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*Pit Happens*

A sermon on Psalm 40, with help from Philippians 4:4-9

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*Before reading Psalm 40:*

Have you ever wondered what it looks like to “Rejoice always”? To “not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”? Or what it looks like to think about things that are true, honorable, just, pure, excellent and worthy of praise? Centuries before Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, somebody wrote our second scripture reading this morning, Psalm 40. And even though the psalm came first, it is a fantastic example of Philippians 4 in ACTION. Hear now the word of the Lord as it comes to us from this famous psalm . . .

There was an image that grabbed the country’s imagination this week. It was the image of a freeway that was completely clear except for 13 tractor trailers lined up underneath a freeway overpass in Detroit. They were there because police had pulled them over and asked for their help. There was a man on the overpass threatening to jump, and if he did he would have hit the concrete 14 feet below, killing or severely injuring himself. If police could get the tractor trailers to line up underneath, then if the man jumped, he’d only have five or six feet to fall instead of 14.

It was a pretty moving image, those 13 tractor trailers, parked as close together as they could get, creating a this one-of-a-kind safety net underneath the overpass. Each of those trucks had a driver who had willingly agreed to a costly delay in delivering their loads, costly because most of them are paid by the mile or the load and not by the hour. We learned that asking the drivers of tractor trailers to help is something police are trained to do in these situations, and it is

not an uncommon thing, but usually all it takes is one or two before the would-be-jumper agrees to come to safety. In this case, it took 13 trucks and three hours. The picture was a great visual reminder of how incredibly helpful law enforcement can be, and a great demonstration of kindness and teamwork from total strangers.

But as the Lieutenant who spoke to reporters pointed out, “In that picture somewhere is somebody that was contemplating ending their own life,” he said. “We want that to be the story - - not what Michigan State Police did or what the truckers did, but that the person changed their own mind.”

The person on that overpass is an example of someone in a pit. Pits can look like a lot of different things: chronic pain, disease, divorce, debt, addiction, abuse, grief, poverty, disaster, WAR. One pit that more and more people find themselves in is the pit of depression and/or anxiety—it’s so widespread that we devoted a whole Sunday School class to that topic today as part of our Timely Topics series. More than 300 million people around the world, of all ages, suffer from depression, including more than 16 million in the United States. And more than 40 million people in our country suffer from an anxiety disorder. That’s more than 18% of our population.

I want to be very clear that nothing in this sermon should be taken as a substitute for medical treatment, since depression and anxiety can be very serious health issues. But I do think there are some life-giving words for all of us in Psalm 40.

First of all, pit happens. It just does. I wish I could tell you that loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbors as ourselves gave us some kind of protective spiritual bubble wrap, but it does not. Look at the author of the psalm—he obviously had a strong faith, or he couldn’t have written something like this. Yet there he was, down in the

pit. The Lord didn't keep him from falling into the pit, whatever that pit was for him—but the Lord leaned towards him, heard his cry, and lifted him out.

Jesus said to his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” He's overcome it, but that doesn't mean we don't have troubles. To be alive means we're going to have pain and suffering, case closed. And that means: no blaming and no shaming anyone who's down in a pit. Even with the growing number of people being treated for anxiety and depression, there's still quite a bit of stigma and misunderstanding when it comes to mental health issues. It's easy for those of us who don't struggle with these things to look at our loved one suffering from depression and think, “Snap out of it! Just think positive!” But unless we've been there, we really do not understand it.

No blaming, no shaming, no judging. If we ourselves are bent over from the weight of depression or anxiety, and feeling wretched because everywhere we look we see all these shiny, happy people—let's not add shame to the load we're already carrying. If I've learned anything in my years of pastoral ministry, it's that everybody, and I mean everybody, has something. Secrets and pain that, if you knew about it, you would not want to switch places with them, GUARANTEED. If we are depressed, that does not mean we are weak or deficient or less than anyone else. And if someone close to us is anxious and depressed and we are frustrated with them, just remember we've got our thing, too. And it very well could be that one of OUR things is—the pernicious compulsion to judge others. That's a whole lot uglier than depression.

Second, notice how the psalmist expresses himself. He does exactly what Paul describes in Philippians 4:4-9—he rejoices. He rejoices some more. With thanksgiving and supplication, he presents his requests to God. He dwells on the good stuff and he tells everybody all about it—speaks it, sings it, shouts it. He does this not because everything is going his way—clearly

it's not, or he wouldn't be begging the Lord to hurry up and deliver him. He does it because there's power in praise. There's power in voicing our gratitude. It may not be a cure for clinical depression, but there's real power in remembering when God was there for us, and helped us. It provides balance to the often distorted way we hear and see things when we are depressed. It directs our attention towards someone and something bigger, and lifts us out of ourselves. There's a special power in singing a new song—we are literally changing our tune.

Third, a word about ears. Verse 6 says: "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear." And the phrase "given me an open ear" is more accurately translated, "an ear you have dug for me." I love that image of God kind of bending over the human, like a sculptor with her clay, molding and shaping and using her hands to carefully scoop out an ear for the human.

God doesn't want to be bribed, bargained with, or repaid. God simply wants us to hear God's voice. When we're anxious and depressed, it can be hard to hear God speaking to us, and here we're given a reminder that when we're busy beating ourselves up and hating on ourselves, God is digging through the rubble of all the crud, putting his mouth up to our ear and whispering, "I'm right here. I'm right here. It's OK. I'm right here."

And while we're talking about ears, on this day when we are commissioning two new Stephen Ministers and celebrating our Stephen Ministry, may we never forget the healing power of listening. Of fully, deeply, attentively listening to another human being. No interrupting, no judgment. Holy listening, over time, has the power to help pull people out of pits. If we want to make a difference, we will learn to listen. It is every bit as life-saving—even more so—than 13 tractor trailers, lined up under an overpass on a freeway . . .