

“The Glad News of Deliverance”

Rev. Will Malambri

Psalm 40:1-10

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When I think of miry bogs and desolate pits I think of childhood days spent with guns and my father on the edge of a swamp. I’m sure that surprises you and I know that *is not* how the Psalmist meant for these phrases to be heard, but those are the images that come to mind. Cool, winter afternoons in eastern North Carolina, strolling alongside a swamp, waiting for ducks to fly over. One duck would appear, then a couple, then several more. We’d watch them fly over, I’d take a shot, and watch them...keep flying. It would be evident that I needed more practice so the next day we’d be off to the desolate sandpit aiming at cans and, like the ducks, few of the cans were ever endangered. Good memories of a city boy and his father in the miry bogs and desolate pits of the country.

My memories of those days also include the evenings. I remember how quickly darkness would descend on the swamp. We would be out there well before dusk, but as soon as the last ducks passed us it became eerily dark. We’d have to walk carefully back to the car. We could hardly see to make our next step. What a few minutes earlier had been a strangely curious landscape with swamp and knotty cypress trees had now become spooky—the perfect setting for a horror film. I’d listen for chain saws and look for men in masks as we made our way back to the car. I waited to unload my gun, just in case, even though it would not be of any help with me at the trigger. By the time we were in the car the sky was pitch black, my teeth were chattering, I was ready to get back to the house, have a warm dinner, and talk about how nearly I came to getting a duck.

That was many years ago and now the miry bogs and desolate pits I’m around are more metaphoric, but no less real. Like the dark, scary feelings on the other side of dusk, I sometimes join others and am sometimes joined in the swampy land, the places of uncertain steps and dark shadows.

I brace myself whenever one of you begins, “I just wanted you and Tom to know.” Frequently the next words are “tests” or “scans” or “treatment plan.” Sometimes

you say, “I came by to talk about something else, but since I’m here...” and I know what follows will not be small talk. Relationships fracturing. Egos bruised. Financial stress. Hollow, empty feelings. Serious, frightening diagnoses. Loneliness. Grief. These are the moments when we need priests; moments when we want someone to guide us out of the miry bogs, through the dark shadows, past the knotty trees, and onto solid ground. Moments when, at the very least, we want someone in the desolate pit beside us.

I never had to announce my anxiety when Dad and I were in the swamps. I never had to point out the strange sounds and dark places that made me a little jumpy. Dad isn’t the type of father who leaves children in frightening situations to teach them some odd life lesson. So long as he was in the vicinity, gun loaded, and moving us toward solid ground, I was confident that we would be fine.

And of course we always were. When we finally returned to a warm dinner and secure home, our tales were not of fear or dark shadows, but of near-misses and lucky ducks. Our joy was not in having shot or in having survived, but in having spent time together. Togetherness, I think, is one of the ways the Lord delivers us.

The Psalmist does not say the source of his troubles. He does not indicate what is his miry bog or desolate pit. All we know is that the ground beneath his feet was shaky and that the Lord delivered him, the Lord drew him out, and now he is filled with a new song. The fearful dirge he moaned when he was deep within the bog has been replaced by a joyful song of praise.

So we don’t know what his troubles were, nor do we know how the Lord delivered him, only that he has been delivered. We know this because he will not stop himself from telling the glad news.

This past Wednesday evening some of us looked at several of the healing stories in the Gospel According to Matthew. We observed that Jesus often healed by touch, never by magic wands or incantations. We also observed that Jesus’ healing was frequently about restoring community, not just health. Jesus heals the leper, then tells him how to be ritually cleansed, so that he can return to the community. A bleeding

woman is healed, a dead daughter restored to life, both now able to return to those who love them.

There was the story of Peter's mother-in-law bedridden with a fever. Jesus touches her, she is healed, then immediately rises to serve him. We chuckled about this one: Nothing ever changes—the moment the illness is gone, the woman is back to serving.

We then talked about the deeper meaning. Jesus did not need Peter's mother-in-law to clean the house or bake a cake, he wanted her to serve him as a disciple. He wanted her to participate in spreading the glad news of her deliverance.

Note the similarity between Peter's mother-in-law's response and the response of the Psalmist. Delivered from her sickbed, she rises to serve God. The Psalmist, delivered from his miry bog, delights in doing God's will. Neither grabbed a calf or a ram and headed to the altar. Their deliverance, their thanksgiving, did not inspire sacrifice, but service. Like Micah, they had learned that the Lord's delight is not in burnt offerings, but in doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. They knew in their heart that spreading the glad news of deliverance is sometimes done through songs of praise, sometimes through words of adoration, and often through service unto God.

I marvel at the ways many of you have coped with the miry bogs of your lives. Facing tragedy or diagnoses for which no one can prepare, you acknowledge your fear, are honest that this is not how you had hoped to spend the coming months, then resolve to make the best of it. Usually you are not putting on some stiff upper lip, some façade denial. Instead, you affirm life and proclaim God through your quivering lips. You demonstrate a profound confidence that God is still in the business of deliverance.

And as I listen to you while you stand on uncertain ground, shaky, unknown ground, dark-shadowed ground, a familiar tune comes to you. It's a tune you learned from others along the way. At first it is faint, but slowly it builds as you recall what God did for someone else or has done previously for you. The new song grows louder as a little light begins to dispel the darkness. You start to sense that you are not in the miry bog by yourself. You hear the melody and recognize that you are standing with the

Father who never leaves his child to face her fears alone. You hear the chorus and realize that you are standing with the saints whose own glad news of deliverance gives you courage. You reach the height of the crescendo and see that you are standing with the Lord who wants nothing more than to save you from the pit. There you stand with the Source and the recipients of deliverance and glad news springs from your lips.

The new song, which is really one for the ages, reminds you that whatever your miry bog may be, you are not in it alone.

And this, I think, is what makes the Psalmist and Peter's mother-in-law and so many of you dead on about how to respond to the glad news of deliverance. Togetherness is one of the ways the Lord delivers us. Whether in the miry bog yourself or joining another in it, when we are together in the messes and heartbreaks of our lives, we begin to rehearse that new song of praise. We recall the ways God has been active in the past and anticipate what God may do in the present and future. Not in some trite way that trivializes the reality of pain, the misery of brokenness, but in powerfully honest ways that demonstrate God's work in the past is indicative of what God will do in the future. We do not act in a manipulative way that seeks to control what God will do, but in trusting, hopeful ways that acknowledge God's grace is often surprising. When we gather to rehearse that new song of praise, we recall, as have our ancestors since Abraham, the mighty works of salvation that have never ceased.

Many of you knew Betty Smith. When it became obvious that she would die from cancer, she gathered her family for a healing service at her house. She did not expect that her body would be freed from cancer in this life, but Betty assured all of us that her deliverance would come. She faced her death, her miry bog, with courage and hope; her main concern being for those she'd leave behind. She knew, deep within her soul, the song for the ages—that God will deliver us—and she was more than willing to teach us the tune.

May we join Betty and saints like her in singing of God's deliverance until the song is deep within our soul.