



July 22, 2018

## God Loves Us No Matter What

Pastor Vern Christopherson

### PSALM 63:1-8NRSV

<sup>1</sup>O 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.

<sup>2</sup>So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

<sup>3</sup>Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

<sup>4</sup>So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

<sup>5</sup>My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

<sup>6</sup>when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

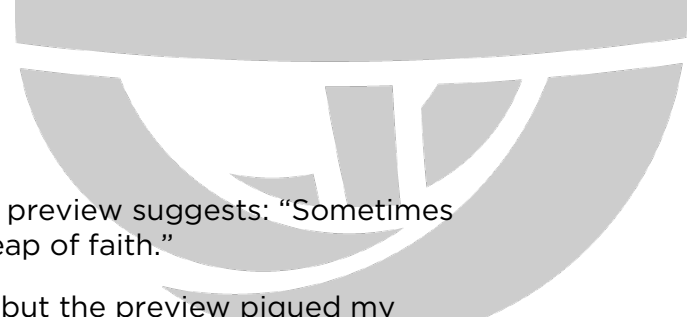
<sup>7</sup>for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

<sup>8</sup>My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

This past week I saw a preview of a new TV show this fall. It's called "God Friended Me." It's about a young man named Miles Finer. He lives in New York City where - according to the trailer - 8.6 million people are searching for meaning and answers. Miles bills himself as a millennial prophet, someone who speaks truth to the meaning and answers people are seeking. He makes podcasts to get his message out. At the heart of what he says is this: "There is no proof of God anywhere in the universe, and that's okay."

Miles' dad is a preacher, but somewhere along the way Miles became convinced that God didn't exist. It had a lot to do with the death of his mother when he was 8-years-old. She'd been diagnosed with breast cancer. Miles prayed for a miracle, and according to him, he got one. But tragically his mom was killed in a car accident on the way home from the hospital.

Fast forward to today. Miles thinks he has things figured out, at least as far as God is concerned. Then out of the blue he gets a friend-request from God on Facebook. Events are set in motion that he can't explain. He bumps into a stranger on the street and then later saves the stranger from an oncoming train.



He's still incredulous, but he begins to wonder. The preview suggests: "Sometimes life's greatest mysteries can be solved only with a leap of faith."

Now, I don't know if this TV show will be any good, but the preview piqued my interest. I heard an underlying theme that goes something like this: *There is a God. God has a plan for our lives. And God has a way of showing up for us, sometimes when we least expect it.* That theme works for me.

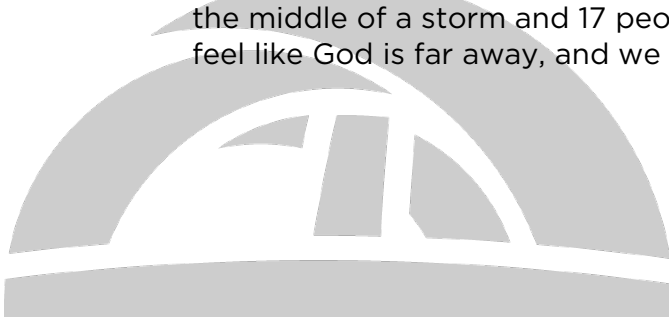
In Psalm 63 we hear the prayers of a desperate person who sounds almost as far away from God as Miles Finer, at least at the beginning. "O God," he cries out, "my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." The psalmist isn't doubting God's existence, but he's speaking from a time of deep spiritual dryness and weariness. "God, are you there? You seem far away. Don't you care about me?" I suspect we've all asked these questions at one time or another. We've wondered if God is out there, and if so, when and where will God show up for us?

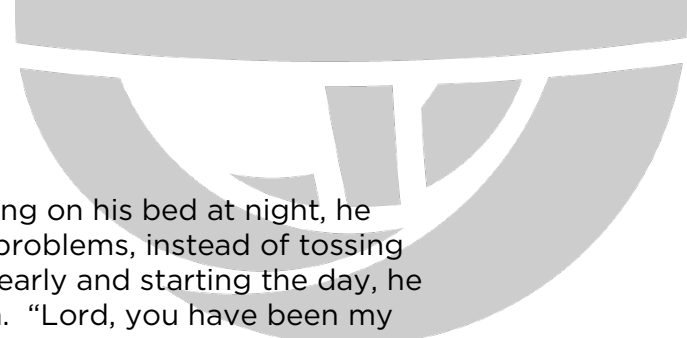
Notice what the psalmist says next: "'So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.'" In so many words, the psalmist is telling us that he's still going to worship, even though his spirit is all but dried up. This is a key point. I mean, what often happens when we feel dried up? We stay home. We don't engage in worship. We don't join with others. We turn inward, and hope that things will eventually work out. But that's not the way of the psalmist, who instead joins in whether he feels like it or not.

Next comes an affirmation of trust. "Lord, because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live." When you think about it, this is a remarkable vow, whether it's made in the ancient world or today. Here we are surrounded by the Mayo Clinic. People come from all over the world. Why are they here? For health, and wellness, and a good long life. And the vast majority of those who come probably want to live as long as possible, right?

The psalmist turns this thinking upside down: "God, your steadfast love is better than life itself. If I don't have that love," he's claiming, "then I don't have anything." The Hebrew word for "steadfast love" is *hesed*. It's much like *agape* love in the New Testament. It's a love that comes from God and is freely given. It's the highest and best gift possible. Jim Limburg says: "Much like John 3:16, it's the sort of love that keeps on loving us no matter what." Here's the truth: whether or not we always *feel* that love; and whether or not we always *feel* very lovable; and whether we live to be 60, 70, or 100 years old, that love is what makes life worthwhile. We are God's idea of some really great children. And that is never going to change.

God's promise of steadfast love is more important than ever, maybe because hope seems to be in such short supply these days. Depression. Dementia. Cancer. A loved one dies in a car accident on the way home from the hospital. A volcano erupts in Hawaii and hundreds of homes are destroyed. A Duck Boat capsizes in the middle of a storm and 17 people drown. Look around. It doesn't take long to feel like God is far away, and we don't have a prayer in the world.





Notice what the psalmist does about that. While lying on his bed at night, he remembers the past. But instead of fixating on his problems, instead of tossing and turning for hours on end, instead of getting up early and starting the day, he meditates on the good things God has done for him. “Lord, you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.” This is really quite amazing. The psalmist focuses on God’s help and strength, even when most of the evidence points to the contrary.

I was listening to Fresh Air on MPR on Friday night. Professor Matthew Walker was talking about sleep. Last year Walker came out with a book entitled *Why We Sleep*. During Friday’s interview he discussed our lack of sleep as a society. It’s an epidemic. And it comes with any number of consequences. Walker had a few suggestions for those of us want to get more of it. One of them you may have heard before: If you wake up in the middle of the night, it’s best to get out of bed, move to a chair, and find something to read until your body is tired again. Another suggestion from Walker that you maybe haven’t heard. It comes out of research on the positive effects of meditation. Instead of getting out of bed, you can stay under the covers and focus your mind on something encouraging and life-giving. Perhaps something like psalmist says: “Lord, you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.”

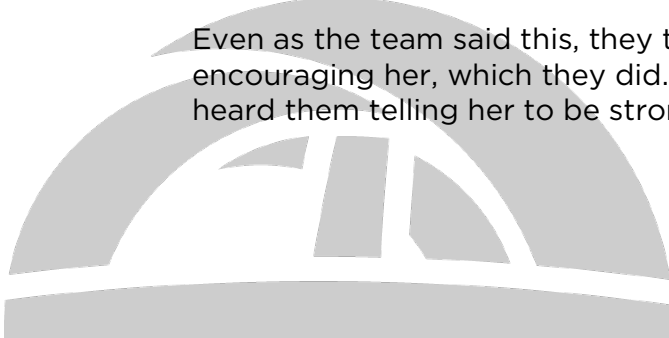
As I’ve shared before, I’m not a particularly good sleeper. And I haven’t done a lot of meditating in my life. But I’m going to give this a try. I want to let go of the nagging problems and instead embrace the steadfast love of God.

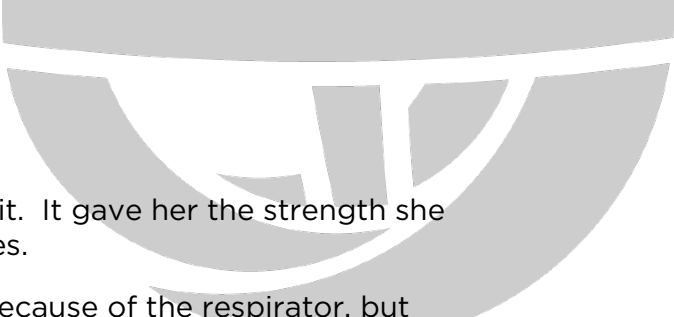
Our psalm is a great reminder that God comes to us is in a variety of ways. Whether we’re worshipping in the temple in the morning or mediating on our bed in the middle of the night, God shows up and life feels different than before. There’s an excellent book called *Sacred Pathways* by Gary Thomas. We plan to read it during Lent. It details nine different ways that we might experience God in our lives, in everything from traditional worship, to meditation, to our work as caregivers, to going for a walk in the woods. What I really like about the book is that it’s not one-size-fits-all. What works for one doesn’t necessarily work for another. The main thing is to open ourselves to the possibility that God can, and will, show up for us.

Rosie Monson of Zumbro recently experienced God’s presence in her life. It came in the middle of a health crisis. One day in early May, Rosie was having trouble breathing. Her husband Duane took her to the emergency room. Doctors weren’t able to pinpoint the exact problem, but they kept a close eye on her. After a week or so, and after much insistence from Rosie, they sent her home.

A few days later, Rosie was back in the ER. Her situation had deteriorated. They immediately put her in ICU. She was placed in a medically-induced coma. Before long, the care team was telling Duane and the family that they better prepare for the worst.

Even as the team said this, they told the family to keep talking to Rosie, to keep encouraging her, which they did. As Rosie described it later, over and over she heard them telling her to be strong and to keep fighting. She heard them saying





“we love you.” Rosie could make out every word of it. It gave her the strength she needed. She so wanted to get back to her loved ones.

After three days, Rosie woke up. She couldn’t talk because of the respirator, but she gave her family a thumbs up. Later she learned that she had a whole litany of problems: a severe case of pneumonia, and A-fib, and congestive heart failure, and kidneys that were shutting down. She spent much of the next six week in rehabilitation. She had a wonderful team of people who were caring for her. She made some great friends who were her cheerleaders. In all these things and more, Rosie felt God’s presence. Her faith grew stronger. She said: “I was given a second chance at life. I had an overwhelming sense that my work on earth was not yet done.”

Rosie put these events together in a story for me. Then she added a prayer: “Heavenly Father, I don’t have words enough to thank you. I don’t feel I deserve what you’ve given me, but for some reason, you must have plans for me.” Then Rosie added a vow that sounds like it right out of Psalm 63: “I will praise you until the day when you finally call me home.”

Whether for Rosie Monson or the psalmist of old, sometimes we find ourselves in a dry and weary place. Sometimes our backs are to the wall and we have little choice but to cry out: “God, are you there? You seem far away. Don’t you care about me?”

The fact of the matter is, there is no hard and fast proof of God anywhere in the universe. Miles Finer is right about that. But that’s not necessarily the last word. As people of faith, we keep our eyes and ears open. And who knows, we may get hints along the way. God may show up at just the right time and give us the reminder that God’s steadfast love is better than life. That’s the last word for us. Indeed, we are God’s idea of some really great children, and God is going to love us no matter what. Amen

