

## “Out of the miry bog”

*Psalm 40:1-11 (January 15, 2023)*

Remember that dump of snow we had at Christmas? And then again a few days later! Lindsay and I were out for a walk soon after that and came across a person who was stuck. “Need a push?” we asked.

One of our neighbours had already come to help. We could tell he was irritated. “My wife heard this roaring engine,” he complained, “and I opened the door to the smell of hot rubber. This guy doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“Just because you drive a truck doesn’t make you invincible,” he said, purposely within earshot of the driver. I felt badly for that poor fellow. Because we’ve all been stuck.



Many years ago, I took my tricycle out for a ride on the sidewalk after a snowfall. I don’t know what I was thinking! I got stuck in front of the neighbours. And all I could manage to do was sit there helplessly, and wail, until she came out and lifted me up, and sent me back home again.



Our sermon today is rooted in the words of Psalm 40. I don’t often preach on the Psalms, but today’s passage struck a resonant chord.

“I waited patiently for the LORD,” it begins. Now I don’t always wait patiently. The Psalmist waits for the Lord to answer his prayer. As we read further we discover why: The Psalmist was *stuck*. But God has intervened to rescue him.

“He heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog.” (v. 2) That’s a vivid image, don’t you think? A desolate pit. A miry bog. What comes to mind when you think of those things?



This is a picture of a lake in Jasper National Park. It seems so tranquil and lovely. But don’t be deceived. At one end of the lake there is a sign that reads: “Danger! Quicksand. Do not approach.” When I saw that I was taken aback. Who knew there could be quicksand in the mountains?

My only other acquaintance with quicksand has come from television, as part of a storyline where someone accidentally stumbles into it and begins to sink. So they’re in danger of losing their life – unless someone comes to rescue them. Deeper and deeper they go, and time is running out. It’s all very dramatic.

Quicksand is a thing of mythological proportions. Imagine someone being swallowed by the mud. Sinking helplessly into the earth. The more they struggle, the more they sink. The Psalmist uses this image to speak figuratively about his predicament.



In his book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a 17<sup>th</sup> Baptist preacher, named John Bunyan, writing from prison, tells an allegorical tale that describes a Christian's journey through life. At one point, Christian falls into a bog, named the "Slough of Despond."

He "wallowed for a time," Bunyan writes, "being grievously bedaubed with the dirt, and Christian, because of the burden that was on his back, began to sink in the mire."



Artist: Rachael Robinson Elmer

This Slough is a collection of "many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place," Bunyan writes.<sup>1</sup> Fears. Doubts. Discouraging apprehensions. They can swallow you up! Do you experience any of these things? Have *you* felt trapped in a Slough of Despond?



What is it that "bogs you down" in your journey of faith? Could it be a bog of complacency? Or maybe it's the mire of self-loathing, the discouragement that comes from feeling that we never quite measure up.

We can be caught in the quagmire of racism, living with resentments toward others. Looking at them with biases we've inherited from the past. We can be trapped in a world of untruth, perpetuating one false thing after another, until we hardly know what is right. We get sucked in, and keep digging ourselves deeper, in a world of lies. Or we get bogged in conflict, feeling the only way to respond is to retaliate. We can't think of a more life-giving response.

We get stuck in our *sin*, controlled by powers that are so much bigger than we are. You don't think sin is powerful? The apostle Paul, ever the realist, writes: "I do not do the good I *want*. The evil I *don't want* is what I do. ... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me?" (Romans 7:8, 19-20, 24)

Who indeed!



The more we struggle, the more we sink. Until we let go of the idea that "I can manage this on my own." We can only escape with the help of God! Ask any AA member about their need for some higher power.

And we do it with the help of others – which is one of the ways God chooses to work in the world. Through the lives of *others*.

It's why we have a *church*. So God can work through our hands and feet and hearts and lives. And to remind us that we are never alone in the struggles that we face. We are part of a loving, caring, healing community. When the church is at its best, that is what it is.



Perhaps you've heard this story – about a man who was trapped in a flood. He scrambled up on the roof to escape the raging torrent and prayed that God would come to help him.

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<sup>1</sup> John Bunyan, "The Pilgrim's Progress," Penguin Books, 1965, p.45-46.



In a little while a motorboat came along, and the folks on board offered to transport him out of danger. But he said, “No thanks. I’m waiting for God to rescue me.”

A little while later a helicopter arrived. They called through a loudspeaker, hoping to airlift him to safety. “No thanks,” the man shouted. “The Lord is my helper.”

A little while after that, the skies opened and the Lord Almighty appeared. “What are you doing here?” God asked the man. “Why I’m waiting for you to save me,” he replied. “But I *already* sent you a motorboat. And a helicopter. What more do you want?”

Our help comes from the Lord, but often it comes by way of human agency. If we want to be rescued, we have to *accept* God’s help.

And let me just pause there to say that that is not an easy thing for many of us to do. We are proud people. And we can be embarrassed to admit our need – even to ourselves, let alone to others.

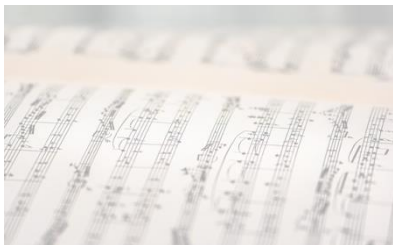
“Everything alright?” someone asks. “Oh yes,” we say. Fine thank you.” We’re eager to project our strength and competence. And we hesitate to let others see how much we’re struggling.



“God drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure,” writes the Psalmist. (v. 2) God rescues us. God pulls us to safety. Gives us solid ground to stand on. “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.”



“He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.” (v.3) Singing is a natural response to God’s saving presence in our lives. When we sing, we use our voices to express feelings of wonder and gratitude and desire that arise within our hearts. We can’t keep those things inside us; we have to speak them, feel them, *sing* them!



Music is one of those beautiful gifts that allows us to praise our loving, saving God. “He put a new song in my mouth,” the Psalmist writes. “Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.”

It’s a *new* song, because God has intervened and grasped our lives – and this is a new work. An amazingly fresh encounter with the God who came to the world in Jesus. And healed the sick. And set the captive free. And – just so you know there’s no pit too deep, no bog too miry – God raised Jesus from death to life!

“Do you not know,” writes the apostle Paul, “that *all* of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death ... so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4) Each day we follow Jesus, we are being led into God’s new life.



God lifts us up, sets our feet on solid ground, inviting us to bear *witness* to God’s wondrous ways.

“I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; I have not restrained my lips .... I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation ....” (v. 10)

This is a singing, speaking, testifying faith! A faith that just can't keep quiet. Not drawing attention to *itself*, but pointing to the amazing work of *God*! Remember, I said at our anniversary that the church is not the star of it's own story? God is. We are witnesses to the presence and activity of a living God. Not just a God of years ago, but a God of here and now.

There's a place for *testimony* in the church. For coming together to encourage one another. All it takes is for one person to say, “This week I have seen the Lord. And here's how it happened. And here's why I am thankful.”

That kind of sharing faith can be contagious. It is an encouragement for *all* of us. Especially if we're going through a hard time. It helps us to remember that God is working in our lives.

We heard that testimony on our Anniversary weekend, and it was powerful! We've heard it in our Bible Studies, when someone allows us to see their less-than-perfect lives, where God's love and grace are present nevertheless.

We see it every time a person is baptized, or joins the community of faith, and stands up before the congregation to say, in their own simple words, how God is real to *them*. Which opens a whole range of possibilities for how God can be real to *us* as well.

“I have not hidden your saving help within my heart. ... I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation.”



And that leads me to one last thing. At first it may seem a bit of a puzzle. You see, the beginning of the Psalm is one continuous song of thanksgiving for God's deliverance.

But then, it *shifts*! And the Psalmist begins to pray. “Be pleased, O Lord to deliver me; O LORD, make haste to help me.” (v. 12a, 13) Has no progress been made? Has the Psalmist gone right back to the very beginning? Has God's deliverance been forgotten?

Life is full of ups and downs. And the Psalmist knows it. We no sooner get pulled out of one pit, then we find ourselves in another, waiting for the Lord. It's not that we've forgotten God's salvation. Don't think the Psalmists' faith is wavering. It's not.

On our journey through life, it is easy to fall into the bog. Maybe you're stuck there, even this morning. But you are not alone! Our loving, saving, God is with us – to deliver us. Thanks be to God!

