

“When Life Sings the Blues”
Psalm 40:1-5 – February 7, 2016

INTRO: Most of the Psalms “aren’t the voice of God addressing us, but the voice of our own common humanity, speaking about life the way it really is. The Psalms speak about human experience in an honest, freeing way (life is both the good and bad times. We hear people whose coping mechanisms may be challenged, who are moved to speak to God about what’s going on in their lives.) Perhaps Psalms can most appropriately be prayed by people who are living at the edges of their lives, sensitive to the raw hurts of life.” (Walter Brueggemann)

Singers sing the blues, writers write the blues, and sometimes we just plain live them. People lose jobs, marriages may fall apart, we are worn down by illness, people dear to us die too soon, relationships with friends crumble. In just a few days this week, the world experienced an earthquake in Taiwan which brought down apartment buildings full of people; lives were lost in an avalanche in the Alps; and one of those big cranes as they were trying to secure it on a windy day, came crashing down onto a New York City street resulting in one life lost and others injured.

We can be taken down by these events, literally, psychologically, spiritually. But some of us, in the depths of a struggle, seem to dig deep for the roots of our faith.

“In Zora Neal Hurston’s famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the main character Janie has taken hold of her destiny by marrying the much younger Teacake, and she seeks to find her place in the world.” (Otis Moss III)

It’s not an easy world to inhabit-- full of poverty, trials, and most of all, being a Black woman in the South. “In one stunning section, Janie and Teacake take refuge from a hurricane and Hurston’s blues theology emerges: *The wind came back with triple fury and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others and other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if (God) meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.*

In the throes of a storm which sounded like God was moving the furniture around upstairs, that’s precisely when they turned to God.

Tex Sample was a seminary professor for much of his life. One of the hymns he never liked was “In the Garden.” He thought it was schmaltzy, the theology wasn’t good, and it relegated ones’ relationship with Jesus to a me and Jesus kind of thing. He proceeded to share his thoughts with his classes and one day concluded his rant with: “What this song does is to move the Christian faith to the periphery of life, to a garden. The world is going to hell in a handbasket, and we have Christians moaning these songs about me and Jesus in a garden with birds singing.”

After class, one of his students, a forty year old woman who came to seminary in midlife, stayed and approached him. And she said: “Tex, my father started sexually abusing me when I was eleven years old until I was sixteen when I finally found a way to stop it. After every one of those horrible ordeals, I would go outside by myself and sing that song—*and he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own.* If it had not been for that song and for Jesus walking with me, I would never have made it through that absolutely awful time.”

“Tex has never made fun of that song again except to tell this woman’s story. For Tex, that song was words on a page that he could analyze and dissect. But for the woman, that song was about survival, coping, and belonging to Jesus. Tex still doesn’t like the song, but when he is in a worship service where the song is sung, he sings it with her in mind.” (*Earthy Mysticism, Spirituality for Unspiritual People*)

At one of the lowest points in this woman’s life, she turned to God, to Jesus, to help her survive, so that she would not be destroyed by the abuse of her father.

Like the Psalmist, God is the one we need, who delivers us from whatever version of blues, life has given us. One subtitle for Psalm 40 is the “mud Psalm.” *You listened and pulled me from a lonely pit full of mud and mire. You let me stand on a rock with my feet firm.* When we are stuck—like when we’re in mud, quicksand, a pit that seeks to pull us under, God will help get us to a firm rock.

As a child, my parents were always looking for good fishing lakes in northern Wisconsin. And over the years, we tried out a number of those lakes in the Spooner/Minong area. My parents always wanted to know how the pan fishing was going to be. And at that point in life, I wasn’t much into fishing yet, but my big concern was what kind of beach did the resort have! Repeatedly I would be told that it was a good sandy beach, and sometimes that was true. But the proof would be to

swim out a ways and then put my feet down. My experience, more times than not, was that I immediately encountered that black, sticky muck, where those slimy green weeds grew. I can still feel it and it makes my skin crawl. And once you were in that stuff, it felt like it wouldn't let you go. I could never get out fast enough—back to solid ground.

The Psalmist found that at a time in their life, when they were in trouble—when life was the pits, they were stuck in the depths, they went to God and God delivered them. They could put their trust in God, to get them through the awful times.

Many blues writers, write from their life experiences. Good blues music can “lift you up when you're down, comfort you when you're hurting, heal you when you're in pain” because this music expresses very real emotions. (Duane Shank March)

And often we hear the writer's statement of faith built right into their music. “In his song Call It Stormy Monday, T-Bone Walker laments how bad and sad each day of the week is.

They call it stormy Monday, and, baby, Tuesday's just as bad

Wednesday's worse, Thursday's oh so sad

The eagle flies on Friday, and Saturday I go out to play

Sunday I go to church, I kneel down and pray

Stormy Monday forces the listener to reject traditional notions of sacred and secular. The pain of the week is connected to worship on Sunday.” (Otis Moss III)

The blues can help us integrate our lives—the real stuff of them, Sunday to Sunday is all one piece—it's all a part of the whole. But sometimes the church may not have been terribly welcoming of the downsides of our lives, of the not so pleasant underside. We may have thought that somehow our faith in God was supposed to take away the awful stuff. But although our faith doesn't take it away, hopefully it gives us resources to deal with it. There is a place for the blues of life. It's as much a part of our life as the times which are easy to negotiate.

On a bulletin board outside a church, there was a sign which read: “If you have troubles, come in and tell us about them. If you have none, come in and tell us how you do it.”

The Psalms are the original music of our faith. And they speak to us of the variety of human experiences in a way that can both comfort and challenge us. And as much as some of these Psalms are blues songs, Psalm 40 reminds us of the new song God will give to us. Maybe that's a different way of looking at life or maybe it's the realization that life is much more than the 24 hours right in front of us. The new song is one which gives us hope, lets us know that we can't always see everything God has in store for us.

Even in life's blue times, even “when light fades and darkness falls—as it does every single day, in every single life—God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Even when you cannot see where you are going and no one answers when you call, this is not sufficient proof that you are alone. There is a divine presence that transcends your ideas about it. Darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as day.” (Barbara Brown Taylor)

May that perspective inform the blue times of our own lives and may our eyes keep watching God.

--Sue Burwell