

CREATED FOR FAITH



Scripture:

Isaiah 55:3-9

³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. ⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Psalm 63:1-8

¹O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ²So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

⁵My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips ⁶when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. ⁸My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



This doesn't sound like someone who is deeply suffering, but David was deeply suffering. He was 'on the lam,' running from his son, Absalom, who was hell-bent on killing his father.

Psalm 63 is known as one of the most beautiful Psalms written by King David. It is

very heartfelt and visceral. Yet it was written in very desperate circumstances. When David wrote and probably sang this Psalm, he was in the wilderness of Judah fleeing from his son who was determined to take over his kingdom. (Remember when the prophet Nathan figured out that David ordered Uriah

to be killed in battle? David had impregnated Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, while Uriah was defending Jerusalem as a soldier in David's army).

THE PROPHET NATHAN'S PREDICTION

The prophet Nathan predicted (on behalf of God): "Now, therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah to be your own" (2 Samuel 12:10). That prediction came true. David lost three of his sons and before Absalom died in a battle with his father's army, he had previously killed one of his half-brothers for raping his sister, Tamar.

With all this turmoil and suffering happening in his life, David still wrote and sang Psalms to God. He never stopped singing while he was in the wilderness. Even though he was surrounded by desert, and probably physically very depressed and thirsty, he had faith and lifted his hands to God.

SUFFERING CAN MAKE US FEEL CLOSER TO GOD

What is it about the human spirit that it seems to take deep suffering for us to feel closer to God than during the times of joy? I think we tend to take credit for our times of joy over the good things that happen to us. But when we are knocked down and hit bottom with nowhere else to turn, our hearts turn to God for comfort or we blame God.

EXPLORING THE GOD IDEA

(Commercial break!) On the first Thursdays of each month you are invited to meet with a small group of us in the Rose room at 10:30am to share your thoughts about 'Exploring the God Idea.' Today's topic has come up about how and why people continue to feel connected to God despite the things they go through, like fires, and floods, the death of children, and other huge hardships.

The conversations are fascinating as we imagine how God is with us all the time, by way of quantum physics, cosmic particles, or in our minds that are eternal beyond our consciousness, or in the fairy dust in the universe, as J.M. Barrie believed. See the photo on page one.

If you would like to imagine with us how God's amazing power connects to us, among other topics, you might want to join us on the first Thursdays to share your thoughts or listen to others share their experiences of faith. I find our discussions very inspirational.

WE YEARN FOR GOD

This Psalm for today addresses the deep yearning we all have for God.

David says his soul thirsts for God. In an earlier psalm David says in Psalm 42, "As the deer pants for water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for God, the living God."

Reverend Samuel Wells says that we often think of practical Christianity as striving to meet various kinds of needs: for the starving, food; for the thirsty, water; for the naked, clothing; for the sick, medicine. All of which is good and right and true. But like U2 and the Rolling Stones, people want and need something deeper than that. "Almost always, what they want is something no one person can give them." We yearn for God.

**When I was a young adult just beginning to get seriously involved in Bible studies to help me understand my faith, I remember someone said this that really resonated:
"Faith in God fills that empty vessel we all carry inside us."**

I know from working with people addicted to drugs and other vices that if people don't fill that emptiness in the soul

with faith in God, they may try to fill it with other things that ultimately disappoint and sometimes destroy them, like drugs, materialism, fame, and striving for fortune and notoriety.

So, if we are created with this empty vessel inside, this void that yearns to be filled, this thirst for faith that needs to be satisfied, then why do some very thoughtful people remain atheists? They look to be healthy and mentally okay, at least from the outside. Why do some people not seek faith in God or faith in something? Those who do not have faith are the smaller percentage of people in the world.

IT IS NATURAL TO BELIEVE IN THE SUPERNATURAL

It is biologically natural to believe in the supernatural. Some neurologists have studied the brain and believe parts of the limbic system in the brain are hard-wired for faith. CT scans show the hypothalamus, amygdala, and hippocampus seem to light up and expand during prayer.

Consider how many people worldwide belong to a religion: nearly six billion, or eighty-four percent of the global population, and these figures are expected to rise in the coming decades. In the U.S., surveys show ninety percent of adults believe in some higher power, spiritual force or God with a capital G. But traditional church attendance is becoming less common. In 2018 Gallup published statistics that showed weekly church attendance between 2008 and 2018 went from forty-two per cent to thirty-eight per cent, but those who attend just once a month stayed the same and those who attend rarely went up. They found some people are choosing to practice their faith by hiking in nature, walking labyrinths, and volunteering for service projects rather than attending worship.

There are also studies linking DNA to a belief in a higher power. A certain genotype has been identified and linked to the ability to

have a sense of self-transcendence and spiritual belief. In the beginning, God created us for faith. If we are made in the image of God, then it is no surprise that we were made to have faith.

Even atheists have faith and supernatural leanings. They have faith in atheism. They believe in their way of thinking as the way to live their lives. Often something has happened to them that made them blame God or blame Christianity in general for their disappointments in life. Maybe they were influenced by parents or priests who role modeled hypocrisy in religion. Anger or pride are often underlying factors inspiring atheism.

ATHEISTS FINDING FAITH IN GOD

Yet, there are many stories of atheists finding faith in God over time. Francis Collins found faith in God in medical school even though he grew up in a family of atheists. Recently I read a new testimony from a very successful young history professor from Australia. (Fifty-two per cent identify as Christian in Australia compared to seventy per cent in the U.S.)

Sarah Irving-Stonebraker wasn't seeking to fill an empty vessel in her soul. But when she saw the self-less work of Christians in her community her heart melted towards God.

She tells the story this way: "One afternoon, I noticed that my usual desk in the college library was in front of the Theology section. With an awkward but humble reluctance, I opened a book of sermons by the theologian Paul Tillich. As I read, I was struck at how intellectually compelling, complex, and profound the gospel was. I was attracted, but I wasn't convinced.

“Then in the summer of 2008, I began a new job as an Assistant Professor doing research that examined the relationship between the history of science, Christianity, and political thought. With the freedom of being an outsider to American culture, I was able to see active Christianity in people who lived their lives guided by the gospel of Jesus: feeding the homeless every week, running community centers, and housing and advocating for migrant farm workers.”

This all had a deep impact on Sarah’s heart.

One Sunday before her twenty-eighth birthday, she walked into a church for the first time earnestly seeking God. She said, “Before long I found myself overwhelmed. At last I was fully known and seen and unconditionally loved. Perhaps I had a sense of relief from no longer running from God. Soon after, a friend gave her C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* book.

She started a rigorous diet of theology, reading the Bible and exploring the thoughts of theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr.

**Sarah said she discovered:
“God wants us to wrestle with Him;
to struggle through doubt
and faith, sorrow and hope.
Moreover, God wants broken
people, not self-righteous ones.”**

And Sarah was surprised to find that Christianity was radical. The love of God was unlike anything she had expected. She said, “God suffered punishment in our place because of a radical love. This sacrificial love is utterly opposed to the individualism, consumerism, exploitation, and objectification in our U.S. culture.”

Sarah added: “Just as radical was the new creation which Christ began to initiate. To live as a Christian is a call to be part of this new, radical, creation. I am not passively awaiting a place in the clouds. I am redeemed by Christ, so now I have work to do. With God’s grace, I’ve been elected to serve – in whatever way God sees fit – to build up His Kingdom. We have a sure hope that God is transforming this broken, unjust world, into Christ’s Kingdom, the New Creation.”

Something to ponder this Lent: If we are created for faith, the world is also. May it be so. Amen

Sarah Irving-Stonebraker is a Senior Lecturer (with tenure) in Modern European History at Western Sydney University in Australia.

Samuel Wells quote from: The hunger that no meal satisfies, Isaiah 55 gives voice to the longing we can't quite name. by Samuel Wells February 1, 2018,

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/hunger-no-meal-satisfies>)

Benediction:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forevermore. Amen



**The Rev. Dr. Cindy Alloway
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405**