

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, June 19, 2016)

Note: The Sunday, July 19th service was a special time of mourning and celebrating the lives lost during the tragic massacre at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida during the early morning hours of Sunday, June 12, 2016. Our service was created around our lectionary Psalms 42 and 43, and included a variety of readings along with music and the brief reflections by Pastor Donald. After Pastor Donald's reflections printed below, you will find the words to the hymn, "To a Place of Celebration" by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette sung at the conclusion of the main part of the worship service.

Texts:

Psalm 42 (*The Voice*)

My soul *is dry and* thirsts for You, True God,
as a deer thirsts for water.

I long for the True God who lives.

When can I stand before Him *and feel His comfort?*

Right now I'm overwhelmed by my sorrow and pain;

I can't stop feasting on my tears.

People crowd around me and say,

"Where is your True God *whom you claim will save?*"

With a broken heart,

I remember times before

When I was with Your people. *Those were better days.*

I used to lead them *happily* into the True God's house,

Singing with joy, shouting thanksgivings with *abandon,*

joining the congregation in the celebration.

Why am I so overwrought?

Why am I so disturbed?

Why can't I just hope in God?

Despite all my emotions, I will *believe and* praise the One
who saves me *and is my life.*

My God, my soul is so traumatized;

the only help is remembering You *wherever I may be;*

From the land of the Jordan to Hermon's high place

to Mount Mizar.

In the roar of Your waterfalls,

ancient depths surge, calling out to the deep.

All Your waves break over me;

am I drowning?

Yet in the light of day, the Eternal shows me His love.

When night settles in *and all is dark*, He keeps me company—

His *soothing* song, a prayerful melody to the True God of my life.

Even still, I will say to the True God, my rock *and strength*:

“Why have You forgotten me?

Why must I live my life so depressed, crying endlessly

while my enemies have the upper hand?”

My enemies taunt me.

They shatter my soul the way a sword shatters a man’s bones.

They keep taunting all the day long,

“Where is He, your True God?”

Why am I so overwrought,

Why am I so disturbed?

Why can’t I just hope in God?

Despite all my emotions, I will *believe and* praise the One

who saves me, my God.

Psalm 43 (*The Message*)

Clear my name, God; stick up for me
against these loveless, immoral people.

Get me out of here, away
from these lying degenerates.

I counted on you, God.

Why did you walk out on me?

Why am I pacing the floor, wringing my hands
over these outrageous people?

Give me your lantern and compass,
give me a map,

So I can find my way to the sacred mountain,
to the place of your presence,

To enter the place of worship,
meet my exuberant God,

Sing my thanks with a harp,
magnificent God, my God.

Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul?

Why are you crying the blues?

Fix my eyes on God—

soon I’ll be praising again.

God puts a smile on my face.

God is my God.

As I read through the lectionary passages from the scriptures for today, I was drawn, as I often am in times like these, to the words of the Psalms – those great songs of the Spirit that speak so deeply to so much of what we must deal with in this earthly existence.

Today's psalms were particularly poignant and apt for this week of unbelievable grief as we witnessed the carnage of so many beautiful young lives being snuffed out in such a senseless and brutal act, perhaps the result of some internalized hatred making itself externalized through the taking of lives and the insanity of violence.

How I yearned with the psalmist as he wrote, "my soul longs for you, O God" and "My tears have been my food day and night." Who else but God can know the depth of our grief and speak to us of hope in the seemingly hopeless landscape of a world so beset with violence and the loud voices of those who would promote hatred over love and exchange evil for good?

For these are the times when we face, as Joan Stott describes it in her personal meditation on these psalms, "the eternal question of balance in one's life and faith. How do we balance hope and despair; faith in God and an anxious, paralyzing "wilderness" experience; the past and the present situation; and trust in our faithful God and the day-to-day realities of living in a world that very largely ignores God and the worship of God."

Here in these psalms we can identify with the one who cries desperately through the day and through the night, who is downcast and disquieted, yet finds a peace and a renewed hope when remembering the glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving as she praised God and kept the festival of God as we do here every Sunday.

Gladness and optimism live right next door to sadness and despair when we remember God's steadfast love and gaze at what God has created and hear the thunder roll and watch the lightning crack. Going to God with all that we are, whether downcast or filled with exceeding joy, we can discover the light and the truth sent out by the One who created us and will never forsake us.

As you listen to these two psalms today, lifted up in both word and song, I encourage you to let whatever arises for you in your spirit to come forward and be blessed.

*We come today to worship the God of unfailing love. We come, because our hearts are breaking over those whose lives have been cut down, over painful memories of lost opportunities, of rushed and foolish decision making; and of failure.

We come to praise the God of truth and light. We come, because we are anxious about the way our leaders are acting—and we long for a time under God's guidance of true wisdom and generosity.

We come to honor and revere the God of hope and the source of all joy—OUR God who hears and answers our aching cries of fear.

We come, because we yearn for God's presence and help in these troubled times, as we know that there is no other source of security or unfailing love.

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To a Place of Celebration

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To a place of celebration filled with laughter, dancing, joy,
Came such violent devastation— one man's efforts to destroy.
God, we grieve for loved ones taken; we lament, "What can we do?"
Now, we're feeling lost and shaken; heal our nation! Make us new!

Weapons kill— and so does silence; hear our prayer as we confess:
We have given in to violence, we have bowed to hopelessness.
God, we've lost our sense of vision of a world where there will be
Plowshares made from violent weapons, justice in society.

Give our leaders strength for action, give them minds to mend our flaws,
Give them courage and compassion, and the will to change our laws.
May we work for legislation that will curb guns' awful toll.
God, renew our dedication to a world that's just and whole.

Give us love to change our vision; give us love to cast out fear.
Give us love to speak with wisdom— love to work for justice here.
Give us love to welcome difference— love no hatred can destroy.
Only love can stop the violence; only love will bring back joy.

Biblical References: Isaiah 4:2; 1 John 4:18; James 3:1-12; Micah 6:8;
Matthew 25:35

Tune: Thomas John Williams, 1890. Alternative Tune: BEACH SPRING

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