

## **“An Open Ear”**

### **Psalm 40:1-11**

I waited patiently for the LORD;

God inclined to me and heard my cry.

God drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

God 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.

Happy are those who make the LORD their trust,  
who do not turn to the proud,  
to those who go astray after false gods.

You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds  
and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you.

Were I to proclaim and tell of them,  
they would be more than can be counted.

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,  
but you have given me an open ear.

Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

Then I said, “Here I am;  
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.

I delight to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart.”

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.  
Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me;  
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
keep me safe forever.

## **“An Open Ear”**

Psalm 40:1-11

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Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

### **I.**

Given the events of this past week and, especially, the way they intersect with today's text, there probably are a few things that I really *should* be preaching on this morning. However, I am not going to. Or, at the very least, I am not *planning* to here at the start of the sermon. Mostly because I am not so sure I have the energy, ambition, or objectivity which would be required. Perhaps in time I will, or will have to, but right this moment? No.

However, in an effort to *not* preach such a sermon, I struggled to find a different angle, another point of access to the text, or a change of perspective. This led me, first, to the internet as I reviewed the various comments and commentaries which abound on just about every passage in the Bible, including Psalm 40:1-11. When it comes to scripture, someone always has too much to say, and simply cannot wait to tell everyone all about it. This led to the second thing: my audible moaning and groaning.

### **II.**

Though it is certainly not the only interpretation of Isaiah 40, one of the more popular would seem to be what I call “Happy Camper Theology.” This is the kind of theology often found at work in Church Camps, conservative seminaries, and evangelical youth organizations. First, we paint a picture of how bad our lives have been, or how bad we have been in our lives. In spite of all this, however, God still saved us.

This helps those others who are hearing our triumphant tale of woe to begin to believe that their own particular form of “bad” really isn't so bad after all such that they entertain the possibility that God could save them as well.

*God drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.*

Next comes the blessing and the response.

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

We all know if we aren't praising we aren't pleasing. Right?!?

### III.

Such joyful redemption sets the tone for others to follow.

*Many will see and fear/be in awe, and put their trust in the LORD.*

Next the reward, and the admonishment to stay on the path and not give into temptation (or the “Tempter”).

*Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.*

After such a wind-up we finally get the pitch this was always going to be about.

*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 spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.*

Such unbridled and incessant *talking* about one’s faith experience, also known as “witnessing,” becomes the prime directive to which resistance is futile (excuse my mixed Star Trek metaphors).

### IV.

Yet, even after such a triumph the reality of real life (always) sneaks back in (amen to that).

*Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.*

Seems things are *not* so cut and dried after all and that, perhaps, there is still some room or a faith which is on the believing side of doubt.

Now, I am certainly *not* saying that the “Happy Camper Theology” is in any way wrong or inappropriate. If what speaks loudest to you is praising and proclaiming, I offer a begrudging but very sincere, “Good for you!” Oh, how I wish it could be the case for me. Instead, my faith seems to begin right where the faith of such a “Happy Camper Theology” leaves off.

### V.

Were I to write a Psalm such as this which corresponded to *my* life experience I would spent a lot more time, and use far more words, relating not just my struggles in the pit and my time stuck in the miry bog but, also, the profound sense of gratitude I have at no longer being in such places. At least for the present moment.

Were I to write a Psalm such as this which corresponded to my life experience I would spend a lot less time, and use far fewer words, praising and proclaiming knowing that such moments are as rare as they are precious. Praising and proclaiming is not about quantity and decibel level, it is about quality and being afforded a quite moment and rare opportunity to truly praise and proclaim with the still small voice that is within each of us.

## **VI.**

*And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still, small voice. (1 Kings 19:11-12)*

Now, if you were playing close attention to everything I have just said, you will have noticed that I carefully elided over what, to me, is the most important verse of today's text, verse 6.

*Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear.*

Sometimes, if I take a step back and try to listen with objectivity to some of the things I say in these sermons, I will admit that I sound a little "New Age" what with talk of the sacred within us, hand of God, mystical movement of the spirit, and the call to repentance which is understood not as guilt and remorse but as change-making and making the turn from what was to what yet might be.

## **VII.**

Correspondingly there is also an absence of a great many things which one might expect or be prone to hearing in others churches. There is little talk of sin, morality, purity, temptation, or formulaically accepting Christ as Lord and Savior. Neither, though, is there talk of social justice, liberation, marginalization, oppression, righteous anger, or inclusivity.

Most interestingly, though, is that I don't really do all that much talking about Christ. This for two reasons. First, when we *do* finally talk about Christ it means we need to sit up and take notice. Incessantly talking about Christ this and our Lord that only ever seems to lead to skipping the part about actually doing what Jesus commanded of us: to feed God's sheep, take care of widows and orphans in their need, and to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

Second, I find great value in 14th century theologian Meister Eckhart's plea, "I pray God to rid me of God. Chew on *that* awhile.

## VIII.

It isn't that I do not necessarily believe in any of these things or that I think them to be unimportant. Instead, it is simply the case that after 33 years of parish ministry I have come to know more and more about less and less. However, of the little I do know I am pretty darn sure.

I am pretty darn sure that God does not desire from us sacrifice or offering. Instead, God has given us the gift of an open ear so that we might hear the still, small voice not just of our God, but also of our brothers and sisters as, together, they pass by walking in the cool of the day. Those who have taken *their* turn in the desolate pit and the miry bog who, now, find the most powerful expression of their faith to be a willingness to abide and support others as they take *their* turn.

As we near the season of Lent, let us quiet ourselves that we might strain an open ear to hear the whispers of others even as God hears our own. Amen.