

Soul Reset: 2. Tormented Soul
Psalm 42; Luke 10:38-42
January 12, 2020
Pastor Steve Richards

Has your tank ever been empty? You knew you were running low on fuel. The gas gauge was on empty. The low fuel light came on, but for how long, you couldn't remember. You thought there was enough to get you where you needed to go. And you didn't have time to stop. Until it happened. Suddenly your tank was empty and it was impossible to keep moving when the tank was empty. I remember years ago. We were living in another community, and I had an important meeting (aren't they all?) but I realized I'd left the papers that I need at home. We lived a few miles away, and I had just enough time to drive home, get the folder, and return. But half way home, the car rolled to a stop. There was no fuel remaining. I didn't have a phone. So I got out of the car to walk home where I knew I had a gas can. But when I got home the gas can was empty, which meant walking to a gas station and then walking back to my car. And I learned something that day about gas cans. If the gas can doesn't have a long neck you won't be able to pour the gas into the tank. So I found a cup in the trunk that I could shape into a funnel. But the cup was made of Styrofoam – and do you know what gas does to Styrofoam? I learned that day. My funnel disintegrated and I got more gas on me than in the tank – but just enough that I could start the car and get home. I was frustrated and angry – angry with me, but I was also angry with God. How could you? All I needed was enough gas in the tank to drive another mile. But I was empty.

This morning, I'm not just talking about the gas tank on my car. I'm talking about that inner tank that we all have. The tank that gives us the energy and the motivation to keep going. Many of us have tried to live our lives on empty – as I said last week – overcommitted, overscheduled, and under praying. And the forward motion of our lives keeps expecting demands from us. Last week, I listened to one person who said: "I worry that something bad is going to happen to my family or myself. I worry about my kids if something happens to me and that worry leads me to think every cough, sore muscle and headache is the cancer that is going to kill me. And my obsession with bad things makes me irritable. I yell at my kids. I miss moments with my family and friends because my mind won't stop racing. I don't feel out of control, but I'm so, so tired." And I think many of us get to that place where we are so tired and worn out.

Stress is part of living, and it's not necessarily a bad thing. If we have no stress, we're not doing anything. But it is a demand on our mental, physical, and spiritual strength. Dr. Paul Rosch of the American Institute of Stress says: *"Increased stress increases productivity, but only up to a point. After that point things deteriorate rapidly. And that level of stress differs for each of us."* Things that stress me out don't necessarily stress you out and vice versa. Some people would be totally stressed out to stand here and speak to you or to pray out loud. Stressors are different. He says: *"It's like a violin string. Not enough stress produces a dull, raspy sound. But too much stress produces an irritating screech. Just the correct amount of stress produces a beautiful tone."* When you know you have a deadline on Friday, it produces a certain stress causing you to be ready. Stress is a demand on our energy, and if there are too many stressors, we end up without sufficient resources to meet the demand. We call that stressed out. We feel it physically. We can't sleep, can't focus. And the only way forward is to replenish

I remembered this scene near the end of one of my favorite movies, *Green Mile*, in which Tom Hanks plays a death row prison guard. He believes one of the prisoners, John Coffee whose initials are JC, is wrongly convicted. Like another wrongly convicted JC two thousand years ago, JC is compassionate, his life devoted to bringing healing. We see him perform miraculous acts,

taking on the hate, evil, and pain of the world. There is something in him that is more than human. Tom Hanks cannot bear the thought of ending the life of someone who is clearly sent by God, so he offers to help him escape – something John Coffee refuses. He is prepared to die. And in this scene, he describes the toll a lifetime of caring is taking. [scene from movie]

And to varying degrees, we also understand. We get so tired of it all. There are moments when I consider all of the times I've been alongside people at some of the worst moments of their lives, offering comfort and presence in their grief and pain. Or the times persons have confided in me about their deepest hurt or struggles and sins that no one else has heard. Things shared in confidence that I have promised to carry with me to my grave. And what I didn't know early in ministry is the toll that would take on my soul. I entered ministry because I wanted to care for people but the process of caring takes inner resources and if those resources are not replenished, one can end up broken and empty. Or just listen to the news of the past week, so much pain in this world – not to mention what you know about the people close to you. And it wears us out. And like JC, we can feel like little bits of glass are pressing in. Or in the words of David: God, where are you? Why have you forgotten me? Why do I feel so empty?

Psalms 42 is one of the Psalms of David, written at a time of high anxiety and stress. He begins: **Just like a deer that craves streams of water, why whole being craves you, God.** He's thirsty, his tank is empty. David was longing for God, and our souls long for God, too. We were created for a relationships with God. We long to feel God moving in our lives. The earliest commentators suggest David may have composed this psalm when he was prevented from returning to the sanctuary in Jerusalem because King Saul wanted to kill him. David was a successful warrior. He was serving the king, but King Saul was jealous and felt threatened by David's success. Saul wanted to kill him. It wasn't safe for David to return to Jerusalem, but for David, it's in Jerusalem that this spiritual stream of water exists. He's thirsty, he's empty but he can't go there. David has done nothing wrong. His life is threatened and so he turns to the Philistines but the Philistines also want to kill him. All David wants is to serve God, but all about him is stress and anxiety. **My tears have been my food both day and night, as people constantly questioned me, "Where is your God now?"** David is focused on everything that's wrong – everything that's falling apart. He's focused on the horizontal and not the vertical. Haven't we all had times when we got stuck, looking at people who were getting under our skin, people we felt were out to do us harm, and we get to a point where we start believing everything we are being told we are not – instead of looking to God and listening to all God says we are.

So what does David do? **I remember these things as I bare my soul: how I made my way to the might one's abode, to God's own house, with joyous shouts and thanksgiving songs** What does David do? He remembers. He remembers his first love (he was a man after God's own heart). He remembers what it felt like to be in the presence of God. He remembers what it felt like to worship. He remembers what it was like to give thanks. And in remembering, he begins to replenish his tank. It's why I attend worship even when I'm not being paid to be here, because when I worship, I remember. It's also why I like to memorize scripture. It goes into my memory bank, and I find it comes forth in times of need. Last Sunday, I stood at the bedside of one of our members who is at the end of her life – and suddenly I remembered the words of Jesus: "I go to prepare a place for you and when I go, I will return again and take you to myself so that where I am you may be also." Even death is not the end. Jesus will never let go.

David does not stay in despair **Why I ask myself, are you so depressed? Why are you so upset inside?** But he does not stay there. His focus from the horizontal to the vertical he is able to say: **Hope in God! Because I will again give him thanks.**

A few years ago, when Amanda was undergoing chemotherapy at Mayo Clinic, we attended a seminar in which Dr. Amit Sood presented some of his research into the restorative power of gratitude. This seminar came a particularly difficult time in Amanda's treatment journey and at a time when I felt like my "tank" was empty. What he told us was his research had found that a daily practice of gratitude will not only make you happier but it will also improve your physical health. It improves sleep, boosts immunity, and decreases the risk of disease. He recommended practices – simple, easy practices of gratitude. One that I have continued is the first thing in the morning before doing anything else, before getting out of bed, do a gratitude inventory – what are five things that I am grateful for – truly grateful for. Pause for a few moments to remember and to be grateful – and I've discovered that simple practice begins my day by filling my tank – my spiritual tank.

Giving thanks no matter what I'm facing – for David it seemed the whole world was out to get him. Remember and give thanks. Let the strongest voice in your life be the voice of God. David fights back with gratitude. David fights back by letting God in. As we learned last week, the key to finding the fullness of life is to stay close to God.

In Luke's gospel, we find the story of Jesus who is welcoming into the home of a woman names Martha. And while Martha is busy with all of the details of preparing the meal for her honored guest, her sister Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and listens. Martha eventually gets upset because her sister is not helping her. Finally, says to Jesus, "tell her to help me." **The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary.** I wonder if Jesus was saying – simplify the meal. I only need one thing. You need what I have to offer more than I need something to eat. **Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken from her.** Stay close to the one who sustains and heals and redeems and restores.

How is it with your soul? Is it time to reset? Are you connected to the source of Living Water? Are you living from a place of overflow or drought? Have your tears been your food day and night? Are you wondering where God is? It's time to reset and stay close. If you will follow this week's GPS (Grow Pray Study), we will focus on pray – entering into a conversation with God each day. A daily practice of staying close. Slow down. Set down your burdens. And stay close.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 12, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Once again, O God, we call out to you, seeking your will for our lives. Interrupt our busyness and quiet our distractions that we might enter fully into your presence and find refreshment for the parched places of our souls. Amen.

Monday, January 13

This week's soul practice is prayer. The practice of prayer simply means to spend time with God. Each day, you will be invited into various forms of prayer, with the simple task of sitting with God. Set aside a period of time each day and designate a place that will be devoted to your prayer practice. Make this an intentional, set-apart time just for you and God to spend some time together.

Scripture: Exodus 14:5, 9-16

When Egypt's king was told that the people had run away, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about the people. They said, "What have we done, letting Israel go free from their slavery to us?"

The Egyptians, including all of Pharaoh's horse-drawn chariots, his cavalry, and his army, chased them and caught up with them as they were camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth in front of Baal-zephon. As Pharaoh drew closer, the Israelites looked back and saw the Egyptians marching toward them. The Israelites were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Weren't there enough graves in Egypt that you took us away to die in the desert? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt like this? Didn't we tell you the same thing in Egypt? 'Leave us alone! Let us work for the Egyptians!' It would have been better for us to work for the Egyptians than to die in the desert." But Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid. Stand your ground, and watch the LORD rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never ever see again. The LORD will fight for you. You just keep still." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to get moving. As for you, lift your shepherd's rod, stretch out your hand over the sea, and split it in two so that the Israelites can go into the sea on dry ground.

As scary situations go, being an unarmed former slave on the edge of an inland sea and seeing your former master's mighty army closing in on you, would have to rank high. Pharaoh had chariots, horses and trained troops. Israel had their bare hands, and God. Then Moses spoke the extraordinary words we'll see often this week: "Do not be afraid." This passage highlights the paradox Jesus-followers still face. Moses said, "You need only to be still." God told Moses, "Tell the people to move on." Could prayer be your means to discern when God is calling you to be still and trust, and when God's call is for you to "move on" and take action?

Prayer: Settle into a quiet space and turn off your phone. Sit for a moment in silence and center your thoughts and your heart on drawing near to God. When tasks or worries or even fears come into your mind, acknowledge them before God, and ask God to hold them in God's hands. Pay attention to what messages God might have for you – words to bring you comfort or encouragement or maybe even a feeling of peace or mercy. This practice of prayer requires no words or striving; this is simply a time for you to sit with God and to let your thoughts and feelings come and go. When you are ready, end your prayer time by praying The Lord's Prayer.

Tuesday, January 14

This week's soul practice is prayer. The practice of prayer simply means to spend time with God. Each day, you will be invited into various forms of prayer, with the simple task of sitting with God. Set aside a period of time each day and designate a place that will be devoted to your prayer practice. Make this an intentional, set-apart time just for you and God to spend some time together.

Scripture: Psalm 37:5-11

Commit your way to the LORD! Trust him! He will act and will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, your justice like high noon. Be still before the LORD, and wait for him. Don't get upset when someone gets ahead—someone who invents evil schemes. Let go of anger and leave rage behind! Don't get upset—it will only lead to evil. Because evildoers will be eliminated, but those who hope in the LORD—they will possess the land. In just a little while the wicked won't exist! If you go looking around their place, they won't be there. But the weak will inherit the land; they will enjoy a surplus of peace.

When we read Bible verses that say “Do not fear,” we’re often inclined to think, “Yeah, but they didn’t know what I’m facing!” But the Bible writers did not live in some movie fairyland. This psalmist knew well that “people succeed in their ways” and “carry out their wicked schemes.” In spite of that he said, “Trust in the Lord—be still before the Lord.” The writer also said, “[God] will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn.” We tend to ask, “When?” The psalm hints at an answer that may need an extended time of prayer: “Wait patiently for him.”

Prayer: For your prayer practice today, you are invited to write a letter to God. Consider that God invites us into friendship. Friends have regular conversations, sharing hopes and fears, dreams and trials. Take paper and a pen, and write a letter to God, your friend. Share all that is going on in your life right now, what is on your mind, what is going on with your family, what you are struggling with, what you are grateful for – everything that you would share with your very best friend.

Wednesday, January 15

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Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7

But now, says the LORD—the one who created you, Jacob, the one who formed you, Israel: Don’t fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won’t sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won’t be scorched and flame won’t burn you. I am the LORD your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior. I have given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place. Because you are precious in my eyes, you are honored, and I love you. I give people in your place, and nations in exchange for your life. Don’t fear, I am with you. From the east I’ll bring your children; from the west I’ll gather you. I’ll say to the north, “Give them back!” and to the south, “Don’t detain them.” Bring my sons from far away, and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name and whom I created for my glory, whom I have formed and made.

Far from promising us that trust in God ensures that nothing bad can ever happen in this life, Isaiah knew that sooner or later bad things come to all of us. In John 16:33, Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble.” Isaiah wrote, “When [not “if”] you pass through the waters ...When you walk through the fire.” But he began with familiar words: “Do not fear.”

Prayer: Today, you are invited to make silence your friend. Set aside some time to block out any noise and create an opportunity to listen for the still, small voice of a loving God. Let your thoughts float away like clouds, and let the silence clear your heart and mind. Don’t strive to try to achieve in these moments. Simply sit in God’s presence and be still.

Thursday, January 16

This week's soul practice is prayer. The practice of prayer simply means to spend time with God. Each day, you will be invited into various forms of prayer, with the simple task of sitting with God. Set aside a period of time each day and designate a place that will be devoted to your prayer practice. Make this an intentional, set-apart time just for you and God to spend some time together.

Scripture: Mark 6:34-52

When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then he began to teach them many things. Late in the day, his disciples came to him and said, "This is an isolated place, and it's already late in the day. Send them away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy something to eat for themselves." He replied, "You give them something to eat." But they said to him, "Should we go off and buy bread worth almost eight months' pay and give it to them to eat?" He said to them, "How much bread do you have? Take a look." After checking, they said, "Five loaves of bread and two fish." He directed the disciples to seat all the people in groups as though they were having a banquet on the green grass. They sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. He took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them, broke the loaves into pieces, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. Everyone ate until they were full. They filled twelve baskets with the leftover pieces of bread and fish. About five thousand had eaten.

Right then, Jesus made his disciples get into a boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake, toward Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying good-bye to them, Jesus went up onto a mountain to pray. Evening came and the boat was in the middle of the lake, but he was alone on the land. He saw his disciples struggling. They were trying to row forward, but the wind was blowing against them. Very early in the morning, he came to them, walking on the lake. He intended to pass by them. When they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost and they screamed. Seeing him was terrifying to all of them. Just then he spoke to them, "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid." He got into the boat, and the wind settled down. His disciples were so baffled they were beside themselves. That's because they hadn't understood about the loaves. Their minds had been closed so that they resisted God's ways.

Scary situation #1: a large crowd was hungry. The disciples said, "Send them to get food," but Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." Then his power provided lots of food for them to share. Scary situation #2: a strong wind blew across the Sea of Galilee. The disciples were struggling. Jesus came, said "Do not be afraid," and stopped the wind. The disciples were amazed. Both episodes gave insight into human fear and heavenly sufficiency.

Prayer: Sometimes life comes at us, and before we know it, our hearts are overcome with worry, fear, and anxious thoughts. Trials and suffering can make us feel like there is nothing good about our lives or that we will never experience joy again. Name before God your fears and worries, your trials and anxious thoughts. Then close your prayer with words of thanks and praise. Set your heart on gratitude.

Friday, January 17

This week's soul practice is prayer. The practice of prayer simply means to spend time with God. Each day, you will be invited into various forms of prayer, with the simple task of sitting with God. Set aside a period of time each day and designate a place that will be devoted to your prayer practice. Make this an intentional, set-apart time just for you and God to spend some time together.

Scripture: Luke 12:22-32

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore, I say to you, don't worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. There is more to life than food and more to the body than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither plant nor harvest, they have no silo or barn, yet God feeds them. You are worth so much more than birds! Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? If you can't do such a small thing, why worry about the rest? Notice how the lilies grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all his splendor wasn't dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it's alive today and tomorrow it's thrown into the furnace, how much more will God do for you, you people of weak faith! Don't chase after what you will eat and what you will drink. Stop worrying. All the nations of the world long for these things. Your Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire his kingdom and these things will be given to you as well. "Don't be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights in giving you the kingdom.

We may not face marching armies or huge crowds who need food. But every day we face cars that wear out, bills that need to be paid, and the question of "What's for lunch?" Jesus asked us not to worry about those things. Even in this world, he said, those needs are usually met, for the birds and for us. But he sought to raise our sights beyond this world, saying, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." What would it look like if you applied Jesus' wisdom ("life is more than food, and the body more than clothes") to your everyday activities?

Prayer: Practice prayer today by looking for God everywhere. Keep your eyes and ears open to notice the beauty of creation, encouraging words from a friend, the sun shining on your face. Notice the goodness of God all around you and get caught up in it. Set your heart on seeking God, on looking for God's movement and listening for God's voice all day long.

Saturday, January 18

This week's soul practice is prayer. The practice of prayer simply means to spend time with God. Each day, you will be invited into various forms of prayer, with the simple task of sitting with God. Set aside a period of time each day and designate a place that will be devoted to your prayer practice. Make this an intentional, set-apart time just for you and God to spend some time together.

Scripture: Isaiah 30:15-18

Therefore, the LORD God, the holy one of Israel, says: In return and rest you will be saved; quietness and trust will be your strength—but you refused. You said, "No! We'll flee on horses"—therefore, you will indeed flee—"and we'll ride off; on swift steeds we will ride"—therefore, your pursuers will be swift. One thousand will flee at the threat of one, and at the

threat of five you will flee, until you are left like a flagstaff on a mountaintop, like a flag on a hill. Nonetheless, the LORD is waiting to be merciful to you, and will rise up to show you compassion. The LORD is a God of justice; happy are all who wait for him.

In Isaiah's day, the Assyrian Empire threatened Israel from the north. King Hezekiah was worried and sent emissaries southwest to ask Egypt for help. It was futile—Assyria's army was far stronger than Egypt's. On God's behalf, Isaiah pleaded with Israel to turn back from these missions. Trust in God, who loves you and longs to show you mercy, he begged. There's no help in Egypt's swift horses. Instead "in repentance and rest is your salvation." Have there been times when God could have said to you, "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength," but you would have none of it? "The LORD longs to be gracious to you....Blessed are all who wait for him."

Prayer: Today, align your prayer with your breath by practicing a breath prayer. Throughout the day, as often as you can, let your heart whisper as you inhale, "Lord Jesus Christ;" and as you exhale, "have mercy on me."