**Praying the Psalms**

**Sunday July 8, 2018**

**“Thank You” (Psalm 40)**

**1. Introduction: *Saying ‘thank you’***

In my first year of graduate school one of my favorite courses was biblical Hebrew. In each class, we’d sit in a circle and we’d translate a Psalm together. Each one of us would take a turn reading a verse of the Hebrew text out loud and translating it. I loved the course, because I enjoyed translating Hebrew and I love the Psalms. In one class session, our professor was making a distinction between the different kinds of thanksgivings or praises in the Psalms. To illustrate this, he told the story of the time that he gave a gift to his nephew on his birthday. It was a bell for his bike. His nephew opened the present and when he saw what it was, his eyes opened wide as saucers, a huge smile appeared on his face, and he burst with excitement. “This is excellent, uncle Michael,” he exclaimed. The boy’s parents then said, “Now say thank you to your uncle.” The irony was that it was already quite clear that the young boy was very thankful for the gift, making the more formal ‘thank you’ a bit stuffy and unnecessary. Our professor remarked that his nephew’s excited response was more meaningful to him than the proper “thank you” that came after.

The Psalms work in a similar fashion. There are psalms that are akin to *formal liturgy*, such as Psalm 113. These kinds of psalms are like a proper “thank you” to God and are classified as *descriptive praise.* These psalms typically begin by calling the whole congregation to praise God.

“Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord, you his servants;  
    praise the name of the Lord.  
Let the name of the Lord be praised,  
    both now and forevermore.  
From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,  
    the name of the Lord is to be praised” (Ps 113:1-3)

And then they move on to remind the listeners of God’s *greatness* and *goodness*.

**“**The Lord is exalted over all the nations,  
    his glory above the heavens.  
Who is like the Lord our God,  
    the One who sits enthroned on high,  
who stoops down to look  
    on the heavens and the earth?” (Ps 113:4-6).

These psalms of descriptive praise speak of God’s character and activity in more *general* terms, giving us the *big picture* so that all God’s people can join in worship. On the other hand, there are psalms, like the one that was read this morning, that depict a more personal response of joy to God for his intervention in a specific situation. These psalms are termed *declarative praise* or *thanksgiving psalms.* These psalms are an explosion of thanksgiving, very much like the young boy’s delight when he received the bell for his bicycle. In the *thanksgiving psalms* we hear the voice of the individual rising up to God with gratitude for a specific response to a difficult situation. In the case of Psalm 40, the psalmist thanked God for lifting him out of a miry and mucky pit and placing him a solid rock.

Both types of psalms are found in the Old Testament and both are essential prayers and praises to God. As a congregation we need both kinds of praises within our worship. There are times when we need to meditate on the grander themes of God and sing, “To God be the glory, great things He has one.” Just last week, we reflected on the wonder of God’s creation and our place within it as we considered Psalm 8. Collectively in worship, we raise our hearts and voices to God, praising him as our Creator, Redeemer, and Lord. When faced with the great masterpiece that God has painted, our shared response is an audible “wow.” On the other hand, there are times when we need to listen to the voice of the *individual* who has a story to tell of God’s amazing grace in their lives. We need to make space in our worship for people to share their thanksgivings because these are testaments of God’s grace and they serve to strengthen the faith of each one of us. So, our prayers and praises to God are both *wow* and *thank you;* both *individual* and *communal.*

**2. From Desolate Pit to Solid Rock**

The writer of Psalm 40, identified as David, is reflecting on the difficult times of the past. He remembers when he was in a “pit of despair,” with a muddy, mucky, and marshy bottom. What a vivid picture of those moments when we are knee deep in the struggles of life! Deep in a pit of desolation and despair; the ground so muddy that we can’t get a firm footing. Stuck in the mud with no way of getting out, slipping a sliding with every step we take. Caught in the quicksand of life, our only recourse is to start yelling, “Help me! Help me!” And that’s exactly what David did. He writes, “I waited patiently for the Lord to help me” (40:1). This verse can also be translated, “I *waited*, and *waited*, and *waited* for the Lord,” nicely articulating the perseverance of many who cry out to God for help. Yet, unlike a lament psalm where the person praying is left waiting, here, there is an answer. The Lord bent down to David and heard his cry for help and he lifted him up out of this place of despair (40:1-2). But he didn’t just lift David out of the pit, he placed his feet on a *solid rock* and *secured* his steps so that he wouldn’t slip and slide any more. God rescued him and re-established the security that he once had.

What strikes me about the opening verses of this Psalm is their focus on *God’s activity*. David’s reflections are all about God. He begins by telling us, “*I* waited and waited for the Lord” (40:1). But his emphasis quickly shifts to the *God’s response*:

• *He* bent down to me

• *He* heard my cry for help

• *He* lifted me from the pit

• *He* set my feet on a solid rock

• *He* secured my steps (40:2)

David’s song of thanksgiving is not about him; it’s about God and his remarkable intervention into his dilemma. David does not give us the exact details of these dire circumstances, but he doesn’t need to because the attention is solely upon God’s act of rescueing him. The contrasting images of *desolate pit* and *solid rock* have a powerful ability to speak to a number of difficult circumstances of life. In this way, David’s declaration has a universal appeal because all of us can relate, in one way or another, to being in a muddy pit.

As I reflected on David’s words I realized that many of us might be stuck in a muddy, mucky, miry pit, waiting to be rescued. I thought about this image of the desolate pit and I thought about its ability to speak to a number of terrible circumstances that people face – death, depression, addiction, family dysfunction, alienation, rejection, marital breakdown, failing health, aging, lonliness, and the list goes on. The desolate pit can represent any number of life’s disappointments and struggles. I was also struck by the distinct way that Psalm 40 concludes. Most *thanksgiving psalms* end with the psalmist’s promise to praise God. While Psalm 40 does express David’s praises, it ends with a desparate cry for help (Ps 40:12-17). It seems that David was rescued from one difficulty only to fall into another one. Psalm 40 acknowledges the topsy-turvy reality of life, where one minute you’re thanking God for an answer to prayer and the next you’re on your knees again, crying out for help.

David’s struggles were much like ours. Crying out to God for help, he confesses, “For troubles surround me— too many to count! *My sins pile up so high I can’t see my way out*. They outnumber the hairs on my head. I have lost all courage” (Ps 40:12). Sometimes the weight of sin is so heavy upon us that we feel helpless and we can’t see our way out. We feel so overwhelmed by our sinfulness that we begin to doubt God’s ability to forgive us. At other times, we feel like we are under attack just as David was (40:14-15). Perhaps we feel like we’re besieged by the enemy with no one is defending us. So, we call out to God, just as David did, “Please, Lord, rescue me! Come quickly, Lord, and help me” (Ps 40:13). In the midst of our troubles we realize, as David did, that we are “poor and needy” and so we pray, “*You* are my helper and my savior. O my God, do not delay” (Ps 40:17).

It’s that time of waiting; hoping and praying in the dark pit that is the hardest to endure. Anne Lamott writes about this experience of darkness in her book on prayer, “Domestic pain can be searing, and it is usually what does us in. It’s almost indigestible: death, divorce, old age, drugs; brain-damaged children, violence, senility, unfaithfulness. Good luck with figuring it out. It unfolds, and you experience it, and it is so horrible and endless that you could almost give up a dozen times. But grace can be the experience of a second wind, when even though what you want is clarity and resolution, what you get is stamina and poignancy and the strength to hang on” (Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow,* p. 30-31).

**3. A New Song Of Praise**

So, what keeps us hanging on when we feel like giving up? We remember the grace of God and recall the many times that he intervened in our lives. We also receive encouragement from others and their stories of God’s grace. And we draw on the rich tradition of Scripture and meditate on its powerful words. And as we meditate on God’s word, we remember that David was once in the miry pit, waiting patiently for God. We listen carefully to the *new* *song* that God had given him; his *praise* *song* (*tehillah* תהלה) to the Lord (Ps 40:3). His song of thanksgiving tells the tale of his journey from the pit to the solid rock. But it’s not a story of David’s achievements, rather it’s a *thank you note* to God, celebrating how God *inclined* his ear*, heard* his cry*, lifted* him outand *established* his steps. David’s reflections flowed out of his heart to God and to others.

David’s song of thanksgiving is a gift from God that emerged from God’s act of rescuing him from the miry pit. Down in the pit his world was shaken to its core and he needed to rely on God completely. When God placed him on the solid rock, he was able to look back with a renewed trust in his Lord. His faith in God was tempered in the crucible of anguish. His dependence on God kept him hanging on when all else failed. Standing on the solid rock, David was able to sing his new song for the congregation of God’s people.

“I have told the glad news of deliverance  
    in the great congregation;  
see, I have not restrained my lips,  
    as you know, O Lord” (Ps 40:9).

David’s new song of praise celebrated all the wonderful aspects of God – his righteousness, faithfulness, saving power and steadfast love (Ps 40:10). David’s experience of being lifted out of the pit of despair bears witness to God’s great faithfulness. As a result, “Many will see what God has done and be amazed. They will put their *trust* in the Lord” (Ps 40:3).

David’s song of thanksgiving to God still resonates today, encouraging many people to put their trust in God. The question for you and me is this: “What is the new song that God has given to us?” What is the praise song that you can tell others so they will be encouraged to put their trust in God? All of us have a story to tell; a story of God’s faithful care in the most difficult times in our lives. It’s a song of thanksgiving to God about how he lovingly intervened to take us from hopelessness to hope. Yet, we hesitate to open our mouths, fearing that our song is not good enough. Famous poet Walt Whitman, wrote:

“The question, O me! so sad, recurring – What good amid these, O me, O life?

*Answer*

That you are here - that life exists and identity,

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse”

(Whitman, *Leaves of Grass)*

Each one of us is part of this powerful play of faith and we all can contribute a verse. We need to tell our stories to each other. Whether in the context of a worship service or a small group or a quiet conversation with a friend, we need to tell our stories of God’s loving involvement in our lives so that we all can be encouraged to put our faith in God. I’d like to end with these words from Anne Lamott:

“We sing a slow hymn at my church, St. Andrew, that goes, ‘God has smiled on me. He has set me free.’ For us to acknowledge that we have been set free from toxic dependency, from crippling obsession or guilt, that we have been graced with the ability finally to forgive someone, is just plain astonishing. You can’t have gotten from where you were- gripped by anxiety, tiny with fear – to come through to freedom, for God’s sake. To have been so lost that you felt abducted, to feeling found, returned, and set back onto your feet: Oh my God, thankyouthankyouthankyou. Thank you. Thanks” (Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow,* p. 31).

*Thank You, God!*