

Psalm 40
A New Playlist
Rev. Kelley Becker

I waited patiently for God;
 who inclined to me and heard my cry.

² God drew me up from the desolate pit,^[a]
 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 put their trust in God.

⁴ Happy are those who make
 God their trust,
who do not turn to the proud,
 to those who go astray after false gods.

⁵ You have multiplied, O 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 God.

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.

Sermon

Each week when we gather for worship, we come to tell stories, all kinds of stories about who we are, who we want to be, who God is, and how we have encountered God and other sources of love. We tell these stories as we read the Bible, poems, children's picture books, and wisdom from other traditions, when we pray and even when we are silent, and always as we gather at the communion table. We tell a story about the value we place on children as we make space in the sanctuary for them to worship in their own ways, so they will come to know they are part of this church's story too. We tell our stories as we welcome one another to worship, in the sunlight that shines through the stained-glass windows (when the sun actually shines), and in the colors on the communion table. Our stories are sung in ancient hymns, praise choruses, even U2 songs, and from time to time, even *Baby Shark*.

And then there is the sermon when I try to tell a story that will help us understand where we, as a church and as individuals, fit in the story of Love, compassion, and justice that brings us hope and inspires us to action. I try to remind us that this story is still being written every single day in a world that seems, sometimes, to have forgotten that we are all part of the same story. Despite my gallant efforts, though, I know many of you will be more impacted by what the choir sang, or what Tim and Maria shared, than anything I will say this morning. That's just how we are wired.

In an April 2022 Time Magazine story called, "Why We Remember Music and Forget Everything Else," Nayantara Dutta writes that "In 2017, Nielsen estimated Americans spent over 32 hours a week on average listening to music, so it's no surprise that we have such a strong memory for music and can easily recall lyrics and melodies, even if we haven't heard them in years...People often wonder why we tend to remember songs and lyrics more easily even than our own memories, where we kept our keys, and what we learned in school. It seems to be because of how often we experience music, in the world or in our minds, and the joy and

emotional connection it brings us. Music represents who we are and how we feel, so of course it's what we remember."¹

Many of you play the New York Times game, Wordle each day. Wordle is a game in which players are given 6 tries to guess the word of the day. I'm wondering, do any of you play Heardle? This game tests musical memory by asking people to identify a song after hearing only one second of it, and for every wrong guess, the game extends the track by one second.

Alex, let's play.

**Play Heardle-Alex

Our ability to name those tunes so quickly demonstrates the effectiveness of children learning the alphabet by singing the ABCs. I even learned the Hebrew alphabet by singing the Aleph Bet song and I was in my 40s at the time. It was adorable...and it worked. There are many songs written specifically to teach us something, songs like "Conjunction, Junction" and "I'm Just a Bill" from Schoolhouse Rock. Other songs were written to help us get to sleep, celebrate a birthday, or pray for a meal.

Today's text from Psalm 40 talks about a specific kind of song. The psalmist writes, "God put a new song in my mouth..." This "new song" is most likely a term for what Hebrew scholars usually describe as a "song of thanksgiving." It is a song written and sung after God delivered the psalmist from some sort of crisis described in this psalm as a "desolate pit" and "miry bog." Theologian Dr. Walter Brueggemann calls this type of psalm a "psalm of reorientation." He writes that these psalms, "bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected."² They tell the story of having come through a difficult time and emerged.

The "new song" is the recognition that difficult times change us. When we have experienced something really difficult or traumatic, we will never be the people we were before. Psalms like Psalm 40 affirm what we know to be true: all will not always be well and all is not as it should be. But also, it reminds us that despair and awfulness are not permanent and they do not and will not have the last word. Every time we make it through a crisis, we sing a new and different song

¹ <https://time.com/6167197/psychology-behind-remembering-music/>, accessed 1/27.23.

² Brueggemann, Walter, *The Message of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 123-24.

afterward and that song testifies to what we have been through, how we survived, and who we are now that we've made it through.

Sometimes, like in this psalm, the new song is a thank you note for the one or ones who helped us through the difficult time, "God drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure" (Psalm 40:2). This an expression of gratitude to God in the same way, Andy Grammar's song "Saved My Life," is his thank you note, "I think you should know you saved my life/I don't think you realize/What you've done for me/Oh, I don't think you realize/What a little love could mean."

The words of this psalmist are not solely a thank you note, though, they also highlight the importance of telling our stories. We hear that in verse 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." In other words, not only are our stories important for each of us, but they are important for other people to hear too. Sing a new song for yourself and also so other people can hear it.

Because the songs we sing tell important stories, listening to and making music has the power to impact our mental health in positive ways. When we tell the story of a difficult time and how we came through it, we give the ones who are struggling now hope that there is a way out and we tell them the truth, that they are not alone. The psalmist wants us to know and take to heart, "The Holy can and will help."

To be clear, God doesn't need us to tell or sing our stories because God is an ego maniac who wants to get some divine credit, but because other people need to hear them. There is healing in hearing another person's real story of their struggles (like our struggles) and their real doubt (like our doubt) and how they found their way into a new place or a new season. This is lifesaving, heart changing, and mountain moving stuff. It's important to note that not everyone among us chooses to attribute the moments of transformation they experience to God and that's okay. There are all kinds of words to use to talk about the role of love, hope, justice, and grace in life. The point is, we can recognize sacredness in anything or anyone that delivers life from destruction.³

³ enfolded, commentary on Psalm 40.

My experience has been that the Holy's help comes in the form of other people, through their compassion, their presence, and their creativity. People, reflecting God in the world, provide "in the flesh" help to us when life goes off the rails. They bring us meals, transport our child, wait with us at the doctor's office, listen to our stories over dinner, and sometimes without even knowing us, paint a picture or write a song that resonates with part of our own stories. It really is quite magical when we can look at or listen to someone else's creation and say, "Yes, me too." For example, there is one artist who seems to know my heart without actually knowing me, His name is Kelly Latimore. Here are some of his paintings:

Kelly Latimore paintings on screen (copyright Kelly Latimore).

These paintings affirm for me that someone else sees God and God's story in real people, people who are different from me. His paintings celebrate that.

Turning back to music, one of my favorite parts of doing weddings is hearing the couple's love story. If I don't know their story, I ask about it as we prepare for the wedding. I've noticed that very often, part of that story shows up in the words of the music at the wedding. At a wedding I did for a couple who recognize the importance of the village that surrounds them, these lyrics were sung, "I want a house with a crowded table. A place by the fire for everyone." Since John isn't in here to embarrass, I can share these words from our wedding, "If I live a hundred years before my life is through, if I live a hundred years, I'll spend them loving you." It doesn't matter when or where we hear the music sung at a wedding or a grandparent's funeral, a child's college graduation party, or in the car on the way to the first day of the dream job, our minds take us right back to that day. And sometimes it sparks the feelings we felt that day, for good or bad.

Music tells all kinds of stories. It tells stories of people who have learned to love parts of themselves they were taught to hate, like the song "Victoria's Secret" I mentioned last week. And stories of people who have finally found their voice, like Katy Perry's song, "Roar", the song begins like this, "I used to bite my tongue and hold my breath/Scared to rock the boat and make a mess/So I sat quietly, agreed politely...and then the chorus, "I got the eye of the tiger, a fighter/Dancing through the fire/'Cause I am a champion, and you're gonna hear me roar. I learned this week that the old Barry Manilow song, "I Write the Songs," was

written to celebrate that all music comes from the Holy, "I've been alive forever/
And I wrote the very first songs/I put the words and the melodies together/I am
music and I write the songs/I write the songs that make the whole world sing/I
write the songs of love and special things/I write the songs that make the young
girls cry/ I write the songs/I write the songs.

I wonder what new song or songs we are being given will sing in this season and
the seasons to follow.

This week's spiritual practice is going to help us answer that question. But first, if
you have been doing a "ritual upon arising" to start your day, and you like how it
makes you feel, keep it up. And tell your story to other people. If something is
freeing you from the blahs, it is likely to free someone else.

This week's spiritual practice is pretty simple: listen to a new song. If you are
experiencing the winter blahs or any kind of blahs, choose music that tells a story
of overcoming something similar to what you are experiencing. Let us remember,
there is a fine line between listening to music that matches how we are feeling to
be reminded we are not alone and getting lost in sadness, isolation, and
negativity. You can only listen to "Take This Job and Shove It" for so long before it
impacts your ability to a good job. Listen to a song that will help you see the light
of hope. Experiment with different types of music this week to see what makes
you feel like you want to feel. And then listen to more of that. Don't forget that
even when the world feels dark, there is light inside you. Amen.