

Waiting for What?  
Psalm 40  
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Our second reading for this Sunday is really not just one psalm, but two. Psalm 40. It is both a psalm of Thanksgiving the first eleven verses of it followed by a Psalm of lament much of which is replicated in psalm 70. But I think it's important to realize that long ago thanksgiving and the lament were joined together, I believe, for a purpose to better represent and capture the breadth, the height and the depth of our experience of life and God's presence in all those experiences with us in both the good times and the hard times. So our text today is Psalm 40.

The psalm has been attributed to both Daniel and Jeremiah because both of those prophets got thrown into pits and the psalm begins with the psalmist talking about being in the pit. But it also echoes passages from Micah, Jeremiah and Isaiah and the text attributes this to David himself who knew a thing or two about thanksgiving and lament. And yet most commentators – both ancient and modern suggest that this is also a psalm for the nation – it is a very public expression of faith. It is meant for the people, for the nation as a national thanksgiving and lament and see how it's used in the letter to the Hebrews in the tenth chapter. It's also meant for you and I as an individual expression of our relationship to God. So I would like you now to grab the Bible that is in front of you and turn to page 513 and what I'd like to do is work through this text with you and then explore its resonance in light of this being Martin Luther King weekend as we remember a latter day prophet of our own era and as we think about our life today together.

Psalm 40: I waited patiently for the Lord and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. Verse 1. 'Waited patiently' sounds like a very relaxed situation but the word patiently in The Hebrew has an intensity to it and Charles Briggs explains it in The Hebrew – it has a quality of driven-ness of complete attention. It's not the kind of waiting you might wait for the train to come knowing exactly when it will. This is

the kind of waiting outside of a waiting room for surgery where you are waiting with every fiber of your being for the doctor to come out and tell you the results. This is the kind of waiting that a father might experience outside a maternity ward. Or to relate to the present month and the upcoming Super Bowl is the kind of waiting you might feel for a 48-yard field goal attempt. It's not passive – it has our full attention. I waited steadfastly intently for the Lord. That's how the psalm begins. The psalmist remembers the saving acts of God in the first three verses of this psalm. He made his cry to God and God drew him up from the desolate pit that is a metaphor for the place of non-being – the place where we are desolate from God. God drew him up from there out of the slimy bog – imagine being in a place where you just cannot get purchase because it's so slippery and your feet are constantly without purchase or hold – you can't move or walk. That is the imagery here. He drew me up out of that and set my feet upon the rock making my steps secured. The rock is where salvation happens in Old Testament Hebrew — it's a crag high about your troubles and the dangers below you – it's where you get the vista of 360 degrees – you're safe and secure on the rock. 'God is my rock and my salvation' how many times do we read that in the Old Testament?

Or think of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount 'build your house upon the rock' – and this is what God has done for the psalmist and not only that Verse 3: And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the LORD. That's the public aspect of his praise – the praise is personal for what God has done for him but not private. The psalmist will make his song of praise in the great congregation. Now we have what I call a sermon verse – this is 4 & 5: Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, do not turn to the proud to those who go astray after false Gods, literally lies. You have multiplied O God your wonderful deeds and good intentions, thoughts, your good plans toward us. None can compare to you were I to proclaim and tell of them. There's no limit to the good God accomplishes. And now verse 6 through 8 a different deeper understanding of worship and praise – not external, but internalized. 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin

offering you have not required.’ Hear the echo from Micah 6: What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God. It’s the same message we find from the psalmist in this psalm: Then I said here I am – think Isaiah chapter 6 – here I am Lord, send me. I delight to do your will oh, my God. Your law is in my heart. There’s Jeramiah 34: Days are surely coming says the Lord — now make a new covenant with the children of Israel. Not like the old one which they forsook for I will write my law upon their hearts and they shall know me from the least of them to the greatest. That’s what Jeramiah says and that is what we hear here in verse 8: Your law is within my heart.

Verse 9-11 is a testimony. It’s like this person has come to church and is doing a testimony in worship about what God has done. ‘I’ve told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see I have not restrained my lips as you know, oh Lord, I have not hidden your saving help within my heart.’ His faith is personal, not private. ‘I have spoken of your faithfulness; I have not concealed your steadfast love from the great congregation. Do not withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and faithfulness keep me safe forever.’ That is the psalm of thanksgiving and praise that we are given at the beginning of Psalm 40, and now we turn to the second half which begins at verse 12. And now we’re in the present – he remembered God’s saving acts in the past and in the present moment he is going to testify to that but now he is talking about his present/future situation.

Verse 12: ‘For evils have encompassed me without number. My iniquities have overtaken me’. Think about how sooner or later the consequences of the poor decisions that we make can come home to roost. ‘There are more of them than hairs of my head – my heart fails me.’ And now the supplication verse, Verse 13: ‘Be pleased, oh Lord, to deliver me’ how humble, how courteous a way to address God. Let us be pleased oh Lord and deliver me; make haste to help me. Let all those be put to shame and confusion and those who seek to snatch away my life.’ This person has enemies and adversaries. ‘Let them be turned back; let those be appalled because of their shame.’ And now at the end of the psalm the psalmist is thinking about others

particularly of those who have heard his testimony – ‘But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. May those who love your salvation say continually, ‘Great is the Lord!’ That is the psalmist’s prayer with such humility. Verse 17: ‘As for me I am poor and needy but the Lord take thought for me. You are my help; do not delay oh, my God.’

As we enter another decade and another election cycle we are going to go through all of that again. As we remember Martin Luther King Jr. on this weekend it’s important to know what it is we’re waiting for because it’s not what we’re waiting for, it’s who. I’ve lived through 16 presidential elections in my life. The second and the third are the ones most vivid to me today – 1960 and 1964. The reason is in 1960 I saw John F. Kennedy 50 feet away standing on top of a firetruck outside Swarthmore, PA. Back in 1960 my dad was driving me in the station wagon to the A&P outside of town and we got up on the hood and we watched Kennedy speak to us. The next day dad put a 5” campaign button on me before I went to kindergarten – great big ‘Kennedy for President’ and I walked to school and got half way down the block and Chris came out of his house and said, “What’s that?” and I said, “We’re voting for Kennedy for President!” And he thought about that for a minute and he didn’t look very happy. The next morning, he came out of his house with a 5” button that said ‘Nixon for President!’ And so Chris and Clint with Kennedy and Nixon buttons – we went to kindergarten of all places. God help our teacher. The second election I remember most vividly is 1964 and that’s because I shook the hand of President Lyndon Johnson which were gigantic, meaty hands. The helicopter landed on the field at Swarthmore College and the whole town was out along picket fences. I remember the President, a big guy, coming out from underneath the wind of the rotors and working his way down that picket fence. When he came to me, he put his hand down and I shook hands with the President of the United States of America. I was nine years old and I won’t forget that.

But what I want to talk to you about today is what happened between those two elections between 1960 and 1964 and how they relate to this man we remember today

— Martin Luther King Jr. When I was born Rosa Parks decided to sit down on the bus because she was tired and by the time I was two years' old there was Little Rock, and by 1960 a whole lot of other people were sitting down. Black Americans were sitting down in places like soda fountains at Woolworths and Greensboro, NC. In fact, so many came to sit down that no matter how hard they tried to say they were breaking these laws more would come in and sit down. There was a Civil Rights movement happening in this nation. In 1961 Interstate bus travel – the Freedom Riders rode the Greyhound busses and used the facilities reserved for white people in the waiting areas and the restrooms. There was a new spirit at work in our land and it was polarizing back then as I remember growing up the preacher's son in Swarthmore Presbyterian Church. 1963 saw the very nexus of the Civil Rights movement concentrate at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist church in Birmingham, AL and a fiery young preacher named Dr. Martin Luther King. King had a PhD – he studied the non-violent strategy of Gandhi and he was leading a very concerted effort to change the fabric of our nation and to finish the work that was begun in the Civil War — the full Emancipation of Black Americans that were now repressed by legislation like the Jim Crow laws that had swept our nation in the 1890s. The nexus of all this was Birmingham and every day from the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, marches would go forth. The Commissioner of Police of that town, Bo Connor, authorized the police to use fire hoses and German shepherds on the marchers – which they did – even when King sent out children in May of 1963. Governor Wallace tried to stop two students from entering the University of Alabama in June of that year. But in August of '63 a march on Washington was coming together.

My dad and many other white Protestant ministers who were following the Civil Rights movement were caught up in the power of this and in August I remember dad telling me, “We're going to go to Washington - me and a bunch of other people from the Philadelphia area.” The Session wasn't too happy about that as dad told me. It was a polarizing issue back then. My dad went to Washington and was there on the steps of the Lincoln memorial when King made his famous ‘I have a dream’ speech. King's purpose in making that speech was to talk about American freedom and he

used Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address to remind Americans what happened in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation, but his real text went back to 1776 ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal,’ and King began his speech by saying ‘I want to speak to the meaning of that statement.’

King’s speech could have been angry, scathing and sarcastic – it was anything but that. It was filled with agape love that not only lifted the speech but all Americans with it. “I have a dream...” he said, “that one day on the red hills of Georgia that the sons of slaves and sons of slave owners will sit down together at the table in brotherhood...I have a dream where one day little black boys and girls will be holding hands with little white boys and girls...I have a dream that my four little children will one day be judged by this nation not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character...I have a dream that all God’s people – black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics [and women, and our LGBTQ brothers and sisters] – that all God’s people will one day join hands together and sing ‘Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we’re free at last.’” That was then and the power of those words ripple down to this present moment that we live in today.

I remember dad coming home that August. He was elated. He was filled with joy – and yet less than two weeks later on a Sunday morning, a bomb went off at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist church and killed four little girls who had come to Sunday school early that day. And two months after that the President of the United States, John Kennedy, was gunned down in Dallas. Indeed, Psalm 40 is what we need for that world and this – joy of thanksgiving and the lament as well. That seems like ancient history for some of us – but not all of us – half a century ago. But here we are at the cusp of another election cycle 2020, and our nations seems to be once more deeply polarized as our nation was in the 60’s. And I know many people are lamenting the anticipation of this presidential election cycle – they’re worried about it. They’re not looking forward to it. And that’s why I want to remind us today that there is still reason to rejoice and to remember who God is and what God has done. Consider – like the

psalmist does – remember what God has done in and for this nation. It's amazing. Jesus said the truth will set you free. We need to remember the truth of what God has done in America. It seems to me we also need to remember what God will do in and for our nation. Why? Because God is merciful and just, and God's steadfast love endures forever. And that's why the psalmist places his trust in God and that's why we should too.

Friends it's not what we're waiting for its whom. And so whatever button your dad puts on your sweater this year, I want you to remember this: We all belong to God. We're all God's children. King I says there's some good even in the worst of us, and the best of us. And when we discover that we are less prone to hate our enemies. I think that can be us as we go into this time together and what I know can be us is the prayer that we all say: Your kingdom come, your will be done. Amen.