

**“Find your Jam”
Rev. Lynne Keel
1-15-17**

I love to write, which is a fortunate thing because we do a lot of writing as pastors. I haven't always felt that way, but somewhere in my journey through seminary, I learned that I could reflect and connect when putting pen to paper in ways that couldn't quite happen in my head. There was something about capturing all the undefined emotions and observations of my insides and then using this vast array of words to try to process, organize and express whatever was swirling around my head and my heart.

Because I enjoy this process so much, one would think that I have a blog and that I fill up journal after journal. Not so much. It's not that I don't love a good journal. I'm a sucker for those artsy, pretty journals with organic paper that you find at those boutique paper shops or journals that have been handcrafted out of leather like you see at arts and crafts festivals. I probably own something like 20 journals, and yet I have written on the first 2-3 pages of all of them and then I set them aside. I always feel so great after the process of journaling that I promise myself that I will definitely make it a daily discipline. It hasn't happened yet. And if someone 100 years into the future were to locate these journals and piece together their entries, they would think I have lived a complete disaster of a life. Because I only sit down and write in them when things are really, really bad.

On the flipside, there's Facebook. I don't post a whole lot on Facebook, but if one were to look at my life through the eyes of Facebook, it looks like I live a perfect and charmed existence. In Facebook world, the snow is beautiful, the vacations fabulous, the sunsets ethereal. In journal world, I wiped out on the ice, the kids fought the entire trip and it rains constantly. Of course both accounts are simultaneously misleading and absolutely true. Life contains both the pit of despair and the mountaintop high, but we seldom hold those two in tension so close together or utter them in the same breath.

That is why I have fallen in love with our Psalm for this morning, Psalm 40. Our common lectionary only recommended reading verses 1-11, but I opted to preach on the whole Psalm because it offers the whole life experience together, framed in the language that we, as people of faith, are invited to use. I invite you to read or listen to the reading of this Psalm, paying close attention to the movement as it opens with a hint of lament, moves to praise and thanksgiving and culminates back into lament and petitions. Read and listen for God's word to you today:

¹I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

²He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

³He 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.

⁴Happy 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 my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward 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 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 your 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 forever.*

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 those be put to shame and confusion who seek to snatch away my life; let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire my hurt.*

¹⁵*Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"*

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 my God.*

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Isn't that a lovely psalm? It is fast moving up to my top 5 favorite psalms, because it is so instructive and comprehensive. It invites us to bear witness about what is happening in our lives and put it into dialogue with our faith. I'll be honest, though, this psalm writer almost lost me when it opened with "I waited patiently for the Lord." Well good for you, psalmist. Patience is not my gift, and so at the top I was thinking this Psalm might be a bit beyond my pay grade. As I have aged, I think I've gotten better at patience which is to say that I now have the patience of a 10 year old rather than a 2 year old. But I still have a way to go. Anyone who has fervently prayed a prayer of desperation knows something about the unbearable waiting. Very rarely do we ever get an answered prayer on the spot. Some deeper digging into this text revealed to me that a more literal translation of the Hebrew is something like "Waited, I waited or Waiting, I waited," emphasis on waiting with nothing about actual patience. This made me feel much better. Waiting on God is something I think we can all relate to and thankfully patience doesn't seem to be a prerequisite for us to be faithful in the waiting.

Rather than dwelling on the waiting, the psalmist seems content to move immediately to praise of God's deliverance. Verse 2: "He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure." And then in Verse 5: "You have multiplied your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us...were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted." While the psalmist lacked computers to count all these deeds and collect them as verifiable data, the author is making a powerful statement about the sheer magnitude of the ways God has worked and moved in his or her life. This feels like one of the most important parts of the psalm to me.

By most accounts, 2016 was a brutal year for so many reasons. So many cancer diagnoses, deaths, broken relationships, ugly statements and behavior. It was a toxic year for so many people that I

encountered, including myself. What worries me about this constant stream of negativity is that we have gotten really good at complaining and lamenting and have gotten out of the practice of praising. Having been in conversation with people in the service industry or helping professions, they have told me that very few people give compliments for good service anymore but will angrily and aggressively make a long list of complaints when something wasn't satisfactory.

I'm no stranger to receiving or making complaints myself as exhibited in my journaling habits, so I wonder where we could all learn something from the psalmist. Perhaps we could do a better job of taking note of the many gifts and blessings in our lives and offering praise and thanks to God for those gifts. As we open our mouths or pick up our pens to make a complaint, how might we pause to reframe the moment and think about how God has delivered us from the many pitfalls of our lives?

I've been a little obsessed lately with the soundtrack of the Broadway musical "Hamilton," and there's a refrain that Eliza Hamilton sings: "Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now." She sings this in the midst of the American Revolution which we can look back upon and see through rose colored glasses, but I'm sure things felt pretty negative and dark for our Founding Fathers while preparing for war. Yet, she was able to focus on the possibilities and blessings rather than the hardships.

The truth is, here in 2017, we are so fortunate in almost embarrassing ways. We have access to resources and possibilities unlike any previous generation. There are gadgets and machines that do things that I never could have dreamed of as a kid. And we've had access to things like public education, law enforcement, and healthcare for so long that we completely take it for granted. This was especially apparent to me coming back from Haiti where mothers carried cinder blocks on their heads on a two hour hike just so their kids could have a shelter for school. Haitians feel no sense of entitlement to education, health and safety like we do. So often, we are sitting on a gold mine and complaining about it. The psalmist sets an example for us in this morning's text to tell our stories, remembering to give God praise where praise is due. To do that, we have to pause, look around and pay attention to how lucky we are to be alive right now.

This is not to say that there isn't a place for lament or complaining. Clearly, in order to offer praise to God for being drawn out from the pit, one must name the pit, describe the miry bog, list all the iniquities that are more than the hairs on this poor Psalmist's head. That is why I decided to share the whole Psalm this morning, because we cannot understand the whole story of God's deliverance without the lament. God's story of salvation only becomes powerful when we name the depth of the crisis from which we were delivered. And yet the food that we live on in the midst of the crisis is the story of salvation we tell in a song of praise, or as the psalmist says, a new song.

So what would your new song be for 2017? My 14-year-old, Gabbie, does this thing when a favorite song of hers starts playing. Her face lights up and fingers start snapping, she starts swaying and she announces to everyone standing nearby, "This is my jam!" There is just something about a song that can capture your spirit exactly in the moment. So our first invitation this morning from the psalmist would be to find your jam. Think about your life story and name the ways that God has delivered you. I guarantee you that when you start listing them, the list will grow longer than you realize. What pits have you inhabited and what had to happen for you to ascend out of that miry bog? I think it is important to name the lament and the salvation back to back just as the Psalmist does. Don't follow my example and name one thing in a journal and another thing on Facebook 6 months apart. Put them together, and that is the new song of praise God has put in your mouth.

The second invitation would be to share your whole story, to sing your new song of praise publicly in the company of the congregation. Share it in your Sunday School class, circle group, or with anyone who will listen. The Psalmist writes, “I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips...I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.” The psalmist feels it is not enough to journal about it or quietly share it with our closest friends. We are called to sing our new songs in the presence of the congregation so that all might hear and respond in praise.

While that sounds a little terrifying, I think the psalmist is spot on for a couple of reasons: to share the entirety of our stories publicly is instructive, inspiring, healing and it strengthens our relationships with each other. At any given time, the inhabitants of these pews are experiencing a time of great blessing or great sorrow or something in between. When we share our stories, we can learn from each other about different kinds of trials and most importantly, we learn about the many different ways in which God responds. Hearing about another person’s journey can inspire us and help us cope in that infuriating waiting period where we are supposed to be waiting patiently for the Lord. And as we share our stories with one another, our relationships with God and with each other grow stronger and deeper. Each of us has a song to share and over time, all of those songs form a great choir with diversity and harmony.

Of course, it takes an abundance of courage to share your new song of lament and praise. It is hard to be so vulnerable when we run the risk of being judged or becoming the subject of gossip which is probably why we are often hesitant to share our songs. But if there is anything I have learned from the bird’s eye view of my years in ministry, God’s grace, love and provision far outshines any crisis or scandal. Every time, without fail.

It was not part of the plan for me to be a single mother in ministry. I can describe in epic and precise detail what the inside of a desolate pit looks like, because I have spent plenty of my own life in there. While I spent more nights crying out to God than I care to remember, I never could have created on my own the song of deliverance that God put into my mouth. As I began the call process to become ordained and installed as a minister, I fielded numerous questions about my single mother status in interviews, so much so that I felt a scarlet D was forming on my chest. When I received a call to serve a church here in Charlotte, they requested a biography to share with the congregation. We all felt it was important to be transparent about my marital status which honestly was awkward and uncomfortable for me.

Their first impression of me was to be formed by what I believed to be my biggest life failure. Nothing could have prepared me, however, for the hands that raised, the arms that embraced. “Me too, and you are one of us,” are the words that the great congregation would say. This very painful and personal part of my story was exactly what opened the door to others sharing their stories of loss which would not only heal and comfort but above all sing God’s praises. Any of you who have spent time in a pit will know how to describe the darkness, but more than that, it is the bright light that is so surprising and overwhelming. The bright light of friends that you never knew you had and visions of love that you never knew existed. That is worthy of praise, dear friends, and God deserves all the glory for such love and grace.

So what is your jam? Even if you aren’t sure about God’s salvation yet, start telling the story. Start singing your song. You might be surprised where it takes you. Amen.