

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?*by Elaine Poproski***PSALM 40:1 – 11***I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.*

Do you know what it is to wait for the Lord?

Do you know what it is to need something from God? or even just to want something from God? But not be given it? It can be a painful place – that place of waiting. It can be a faith-testing place. Especially if the waiting goes on and on.

There are so many things in our lives and in our world that aren't the way they're supposed to be. Can you imagine what it's like to live in Ukraine these days? Can you imagine shivering with your family in an unheated home in a bombed city unsure if you'll have food through the week, praying to God to end the war, only to wake up morning after morning still waiting for God to act? Can you imagine being a refugee, living in a camp in a country that's not your home, surrounded by people who don't want you in their country, too focused on survival to manage the post traumatic stress that tears at your soul? Can you imagine what it's like to pray for God to rescue you, day after day and night after night, for years, without a response?

Maybe you can't imagine those kinds of things. But maybe you know what it is to be stuck in a job that sucks the life out of you, or working under a boss who treats you like you don't matter or have nothing of worth to offer. You pray for a new job. You pray for a new boss. And nothing happens. You just keep praying. Maybe you're so deep in debt you don't think you'll ever be free of it. So you pray for a way out. You pray and pray and pray and still you drown in debt.

When do you give up? When do you stop praying? When do you stop waiting?

In 2 Peter, the author is writing to people who are ready to stop waiting. They've been waiting and waiting for Jesus' return – for an end to all the suffering and hardship of the world, for the promised kingdom of God to finally come. They've been waiting and praying and waiting and praying, but nothing happens. And so Peter writes, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance."¹ In other words: Your waiting is not in vain. God isn't ignoring you. God isn't deaf to your pleas and your pain. God hears. God cares. God is doing something, even if you can't see it. So keep waiting.

The psalmist in Psalm 40 writes, "I waited patiently for the Lord."

That's the challenge of waiting, isn't it? To wait patiently? Waiting patiently implies, at least to me, that the person who's waiting has faith that their waiting is not in vain. They have faith that even if there's no evidence that God is doing anything, God does, in fact, hear us. God does have compassion for us. God does want the same as we want (at least insofar as what we want lines up with his love for us and the realities and values of his kingdom).

¹ 2 Peter 3:9

But the longer the waiting goes on, the more difficult it is to maintain this faith, isn't it? The more difficult it is to keep waiting – to keep praying and hoping. It's one thing to wait for something like Christmas. But what if it's months or even years that you're waiting? That's why it's important to hear other people's stories about their waiting and God's response to their waiting. It's why it's important not to forget other time in our own lives when we waited and waited for God to do something, and he finally did. That's what the psalmist in Psalm 40 is doing. He or she is remembering. And in that remembering there is hope for the next time. There is hope for the next person. The psalmist isn't just saying these things to themselves. The words are meant to be proclaimed in a worship environment, for others to have hope because the psalmist has experienced God acting after all that waiting.

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;*

I love the language of this psalm. The NIV translation, which is what I just read, is especially descriptive. *He lifted me out of the slimy pit*. The NRSV is a bit less visceral in its description, though probably a bit closer to the original language: *He drew me up from the desolate pit*. What do you picture in this description? A desolate pit is lonely, isolated, hopeless. If you add the NIV adjective of slimy, you get an extra dimension of yuck. The NIV continues: *out of the mud and mire*. The NRSV reads, *out of the miry bog*. Neither are pleasant images. It's a desolate, lonely, hopeless, slimy pit. It's a smelly, wet landscape that threatens to suck you under with every step.

Have you ever been in a place like that? I don't mean literally, although perhaps you have. But as is most often the case with poetry, the description is meant to be read metaphorically. Have you ever experienced the lonely, isolated, hopelessness that threatens to drown you – that feels impossible to escape?

That's where the psalmist was. It was not a place conducive to waiting, especially to waiting patiently. How long can anyone be expected to wait when they're drowning in mud and slime? And yet, the psalmist waited patiently for the Lord. We don't know how. We don't know what motivated him or her. All we know is that the psalmist waited patiently for the Lord, and the Lord heard. The psalmist writes of the Lord, *He drew me up (or lifted me out)...and set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God*.

The psalmist waited patiently for the Lord even while in the worst of circumstances, and the Lord heard the psalmist's cry. I don't know what you're waiting for, but I do know that God is not deaf to your cry. I don't know how long you've been waiting or how hopeless you feel, but I know that God has not forgotten about you or abandoned you in your misery. The entire Bible, from beginning to end, is a testimony to the fact that God does not abandon us or forget us or ignore us or get busy doing other things. I know that God will answer, some day, some how, but I don't know how long you'll have to wait.

The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt for somewhere in the realm of 400 years. They waited all that time for God to rescue them. The thing is, God was with them even in the midst of all of it. God wasn't ignoring them. God was acting, even in the midst of it all.

The psalmist knows that this story of rescue, this story of waiting needs to be shared. After this beautiful, brief description of God's response, the psalmist writes, *Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord*. The psalmist knows their experience needs to be shared because the psalmist knows their story will empower others to trust and to wait patiently.

The psalmist continues in verse 4 with a beatitude – a statement of blessing: *Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods*.

When we're in a tough spot and we're waiting and waiting for God to act, it's easy to give up on waiting for God. But it doesn't mean we stop trying to find a way out. When God doesn't act, we look for someone or something else to help. We're drawn to those who offer quick fixes or easy solutions. Even if what they offer costs us everything we have or stretches us beyond anything we thought we were capable of, we grab at it because we're desperate. We need out. We need to be lifted up. We can't keep going the way we've been going. And God isn't answering. God isn't responding. God doesn't seem to care. So we turn somewhere else.

We turn to psychics for hope. We turn to charlatan's and quacks for medicines and therapies. We take out payday loans from legalized loan sharks, at exorbitant interest rates, desperate for relief from debt and financial pressure. We listen for promises and prophecies that make us feel better, regardless of whether or not they're true. Or maybe we drink ourselves into oblivion for a while, so we don't have to feel, or we go numb for hours on end in front of the television so we don't have to think. But none of these alternatives to waiting on God are helpful. Not one of them has the power to lift us up out of the slimy or desolate pit, out of the mud and miry bog. Not one of them has the power to set our feet on solid ground and make our steps secure. Waiting is hard. Waiting patiently for God to act – for God to hear – can feel impossible at times. But in the end, as the psalmist writes, it is the one who trusts in the Lord who is blessed.

What are you waiting for these days? Is there something going on in your life for which or about which you are crying out to God? How tempted are you to give up? How tempted are you to look somewhere else for an answer – for hope?

Pause for some self-reflection.

I think the psalmist understood what it was like to want to give up. I think the psalmist understood what it felt like to wonder where God was or if God was listening. I think that might be why this psalm was written. Because that temptation to give up is a common human experience. If you find yourself tempted to give up on the waiting, it's not because you're a bad person or a bad Christian; it's a common human experience. I suspect that even the most faithful of Jesus' followers at some point, when things are bad and there doesn't seem to be any end in sight, are tempted to stop praying for relief – to stop waiting on God to do something. But if we hear someone else's story of their own waiting and of God's eventual rescue or response, it helps. It gives us a bit more hope – a bit more push to keep waiting, at least one more day.

The psalmist came out of their time of waiting and despair having experienced God's rescue. And that experience led to praise – to worship. In verse 5, the psalmist writes:

*Many, Lord my God,
are the wonders you have done,
the things you planned for us.
None can compare with you;
were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare.*

I think in the slimy, desolate pit, in the mud and miry bog, it's very hard to remember these truths. It's very hard to believe these truths about God. I think when we're in that place of despair and hopelessness, it's very hard to remember the wonders God has done or the promises God has made. Which is why we need other people to remind us. We need other people we trust to tell us the truth of these things because we can't tell them to ourselves when we're in it – at least not in any kind of convincing way. But as we hear others tell their stories, as we experience others worshipping God, maybe we can wait another day. Maybe we can not give up one more week.

When we wait patiently for the Lord, and eventually experience the kind of relief the psalmist describes, worship is a natural response. Thanksgiving is a natural response. That's what's happening in next five verses of Psalm 40. Listen to the voice of the psalmist – the voice of one who waited patiently for the Lord, until the Lord heard their cry:

*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire –
but my ears you have opened; -
burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.*

I wonder if the psalmist tried these things to get God to pay attention. I wonder if the psalmist went to the temple with sacrifices and offerings, perhaps spending more than they could afford, hoping that if they just gave enough God would listen – God would act. But it didn't work. Listen to what happened next (beginning in verse 7):

*Then I said, "Here I am, I have come –
it is written about me in the scroll.
I desire to do your will, my God;
your law is within my heart."*

God isn't bribed with sacrifices and offerings. All God wants of us, is us. He already loves us. We don't have to convince him to love us. He already cares about the things we care about. We don't have to persuade him to care. When all is said and done, it is, quite simply, the waiting in itself that is enough. Because in the waiting we declare that we won't give up on God. We declare that God won't give up, and hasn't given up, on us.

This is what the psalmist has learned in the waiting, that they can finally give voice to now that they have been lifted out of the pit. Listen to verse 9 and 10:

I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly;

I do not seal my lips, Lord,

as you know.

I do not hide your righteousness in my heart;

I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help.

I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness

from the great assembly.

Can we say the same thing? Can we say that we share with each other the ways we have been saved by God? Can we say that we don't hide God's righteousness, that we speak of his faithfulness and of the way God helped us?

I hope so. Because I know that when I'm in the pit, when I'm ready to give up waiting, other people's experiences are sometimes the only thing that keeps me going – the only thing that keeps me waiting patiently for the Lord to hear my cry and to lift me up. And I know that I'm not alone in this. None of us are meant to journey this life of faith on our own. When we're weak, we need the strong to hold us up; and when we're strong, we need to hold up the weak. We need to be in this together. And if we don't share our stories with each other, whether they're stories of God's faithfulness and rescue, or stories of our own hopelessness and despair, we won't be in this together. And if we're not in this together, I fear we will be swallowed by the mud and miry bog.

The thing about the pit is, it's not just a one and done kind of thing. It's not that we go through a hard time and eventually experience God's rescue, and then everything is lovely for the rest of our life. It doesn't work like that. Because life isn't like that. There are lots of ups and downs all through our lives and because of that, even when we're rescued from one slimy pit, we will, one day, find ourselves in another. I think that's one of the most powerful things about Psalm 40. It doesn't end on this triumphant note of worship and promise to proclaim. Instead, listen to how it continues, beginning in verse 11:

Do not withhold your mercy from me, Lord;

may your love and faithfulness always protect me.

For troubles without number surround me;

my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.

They are more than the hairs of my head,

and my heart fails within me.

Be pleased to save me, Lord;

come quickly, Lord, to help me.

Here the psalmist is, again, in need of rescue. Here the psalmist is, again, crying out to the Lord to be saved. This is the reality of our human experience. Bad things happen. Suffering and pain is a reality of life. Sometimes our own choices and sin contribute to that suffering and pain. Other times, our hardships are completely the fault of others. The point isn't about fault or blame. The

point is that these things are part of life this side of God's kingdom. Over and over again we find ourselves in need of God's rescue. And over and over again we find ourselves waiting. Sometimes we hardly wait any time at all. But I think more often we wait and wait and wait.

In the waiting, do we trust in God's faithfulness? In the waiting, do we trust in God's goodness? In the waiting, do we remember the ways God has acted in the past? In the waiting, do we listen for other people's stories of God's rescue?

Listen to how this psalm ends, in verse 17:

But as for me, I am poor and needy;

may the Lord think of me.

You are my help and my deliverer;

you are my God, do not delay.

The psalmist is back in the pit – back in the mud and the miry bog. But the psalmist is once again able to wait patiently for God, even while crying out to God, because God has proven to be faithful and good. God has previously been the psalmist's help and deliverer, which means the psalmist can count on God being their help and deliverer again. That's the power of remembering our own stories; that's the power of hearing each other's stories.