

Sermon 2025-08-24 – Psalm 40:1-10 (+ Luke 17:11-19)

Welcome to re-orientation!

It's week 5 in our 6-week short series on Psalms and the Rhythm of Life, with the theme of Orientation, Disorientation, and Reorientation. So we got ourselves oriented, and have made it through a time of disorientation, and now here we are, ready to reorient ourselves. And yes, many of us may still be experiencing disorientation, with more despair than hope, and the world is a pretty broken place right now.

But let's try to imagine we have come through some difficulty and things are looking up. Maybe you've gotten that job you have been hoping for and will be able to pay the rent. Or maybe you have finally recovered after a long illness.

God has pulled us out of the miry bog at the bottom of the pit. I love that imagery. Some bible translations of this verse mention mud and filth. The suction was just pulling us down. Maybe we could get one foot out of the bog, only to have the other foot sink even deeper. And just imagine the smell! We tried so hard to get unstuck and climb out, but we just couldn't do it on our own. We probably didn't wait "patiently" either, and some scholars say that a more literal and faithful translation is to say "I waited and waited". Either way though, our prayers were answered.

Note that the psalmist now says "God heard my cry". That means that they asked God for help. They didn't wait around for God to notice them, whether patiently or not. Why does that matter though? After all, God knows what we need. We believe that God loves us, and gives us gifts by grace alone. We don't have to earn those gifts, and we wouldn't be able to anyway.

So why do we need to ask God for help? First, as a practical matter, God often works through other people, and while God is all-knowing, nobody around here is. So unless we ask someone for help, they probably won't know what we need, or may give the wrong kind of help. More importantly though, when we ask God for help, we are, perhaps finally, admitting that we can't solve our problem alone. We are acknowledging that we really do need God. And if we do so in some public way, we might teach someone else that it is ok to ask for help too.

Asking for help is a hard thing to do in our society. We are all supposed to be able to figure things out on our own, to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We tend to look down on people who are stuck in their own miry bogs, such as the poor, homeless, or those who are asking for handouts on the street outside Walmart. Yet few, if any, of us here have ever been in their situation and probably have no understanding how hard it really is to escape from poverty. Who is listening to their cries?

So back to our reorientation. God has heard our cries, whether silent or aloud, and now we are free!

Think of the relief, or joy, or even euphoria you might feel when a difficult ordeal is finally over. We want to revel in our new reality, to celebrate, to shout our good news to the world. Or, at least share it with our friends on social media.

Yet, who do we give credit to for our good fortune? Are we proud of ourselves for finally coming through? Maybe we just think it was random good luck. Perhaps our help came in the form of someone else. Yet, we trust that all good comes from God, even if it comes through another person.

So we are called to give thanks and praise to God. This is much more than just saying a casual “thank God that’s over” before moving on. This psalm tells us to speak of God’s faithfulness and salvation, and to not restrain our lips. This is good news that is meant to be shared. We literally can’t thank God enough, or too many times. Just like asking for help, giving God thanks reminds us that it was God who helped in our time of struggle.

God wants us, not just our offerings of thanks. We are called to meaningful action. God’s world is full of suffering. God’s people are hurting. We can show our true thanks by letting God work through us to help pull others out of the mire. We can stand against injustice, and against the lies that tell us to fear anyone who is different. Alone, we might not be able to do much to directly help someone. But, we can make our voices heard. We can remind people that Jesus tells us to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and care for the sick. We can show others what it means to love our neighbor.

You’ve probably heard the saying that “whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”. Right? Well, that saying is probably not literally true in many cases. Most of the time, if something does us actual damage, whether it is a physical or mental illness, injury, or harm done by others, we never quite come back as good as we were before. We might gain immunity from a particular disease, but if we actually get sick there’s always a cost to gaining that immunity. At least for me, this seems to be even more true the older I get.

I have heard a different version of that saying on the radio that says: “whatever doesn’t kill you... mutates and comes back to try again”. It’s meant to be funny, but that’s at least partly because it is accurate. This is what the world is really like. This is how evil works. Evil never

really goes away. It always tries something new. Or something old that too many have forgotten about.

Once our feet are once again on solid rock, we know that there's no going back to that childlike time of initial orientation. Yet, our faith can be strengthened by difficult experiences. We are no longer naive children wandering through the world oblivious to the pain around us, if we ever really were. We do not have to hide from suffering, whether our own or that of others, because we have learned that suffering can come to an end and the evil does not have the last word. Hopefully we also learned to ask God and others for help, and to give praise and thanks to God even before help is received. Hopefully we are now more willing to offer real help to others who need it.

As long as we live in the "not yet" time of God's earthly Kingdom, there will be other times of disorientation. Sometimes these difficult times may not end during our lifetime. Yet God is always with us, in both the good times and the bad. May we keep God in our hearts, and sing God's praises, and work God's love for others, through all times, so the world might know of God's wondrous deeds.

Amen.