

Today is the last of the four-part sermon series on the psalms, and I want to linger on Psalm 40 because it takes us through so much of the human experience. The NRSV says, “I waited patiently for the Lord,” but apparently a closer translation would be “I waited and waited,” or “Waiting, I waited for the Lord.” It indicates that the psalmist spent a long time in expectation of God’s intervention—not that the psalmist was particularly stoic or relaxed at the time. “I waited and waited for the Lord; God inclined to me and heard my cry.” God answered, drew the psalmist out of a miry bog, and set their feet upon a nice, solid rock. God put a new song of praise into the psalmist’s mouth, and now those who hear it will be impressed and put *their* trust in God.

So this, like the psalm last week, comes out of an experience of desolation. A situation like a “miry bog,” whether it’s physical or virtual, is one in which there is no way to get out by oneself. Thrashing around will only sink you further. The psalmist felt very much alone in a no-win situation for a long time. Then they go on: “Happy are those who make the Lord their trust.” Again, a little translation note: apparently “happy” is how they translate the Hebrew ‘ashre, but apparently this is also inadequate. One Rabbi Steven Schwartzschild said, “The biblical translator who uses such a word should change jobs, maybe write TV comedies with nice happy endings. You might use a phrase like ‘on the right track’ or ‘going in the right direction.’ Sin, by the way, means being off the track, missing the target. Being ‘blessed’ means you aren’t lost -- you’re on the path the Creator intends you to be on. But what you recognize as a blessing may look like an affliction to an outsider. Exchanging ‘blessed’ for ‘happy’ trivializes the biblical word. You might as well sum

up the Bible with a slogan like, 'Have a nice day'." *Ashre* is also characterized as "the happiness that flows from justice." It has this sense of well-being that comes from rightness rather than from comfort.

<https://incommunion.org/2004/12/27/blessed/>

Being blessed (*ashre*) means you're on the path the Creator intends you to be on, but what you recognize as a blessing may look like an affliction. Boy, that has the ring of truth. Those who make the Lord their trust, according to the psalmist, have as consolation the awareness that they are on the right path. Nevertheless, they're going to find themselves waiting and waiting and waiting, unable to extricate themselves from the miry bog. (Not to mix a metaphor.)

The next thing the psalmist says is, "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear." In other words, God doesn't ask us to give traditional offerings, but to have open ears, to listen—God asks us to stay aware and present and to tune in. The psalmist is able to do that: "Then I said, 'Here I am; . . . I delight to do your will, O my God.'" Moreover, the psalmist shares the experience, telling the "glad news of deliverance in the great congregation," not hiding God's saving help within their heart, not concealing God's steadfast love and faithfulness from the "great congregation."

Ashre is the condition of the psalmist, the condition of confidence in God's efficacy and trustworthiness however long we wait for relief. It doesn't mean being in a good mood, or always feeling cheerful. It's a deeper bedrock of calm, because you know that you're on the right path. In this context, I read the story of Jesus healing ten lepers as a story about belonging. The story takes place in a very

ambiguous space, “the region between Samaria and Galilee.” This is territory between frenemies whose enmity goes back to the Assyrian invasion 800 years earlier. It’s a geographic location that testifies to the fact that history happens and changes things forever. Where kindred tribes had lived in relative harmony, for generations now people of different ancestry have made it their home, and that’s not going to be erased or undone.

Jesus is out in the country, in this land of loss, not inside a village, when he’s approached by ten lepers who are, of course, people who can’t belong anywhere because of their physical ailment. Likely the Jewish ones are from the nearby village, or another village fairly close, but they can’t go into town, so now they just belong to each other, a tiny community of lepers. They appeal to Jesus for healing, and when they follow his instructions to go to the priests, they find themselves to be clean. However, one of them then turns back and thanks Jesus, and that one is a Samaritan. That one is not Jewish, could not go to a priest, *and* no longer belongs to his little band of lepers because it’s disbanded. It’s great not to have leprosy, but it’s sort of a precarious position to be in, too. But Jesus praises him for turning back, and in fact, tells him that his faith has made him well. Not clean, but well.

In light of Psalm 40, which talks about *‘ashre* or security/well-being even in adversity, I wonder if what this Samaritan leper has that the others don’t have is *‘ashre*. The nine Jewish lepers went leaping with joy to the priests to have them declare them admissible to the community again. They still depend on an external authority to validate them, and it’s always possible that they could be re-stigmatized as “the guys who had leprosy.” Like the land that had been Hebrew tribal land until

the Assyrians brought in foreigners 800 years ago, the nine Jewish lepers have a past that cannot be erased or forgotten. They will always be ex-lepers.

And maybe that's okay, but maybe the Samaritan is in better shape because he has no investment in anyone forgetting he'd been a leper. He wouldn't ever belong to Israel anyway, so he has no investment in that community and the condition of "cleanness" that implies acceptability. He can join the community of people who've been wounded or marked by loss, and go on from there. He's not seeking a return to life before leprosy; he can walk forward into the unknown world of wellness, where what is foreign is no longer of importance, nor is what has been unclean. He has a rock to stand on now.

We can probably all think of people or our own experiences when healing meant walking straight into danger, or acknowledging one's past. A parent who takes the kids and leaves an abusive spouse is abandoning one kind of security, but trusting there will be a greater security beyond the initial loss. A transgender person who comes out and even shows up at public events in support of transgender refugees, as I saw at Cindy Axne's office this week, gives up the safety of the closet for fuller life in the midst of danger. Those are "happy," or better, *'ashre*, happy in the sense of being on the right path. And they're like the Samaritan leper in the sense that they know there's no going back, no erasing the past; their happiness has to be waited for—waited and waited and waited for, maybe, but also counted on as utterly secure, as God is utterly trustworthy. Psalm 40 is a psalm of experience—of scars and gray hairs richly earned and borne with grace and even joy.

God of healing
gently touch our lives
with your Spirit. Give us courage to turn away from false securities, and hold our
heads above the miry pit; deliver us.
Bring warmth and comfort
life and wholeness
restoration
into fractured lives
and souls. Amen.