

Sing a New Song!
Psalm 40.1-5, 9-10
Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC
August 13, 2017
The Rev. Jane Anne Ferguson

1 I waited patiently for the LORD; [God] inclined to me and heard my cry.
2 [God] drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.
3[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.
4 Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to
those who go astray after false gods.
5 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.
9 I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation;
see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD.
10 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.

Here in CO we don't have too many miry bogs. Lots of rocks to climb, but not too many bogs. From my understanding of the Hebrew word translated here in Psalm 40:2 as "bog", the Middle Eastern equivalent to a bog would be clay....more of a mud hole. Perhaps we can relate to that image better especially after our weather the last week or so. Perhaps we can relate to it given the state of our country and world, with violence and hatred erupting in VA in place of free speech and civil discourse, with our nation tense with the threats hurled between north Korea and the White House. We may feel more like we are stuck in quick sand this morning. Still I think we can relate on some level to the psalmist who was in a desolate pit, a miry bog.

There are a lot of bogs in Scotland. Between my sabbatical in 2009 and our pilgrimage this spring I have logged a lot of time bog walking. Bog walking is interesting and tricky as many of our Scotland pilgrims can tell you. The tricky part is that what may look like a solid piece of ground can suddenly sink you in squishy mud up to your shin.. The bog ground is springy, a verdant green of bog myrtle, covering hidden streams that make the squishy mud. One has to learn to move carefully, but also quickly and lightly between the tufts of solid ground. If you stay too long in one place you start to sink. Its not quick sand....you will not sink into oblivion. But you could momentarily lose a hiking boot. And as you seek to avoid the squishier places, bog walking does not happen in a straight line....sometimes you can follow winding sheep trails. Sometimes you have to blaze your own trail. There are no little cairns for rock set up to follow. Sound anything like life?

Yet in the midst of squish and winding trails there are beautiful wildflowers, wild yellow iris, bog cotton and tiny pink bog orchids, in the spring. Heather and gorse

blooming purple and gold in the fall. The outcropping of grey rock and solid ground are welcome sites even if it takes a bit of effort and some high stepping to scale them. On the Isle of Iona they might be the foundations or remains of Neolithic forts or houses or a hermit's cell. And there the bog can be the gateway to incredible views of the wild seas surrounding the islands of the inner and outer Hebrides leading you to the places saints prayed. Bog walking is beautiful but quite strenuous, even tedious at times. I have learned to love it. And it a metaphor for life.

I think the writer of Psalm 40 understood the metaphor I experience even if Middle Eastern bogs are different. The psalm begins with remembering how God has answered the psalmist's pleas for help in the midst of troubles. I waited patiently and you drew me up from the desolate pit, the miry clay and set me on solid ground. Then the psalmist moves to thanksgiving and praise for that help. God has put a new song in her heart! And she pours forth praise about the wondrous deeds of God too numerous to count. She testifies, witnesses to God's grace and mercy and deliverance in the presence of the great congregation! The curious part about this psalm is that if we were continue with it past the portion we read this morning we would discover that after this great song of praise, the psalmist returns to asking for God's mercy. *"Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever. For evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see; ... Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; O LORD, make haste to help me."*

Life is like this....it moves from triumphant, exhilarating beauty to sinking into feelings of despair or overwhelm. We are walking along with energy and confidence. We feel close to God, walking in God's ways. Then we are suddenly something changes and we are slogging through mud. And we wonder where God is! We go through life up hill and down hill, under sunny skies, then clouds and sometimes even pouring rain. We reach great heights and give thanks and praise. Then we are in the valley of the shadow again, in the miry bog, the desolate pit. We are moving along with ease and then suddenly the boggiest parts of humanity, the boggiest of our own souls present themselves. Still we affirm that life is a place of great beauty as well as uncertainty. I have found that to get to the best spots I often have to risk walking through a bog. Its always good to listen for God's songs when you are feeling overwhelmed with the mud and twisting path.

While we were on the Isle of Iona this spring I took two bog hikes in one day. One early in the morning to following our archeologist guide to the site of a Neolithic fort. This one was finished in a downpour of thick Scottish rain. And the other was in the afternoon was a pilgrimage walk to St. Columba's Bay, the legendary site of the saint's first landing on the island. On this walk, we moved in and out of cloudiness...mostly in...we got lost a time or two and had to choose a new path. But we made it home together.

Being one of the leaders it was my job to keep spirits up when the way became rough. And to stop at times to introduce a moment of worship, prayer and some song. I had found on my sabbatical that walking rough terrain always seem to bring up a song in my head. Usually a prayer song....not always...sometimes a song from childhood....but often that was even a hymn. One of the songs I led the pilgrims to sing as we walked along was John Bell's "Take, O Take Me as I am, Summon up what I might be, Set your seal upon my heart and live in me." We often sing it more lyrically or meditatively in our

6 pm service. But it makes a great walking song, especially if you are trying to get home before the rain or in the midst of the rain or with wet squishy boots. "Take, O take me as I am, Summon up what I might be, Set your seal upon my heart and live in me."

I like to think the psalmist would also delight in John's song. It's a song to get you through the toughest, darkest places. It can be sung in meditation or in defiance or in despair or in great wonder and joy. Like the psalmist's song. "Draw me up from the pit of despair, from being stuck in the mud! Deliver me from evil and iniquity! Use me to proclaim your wondrous deeds and great mercy!" Both are songs for our times and our lives.

I asked you before the service began to pay particular attention to the words of the hymns this morning. Literally songs for this time of worship. I hope you ALWAYS pay attention to the words of the hymns because we choose them carefully to facilitate worship. They are always intended as God's songs to lead us in whatever situation we find we are in midst of in life. But today the hymns we sing are some of Jieun's favorites. I asked her to pick hymns and then I would find a scripture. Usually it works the other way around. Like the composer of Psalm 40 Jieun is leaving us with words of witness and testimony to God's deliverance and grace for this "great congregation." And I know they come from her heart of deep faith. Do you remember what we have sung?

"Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices; Who wondrous things have done....in whom this world rejoice....And keep us still in grace and guide us when perplexed and free us from all ills in this world and the next." "All my hope on God is founded. Who else can my hope renew? Still through change and chance God guides me, only good and only true." And in our last hymn, the one to come, a prayer for peace in these troubled times..."O day of peace that dimly shines through all our hopes and prayers and dreams, Guide us to justice, truth and love Delivered from our selfish schemes...Till by God's grace our warring world shall see Christ's promised reign of peace."

Jieun has walked with Plymouth through the heights and depths of life....through mountaintop experiences and boggy mires. Joyfully and with great sensitivity she has offered musical testimony of God's grace and love in our worship week after week. So as we part company, the best thanks we can give her is to continue to sing God's songs, literally and figuratively, no matter where we find ourselves in life....one smooth paths or rough terrain. To testify to all we meet...in our own words, humble though they might be, ... of God's saving grace, particularly the grace we know in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. To remember that "all our hope on God is founded" as "we gather together to ask God's blessings, to give thanks and praise" and to pray for "Christ's promised reign of peace." To sing with the psalmist..."You have multiplied, O LORD our God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. ... they [are] more than can be counted. We will not hide your saving help within our hearts. We will speak of your faithfulness, your steadfast love and your salvation to the great congregation of your beautiful, but hurting world!" Amen

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