

Sermon for Sunday, May 10, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

One of the hardest things
about focussing on the psalms
week after week
is that after a while
they all begin to sound kind of the same.
Certain themes
are repeated;
even the words themselves
repeat.

“Sing to the Lord a new song”
is how our psalm begins.
“Sing to the Lord a new song.”

And it’s not the first time we’ve heard those words.
Psalm 96 begins that way too, and psalm 149,
and a chunk of Isaiah chapter 42.

“Sing to the Lord a new song.”

And I have to admit,
that when I first read these words
I began to sigh.
Okay, here we go again.
Yet another psalm
telling us to praise God.
But there’s a limit to how many times
I can preach that.

But then i began to think a bit more.
This week
I was at our annual conference
for the clergy of the diocese.
Our speaker was Eugene Lowry.
He’s from Kansas,
and spent his life teaching preaching in the midwest.

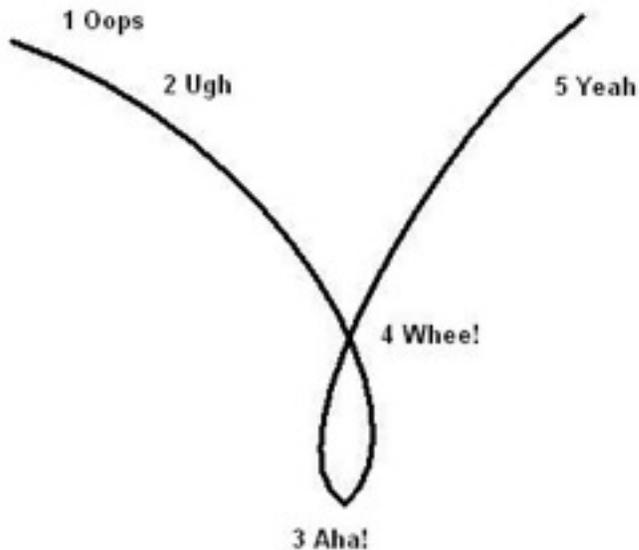
I've known him for almost twenty years,
 but when you first meet him,
 you could be forgiven for thinking
 he's just a country boy;
 what does he know about life and faith here on Long Island?

But then you discover
 that he's one of the giants in the preaching world.
 Not because he's a famous preacher - though he's good one -
 but because a little book of his
 that he wrote 35 years ago
 changed the shape of preaching.
 The way he describes it is something like this,
 "The old style of sermon
 was that first of all you introduced the sermon by saying what you were planning to say.
 Then you said it - preferably in three points, each one saying your main idea in a different
 way.
 Then you had the conclusion, where you said what you just said.
 Then you added a poem or quoted a hymn
 where you said it all again."
 And then, if you weren't entirely convinced that people had got the point, you prayed a
 prayer in which you said it all again.

Sermons were like lectures;
 and no wonder preaching had a bad reputation,
 and people's eye glazed over about three minutes in.
 Because everything that was going to be said
 had already been said.
 Why both listening any more?

But Gene said,
 what if sermons were not so much lectures
 as stories?
 What if
 they had a sense of movement, a plot?
 And so he wrote a little book called The Homiletical Plot.
 And came up with a diagram,
 which his students called
 the Lowry loop.

You have a copy of it in your bulletins.



How he thinks of it is this,
and it might make more sense
if I describe it in terms of a story we all know,
the story of the annunciation to Mary.

First
we have a problem. Some sort of conflict. In a fairy tale
it's the words, "Once upon a time" - because we all know
that when a story begins like that, something bad is coming.
In the Lowry loop, this is traditionally called "Oops."
Mary is sitting at the kitchen table having her morning coffee
when an angel arrives. And she's afraid.

Then there's the Complication. Things get worse. the angel says to Mary - who is not
married -
"you're going to have a baby."
Ugh.

Then you have the point of transformation: aha. This is where the gospel comes; this is
where grace is found.
The angel says to Mary,

“This isn't just any baby. This one will be holy; this one will be the Son of God. Nothing is impossible with God.”

And then the fourth part is the effect of that turning point, the effect of God's grace, what in the Lowry loop gets called “Whee.” Mary responds, “Yes.”

And finally the response. What happens. The thing where we all want to shout “Yeah!”

The original problem

is not only resolved;

something amazing has come from it. We can see the grace. In fairy tale style, that's the line,

“and they all lived happily ever after.” In Mary's story,

it's the Magnificat - that amazing song of celebration and glory to God

that she sings

after she visits her cousin Elizabeth.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

That's Gene Lowry's loop.

It's a way of telling the story of faith,

the story of how God

works in our lives.

So back to our psalm.

Instead of getting stuck with those first words, and wondering

what on earth to say that is new about it,

what would it look like

if we tried to think about it

in terms of Lowry's loop?

What is the oops?

Psalms are hard,

because for the most part

we don't have the story behind them.

We don't know when this psalm was written;

we don't know the background to it.

But there's one thing we do know.

If the people are being encouraged to sing a new song,

there must have been an old song.

So what might the old song have been?

There are hints -

if the new song

is supposed to be about the marvelous things God has done,

then the old song was probably complaining about what God didn't do.

Perhaps it was like the one in psalm 137, a song from the people's time of exile,

“By the rivers of Babylon—

there we sat down and there we wept

when we remembered Zion. “

Or perhaps it was a song like the complaints of the complaints of the people at Meribah and Massah

when they were wandering in the wilderness in the Exodus,

whining that God hadn't given them enough to eat or drink,

even though they had manna every morning

and the rocks cracked open with fresh water.

Or perhaps it was a song like the one of Job's friends,

blaming God for the bad things that happened to him.

We don't know the details,

but we know what it's like to struggle;

we know what it's like

to wonder if God is with us.

We know what it's like

to be in the downward spiral

of Lowry's loop.

But what happens

when we hit bottom?

What happens

in our psalm?

It doesn't just say

quite whining

and get yourself together.

What it says is,

listen

to what God has done.

Listen.

God has done marvelous things.

God has won.

God's shown righteousness.
God's remembered.
God's been faithful.
God's been merciful.

God has done something.

So what has God done?
We don't know
the specifics of what it was
that prompted the psalm.
But we do know
what God has done for us.

We say it each week in the Creed.
God has made the world.
God has sent his son, for us and for our salvation.
God has spoken through the prophets.
God offers us forgiveness.
God raises us to new life.

But, I hear you say, all that's very well,
but what has God done for me?

While you think about that, I'm going to tell you about the other conference I went to recently.

It was a conference for a group called the Gathering of Leaders;
it's for clergy in the Episcopal Church who are interested in the missionary call of Christ
and growing the Church in spiritual depth and in numbers.

This year's theme was, officially, "Vitality & Effectiveness: Sharing Stories in the
Missionary Church."

But what it was really about
was sharing stories.

Sharing our stories
of how God has worked in our lives.

And it was amazing.

Times after time
we heard stories
about how God has been working
often in the most unexpected ways.

Time after time
we heard new songs
of praise.

And time after time

we were encouraged to go do something in response.

Or in terms of the Lowry loop, we heard the oops and the ugh, and the aha. And we began to explore what might be the whee and the yeah.

And so now, I'm going to ask you to do something.

Please turn around in your pews and find two or three other people to talk with.

And tell your stories.

You might find it helpful to use the Lowry loop.

Begin with something that was a problem,

and how you eventually saw

God's grace at work.

And if you're not done

when I tell you to stop,

then you can always continue

after the service/at coffee hour!