

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

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Psalm 40: 1-11

Telling the Glad News

When Bishop William Willimon was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, he received a phone call one day from an irate father. The father fumed, “I hold you personally responsible for my daughter not going to medical school! Don’t you realize how impressionable kids that age are? Because of your sermons, she’s gotten it into her head to go to Haiti for three years and teach poor kids there.” Willimon responded that he knew who the man’s daughter was and that she did regularly attend worship at the chapel. But then he shifted the conversation. “You can’t put all the blame for this on me,” he told the father. “When she was a baby, did you take her to be baptized? And when she was growing up, did you take her to Sunday School?” The father replied, “Of course we did those things. We just wanted her to be a good person. We never expected anything like this!” (story quoted in *LectioAid*, vol. 10, number 1, Dec 2001-Feb 2002, p. 29).

So what do you think? Do you expect God to change your life – to re-arrange your plans, to transform you? Do you expect your faith in God and your presence here with other believers on Sunday mornings to do anything for you, to make any difference in your life?

I do. So did the psalmist of Psalm 40. He waited patiently for God to deliver him. He trusted God enough to believe that somehow his situation would change, that he could not be in the pit of desolation forever. And he wasn’t. God drew him up from the miry bog and set his feet upon a rock, and a put a new song in his mouth. God heard his cry. God saved him from his trouble. God transformed his life. The psalmist is not the same as he once was. He has a new song to sing. He has a new life to live.

In an interesting exploration of this psalm in the current issue of *Homiletics*, the writer talks about the soundtrack for living, and suggests that what happens in Psalm 40 is that the psalmist changed his tune. At the beginning, when he was in the pit, his life soundtrack was a dirge, a sad song, maybe something like *Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve Seen*. But after receiving God’s help, his song changed. Now he sings a song of

praise, a song of joy. God enabled him to interpret life differently -- and that's what God does for all of us. That's what our Christian faith is all about -- it helps us to interpret life with a different soundtrack – not necessarily always upbeat, but always with a joyous undertone. Because the pits of desolation are never a life-sentence. With God there is always release, there is always deliverance, there is always a new beginning.

Being delivered, however, is not enough in and of itself. Our personal stories of salvation, of healing, of deliverance, of rescue, of forgiveness, of transformation – are not meant to be private stories. They are meant to be shared -- they are meant to be made public. Because what God has done for us can be a sign of hope and possibility for someone else, and can be just what someone else needs to come to faith in God, or to have faith in God strengthened and confirmed. Hear again how the psalmist puts it: “He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.” We don't tell our stories to brag, or to put the spotlight on ourselves. We tell them because in the telling others can hear, and others can be touched, and others can be encouraged. What God has done for me, we say, God does for everyone -- what God has done at this time in my life God is doing all the time in the lives of others, too. Because that's who God is and that's what God does: God hears our cries, God saves and delivers us from the pits of desolation, from the miry bogs of life, makes our steps secure, and puts a new song in our hearts and in our mouths.

When something wonderful happens in your life, what do you do? We send out graduation and wedding and birth announcements to our families and friends, don't we? We have parties. We get on the phone and computer and share the news -- guess what? we say -- I got a promotion, I got engaged, I got a new car, I got a good report from the doctor, my kid made the honor roll, I passed my driving test, my team won the championship, I bought my first house, I was in an accident but didn't get hurt -- whatever the news, we share it with those we want to know. Something has happened that we want others to know about.

The same is true for us as a community of faith. The psalmist did not keep quiet. In fact, keeping quiet just wasn't an option. Because when God has delivered you from the pit, what else can you do but shout it out for all to hear. “I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord. I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your

faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.”

My faith is enriched because I know what God has done in some of your lives -- whether in the congregation or one on one, I have heard how God has delivered you, and because you have spoken of God’s faithfulness, I am encouraged in my own life of faith. It makes a difference in my life that I know what God has done for you, as well as what God has done for me. Addictions that have been overcome, broken relationships that have been mended, illnesses that have been healed, messes that have been cleaned up, shame that has been removed, bitterness that has been melted away, sadness that has been lifted, mistakes that have been corrected, destructive forces that have been conquered, problems that have been solved, troubles of every kind that have been faced head on and put to rest. When I look out at you, I see people who know what it is to trust in a God who hears and saves and transforms. I see people who know how to sing a new song. And that helps me to keep on trusting, and that helps me to keep on singing.

It’s my prayer that being here in this congregation with people who have been delivered and who can sing a new song helps you, too -- that your faith is enriched and strengthened by the experience and witness of those around you. I’m not sure I can think of a better reason to be here week after week than that -- to hear what God has done, to hear how God has changed our lives, to hear a new song being sung, to hear once again how God’s love has lifted us up.

And that’s what we’re going to do now -- I have asked two persons from this great congregation to tell the glad news of what God has done in their lives. Before they come forward, however, I want to have you listen again to our verses from Psalm 40, this time from a contemporary collection called *Psalms Now* by Leslie F. Brandt. May these words speak to us, and lead us, each in our way, to tell the glad news:

I searched long and shouted loud for God.
 It finally paid off. He responded.
 He reached into my pathetic emptiness
 and planted objective and purpose.
 Now I feel like singing;
 there is genuine meaning in my life.

And I can tell others about the
prominent place God holds in my heart.
Those who are thoroughly fed up
with the fly-by-night objectives
of this ephemeral existence,
who will look to their Creator
and seek out His will for them,
they also will find something to sing about.
There is love and concern in Him,
and meaning and purpose,
far more than one can possibly imagine.

Our God is not looking for genius;
He does not require great talent.
He is not charmed by our panic-ridden activity.
He simply asks for our faith and our obedience.
It was when He turned me from self-seeking
to follow His will for my life
that I discovered serenity and security.

Thus I am compelled to express in word and in deed
the glad news of God's love and concern
to anyone who will listen.
And the Lord knows
that I have honestly tried to do this.
My frailties and my failures are many,
but I have not cheated on this score.
I have proclaimed the salvation
that God offers to all.

Lyndon Steele told me this morning that at the Martin Luther King Jr. concert tonight at Severance Hall, the choir will be singing *Ain't a that Good News*. In way we're playing the same soundtrack here this morning, aren't we? For isn't it good news what God has done for us? Isn't it good news that God has drawn us up from the desolate pit, that God has reached into our pathetic emptiness, and given genuine meaning to our lives?

Isn't that good news? It is, friends, it really is. Let's listen now with glad ears to Terry Stills and Mary Lou Sneyd-Gillis as they share with us, in their own words, the glad news of what God's faithfulness has meant in their lives.