

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Lent 3C, Psalm 63:1-8 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

In our collect this morning, we prayed “Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul.” Like all of our prayers, it's beautiful; but, can also lead to a spiritually unhelpful division of body and soul.

Take our psalm today, for example. My soul thirsts for you, we hear in the prayer book translation of psalm 63. The King James version uses soul, too. English speakers have long translated the Hebrew word *nefesh* as soul, but it isn't quite right, as anyone who has studied Hebrew knows. “Soul” and the separation of soul and body are Greek ideas, not Hebrew ones. As Christians, we are influenced by such Greek thought. But sometimes it can be unhelpful, and perhaps especially in Lent.

Nefesh literally means neck or throat. Robert Alter translates the same line this way: “My throat thirsts for you.”¹ My throat thirsts for you. I can't speak for you, but for me, that's more vivid. I know what my throat feels like when it's thirsty. I especially know this as dry throat is a side effect of many medications I take. Hearing “my throat thirsts for you” evokes a sensation I recognize, vs. my soul thirsts for you. “My soul thirsts for you” is vague. More...spiritual.

Sometimes such so-called spiritual language like soul can let us off the hook, can keep us from engaging with God and Jesus in the way that we are called to. This Lent, many of us, like me, are choosing not to physically fast from certain things, like dessert or bread or meat. I feel like the pandemic has already called me to physically fast from many things and I'm sick of that. So this year I am trying to savor life. *But*. I find that this can be challenging because it's more of a concept than something concrete and physical like not putting chocolate into my mouth. I have to endeavor to truly, physically savor, like walking outside in the dark and savoring the sight of a moon partly obscured by clouds. Closing my computer and savoring the food I'm consuming even if my husband isn't at the table with me.

We need to take real, bodily actions in Lent because we worship a real, bodily savior whose real body was literally resurrected. The empty tomb was not the end. Jesus appeared to his disciples with real wounds that they could really touch, and he ate in front of them.

What real, bodily actions are you taking to prepare for Easter? Being here and worshipping is one such action, of course, because as Episcopalians we pray with all of our senses, tasting the body and blood of Christ. This isn't a show where you watch me: this is a worship service where we pray together and move around as we are able.

Psalm 63 is about desire and longing. So often desire and longing get us in trouble. Dana talked about that in the Ten Best Ways to Live at our Lenten program Wednesday night: “do not want what others have.” As she also said, these ten best ways are not the ten *easy* ways to live. These are hard. Not wanting what others have is hard. This can be especially hard when we do give up something physical for Lent, like sugar. If I gave up chocolate for Lent and see you eating a

¹ Alter, Robert, translator and commentator. *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3, The Writings*, Ketuvim. New York: Norton, 2019, 154.

Milano cookie at coffee hour, I'm going to want what you have. Fortunately, remember, Sundays don't count for Lenten disciplines. They are Sundays *in* Lent, not Sundays *of* Lent. Just check your bulletin and eat the cookie.

On Ash Wednesday we repented of our intemperate love of worldly good and comforts. So many of the petitions in that litany resonate with me, but that one works especially well when thinking of our desires during Lent. Do any of your worldly goods and comforts get in the way of your relationship with God? Clearly, if you are here today, you resisted the temptation to stay in your soft bed or to eat a stack of Belgian waffles instead of coming to church; but there are so many worldly goods and comforts that we love. Or that other have that we want.

Meditating on psalms like this and focusing our attention on God can help us to reorient our desires, and meditating means looking at more than one translation, which is easy to do online through free websites like biblegateway.com. There are also translations you won't find there, like Sarah Ruden's translation of the Gospels or Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible, which I already talked about. Our translation this morning says that the psalmist's flesh faints for God, which sounds really weird to me, honestly, as I associate fainting with low blood pressure that causes me to collapse. I have trouble connecting that to a longing for God. But Robert Alter's version says my flesh yearns for you.

Yearning. Do you yearn for God? Does your throat thirst for God? Maybe that doesn't resonate, but do you yearn for a release from pain? Do you yearn for your loved ones to thrive free from pain? Do you want justice? Longing for such things is longing for God. This Lent, spend some time thinking about what you want, and how your desires can align with God's desires for you and for the world.