for how God is at work. Through prayer, through gathered worship, through the Scriptures and sacraments, we train our eyes to notice the light in the darkness.”

Last week I said that the first step of the adventure is to simply take hold of the gifts which Christ gives us, that equip us for the journey. This is one way we do so. Through these means by which we train ourselves to see God at work around us. Jesus reveals himself to us in his Word, through prayer, through silence, through worship, as we re-tell and re-live the Story of the God who shows up.

And as we come to know him more and more, to know what he looks like – what his grace and mercy and beauty and truth and justice and joy look like – we’ll recognize him more and more in the rest of our lives, wherever we see his grace and mercy and beauty and truth and justice and joy, at work in the world in quiet, steady ways, or in game-stopping, astonishing, surprising ways.

“Christians,” says Harrison Warren, “take up watching as a practice – a task even. We stay on the lookout for grace.”

We stay on the lookout for grace, so we can tell the story of the God who shows up, to fellow Christians, to unbelievers, to ourselves.

“Do you remember where you were when God did a new thing?”

Would you pray with me?