

New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Second Sunday after the Epiphany  
Sunday, January 15, 2023

“A New Song”  
Psalm 40:1-11

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

The psalmist has a story to tell—a story of rescue and deliverance:

“I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure” (vv. 1-2).

The details aren’t spelled out, but the bones of the story are clear: the psalmist “was in death-threatening trouble, [...] prayed for help, [and then] [t]he LORD delivered,” rescued, saved; it’s a story of “distress and God’s response of rescue” (Day), a story that began in the mud and muck, way down deep in despair, in a place of loneliness and abandonment that the psalmist calls a “desolate pit” and a “miry bog.” The language here is unnerving: one scholar translates it as a “raging pit” and “sucking mud” (Davis).

And there, we’re told, the psalmist “waited *patiently*”—which is a rather surprising posture for someone despairing in the “sucking mud” (Davis). And I think if there’s anything in this psalm that seems somehow unrelatable, it’s this perplexing patience: I don’t think any of us could really relate to that; we’re impatient at the best of times—let alone when we’re stuck in a “raging pit.”

But in the Hebrew of this psalm (קָנִיתִי וְקִנֵּיתִי), the language is literally “waiting I waited” or “hoping I hoped” (Charry). There’s a raw urgency to this waiting—so much so that one Spanish translation renders it “Yo esperaba *impacientemente* al Señor,” “I waited *impatiently* for the Lord” (Schökel). There’s a kind of patience here, but it’s intense; it’s patience that’s clinging to hope desperately. You could hear this as “I hoped urgently” (Day) or even “I waited-in-tense-expectation” (Davis). This is patience at its limit, struggling to hold out. It’s why I think one of the best translations of this verse is what we find in the old Scottish Psalter of 1650:

“I waited for the Lord my God,  
and patiently *did bear*;  
*at length* to me God did incline  
my voice and cry to hear.”

The psalmist has a story to tell—a story of rescue and deliverance—and the psalmist simply *must* tell this story; in fact, the psalmist must sing it! What the psalmist learned down there in the pit, what the psalmist learned in the mud, this *must*—simply *must*—be shared, be sung...because the psalmist wants others to know that God is trustworthy, that even when we’re down in the pit—even there, God can rescue:

“He put *a new song* in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God.  
*Many* will see and fear,  
and put *their trust* in the LORD” (v. 3).

And our psalm this morning *is that song!* God “put a new song in [the psalmist’s] mouth”—and this is it! The ‘many’ that the psalmist imagines hearing and heeding this song—that includes us! We are inscribed in this psalm, and included in its reach, as we listen to the story and song the psalmist has for us. And in this way, the psalmist challenges others—and challenge us—to lean on a trustworthy God: “Happy are those who make the LORD their trust” (v. 4), the psalmist declares, spoken like one who’s learned from experience this hard-won lesson of faith.

Then comes a turn, a change, in the psalm—as the psalmist realizes that their experience is wonderful, yet far from unique; the psalmist realizes that this experience—this story of rescue and deliverance—that this is but one more page in a long and lengthening story of God’s redeeming love:

“You have multiplied, O LORD my God,  
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us [...].  
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,  
they would be more than can be counted” (v. 5).

In the midst of this song, the psalmist recognizes that this personal experience of rescue is but “one more example of the innumerable wonders by which [God] has preserved [God’s] people,” placing “the salvation of the psalmist [in] continuity [within the] salvation history of Israel” (Mays). The psalmist realizes that—because God is kind and trustworthy—this experience of rescue is mercifully familiar, yet another moment of grace, among so many, in which God has delivered those lost in the pit.

And so the psalm shifts from ‘I’ to ‘we’ (Nanko-Fernández), from the experience of an individual to the celebration of a community, as the psalmist announces to God:

“I have told the glad news of deliverance  
in the great congregation;  
see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD.  
I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,  
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;  
I have not concealed your steadfast love  
and your faithfulness  
from the great congregation” (vv. 9-10).

In this way, the psalmist’s story, the psalmist’s song—this personal testimony transforms a private experience of God’s rescue into a shared knowledge of the grace of God. The theologian Carmen Nanko-Fernández explains it like this: for the psalmist, “The news of one’s deliverance is not a private revelation; rather,” she writes, “it is sung, proclaimed, told, and spoken [...] in the ‘great congregation’ (v. 10). This testimony to the God who accompanies [us] in times of trial is meant to be shared [...]. Those who are delivered,” she writes, “are themselves responsible to the greater community [...]. This [revelation] of divine [faithfulness] belongs to [us] all.”

And as the psalmist’s story and song move from private to public, from an individual experience to a shared witness, this experience becomes a source of celebration and hope for the whole community. This is how Scripture works as a testimony to the goodness of God: “Our present hope [always] stands on the [...] foundation of the past, saving acts of God” (Nagy-Benson). And here, the psalmist’s story and song tell all who will listen that—when we are in the pit,

when we are down in that mud and muck, when we're at the breaking point of impatient patience—there and then we may yet have hope, because—when we're in the pit—this God is *down in the pit with us and for us*. One Presbyterian minister puts it like this: “This is the God [...] who is already in the pit [...] by the time we arrive there. This is [the] God who is near enough to hear the cries of lament,” who is “present with us in the pit and has the power to draw us out” (Dana).

And that is a testimony of hope for those who, today, feel lost in the pit. The last verse of our selection from the psalm doesn't end on a note of assurance or victory; rather, it ends with a prayer for God's continuing help:

“Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me;

let your steadfast love

and your faithfulness

keep me safe forever” (v. 11),

the psalmist pleads, in the prayer of one who knows what it's like in the pit—and doesn't want to get stuck there again.

This shows us that “clinging to God's ultimate faithfulness [...] has never been easy” (Charry), even for the psalmist! Like the psalmist, we may experience rescue from trouble, but even then troubles persist and return—for us and for others—and, as stewards of this witness that God is present in the pit—it becomes our responsibility to come alongside others still struggling there (Dana), “who are still waiting for the Lord, who are still crying, who are still in the pit” (Nagy-Benson).

Our next hymn is our psalm, set to music, from the Scottish Psalter. At the very height of the pandemic, which was a difficult time in many ways, when worship was remotely streamed and congregational singing not possible, I often listened to a recording (from before Covid) of a congregation singing this same selection from the Scottish Psalter. At that time, when Covid had taken so much, I'd hear their voices singing loudly all assembled in one place together, and it sounded like something from a different world; yet the testimony of the psalm resonated all the more loudly when I'd listen to it, in my Study, in this otherwise completely empty building:

“I waited for the Lord my God,

and patiently did bear;

at length to me God did incline

my voice and cry to hear.”

This psalm is a testimony that began as an individual experience of rescue, but—because the psalmist shared and sang this witness—it became a song of hope for us all. And to reflect the way this testimony was shaped and shared, the choir will sing the psalm first (beginning with only one voice), and then we'll stand and sing it loudly together as a shared testimony of hope—a witness that, when we are down in the pit, the God of grace is down there with us, and ready to lift us, so that we too may sing. Amen.