

“Blessings in Threshold Moments”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Part of the “Blessings” Worship Series
Edina Morningside Community Church; August 13, 2017

Psalm 42:1-8

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

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. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

In C.S. Lewis’s children’s classic *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Edmund is one of four children who hide in a closet, then discover that it’s a secret passage to a mythical world. The other three children fall in company with talking animals allied with Aslan, a powerful lion described by Mrs. Beaver as not safe, but good. Edmund, a mean, greedy and selfish boy who goes through the wardrobe by himself, is recruited by the evil White Witch to betray his friends so that he can have all the Turkish delight candy he wants. Eventually, his deceit is uncovered, he realizes all the wrong choices he has made, and he is rescued by the forces of good. However, then he must come face to face with Aslan, the fierce lion who knows how Edmund’s betrayal endangered everyone. Edmund finds himself at a threshold moment between his past nastiness and whatever waits on the other side of this fearsome encounter.

C.S. Lewis doesn’t tell us what that conversation was like, but we have experiences enough to imagine it. We’ve been at such threshold moments before, when we must decide to change course and go in a new direction even though the consequences and success of the change are unknown. Such decision points don’t always involve confession and penitence, but threshold moments are what we call those times at the start of something new. They are filled with—in the imagery of earth science—maximum *potential* energy that will be converted to *kinetic* energy once motion starts. Threshold moments are like when you’ve made it past the wedding and honeymoon, and now return home to the ordinariness of life together. Like stepping out the door on your first day of school, or watching your last child walk across the graduation stage. Like changing directions mid-career and going back to school again. Like retirement closing the chapter on decades of life-defining work, and turning the page to who knows what next. Like any time when the past is past but the future is not yet clear, and even the present may feel like a miasma of uncertainty. Threshold moments are not always easy or good—sometimes they can be dreadful. Like when an elderly parent moves for what feels like the final time, and life begins to resemble a slow running out of the clock. Or when a diagnosis bifurcates life into before and after, but the way to live afterward is highly unclear.

Psalm 42 comes to us from such a painful emotional place. The writer is far from Jerusalem, and the temple there that symbolizes God’s presence. The past proximity to God’s throne is painfully, longingly remembered: “how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.” But now, “my soul *longs* for you, O God. My soul *thirsts* for God, for the living God.” And the future is still hidden: “When shall I come and behold the face of God?” The writer is in a threshold moment: looking back mournfully, uncertain of what’s to come, and filled with fear.

I was in a conversation recently about all the change that is going on right now at church. We successfully completed our capital campaign last spring, but we've not begun the construction that will disrupt our building for probably the next several years. In the last twelve months, you've welcomed two staff members as new leaders, said farewell to others due to retirement or resignation, and are not yet settled on what the next staff team will look like. We are about to begin a new year of programming with my first confirmation class here, new models for faith formation, and a new structure of Second Hour opportunities each week after worship. We're working on the constitution and bylaws for a new governance model, but it won't be finished or ratified for another few months. Edina Morningside Church is in a "threshold moment" right now, and I'd be lying if I denied anxiety over how we'll navigate all these changes. There are those who lament what has passed away, others worried about what's to come, and most of us feeling both the opportunities and challenges in all of it.

As if our personal and congregational experiences were not enough, we're also in threshold moments as a community and a nation. Morningside is experiencing a generational transfer of housing between those who have lived here for decades but now must move to senior living, and those working professionals with young families who want larger homes and more than a half-day preschool. As a country, we're on the verge of having no ethnicity make up the majority any more, but expressions of White supremacy continue to inflame our cities and kill our people. We are a multi-faith, multi-racial nation, but travel bans and immigration quotas try to preserve the tattered vestiges of Whites-Only, Christians-Only. We vacillate between [what columnist David Brooks called](#) our two possible futures: "America as a new Rome, a mighty fortress in a dangerous world", or "America as a new Athens, a creative crossroads leading an open and fundamentally harmonious world." We live amid an unsettling churn in all these threshold moments, and we might understandably be daunted by the choices that are before us now.

Each week, this community gathers to seek wisdom from sacred scripture, from our traditions, and from each other as living, breathing images of God. We explore the values that shape our decisions in these threshold moments, inspiring one another to act with faith and not fear, to confess our complicity in sin and sing the vision of another way, to steward resources with an equal mix of care and boldness, to welcome the stranger and reconcile with the enemy, and to trust the God who is still speaking and unveiling truth. We try to inhabit the ways of Spirit-filled living that lead to what Christ called the Kingdom of God, and will continue doing so to our best ability in all the years to come. For today, as we recognize all these threshold moments we are in, the greatest character trait we must seek and show is courage. Courage to have risky conversations with someone different, courage to overcome anxiety in the face of massive change, and sometimes just the courage to get out of bed and face another day's commitments.

Poet Adrienne Rich evokes the language of migration to describe such courage. She writes this to all "prospective immigrants" who are at the threshold:

*Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.*

*If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.*

*Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen.*

*If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily*

*to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely*

*but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?*

*The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.*

[Adrienne Rich tells Bill Moyers](#) that in this poem she is talking about “the choice that we can make, to move deeper into things, or simply to live worthily, maintain your attitudes, hold your position, even die bravely, but not to see what might have been seen. Not to grasp what might have been grasped. And that is a choice, for us all, whether in poetry or in life.”

Will we, like Edmund in the Chronicles of Narnia, face our past even though the encounter with truth is frightening? Can we make the courageous choice to invest in community, set aside our certainties and open to something new? Do we possess the courage of immigrants, to leave behind what is known but unsatisfying in favor of an uncertain future with its risks and rewards? Will we step over the edge of all that is before us as a people and a country, crossing the threshold to face together whatever is new or frightening there?

We overhear a bit of encouraging self-talk at the end of Psalm 42’s opening lament. After longing for God and grieving what has passed away, the psalmist writes: “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”. *There* is the courage of faith, to believe in God and take heart even while facing despair. Though the best way forward is not always crystal clear—in our lives, for this building, in the neighborhood or as a country—our hope in God calls us to trust the future more than we fear it. We do not make these journeys alone, but in the shepherding care of Emmanuel, God-with-us. Whatever else comes, whether from crossing the threshold or still shying back, we shall again join the Psalmist to praise our help and our God. Amen.