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Psalm 63:Title–4, 8-11, ESV

63 A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN HE WAS IN THE WILDERNESS OF JUDAH.

- ¹ *O God, you are my God; earnestly 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.*
- ² *So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.*
- ³ *Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.*
- ⁴ *So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.*
- ⁹ *But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;*
- ¹⁰ *they shall be given over to the power of the sword;
they shall be a portion for jackals.*
- ¹¹ *But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.*

Exodus 33:17–23, ESV

¹⁷ *And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”* ¹⁸ *Moses said, “Please show me your glory.”* ¹⁹ *And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”* ²⁰ *But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”* ²¹ *And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock,”* ²² *and while my*

glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. ²³ Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."

The face of God.

Recently, I had a referral to go see a woman who, as near as I could tell from her medical record, didn't seem like she would need a chaplain. Normally, I am sent to people who are terminally ill, in great pain, facing a disabling diagnosis, or perhaps septic, with a dangerous infection throughout their body. But this woman had a torn ACL, a key stabilizing ligament of the knee. Okay, it's not great to have a damaged ligament, but to me, as a non-medical person, it seemed that she just needed to have it surgically repaired. When I went in to see her, indeed, she was not at all under duress. She was sitting up in her bed, working on her notebook computer. She was about forty years old, quite thin, and she looked healthy. I sat down on the little sofa in her room; the sofa doubles as a bed for overnight visitors. I introduced myself and said that I had a referral to see her. Usually, it's the patient's doctor or nurse who has created the referral, and the patient is not expecting me; I figured she would say that she had no idea who had asked for me and that she didn't need me. However, this woman said, almost breathlessly, "Oh, thank you, I asked to have you come." I said, "What can I do

for you?” She said that she needed someone to pray with her because she had a big decision to make. She had a torn ligament in her knee and the surgeon said that it needed to be repaired. Mentally, my reaction was, okay, lady, get your ligament fixed, what do you need me for? Then she said, “But I just can’t face another surgery. I’ve had over thirty surgeries on the other leg. I don’t want anyone doing anything to my good leg.” I said, “Thirty surgeries?” She said, “Yes, it was amputated above my knee when I was twelve and there have been several complications. You’re sitting next to my artificial leg right now.” I looked to my right, and sure enough, there was a high-tech artificial leg laying on the sofa; it was one of those prosthetic limbs that has a computer chip in it and helps the person walk with a normal gait. I said, “I’m glad you asked me to come.”

Let’s look at our first Bible passage. It’s from a Psalm attributed to King David. It is believed that he wrote it while he was on the run from his son Absalom, who wanted to kill David so that he, Absalom, could be King. King David ran from his son into the desert wilderness, and indeed this Psalm begins with *O God, you are my God; earnestly 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.* This Psalm is about David’s confidence that God will be with him and that God will protect him. David goes on to make it clear that although there is a conspiracy against him which

includes powerful people who have sided with his son, David is confident that his enemies will fail under the hand of God: *But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth; they shall be given over to the power of the sword; they shall be a portion for jackals. But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped.*

But there is a line in the middle of this passage, in between these two quotes, that relates to my message today. Getting back to the woman with the torn ACL, I told her that I am not a medical person, but that I was certain that these ligaments are routinely repaired and that it shouldn't be a major surgery. She said that she knew this, that her doctor had said that the surgery would be straightforward. She was only in the hospital because her stump had been badly bruised in the accident. But, she said, having any surgery at all on her good leg would scare her. She said that she knew it wasn't logical but going in for leg surgery would bring back that day when she was twelve when she lost her leg. Then, as she grew more tearful, she told me the story. Let's call her Lisa. And of course, I am changing details to protect her privacy. She was in the south of France, with a cousin who happened to live there. Her parents were in China, doing missionary work in a very poor area; and so that she would not feel left out, they sent her to spend a month with Luc, her cousin. They were in a remote, rural

area that was very beautiful, but very hot and dry. They were on a dirt road, on a scooter, with her on the back. As they rolled along the road, a car suddenly came roaring around a corner at them. It swerved at the last instant and the car only glancingly hit them. But she was thrown into the air and landed in a rocky ditch. She was stunned and it took a moment for her to realize that her leg had a compound fracture, with the bone sticking out. A large blood vessel, which she learned later was an artery, was bleeding. She was a very smart kid and she knew that she was bleeding to death, quickly. Lisa also knew that they were many miles from the nearest hospital, and that it was a tiny country hospital. Her cousin wasn't anywhere near her. She called out for him. He didn't answer. He was unconscious, but he fully recovered. At first, she was in a panic. She was terrified. Then, a calm came over her. She was a Christian. A Psalm that she had memorized in Sunday School came to her. She began saying it out loud. She told me that there was a line in it that she tried to remember, but she could only recall that line if she started from the very beginning. Now, Lisa was remembering the King James version, and I have put the English Standard Version in this message. Other than modernizing the vocabulary, it is pretty much the same. As she lay in that ditch, she got to this verse: *So, I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life,*

my lips will praise you. So, I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. At the moment in the ditch when she said, “I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,” God appeared before her, not spiritually, not mentally, but in a very literal fashion. She felt a sudden calm come over her. She knew instantly that everything would be okay. She couldn’t tell me what God looked like, only that he was there. Lisa couldn’t say if God looked like a regular human or like some interstellar creature. But God was before her. A few moments later, someone came down the side of the ditch. Later she would learn that he lived in a shack-like house nearby. He used something to make a tourniquet. He stopped the bleeding just as she passed out – but before she did, God reached out and touched her on her forehead. She felt the energy of God go through her body.

She woke up in a hospital. They said that they had transfused her and had given her a large volume of blood, but that she would live. But they weren’t sure about her leg. They drove her to an airstrip, where she was put in a small plane to fly her to a bigger hospital in a town. She passed out again on the way. She woke up in another hospital bed - without her left leg. She told me that they tried to tell her slowly that her leg was gone, but somehow, she knew the instant she woke up that it had been amputated. And she wasn’t upset at all. It was another twenty-four hours before her mother was there, but the waiting time was very

peaceful. She had been in the presence of God, and God had touched her. The memory would stay with her always. She told me that it totally and permanently changed her. From that day on, she never questioned her faith. She had three children who were being raised in the church. Her husband wasn't much of a believer, but she was working on him. Then she asked me if I believed her, that God had really, truly been there and touched her. I said yes, I believed her. I said that God had never appeared to me, not in such a physical, literal way. But I firmly believe that God is real. I know that God does appear to people.

I tried to reassure her that God would be with her every instant of her knee surgery. Then, she said something very intriguing. She said that while she was in that ditch, she had tried very hard to see God's face, but was unable to. I asked her if she was aware that there is a passage in the Bible that, if taken literally, might make you not want to see God's face. It's from our second Bible quote. This quote appears in the scene where Moses is up on the mountain with God. God is offering reassuring words to Moses. This is actually Moses' second trip up the mountain to see God. The first time, he was given the commandments on stone tablets. When Moses went back down, he found that his people had abandoned God and were worshiping a golden calf. That caused him to smash the tablets. So, he went up on the mountain again, to get new tablets. In this

passage, God is trying to reassure Moses. God says this to Moses: ²⁰ *But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”* God says that Moses will see the glory of God and will be honored by God, but one thing cannot happen. Moses will not see God’s face, because any human who sees God’s face must die. I explained all of this to Lisa, and I added that it is a common Christian belief that no living human can see God’s face and survive.

She laughed and said that her knowledge of the Bible was spotty, and that she had gone all her life without knowing this. She said that she knew only what her Sunday School teachers taught her and what she picked up in church, and that she had never read Exodus. I told her that God had treated her the same way he had treated Moses. God had shown his goodness and his graciousness with her. She had seen his glory, but not his face. And maybe, I said to her, the fact that you did not see God’s face was because God had plans for you on this earth.

When God appears to us, it’s called a *theophany*. “*Theo*” is Greek for God and “*phany*” is based on the Greek word for making an appearance or shining before something. Bible scholars have gone to a lot of trouble to identify all the places in the Bible where God has appeared to people. I cannot tell you if God actually appeared to Lisa. I am not in her head. As a chaplain, I support

someone's faith. I affirm their trust in God. To be honest, I tend to think that yes, it really did happen. God does not appear to most of us. We have to live our lives putting trust in God and knowing that we will never have that absolute, firm, human evidence that God exists. We won't have the proof that Lisa has. But when I have a chance to talk to someone like Lisa, it lifts me up and builds my faith. I told Lisa that I deeply appreciated her talking to me, that she had given me a great gift. She said that she knew she was going to have to have surgery. I told her that God would be there in the O.R. She smiled and said yes, she was sure God would be there. Then I offered a prayer of healing for her, a prayer for God to release her from anxiety, and a prayer of thanks for me being privileged to hear about God appearing before Lisa. Please pray with me.

God, it would be nice if you stood before each of us and touched us on the forehead. It would make it very easy to believe. But your son told us that those who believe without seeing are blessed. Our job is to believe by listening, not seeing. It is your message that matters to us on earth, not your face. We are to live according to the example of Jesus, with generosity, forgiveness, and love for all. Faith is something that is much stronger if we have to work at it, and we work at it by listening and then living accordingly. Please never let us forget that.

Amen.