

August 24 – Psalm 40

One of the nice things about serving in a new place is I can retell some of my stories. The story of how I came to leave medicine and become a pastor is a story I used to tell a lot – it's one of the defining stories of my life. I've got the short version that at least some of you probably have heard.

The longer version has evolved as I've thought more about what all led up to it. And honestly, after over two decades of reflection, I'm still not entirely sure what exactly caused me to get so desperately burnt out. Or even if it was burnout or depression. Probably both.

At any rate, in 1997, after a year in Kansas and three years in Rochester MN for Daryl's education, we returned to Nebraska and I went back to the practice I left when we moved. But all was not well with the practice, and it fell apart in 1999. I joined another group. Unlike the other jobs I'd had in medicine, the one I joined was the more traditional fee for service type practice.

Medicine is always stressful, but the added pressure of making the financial thing work changed the way I had to do things. I couldn't really practice in exactly the way I felt best about. The burnout may have already started a little bit before the change, but it really accelerated after that. I remember that New Year's Eve...the infamous Y2K year...and feeling about as hopeless and desolate as I ever have.

As the year went on, it got worse and in the end it didn't matter much if it was depression or burnout, it was becoming dangerous. After nearly a year the worst of it did lift, sort of inexplicably. I will say I think that was God.

Much of what I did to try to feel like I could continue in medicine was faith based – books I read, meditation, talking to a spiritual director, pastor, and briefly a therapist. The seminary idea really did seem to come out of the blue.

But it wasn't until I made the decision to fill out initial paperwork to start the seminary process that I finally felt some lasting relief. From there, although it was hard to see how it could ever work out, things one by one fell into place and in July of 2004 I turned in my pager and that fall started seminary.

During all that I was working on reading the Bible cover to cover. And this Psalm caught my attention – God drew me up from the desolate pit...only I think the translation I was using called it a slimy pit. Either way, that's what it felt like.

I was trapped in this miry bog and God pulled me out and set me on solid ground. Granted it involved a major life upheaval and we had to figure out how I could get a master's degree in Minnesota without uprooting the whole family. But to me it was clearly God leading the way. This Psalm pretty well captures what it felt like.

The Psalmist here writes of a dramatic rescue. Again, we don't get the back story – we don't know what sort of pit the Psalmist was in. But perhaps many of you have also been in a serious pit and come through. Maybe it was recovery from a serious illness...and it doesn't have to be a so-called miraculous recovery. The God given talents of health care professionals and the things scientists have learned about the body and medicine are also how God works.

Maybe you or someone you love got out of a toxic relationship. Or a toxic work environment and into a life-giving job.

It is of course a confession of faith to say that God rescued me. As I've said before, God most often works through other people. And that was certainly true for me, at least in part. You could leave God out of the equation altogether. It's our faith that leads us to credit God.

I like the way Lutheran pastor, speaker, and author Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it - "God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small."

After the Psalmist writes of God's rescue from the desolate pit, the rest of the Psalm goes on to tell us the proper response to God's deliverance.

When we get through some predicament...when we are pulled out of the slimy bog, it is a choice whether or not to believe God orchestrated it. It's perhaps more obvious when the solution turns out to be go to seminary and become a pastor. But it's still a confession of faith...this was God and not just me following my own heart.

Verses 4 through 6 is really a confession of faith...the Psalmist has already claimed that it was God who rescued him or her. Now the writer encourages trust in God and says that God has done so many wondrous deeds for us that there are too many to count. It's that experience of rescue that makes us able to trust that God will come through for us.

Then the last part of the Psalm tells us that we need to tell others what God has done for us. I think the importance of witnessing to what God has done might be the most important message of the Psalm.

In verse 6, the Psalmist tells us that God does not desire sacrifice and offering. In other words, it's not the rituals of faith that interest God. So, that seems a little odd...after all, God does spell out all sorts of sacrifices and offerings and holy days and rituals in the law given to Moses.

But this isn't the only place in the Bible where that comes up. Several of the Psalms say that as do several of the prophets.

I don't think what the Psalm is saying is that religious rituals and worship are bad. They're just hollow if our lives do not reflect our worship. The prophets condemn religious ritual when corruption and injustice and oppression of the poor is the way of life. Then religious practice is just hypocritical.

Here it's not so much that as it is to say religious ritual alone isn't enough. We are also called to be witnesses to what God has done for us. We're called to see the actions God has taken in our everyday lives...the ways God has pulled us out of the pit in ways dramatic or small. And then we're called to share that.

One of the criticisms of the church in our time is that it doesn't really make clear how God is real and present in our lives. Our rituals and worship are hollow if they're not backed by us living the way God wants and witnessing to what God has done in our own lives. A people who are convinced that God is faithful and acting in their lives will be a people better able to draw others in.

This is primarily a reorientation Psalm. It's a Psalm of Thanksgiving for help in trouble. Reorientation is not a return to the simple orientation faith of our childhood. Whatever we have been rescued from changes us forever.

Reorientation does lead us to a deeper faith – a faith that acknowledges that while the pain and sorrow are real, it's also a faith that reassures us that the despair and hopelessness in the midst of crisis is not the last word.

I would invite you to reflect on some of the pits you may have found yourself in – they don't have to be super-dramatic. Can you see how God worked to bring you through? If so, can you share that with someone? You don't have to try to convince anyone.

You can just say, like I have – I am convinced that God pulled me out of the pit.