

Psalm 40 ¹ I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. ² He lifted me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. ³ God put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and trust in the Lord. ⁴ Happy are those who make the Lord their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods. ⁵ You have multiplied, O Lord, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. ⁶ Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required. ⁷ Then I said, 'Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. ⁸ I delight to do your will, O God, my God; your law is within my heart.' ⁹ I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord. ¹⁰ 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 faithfulness from the great congregation. ¹¹ Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe for ever. ¹² For evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me until I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me. ¹³ Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me; O Lord, make haste to help me. ¹⁴ Let all who seek to snatch away my life be put to shame and confusion; let those who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace. ¹⁵ Let those who say to me 'Aha, Aha!' be appalled because of their shame. ¹⁶ But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, 'Great is the Lord!' ¹⁷ As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O God, my God.

Psalm 40

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"A New Song"

Rev. Amy Terhune

It is January 30, 1972, and a few sparse snowflakes filter down from the gray skies over Free Derry, Northern Ireland. Free Derry so named by the Catholic residents to make a statement. Behind the barricades and barbed wire that they've erected to keep out Ulster Troops and official British military, tension hangs in the air, mingled strangely with excitement. They're going to march. They're going to demand again a free, independent, united Ireland. In marked contrast to standard policy, the authorities have given them permission to march, as long as they don't try to march to Guildhall Square—the political center of Londonderry. They come anyway. What happened next was the subject of two separate investigations by the British government during the last quarter of the 20th century, and still today, the exact circumstances are unclear. What we do know is this: tear gas and water guns turned what was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration into chaos. And then soldiers fire into the crowd. When the smoke settles, thirteen people were dead, ten of whom were under the age of 30. Seventeen more were wounded. Nearly all the dead were shot in the back – an indication that they were fleeing the scene. At least two were killed while trying to help those who had fallen and were in danger of being trampled by the crowd.

In that crowd, Father Edward Daly waved a white handkerchief—a flag of surrender—as he escorted a victim to a nearby home to administer the sacrament of last rites to the dying. A news photographer captured the desperation in Father Daly's face—the terror, the grief—and that picture was seared across papers and TV screens worldwide. I showed it in the video just now. But right there

in Ireland in 1972, that photo found its way into the home of 11-year-old Paul Hewson in Dublin. Those dead are catholic. Hewson is protestant. But while that fact may have enabled some of his countrymen to belittle the bloodshed, the boy was sickened by the tragedy. Just 3 days later, February 2, 1972, in a retaliatory move, the British Embassy was bombed and burnt to the ground in Dublin. That boy felt caged in by violence and carnage, and he has never been able to shake those images from his mind. Even 51 years later, they haunt him still. It's not that he didn't move on with his life—he did. Today, he's known to the world as Bono, the lead singer of the rock band U2.

Rather than allowing himself to stay caged, Paul Hewson tapped into the feelings that those images stirred up and he began to put them down on paper in the form of music. But he still needed something besides vague disgust to tie his collection of music together, so he turned to what has tied his life together: He turned scripture. Ten years after the tragedy at Guildhall Square, U2 released their "War" album—a compilation of songs decrying the use of violence and hatred, and heavily laced with allusions to Isaiah, Micah, and the passion of Christ, to name a few. It was the first of their albums to achieve enormous acclaim and financial success. To close the album, they didn't write anything of their own. Instead, they turned to the words of our psalm this morning. "I will sing, sing a new song" became the prayer and the mission of U2. "How long to sing their song?" became the rally point and protest for millions and a challenge to the world to join in the new song of non-violence, open-mindedness, justice, and compassion. In the recording we heard this morning, you heard Bono bid the crowd at the concert 'good-night'. One by one, the instruments dropped out, until it was just the people who were left to sing and to ponder: How long? How long?

That question—how long, O Lord?—shows up in several psalms. Interestingly, however, it is not actually posed in Psalm 40. But it's a legitimate leap, a fair understanding of what's going on here. You see, the 40th Psalm is something of a rarity among Psalms. It defies categorization. Remember that the Psalms were the hymns of the ancient Hebrew people. They are the only hymnal Jesus ever knew. They were sung. As with our hymns, there are several different kinds of psalms. There are priestly psalms and royal psalms and wisdom psalms. But the bulk of the psalter is either praise psalms or complaint psalms, which are the similar in that they generally state a problem and entreat God's intervention. Complaint psalms spend a lot of time on the problem and not so much time on the praise, while praise psalms briefly recount the problem and spend a lot of time on the praise. Occasionally, the complaint gets lodged between two expressions of praise, but Psalm 40 is unique—it is the only one that begins with praise and moves into complaint—a desperate petition to God to get involved. Some scholars argue that it was once two different psalms, but many other scholars point out that the connection in language between the first 10 verses and the last 7 is too strong to be ignored.

For example, it begins "I waited patiently" but ends "do not delay, O Lord". So much for patience, I suppose. The Psalmist says, "Your good deeds are more than can be counted", but what does that mean in light of the fact that he is also surrounded by "evils without number"? The Psalmist declares with confidence, "Many will see and fear and trust in God" because of his new song, but then goes on to admit that "my inequities have overtaken me until I cannot see".

But lest you get the impression that this poor psalmist is simply regressing in faith, let me suggest that what we've got here is a case of real faith hitting the pavement to cope with real life. The psalmist recalls a past time of trouble and danger. He recalls how God stepped in, how things eventually worked out, how he came through it with deeper appreciation for God's love and care. Now he's fallen into the pit again. His enemies—which could be actual people or could be metaphorical for a present dilemma with disease, financial upheaval, or oppression—those enemies have closed in. He's afraid. He's struggling. He's suffering. And so, he looks to his own history. He

remembers so as to maintain his hope. He remembers the waiting even in the urgency. He remembers the deliverance even in the danger. He remembers the new song even as the clamor of turmoil gains volume. He grasps desperately to hold onto the vision as the scene gets murky. He is a person of faith sitting smack dab in the center of crisis. Sooner or later, most of us find ourselves in that pit for a time. It is the human condition.

But while it speaks to our personal experiences, I ponder it today because it speaks profoundly to the community of faith. Today, being Human Relations Sunday and the commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, that remembrance is vital. We remember to maintain hope. We remember how far we've come; how many great strides have been made. We remember how God has patiently guided and seized key opportunities to affect a more loving world.

But with Bono, we also remember that the pit is always there, and it's so easy to fall in. How long? Bono sings those words, wondering how long humankind will continue to mire itself in violence and bloodshed? How long can we keep hating each other when we've heard a new song of peace on earth goodwill to all? How long can we keep erecting barriers of distrust and suspicion of anyone who is different when all of us are children of the same God? How long will fear of difference override human decency? How long will it take humankind to respect one another, to be fair with one another, to take care of one another, to protect our planet, to truly live justly and civilly? How long will evil encompass us? How long?

In his *I Have A Dream* speech, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King spoke these words from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC:

"We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of segregation and injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children." [from "I Have a Dream" by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. August 28, 1963, Lincoln Memorial.]

Don't miss the inferences there. The urgency of Now. Quicksand and the solid rock. That's our Psalm. Dr. King knew what Bono and countless others have known. Regardless of what it says, nobody waits patiently when sinking in a miry bog! Psalm 40 is the urgent appeal. We know how perseverance pays off. We know what you've done in history, God! Do it again! Act today! Make the vision real. Put a new song in us, a new way, a new life!

But perhaps, before we can sing a new song, we must have new ears. Verse 6 reads like this: "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear." Let me tell you what it says in the Hebrew. Literally translated, the Hebrew texts says: "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have dug for me new ears." That image fascinates me. It alludes, of course, to the creation story, when God formed humankind out of clay. Don't take that too literally. Instead, look at the image. God is digging in the clay. The God of creation is still at work in us throughout our lives. Just as our cells constantly reproduce, old ones sluffing away, new ones taking their place, so God is constantly shaping us, guiding us, teaching us to hear and understand differently, shaping us to listen for the new song, the alternative reality, the Kingdom of God here and now.

To wait patiently is not to sink. To wait patiently for the Lord is to sing, to remember, to hope, to hold on, and most importantly, to work.

In his book *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians*, Tex Sample tells about a conversation he had with Don Bakely, who'd been in urban ministry most of his life. "In his early days, he pastored a church in urban Camden, New Jersey, and he had a no-nonsense secretary named Ella

who ran the front office. Now, Don Bakely tried hard to get out of his office and really connect with the gangsters and street people in Camden, and he especially wanted to reach a pretty notorious street thug Big Mart. One day he was sitting in his office, and he heard a commotion outside, profanity, shouting, a loud argument. It was between Ella and Big Mart. Big Mark had called Ella a vile and obscene name, and she wasn't having that. Pretty soon, Ella came tearing into Don's office demanding that he come throw Big Mart out.

"Don said, "Ella, I've been working for six weeks to get him in here. You want me to throw him out on the first day?" Then he told Ella how "Big Mart" had once been little Martin, a boy who watched his father beat his mother to death right in front of his eyes. Ella listened to the story quietly and when he had finished explaining the circumstances of "Big Mart's" youth, she didn't say a word. She just turned and walked out the door.

"When she returned 20 minutes later, Don was not sure what to expect, but she entered his office, crossed her arms, and stood there. "Well?" he finally ventured. "Well, I guess I'm going to have to learn how to get cussed out." she responded shortly, and she returned to her work. "And," said Don Bakely, "the ministry of that church began right there, right then." [3 ¶s adapted from Tex Sample, *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 160–162.]

The new song doesn't always sound the way we think it should, and new ears take some real adjustment. But if we aspire to make Dr. King's dream a reality, if we sense the urgency of participating in the reshaping of our world into God's Kingdom, then we must begin with our own pitfalls, our own assumptions, our own deafness, and trust them to the lifting and shaping of our Creator. What will you have to learn to impact your world? I don't know. How long will we sing the tired, worn-out song of violence, greed, and hopelessness? I don't know. But every morning is a resurrection; every choice is a chance at new life. I may feel like I'm up to my knees in the bog, but so help me God, I will not be afraid. I will sing a new song. Amen.