

Homilies for Lectionary Homiletics December 2010 – January 2011

Pastoral Implications: Psalm 40:1-11: Second Sunday after the Epiphany

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Published in LECTONARY HOMILETICS, Vol. XXII, Number 1, December 2010-January 2011.

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For the leader. A psalm of David.

I waited, waited for the Lord; who bent down and heard my cry, drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp, set my feet upon rock, steadied my steps, and put a new song in my mouth, a hymn to our God.

Many shall look on in awe and they shall trust in the Lord.

Happy those whose trust is the Lord, who turn not to idolatry or to those who stray after falsehood.

How numerous, O Lord, my God, you have made your wondrous deeds!

And in your plans for us there is none to equal you.

Should I wish to declare or tell them, too many are they to recount.

Sacrifice and offering you do not want; but ears open to obedience you gave me.

Holocausts and sin offerings you do not require; so I said, "Here I am; your commands for me are written in the scroll.

To do your will is my delight; my God, your law is in my heart!"

I announced your deed to a great assembly; I did not restrain my lips; you, Lord, are my witness.

Your deed I did not hide within my heart; your loyal deliverance I have proclaimed.

I made no secret of your enduring kindness to a great assembly.

(Below is the remainder of the Psalm)

Lord, do not withhold your compassion from me; may your enduring kindness ever preserve me.

For all about me are evils beyond count; my sins so overcome me I cannot see.

They are more than the hairs of my head; my courage fails me.

Lord, graciously rescue me!

Come quickly to help me, Lord!

Put to shame and confound all who seek to take my life.

Turn back in disgrace those who desire my ruin.

Let those who say "Aha!" know dismay and shame.

But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.

May those who long for your help always say, "The Lord be glorified."

Though I am afflicted and poor, the Lord keeps me in mind.

You are my help and deliverer; my God, do not delay!

- New American Bible.

Deep within all of us, in "the mud of the swamp" within our body, heart and mind, lies "a pit of destruction." However, this is not the end of the story. Within lies something deeper - "my cry," a deep cry for the Lord, waiting patiently for the Lord's "enduring kindness" to bend down and hear me, trusting the Lord will respond and bring me "loyal deliverance." This deeper cry within the swamp is also in all of us together as a human family. Psalm 40 is a witness to who we are as humans, made in the image of God yet fallen, loved and pursued by a jealous God. This God, who sent the prophets and came in Jesus, is loyal and faithful, has "plans for us" in relationship despite our swamp and pit of destruction. It is God who has given us our deeper cry, inner urge, and desire to be with the Lord who will "set my feet upon rock," steady my steps, and "put a new song in my mouth." "Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you," was how Ireneus in the early church described the cry.

In my ministry as a pastoral psychologist at a pastoral counseling center, I have met men and women, struggling in the mud of their inner swamps and their pits of destruction, crying out for deliverance,

often feeling forsaken by God, church, family and friends, and even by their own bodies, hearts, minds, and spirits. I have realized that there are many levels to these swamps that trap us making it difficult to escape. Some of my clients have temporary falls into the pits, suffering deep depression and anxiety, yet have resilience within and can avail of the strong support of family, friend, church community, and therapy. God's strength and love and acceptance helps them in a profound way.

Others have longer spells of entrapment and pain and need more time and support in climbing back out of their pits and swamps. It can be a battle and yet they do overcome their difficulties by seeking help. Still others have escaped into addictions of various forms in order to numb out the pain – alcohol, drugs, work, sex, gambling, food, shopping, and other ways. Somehow they all struggle on, trapped in the muddy pit and swamp yet hoping for a better way out - to feel salvation, redemption, acceptance, love, and forgiveness. They cry, groan, seek help, and relapse again and again. Some break out and are free, in recovery one day at a time, knowing they need support in many forms to keep recovery alive. Others have thought about suicide and are scared they could sink to a deeper in the swamp of desperation and act on these thoughts.

Still others have been trapped in these swamps for years from tragic traumas, even since childhood, becoming hopeless of ever escaping and being well and healed. The traumas have affected their development, leading to heroic attempts at coping as best they could, given their resources, and yet falling short of escaping the pit of destruction, often repeating the old patterns, getting caught in the slimy mud of the swamp, and having difficulty developing more adequate coping skills to manage the traumas. Some have actually tried options of escape like suicide attempts and some have succeeded, while others heroically hang on, feeling so desperate and worthless, unable to see any good in themselves, sometimes focused on caring for others, sometimes unable to think of anyone else, enveloped so deeply in their muddy swamp that self-destruction feels inevitable for them. Words of encouragement, even hopeful words from family and pastors, cannot reach them. In fact, they even feel that when a pastor or family member tries to encourage them with comforting words of Scripture, they become more discouraged and despairing because the depth of their pain and depression is not understood. They feel so alone and desperate. Their cry to God, church, and family is not being heard. Even God does not care or listen, they think and feel.

The pastor, friend, or pastoral therapist who helps most is the one who empathizes, is able to be with them in their despair, darkness, in their muddy pit, and is a presence, a human presence, a sign of God's presence, that they are not alone. Silent presence beyond words can be the sign to them that their cry has been heard, that they are not abandoned, forgotten, unloved. God is not afraid of our muddy pit of destruction. God came among us, is one of us, and knows the depths we can reach. The Epiphany is a sign to the whole world that God is here, in Jesus, and now, today, in Jesus' Spirit. This hope of something better, of "loyal deliverance" keeps all of us in our different experience of the muddy swamp, hanging on. God is fulfilling his promise of Psalm 40. God's "enduring kindness" is alive and present in the presence of the church. God's people are God's arms, legs, heart, mouth, comfort, silent empathic caring presence. Jesus is present in His Spirit in his church through his believers.

The call of Epiphany to the church is the call to allow The Spirit blow where it will, listening to the cry, of those who are closer to the top of the swamp, those who are deeper in the pit, or those who are really engulfed and trapped in the muddy swamp. God is with his people as Immanuel, Jesus, and the people of God are the Spirit's channel and instrument of "enduring kindness" to the world. Then, in patience, the people can wait and trust for "a new song" in our heart and individuals in pain can receive the Lord's "enduring deliverance."