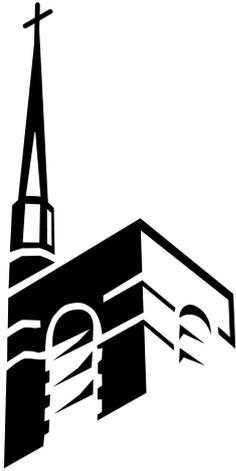


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Uniquely Shaped:
“GRACE ON TAP”

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Scripture: Psalm 42

Have you ever had an encounter with a wild animal that looked straight into your eyes, as if the animal were trying to send you a message? I encountered such a deer on Drummond Island a month ago when I on a retreat with other women here at First Church. I was riding a bike, and when I saw the deer ten feet from me, I stopped. We stared at each other for the longest time. It seemed as if the deer was peering into my very soul. Eventually, the deer realized that I didn't have as much depth to my soul as she did, and she became bored and bounded away,

Coincidentally, we had just been talking on the retreat about how in the Native American tradition, encounters with wild animals have sacred meaning. In Victoria Cowell's book, *Spirit Animals*, she writes, “Wild animals come to honor you with the generous gift of themselves. Obeying a prompting from our common Creator, Spirit Animals let themselves be seen either in the natural world or in your dreams or visions, in order to deliver an important message.”ⁱ “If a deer has chosen to appear to you, it is asking you to encourage that part of yourself that is not afraid to be soft, gentle, and humble.”ⁱⁱ

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” Just as the thirst of a deer is satisfied by the water of flowing streams, so our spiritual thirst for God can only be satisfied by the living water of Jesus Christ. If our very life comes from the God who made you and me, then we can only live authentically when we are in relationship with God.

Psalm 42 was written by someone from whom everything has been taken away. Evidently, the psalmist is living in exile or at least is prevented from making a pilgrimage to the temple. Taken captive by enemies, oppressed and tormented, the psalmist's grief is made worse by the taunts of others, “Where is your God now?”

The writer has become like a hunted animal with its tongue hanging out, panting for the one thing that can restore strength. In the midst of such dire circumstances, what is it for which the psalmist longs? Is it possessions or power or friends or even family? No, the thirst is for the presence of God. The writer remembers times spent in the temple, the joy of worshipping with others, and the songs of thanksgiving. Despite the present sense of despair, however, there is also hope, for at night the old, familiar songs come back, not to haunt but to comfort.

In the midst of feeling abandoned by God, the psalmist can still rejoice, as the twice-repeated refrain suggests: “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.” God has not left him, and because of that hope, the psalmist is free to give thanks to God in the difficult circumstances of the present as well as in the joy of where he has been in the past.

Psalm 42 is one of the most beautiful and poignant of all the psalms because it reminds us that there is this thirst in each one of us that will never be quenched until that thirst finds its fulfillment in God. From the earliest of times, the image of the deer or hart was often found on baptismal fonts, symbolizing those thirsty souls who drink from the fountain of eternal life.

The spirit of Psalm 42 permeates the opening paragraph of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, where he says, “The thought of God stirs the human being so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.” In fact, Psalm 42 was read on the occasion of St. Augustine’s baptism on Easter Day 387 A.D. He was 33 years old. There is an empty space in each heart that can only be filled by God.

How do we satisfying our longing for God? It’s really quite simple. First, we need to recognize and name our thirst. You and I are really good at seeking other things to fill our God-shaped void, aren’t we—that thirst for meaning, intimacy, and fulfillment. Not finding it, we stuff ourselves full of food, gadgets, furnishings, clothes, sex, drugs, and alcohol. We want to be taken out of our dreary lives into a realm of freedom and joy. Needing to deaden the world of pain and frustration, we open a bottle or swallow a pill. We plug the void with our own pleasures but find only a temporary freedom. Nothing ever works.

Dr. James Moore, a United Methodist pastor, told the story of a very wealthy man whose son smashed his sports car into a tree. Moore went to the emergency room to try to help the family. The boy’s father was a nice guy, but his major motive in life had been making money. He was running up and down the halls of the hospital waving \$100 bills in his hand, trying to give them to the doctors and nurses, saying, “Here, take this. You’ve got to get in there and save my boy’s life. Take this, I’m counting on you.”

Of course, the doctors and nurses would not take the money. They would only say, “We’re doing everything we can.” But it was too late. The boy didn’t make it. The father fell into his pastor’s arms like a little lost child and cried his eyes out, sobbing so hard his shoulders were shaking. Finally, he pulled back. He took all that money, all those hundred dollar bills, and threw them on the floor. Through his sobs, he said, “Jim, all these years I have put my trust and confidence in the wrong things. I have money to burn, but in this moment, it is not worth anything. Where do I find the resources to stand this?”

Have you ever had an experience like that? So agonizing, gut-wrenching, and heart-breaking that you cry out, “Where do I find the resources to stand this?” It often takes a crisis to recognize our need for God, doesn’t it? Once we can see the hole in our lives, we have an overwhelming desire to fill it with the only thing that fits.

Oddly enough, once we know that God is the answer, then we have already begun to satisfy that thirst. Once we hear God's voice and turn to it, the thirst begins to be quenched, and we discover that the resources have been there all along. Just like the psalmist, we find those resources in the community of the church and fellow Christians, in the songs and prayers and scriptures of our faith.

During our retreat on Drummond Island, we broke up into groups for Bible study, and the scripture our group was given just happened to be this one, Psalm 42. As we shared about our own thirst for God, one of the women said, "That's God's prevenient grace!" I was astonished. I looked at her and said, "Wow! How do you know that theological term? What kind of amazing congregation do we have at Birmingham?" We then talked about how God's unconditional love or grace goes ahead of us. The word "prevenient" means to "come before."

Our United Methodist heritage is rooted in a deep and profound understanding of God's love. Prevenient grace was used by John Wesley to describe how God loves us before we even know it, preparing the way to faith. God's presence is always active in our lives, whether we realize it or not, uniquely shaping us to be a blessing.

After recognizing our thirst for the grace of God that is already within us, we then need to take that second step and find a way to respond. As we talked in our small group, one woman shared how she was raised in the church but, as so often happens, she fell away from her faith in college and as a young adult. You know how it is. We gradually get out of the habit of coming to worship, our priorities become different, and before we know it God seems far away. Yet, in our quiet and reflective moments we recognize that something is missing and that the longing for God is still there.

So it was for Mary, who was a school counselor. In the teacher's lounge one day, Mary saw a colleague copying some materials for a Disciple Bible study class in her United Methodist church. The teacher sheepishly acknowledged that she wasn't supposed to be copying personal materials on the school copy machine. Mary didn't say anything, though, because she had that deer-in-the-headlights stare. God had stirred something in her heart.

But God had also stirred the teacher's heart. She asked Mary, "Would you like to join our Bible study?" "Yes," she said without hesitation. So began Mary's journey back to God and the church. She reconnected with The United Methodist Church because that teacher responded to the prompting of the Spirit and cared enough about Mary to open the door back to faith. Mary told our group, "That teacher was an angel. Jesus was saying to me through this woman, 'Come back.' And I did. That's prevenient grace. God never gave up on me."

This morning, along with Christian churches around the world, we are celebrating All Saints Sunday. It's one of the most special days of the year for us at First Church because we have an opportunity to recognize and give thanks for the saints who have gone before us.

Most of these saints were not world famous or wealthy, and life wasn't perfect for any of them. They all had their share of trials, heartache, and grief. They were just like you and me and the psalmist. Remember, God did not let the psalmist go back to Jerusalem. He had to learn how to

depend on God in his present situation. He had to hold in tension God's steadfast love as well as the taunting of his adversaries. Unfamiliar, stressful, or even tragic circumstances are opportunities to grow. In times of crisis, God introduces us to deeper dimensions of faith, for the good news is that we can never escape God's grace.

Each one of these saints was a servant of God through whom Christ's love shone. Their longing for God prompted them to become angels for us: mentors, wise friends, gentle counselors, and courageous examples of faith. God's grace went before each one.

But there is one more thing. Once we recognize that our thirst is for God, we will do all we can to satisfy the thirst. But it's nothing compared to the mighty rush of water coming to meet us. It's the cataracts, waves, and billows of God's grace that move us forward, deep calling to deep. However strong or persistent our own efforts, they're nothing compared with the living water that seeks out and finds our parched mouths. The key is the desire of the water itself to meet our needs. God's steadfast love overcomes our last resistance.

The Damnation of Theron Ware is a classic novel of American literature by Harold Frederik, published in 1896. In the novel, which reveals much about religious life of turn of the twentieth century America, a skeptical doctor is speaking to a fundamentalist pastor and a Catholic priest. He says, "If you don't mind my saying so ... it seems logical to me that a church should exist for those who need its help, and not for those who by their own profession are so good already that it is they who help the church."

The skeptic then describes the church as a place that should keep grace on tap, a place where everyone can have their thirst for God satisfied. He says, "Some come every day, some only once a year, some perhaps never between their baptism and their funeral. But they all have a right (to be) here, the professional burglar every whit as much as the speckless saint. The only stipulation is that they oughtn't to come under false pretenses."

Grace on tap, uniquely shaping us to be a blessing to others. Wild deer looking us right in the eye, offering to us humility and inner strength. Grace on tap. Living water for those who know their thirst for God and for those who only know their emptiness. Grace on tap. The bread of life for a school counselor in a teacher's lounge, a grieving father in a hospital, and those who have tried everything else but cannot fill that void. Grace on tap, the cup of salvation for sinners and for saints, for you and for me. A place for everyone to have their thirst for God satisfied. Come back. Come back to grace on tap.

Prayer Song

*As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you;
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you.
You alone are my strength, my shield; to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you.*

ⁱ Victoria Cowell, *Spirit Animals*, Dawn Publications, p. 5.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 33.