

Epiphany 2, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Just over a year ago
I went on a walk.
It was while I was on sabbatical,
and it was a long walk - ninety or so miles
from Holy Island in north east England
to Heavenfield on Hadrian's Wall.
It's called St Oswald's Way, named after one of the early Anglo Saxon saints, and the first part
was lovely, gently rolling farmland, alternating with sandy beaches and the odd rocky headland.
But then the trail turned inland, and I discovered first hand
the effects of a summer of record rains
on the landscape.
As I walked over the moors, the theory was
that there was heather underfoot,
and under that sphagnum moss, and peat,
and running through it, the path
with gravel to stabilize it.
But reality was
the path had become a stream,
and so you had to step to the side
to find dry ground...
except that dry ground
was really
a soggy mossy heathery peaty mess.
Squelching and slipping, I slowly worked my way across the hills,
until I finally reached farmland -
and had to cross a field where that there had been so much rain
that the cows
had mud up to their bellies,
and I had mud
up to my knees.

That
was a miry pit.

Today's psalm
is like a slideshow.
And the first slide
is being bogged

in a miry pit.

Though I suspect our psalmist today
might not have been talking so much about a rain-soaked
cow-trodden field,
as that feeling you get
when everything you do
seems to take so much effort,
when you don't seem to be able
to get any traction,
when the ordinary things of life
just become overwhelming.

Sometimes it happens
because of illness,
maybe your own,
maybe someone you care for,
sometimes
the loss of a job,
sometimes
just the overwhelming weight
of trying to juggle all the elements
of a busy life,
and sometimes
it's a chemical imbalance in your brain.

Whatever the reason
you
are knee deep
in mud.

And if you are like the psalmist
you are waiting.
Waiting, hoping, that somehow
God - or someone - will get you out of there.
Perhaps patiently, perhaps
not so much.
And in fact, it's not entirely clear
that the psalmist is patient either.
Because the original words in hebrew
are something like "waiting, I waited
for the Lord."
The psalmist is bogged down, and waiting, waiting, waiting

for God.
And calls out to God,
and invites us to call with him.

And then we move
to the next slide.

Time has passed
and the psalmist is standing on firm ground,
rock
instead of mud.
Steps that took so much energy, the mud always sucking his foot back down
now are easy,
life that seemed so hard
now seems manageable.

And the psalmist
is full of thanks to God,
and can't help
but go about
telling people
what God has done.

It's a wonderful picture, this slide,
but I can't help wondering
what happened
in between.

It's clear
that looking back,
the psalmist can see
that God had a hand in it.

But what was it?
What transformed life
from overwhelming
to manageable,
even joyful?

We don't know.
But we know how it happens today.
Someone who is sick
gets medical treatment

that works.

Someone who is overwhelmed
is offered some meals,
or some practical help.

Someone who is unemployed
gets a job.

Someone who is struggling to cope with life and all its demands
sees a therapist.

Someone who has a chemical imbalance in their brain
goes on medication.

All of them
different ways
that life can be transformed,
all of them ways
that God is at work
whether it's through the medical profession
or therapists
or medication
or the generous acts
of the people of God.

In all of them
God is at work.
God is at work
transforming life
from overwhelming
to manageable,
and from manageable
to joyful.

And just as the psalmist invited us
to call out to God when we are struggling
he invites us
to praise God
when things are good.
To give thanks to God
for that transformation.
And to tell others
what God has done.

And that's where
this week's readings
connect with last week.

Last week
we heard about the voice of God,
the voice of God
calling,
calling us
to new life
and faith.

This week
it is our voices.
Our voices
calling to God for help.
Our voices
calling to God in thanks.
Our voices
calling to others
telling them
what God has done.

As the psalmist said,
“He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God;
many shall see, and stand in awe,
and put their trust in the LORD.”

Growing up
I heard so many times in church
how we as Christians
are supposed to tell other people
the good news.
We had training events
and pep talks
and were expected to memorize
evangelistic scripts.

But no one told me
how simple it really is.
Just tell them
where you have seen God at work.

We heard it in
our gospel reading today.

John the Baptist was with a couple of his followers, his friends,
when he saw Jesus pass by.

“Look,” he said, “there is the Lamb of God!”

The two disciples decided
to follow Jesus - literally -
trailing after him.

And he saw them, and invited them to spend the day with him.

And at the end of the day, one of them, Andrew,
went and found his brother.

And told him excitedly,

“There was this man we met, and we went to his home,
and we talked all afternoon, and I think,
I think,
we have found the messiah.”

There was no script,
no special techniques,
no pep talks.

Just one person
telling another
about where they
had seen God.

That’s what God calls us to.

To simply speak
about what God has done for us,
what God
is doing
for us.

In our everyday
conversations.

Nothing special.

But, you might be thinking,

I’m not sure

that I have anything to say.

You might even be feeling

that you are stuck

in that miry pit.

What then?

Then,
says the psalmist,
then
cry out to God.
Cry out to God
and God will hear you.

But also, also look back
and see where God might have been at work
at other times
in your life.
And give thanks.

Because the reality is
that our lives are not simply divided
into miry pit times
and standing on firm ground times,
times of struggle
and times of celebration.
Most of the time
the two
are muddled together.

The band U2
captures some of this
in one of their most explicitly religious songs,
“40.”

It’s a version
of this Psalm, quoting
from the first three verses.

And it has two refrains,
One is
“I will sing, sing a new song
I will sing, sing a new song.”

And the other
“How long to sing this song
How long to sing this song.”

And as the song progresses,
the two refrains begin to overlap

and blend
and the crowd picks them up,
and in one of their tours
they combine it with Yahweh,
a song of offering,
“Take these hands
Teach them what to carry
Take this mouth
So quick to criticize
Take this heart
And make it break
Take this soul
And make it sing.”
And as they continue with the refrains,
they invite the crowd to sing
and leave the stage
leaving the crowd...the congregation
to sing
of God.

None of us
lives a perfect life.
We struggle
and we celebrate.
And all the while
we call to God
and we praise God
and we tell of the things
God has done for us.

“I waited patiently upon the LORD;
he stooped to me and heard my cry.

He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay;
he set my feet upon a high cliff and made my footing sure.

He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God;
many shall see, and stand in awe,
and put their trust in the LORD.

I love to do your will, O my God;
your law is deep in my heart.

I proclaimed righteousness in the great congregation;
behold, I did not restrain my lips.”

I will sing
sing a new song