

In the Pit
Psalm 40
January 19, 2020
First Presbyterian, Luling

I love a happy ending. Book, movie, tv show. Give me something happy at the end. And I don't want it to be wishy washy or uncertain. I want the people or animals or talking toys to be obviously and substantially better off at the end than they were at the beginning. If I needed an unhappy ending, I could just watch the news or read the paper.

I once had a colleague who loved to read mystery novels. They were the only fiction she would read. Once I was in ministry for a while, I figured out why. A mystery novel ties things up nice and neat at the end. Loose ends make sense. Peoples' motivations become clear. There's some smart person or persons who make everything make sense in the end. In short, mystery novels are nothing like being a pastor, and there is always a happy and tidy ending.

Life has some happy endings, yes. Some are happy endings we know at the time, and some are happy endings we can only see in hindsight. Some are happy endings that come after a long long long time of unhappy. And some endings never are, and never become, happy. They are just endings. We know all that. I know all that. And I think it's because life is like that, and because we know life is like that, that I require my fiction to have happy endings. That may be the only place I'm guaranteed to have a happy ending, in that last chapter or last scene.

Psalm 40 doesn't have a happy ending. In fact, it's written backwards from the way most psalms are structured. The first half of it is a psalm of thanksgiving. The second half is a psalm of individual lament. The Psalms are full of both of these kinds of songs, and frequently they are combined together. But almost everywhere else, the lament comes first, and the thanksgiving follows. Which makes Psalm 40 seem like it's written backwards. This has so disturbed scholars and the people who make the lectionary, that they have come to believe that it must be two psalms stuck together, instead of one. And so, if we were following the lectionary exactly today, we would have only read through verse 11. That's where it cuts off.

You may be picking up that I disagree with this characterization of Psalm 40 as a combination of two psalms, or that it is written backward. The psalms are known for including the whole range of human experience and emotion, so why would it be strange for one psalm to include both thanksgiving and lament? It

seems to me that that combination is really the essence of life. Thanksgiving and lament, all mixed up, coming one after the other, taking turns sometimes but sometimes not. So we're going to take Psalm 40 as it is written, all at once.

An outline of it would sound something like this: Part one: when I was at my lowest point, God rescued me and helped me sing a new song. Part two: People who trust in the Lord are blessed, because God has done so many great things. Part three: God said, I don't require complicated offerings or rituals, and then I said "Here I am. I will do your will." Part four: I've shared how you rescued me with everyone I know, so they would know it was you. That's where the break is, between thanksgiving and lament. The psalmist continues with part five: I am in trouble, both from myself and from others. Please rescue me again. Part six: Please help me. Please hurry. Part seven: may everyone who seeks you worship you. And please hurry and rescue me.

It seems clear to me, and maybe I'm missing something that scholars read differently, but it seems clear to me that God rescued this person from their lowest point, from the pit. This person praised and thanked God for that rescue. And based on prior experience and trust and hope, the psalmist calls on God again for rescue. That sounds a lot like life to me. Things go bad. God helps me. Things go bad again. I ask God for help again. And that help doesn't come as quickly as I'd like it to.

There are a couple of things that are between the lines, in the background, that I want to point out before I go any further. First, when things go bad for the Psalmist, God is still there. God gets down into the pit to drag him out. And second, even when things turn around and God rescues the psalmist, there is absolutely no guarantee that things will not go bad again. And I know I said a couple things, but there's a third, and I think this is key, from verse 12, is that the "things that go bad" for the psalmist are not just life circumstances, or even the choices he has made with bad consequences. The "things that go bad" are from inside him, or at least he feels like they are. Listen to it again: "For evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me."

I don't struggle with depression in any serious sense myself. I don't like this time of year, and I don't like it when the weather was like it was this week, dreary and gray and drizzly for days on end. And I can get kind of down and mopey and want to just sit on the couch and not do much. But that feeling passes. But I have close family members and friends who do struggle with depression, serious depression, that doesn't just go away when the sun comes out. And from what

they share, and from what I understand, it feels a lot like what this psalmist is describing.

They're in a pit. They feel like it's somehow their fault. And even if they've been out of the pit before, even if they have been able to trust God all the way through the pit, the next time comes, and they fall in it again. And they need help, serious and real help, to get back out. And help never seems to come fast enough.

I think people who struggle with addictions identify with this psalm, too. And PTSD. And bipolar disorder. And we could go on and on. I can't think of a person I know whose life has not been touched, in one way or another, by mental illness of one kind or another or many kinds. I've admired you as a congregation, for the way you support each other through depression of your own, or a loved one's mental health struggles. There are lots of congregations, lots of families, lots of situations, where people want to keep that a secret, where they would feel ashamed to share that kind of prayer request, where they wouldn't want to admit to what they think of as that kind of weakness. But you aren't like that, we aren't like that, and I'm grateful to God for that gift.

And your willingness to share and be honest and trust each other has made me all the more aware of how prevalent and widespread mental illnesses are. I don't know why this would be surprising to me. When I was in high school, a girl in our youth group who was two years older than I was, struggled for years with an eating disorder. She died by suicide the summer after she graduated. That was my first close encounter, at least the first encounter I was aware of and identified as a person I loved who had something wrong with her that she could not control. She needed help, and she was getting help, but it was not enough.

Since then, I have met and known and loved so many people with so many struggles, who are in so many different kinds of pits. I've cried and prayed with them and their family members. I've also learned and laughed with them. And I know that there are so many more people that I know and love who struggle in silence and in private, who feel like they are alone in a pit they cannot escape.

The psalmist has been there, down in the pit, in despair, waiting on help from God who does not seem to hear or answer in a timely manner. This is the closing verse from The Message paraphrase: "And me? I'm a mess. I'm nothing and have nothing: make something of me. You can do it; you've got what it takes— but God, don't put it off." You can hear the desperation, can't you. This psalmist needs help, and it needs to be soon.

Those between the lines messages of the psalm are true, and we can count on them. God is in the pit. When we're in the pit, God has not abandoned us. God

is there, in the mess and the disappointment and the weariness and the sadness and the backsliding. God is there. Eventually, we will get out of that pit, and we will sing songs of thanksgiving, but there is no guarantee that we will not fall down again. To promise otherwise would be lying. We may well fall into the pit again, and God will be there still. Even if it seems like God has abandoned us, God will be there.

Before I get to the happy ending, I have one more thing to say: if you know what I mean by the pit, if you're in the pit, if you love someone who is in the pit, if you or someone you love is thinking that death by suicide is the answer, please reach out for help. Because there is help. There are phone numbers to call and to text, and there is always someone to listen and help. God is in that, too. I've made up some cards with those numbers. They'll be in the fellowship hall. You can call for yourself or for someone you love. I've called before, and they've given me excellent advice on how to help someone I loved. God is in the pit, and God is helping get us out, too.

That's good news, but if you need a bit more of a happy ending, here it is: after we had our Christmas Eve service here, I returned to La Grange, and attended a Christmas Eve service at the Lutheran church, where my new friend Candy is the pastor. The service was lovely, and at the end, the time came for the acolyte to put out the candles on the Advent wreath. He was about 14 years old or so, and had done his job quite carefully throughout the service. He put out all four purple candles with no problem. And then he tried to put out the white candle, the Christ candle, and it wouldn't go out. Three times, it stayed lit. By this point, everyone had noticed he was having trouble. Finally Candy said, "well, that light of Christ just doesn't want to go out." And they left it burning as we left.

Friends, that light of Christ doesn't want to go out. It does not go out. Even in the pit, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. Thanks be to God.