

Upper Path Valley Presbyterian Church
2020: The Global Year of the Bible
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Eighth Sunday of Quarantine from COVID-19

May 3, 2020

A Lamp and a Light, Part 16
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Since April 19th, many in our congregation have been reading from the book of Psalms in the Bible. You've heard me say before that when I read that 2020 was declared the Global Year of the Bible, we searched for a daily Bible that we all could read together over this year. We settled on The Daily Bible, the New Living Translation, compiled in chronological order. So instead of reading through all 66 books in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, one by one, the editors have put events in chronological order to make the overall story of the history of our faith easier to follow and understand. I have been so encouraged to hear many in our congregation talk about how they are understanding the full story of Scripture for the first time in their lives. I have been so encouraged to hear about families gathering during the week to talk about what they've read (before the quarantine). Something they never did before!

Can you tell that I'm excited about 2020 the Global Year of the Bible - even now that 2020 is also the year that brought in a global pandemic? I'm even more excited and grateful that so many are reading God's word every single day, finding truth and encouragement there. His Word is a lamp for our feet and a light for the path. Thanks be to God. (By the way, if you want one of those Bibles, just contact me and I'll tell you how to get one.)

One of the psalms that we read this past week was Psalm 40. It is a psalm about being in the pit, getting out of the pit, falling back into the pit, then getting out again. Before I even read it, can anyone relate? Does anyone feel like you are on a roller coaster these days? One day is really good, or maybe several days in a row – and then the next day or days – not so much...

Let's listen to these words from Psalm 40. The heading of this psalm describe it as being written by King David 'for the choir director.' In other words, this psalm was intended to be set to music. In the first 10 verses David tells how God got him out of a pit and he sings praise to God. Let's listen:

For the choir director: A psalm of David.

¹I waited patiently for the Lord to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry.

²He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire.

He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along.

³He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God.

Many will see what he has done and be amazed.

They will put their trust in the Lord.

⁴Oh, the joys of those who trust the Lord,

who have no confidence in the proud

or in those who worship idols.

⁵O Lord my God, you have performed many wonders for us.

Your plans for us are too numerous to list.

You have no equal.

If I tried to recite all your wonderful deeds,

I would never come to the end of them.

6 You take no delight in sacrifices or offerings.
Now that you have made me listen, I finally understand⁶—
you don't require burnt offerings or sin offerings.
7 Then I said, "Look, I have come.
As is written about me in the Scriptures:
8 I take joy in doing your will, my God,
for your instructions are written on my heart."

9 I have told all your people about your justice.
I have not been afraid to speak out,
as you, O Lord, well know.
10 I have not kept the good news of your justice hidden in my heart;
I have talked about your faithfulness and saving power.
I have told everyone in the great assembly
of your unfailing love and faithfulness.

Everything seems pretty good, right? He's been a patient waiter. Even though he was sinking down in muck and mire, he cried out to God, he waited for God to rescue him, and while he waited he learned some really important things about himself, about his relationship to God, and about God himself who did rescue him - who did set his feet back on solid ground. And what did he do next? Just go on with his life, saying "Whew, that was a close one!" No, he told people what God had done for him. (READ verses 9-10 again below.) He didn't take the credit for making it through – he gave GOD God's due credit (not that God needs that credit, but we need to give GOD that credit to keep us from getting all puffed up, proud, and even more self-sufficient that we were yesterday).

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Let's read verses 11-17 now. After the glory of getting out of the pit and telling everyone what God had done to get him out, um...he's back in the pit.

11 Lord, don't hold back your tender mercies from me.
Let your unfailing love and faithfulness always protect me.
12 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.

13 Please, Lord, rescue me!
Come quickly, Lord, and help me.
14 May those who try to destroy me
be humiliated and put to shame.
May those who take delight in my trouble

be turned back in disgrace.
¹⁵Let them be horrified by their shame,
for they said, "Aha! We've got him now!"

¹⁶But may all who search for you
be filled with joy and gladness in you.
May those who love your salvation
repeatedly shout, "The Lord is great!"

¹⁷As for me, since I am poor and needy,
let the Lord keep me in his thoughts.
You are my helper and my savior.
O my God, do not delay.

In the pit. Out of the pit. In the pit. Out of the pit. That's the way of this world. That's the way of coronavirus 2020. The way of the news. Perhaps the way of your finances. Your family life right now. Your emotions. Your thinking. Yes, even your faith. It's okay to admit that. King David was admitting it right here in this psalm – this song that he gave to the choir director to turn into a song for others to sing.

Folks, when this quarantine began way back in the middle of March, for many people there was a sense of relief. We had been running so hard, working, playing, frantically moving, moving, moving that all of a sudden for many things to come to a screeching halt was relieving for some.

For me, we were just getting into the middle of Lent which is a time that with each passing week things get a little more full (not frantic) for church staff – leading up of course to Holy Week (3 services) plus Easter Sunday (3 services)! I love it, but quite frankly, it is exhausting. When the quarantine began, as much as I wanted it to be over sooner rather than later, for me, there was a sense of relief. Though I cried multiple times when I would even see the names of some of my dear congregants on a live video or in a text message, there was part of me that was relieved. Maybe I could get some rest. There was nothing I could do but try to minister to people from a distance, from my home, in my comfy pants – while stretching my 62 year old brain by learning more and more about the technological opportunities I had never had time nor the motivation to investigate. In some ways I'm going to say that I was in the pit of overextension, and the quarantine gave me time to let God get me out and set my feet back on solid ground. The relief has been real. (Maybe for you too in some ways?) In the pit, out of the pit. Should I raise a hallelujah? If I follow the pattern of this psalm, I definitely should... but I also shouldn't be too hard on myself if I can't sustain it.

Because now that we still don't know when we can gather again in person as a congregation, the uncertainties are enormous in my mind. And that wall looks higher every day. You feel this in some way, I bet. Home schooling, on-line teaching & classes, bill paying, graduations, weddings, medical procedures, insurance, when will sports start again, shopping for groceries and other necessities in masks, being able to visit people, especially our senior adults, , rest, real rest without our minds spinning, man – that WALL looks high. And if that wall looks high, it probably means, we are back down in the pit. So, here's the question we are faced with every day.

Do we trust God in the midst of all this?

And let's add a few more questions to that one:

- Do you trust that God knows what's going on in the world and in your own life?
- Do we trust that God has a will, a plan & purpose for your life, and if we do, do you trust that that will is good?

And if we do, do we trust that God is working his will in and through our circumstances to bring something good, to bring the greatest good, something beautiful & good & true from these circumstances? Or do we just chalk this whole mess up to human error and the schemes of the power hungry, and stay in the pit of helplessness, hopelessness, anger, bitterness, and faithlessness? We are faced with these questions every day. I am. You are. Can we release our grip on the things of this world that we think we can control, and trust God alone?

Twenty-five years ago as I was driving to Gettysburg Seminary to take classes while my kids were still in school and I was working as a director of Music at Falling Spring Church (my home congregation), I was saying to God over and over in my car, "Not my will but yours be done. At that time, I wasn't even sure exactly what I believed the Bible said about women pastors/preachers. I hadn't done the necessary Biblical study that I've done since. So, I would cry out to God, "If I am on the wrong road (and trust me Rt. 30 sure did seem like the wrong road many days, lol), if I am headed in the wrong direction, PLEASE stop this. Please stop this."

There's part of me some days that wishes he had stopped it. The work of pastoring is hard. But what you are doing is hard too. Wherever you are, whatever God has called you to do, whatever journey he has called you to navigate is hard some days too. Especially right now. Times are just harder than usual right now. The late supreme court justice, Louis Brandeis said to his frustrated, impatient daughter, "My dear, if you would only recognize that life is hard, things would be so much easier for you." (source unknown.)

When it's hard, what are we going to do? Just sink further down in the sticky, heavy, stinking mud, or are we going to take the only way out that sets our feet on solid ground again and helps to keep us steady as we walk along, as we travel along, seeking his will, taking joy in doing his will, because as the psalmist wrote in verses 7 & 8 (Psalm 40), these instructions are already written on our hearts. We find ourselves in conflict with God himself and with others when we ignore what we know we should do.

It is such a relief when we can get beyond the wall with Jesus. To say, even now, especially now (as Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane regarding the pain and suffering ahead of him at the cross, "Father, not my will, but yours be done." Believing that as we wait, **intently wait**, (not passive, it's very active waiting), wait before speaking those words that so quickly pop into our mouth to say that are hurtful and harmful, wait before trying to manipulate to get our way, wait before staying where we shouldn't stay, wait before leaving what we shouldn't leave, as we wait, intently, we feel relief. We relax. We trust. As we choose to wait for the Holy Spirit to guide and guard our steps, what comes out is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. The Fruit of the Spirit. And I'm telling you folks, we're going to need more of this as we get further into this year.

As the presidential election gets closer, the bitterness, the hatred, the namecalling, the blame, the ugliness between humanity is going to get worse. No matter what happens with COVID-19, we are in for a time that isn't going to be pretty. I can't control you and your responses. All I can do is release my will for God's will and let his goodness be on display in my life as I do what David wrote in this psalm: As I tell everyone of God's unfailing love and faithfulness. The anchor of our faith in Jesus Christ holds, friends. It holds even in the greatest storms. As my dear friend, pastor, & mentor at Falling Spring Church, the Rev. Linda Harter loved to say especially at the end of a phone call, "I'll pray for you, you pray for me."

Let's commit to pray for one another, that those who have yet to say yes to Jesus will lay down all the objections, all the fear, and all the doubt, and COME to him, saying YES, I don't understand it all, but YES I give my life to you today. Come and fill me with your Holy Spirit and make me NEW. (Things you didn't understand, will become clear, because they are only discerned by the Holy Spirit alive within us.) Oh, thanks be to God for his unfailing love and faithfulness. Amen.