

Epiphany 2, Year A

- There's a question that Loren is fond of asking me – a question she tends to ask, I'd say, at least once a week, usually when I'm being particularly difficult or especially sarcastic
- And that question is this: "Why are you like this?"
- I rarely have an answer for her
- Today, though, I have an answer
- But first, I have to explain the way that I am, in this particular case
- If you haven't noticed it about my preferences in the liturgy, then I'm sure Karel and Beth could tell you how reticent I am to cut anything short, whether it's hymns or readings
- If it's possible to sing the whole hymn, I prefer to
- If it's possible to use a whole reading rather than excising some verses, I tend to do that
- And I'm sure that, on occasion, it leaves people to wonder, just like Loren does, "Why are you like this?"
- The Psalm – or should I say, the portion of a Psalm – that our lectionary has us read today is the perfect illustration of why I am the way that I am
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- If you read verses 1-12 of Psalm 40, you are given a certain picture of its writer
- "I waited patiently upon the Lord," its author says. "he stooped to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay;"
- It is a song of unadulterated praise to God – a proclamation that God has saved, that God required nothing and yet gave everything, that God is incredible and deserving of praise – public praise
- And all of those things are of course deeply true – God **has** saved us all, God requires nothing and gives all, God's praises should be shouted from the mountaintops
- But that isn't all that Psalm 40 says
- It takes a very different turn in the 7 verses we've cut out from our lectionary
- And I'll show you what I mean: here is the rest of Psalm 40, beginning at verse 13:
- "For innumerable troubles have crowded upon me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see; * they are more in number than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me.
- Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; * O LORD, make haste to help me.
- Let them be ashamed and altogether dismayed who seek after my life to destroy it; * let them draw back and be disgraced who take pleasure in my misfortune.

- Let those who say "Aha!" and gloat over me be confounded, * because they are ashamed.
- Let all who seek you rejoice in you and be glad; * let those who love your salvation continually say, Great is the LORD!"
- Though I am poor and afflicted, * the Lord will have regard for me.
- You are my helper and my deliverer; * do not tarry, O my God."
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- It paints a very different picture if we read the whole thing, doesn't it?
- Even if it ends up in more or less the same place, you see a bit more darkness at some points along the way
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- If we aren't careful, it is entirely possible for us to be a little triumphalist in our faith
- We sort of tend that direction, and it's not totally a bad thing
- It is good to know that God is in control, that God is causing all things to work for good in the world, that we know how God's story ultimately ends
- But if those are the only terms we speak in, we are neglecting a significant part of our experience, of the human experience, the experience of a fallen world
- God is in control, yes – but bad things happen
- God is causing all things to work for good, but not always in ways that are obvious to us
- We know how God's story ends, but that doesn't mean we know every detail of the entire plot
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- When we only tell the positive parts of the story, when we only read the verses that are comfortable and easy, or we only read the first 12 verses of Psalm 40, we can give ourselves the impression that God is only present in the good times
- That God is only obviously at work when things seem to be going well
- Or the converse, that God has abandoned us when things go poorly, when we have difficulties, when we suffer
- But when we read all of Psalm 40 together, we realize that the author who joyfully says, "I love to do your will, O my God; your law is deep in my heart." is the same as the one crying out in lament: "For innumerable troubles have crowded upon me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see; * they are more in number than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me."
- The voice which exults, "Great things are they that you have done, O LORD my God!" is

the same one that wails, “Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; * O LORD, make haste to help me.”

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- Perhaps no one knows this better than Jesus himself – the one about whom John the Baptist this morning says, “Here is the Lamb of God”
- It’s later in John’s Gospel where Jesus famously says, “I am the Good Shepherd.”
- Think on that for a moment: Jesus is both the shepherd, the one in control looking out for all his sheep – and the sacrificial lamb, whose blood takes away the sins of the world
- Even Jesus, God’s only and eternal Son, did not have a singular, triumphalist experience in his life – he did not get to the Resurrection without first being crucified
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- We have to be careful in our reading of Scripture, just like in our lives, to make sure that we aren’t avoiding the difficult parts, trying to sweep the problems under the rug – because problems will happen
- Difficulties will arise, and following God is not an inoculation against hard times
- The authors of Scripture know this, and our Scripture reflects this reality
- But God is with us through it all
- In the good times, and in the bad
- Through it all, God is our helper and our deliverer; do not tarry, O our God