

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

2nd Sunday after Epiphany
Year A

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January 15, 2017

Text: Psalm 40:1-11

Title: “Starting Fresh: Overcoming SAD—Spiritual Affective Disorder. Soothe a Savage”

Listening to this beautiful psalm and the poet describing God lifting him out of the miry bog, my mind went back to a canoe trip our family took. I’ve shared it here before but the image of the psalm’s miry bog took me there again. We were in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness of Minnesota with friends of ours over an 11 day vacation. It was a trip we had planned for a year or so and it involved wilderness camping in the over 1,000,000 acre reserved wilderness area, paddling rivers and lakes and portaging between lakes. For those who may not be familiar with portaging it’s basically the act of carrying all your gear including the boat along a hiking path through the woods from one lake to another.

Lynn carried our food pack. I carried a gear pack and our canoe. Josh carried his little pack of snacks and a few other things. We were on the trail on this long portage. I was in front leading with the canoe when I came to a low area along the trail, so low the narrow walking trail was filled with water. It looked like the areas on the side of the trail were relatively dry, so I decided to veer off the trail. I hadn’t walked 10 feet when I sank to my chest in a deep marshy bog. It took a few minutes before the others caught up to me and I remember hearing our young son ask Lynn, “What happened to Dad?” because the canoe was pretty much all he could see. I started to laugh. Lynn and our friends thought it was funny too. I rolled the canoe to my right onto the wet trail and pulled myself up, muddy from chest to toes.

We all walked through water on the rest of that trail and I had to take a de-mudding swim before we started paddling again.

Whenever I read Psalm 40

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

I think of that experience. And it reminds me that life is like that sometimes. You think you’re

making a right decision but something unexpected happens and you find yourself bogged down unexpectedly. You didn't see it coming but you're sunk nonetheless. Sometimes it's not a laughing matter either and sometimes it means doing what the psalmist did: "wait patiently for the Lord". Seek God's help to be drawn out of whatever miry bog or desolate pit in which we find ourselves. Sometimes, in this time of year it can be the loss of light and the strength of the cold that does us in. Other times, it can be some kind of loss that sucks us down.

Whatever it was that dragged the psalmist down, somehow God set his feet on solid ground again. God delivered a sense of security again, so much so that the poet cries out:

³He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.

God gave this bogged down boy a song to sing, a new song. God gave him music. Our faith tradition is saturated with music. Music is the language of the soul. It speaks to us in ways words cannot. It moves us, affects our feelings, our thoughts, our souls. Music deepens our connection with the Holy Spirit in the way only music can do. Music is God's gift to help lift us from those boggy experiences in our lives that could leave us stuck. The 17th century poet and playwright, William Congreve, originated the saying, "Music hath the charms to soothe a savage breast" (often misquoted as "beast"). The play goes on to say "... to soften rocks or bend a knotted oak."

Thomas A. Dorsey is considered to be the father of black gospel music. He is not the same person, of course, as the well-known Tommy Dorsey who was known as the "Sentimental Gentleman of Swing"--a trombonist and band leader in the 1930's and 40's. Thomas A. Dorsey, though, was the son of a Baptist minister who started his musical career as a pianist on the seedier side of life. He performed at bawdy saloons and bordellos and in 1923 had a blues hit that went to the top of the charts. Blues singer, Ma Rainey, and Dorey's record sold 7 million copies.

But then Dorsey had a spiritual change of heart. He heard a chorus sing a spiritual at the National Baptist Convention in Chicago and left behind what he would later call the "sinful days" of his life.

In 1932 Dorsey was drowning in grief over the death of his wife, Nettie, during childbirth. Not long after, the child also died. As he struggled with his loss, a song of faith came to him. He quietly fingered at the piano and the words of "Precious Lord, take my hand" entered his mind and heart. It's a song of prayer, asking for the Lord's help when "I am tired, I am weak, I am worn", asking God to "...lead me on to the light." If you're in a place distant from God, feeling bogged down by something going on in your life, consider this prayer asking God to "Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home." Let's sing and pray:

UMH 474

Not all music is meant to lift us from grief and pain, of course. Some music gives us eyes to see what is all around us and leads us to give thanks and praise for the gifts of God. Some songs give us the words and the tunes to express our gratitude as they describe in words better than our own what God has given.

In Bath, England Folliot Pierpont was wandering through the English countryside. There he walked along the Avon River and among the rolling hills. On that hike, he had a panoramic view of the city and was inspired by all he saw that day, the simple and everyday—but profound—gifts God has given in the earth: “the glory of the skies”, “the love which from our birth over and around us lies;” “the beauty of each hour...the hill and vale, and tree and flower, sun and moon and stars of night”; “the ear and eye”; “friends on earth and friends above”; for “all gentle thoughts”. “Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.”

UMH 92 For the Beauty of the Earth, vv.1-4.

When one of the editors of our hymnal wrote to Gloria Gaither about one of their songs, “Something Beautiful”, she wrote back:

This song was born on a Monday morning when our children were quite small. We were watching them play and have such a good time expressing their delight in life. We thought of how good God has been to us and simply had to conclude that he had certainly done something beautiful in our lives. What a marvel it is that no matter what we have to bring to Jesus, no matter how much pain and dysfunction, no matter how much confusion and brokenness, Jesus takes us as we are, then makes us truly new. He doesn't just patch up and make the best of a fractured past; he truly makes “something beautiful” of our lives. (p. 602)

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Like Pierpont before her Katharine Lee Bates found gratitude well up from within when she traveled in her own country—the United States—from Massachusetts to Colorado Springs. She was an English professor and took this trip west in order to teach a summer class there. Along the way she stopped at the Columbian World Exposition in Chicago. Spending time in the city, the “White City” exhibition captured her attention and made a deep impression. As she left Chicago and traveled through the wheat fields of Kansas by train, the seemingly endless “amber waves of grain” left an imprint. After the summer session was over, she and some colleagues from the East travelled up Pikes Peak on a wagon. Of that trip to the top she wrote: “It was then and there, as I was looking out over the sea-like expanse of fertile country spreading away so far under those ample skies, that the opening lines of the hymn floated into my mind” (as quoted in *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal*, Carlton R. Young, p. 209).

She celebrates the gifts of God and the beauty of some aspect of this country of ours in the first half of each stanza but then in the second half of each stanza she offers prayer that ...

“God shed his grace on thee and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining see.”

That...

“...all success be nobleness, and every gain divine.”

And finally acknowledging imperfections, she leads us to pray...

“God, mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.”

UMH 696

In the midst of winter doldrums or feeling bogged down by experiences of loss or unmet expectations or fear. If you find yourself feeling negative or down or unable to feel gratitude, the spiritual homework exercise this week invites you to listen to other soundtracks. Listen, along with the psalmist, for a new song, a song of praise to our God. The insert invites you to spend some time reflecting on the sounds around you and the internal soundtracks to which you listen. Consider finding a way to listen to soundtracks that lift your spirits and give you hope. If modern Christian music speaks to your heart, turn to Smile FM 88.3 when riding in your car. If spiritually inspired classical music lifts your spirits, take CDs with you of Handel’s “Messiah”, or Johann Sebastian Bach who wrote that ...

The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul.

Consider spending time on “Pandora” or “Spotify” and create your own playlist that will remind you of our God who seeks to lift ...

“from the desolate pit,^[a]
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.