

January 22, 2023
Psalm 40:1-11
In What Does My Hope Lie?
Michael Stanfield

I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods. You have multiplied, O LORD 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. Sacrifice and offering (of animals) you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. 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. Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. The grass withers and the flowers fade but your word, O God, stands forever. So, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of hearts on that word be acceptable in your sight. Amen*



One of the responsibilities assigned to the pastor in the Presbyterian Church is that of choosing the hymns each Sunday. The fact is that by our governing Book of Order, although the pastor has the main responsibility for all of worship each Sunday, our denomination actually grants only a few privileges to that pastor that are *not* subject to the authority of the session – that is our board of elders: 1. The choice of scripture, 2. The choice of how that scripture text will be interpreted and therefore how it will be preached 3. How the pastor prays, and 4. The choice of hymns that the congregation will sing.

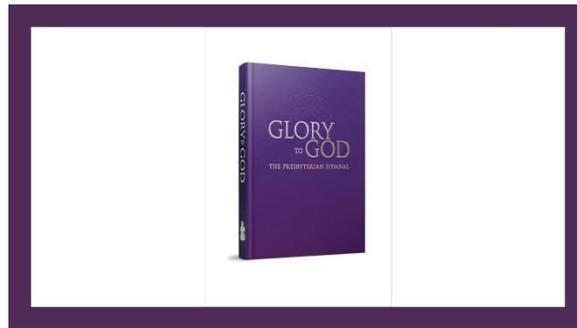
Now, I'll have to be honest with you. When I first began as a pastor, the responsibility of choosing hymns seemed much more like a burden to me than a privilege. I grew up in a small Methodist church that rotated a handful of hymns familiar to the congregation. So I was not at all familiar with the Presbyterian hymn book when I first began leading worship as a pastor.

Choosing hymns that were theologically complimentary to the sermon I found tricky – and not just because I was not all that familiar with the hymnal but because I quickly realized that hymns

that were also *not* familiar to the congregation I served, raised the ire of folks faster than if I had run off with the offering money after the service!

To top it off, although I liked to sing and had a reasonably decent voice, I knew nothing about music and this was the days before the spread of the internet when you could go online and listen to the hymn tunes. You had to meet with the choir director or someone capable of playing or humming the tunes for you or you just did the best you could.

But like a lot of things, what began as a burden turned out to be a gift. I have always been blessed with knowledgeable directors of music and organists from whom I learned a great deal and upon whom I depended for guidance.



And with their help, I discovered that it is amazing what happens when one draws one's full attention to both the music and words of the hymns in a Hymnal. Our *current* hymnal is full of adoration, admonition, cries for God's help and God's salvation as well as shouts of acclamation for God's deliverance.

It also contains the depth and the breadth of biblical theology as well as instruction in the practice of the faith. So, our hymnal acts in the same manner as the Psalms. In fact, a very large number of the Psalms have been put to music and are a part *of* our hymnal.

And I have found that with a proper introduction of unfamiliar hymns that, nonetheless, are theologically on target and wonderful to sing, once you catch on, most folks are very gracious – as long as you don't include more than one of those types in the same service; then, of course, all bets are off!

At any rate, we would do well to remember that the Psalms are actually lyrics to the worship music of ancient Israel. They are, then the hymnbook of ancient Israel. And Psalm 40, I believe, is a rare gem. It contains a little bit of it all. It is filled not only with the mention of the pits and bogs of life, but also with testimony about the goodness of God and the benefit to those who trust in, and rely upon that God. "Happy are those," sings the Psalmist, "who make the LORD their trust."

In so singing, the Psalmist, like all great hymn writers, is giving a wonderful interpretation of life through the lens of faith.

There is an old saying:



“Suffering colors life, but *we* can choose the color.”

Well Psalm 40, indeed all Psalms, and hymns choose colors in combinations that capture something that is both precious and enduring. At times, using contemporary wording, and most often, using language found in the scriptures, our hymns interpret life through the lens of God’s eye, as it were, such that, in good times and bad, our lives are imbued with a higher meaning. Times of joy then become occasions for thanksgiving and times of hopelessness become occasions for remembering where our ultimate hope lies.



The writer of Psalm 40 has obviously come close to some tragedy. We are not told the details although he speaks (possibly metaphorically) of having been in a *desolate* pit and a *miry* bog. That could be the desolation of grief over an inconsolable loss, the mire of a life threatening illness, the fear and dread associated with a callous tyrannical political climate or some other soul-threatening circumstance.

Whatever it was, he has survived it and now he interprets that survival in ways that transform the meaning of the suffering

- From what could have been nothing but bitterness
to something sweet.
- From what could have been fatalistic resignation
to hope-filled joy and praise.

This got me to thinking – how might each of us be interpreting what is going on in our lives right now? With what palette are we choosing to color it?



With what chords of music might we choose to compose a current theme song?



And then what lyrics would we choose to put with that composition?



And lest you think I am mixing my metaphors, the two parts of the brain associated with color and music are actually connected in the brain of many great musical geniuses.

Synesthesia

Greek

Syn (union) + **Aesthesia** (senses)

It's a rare ability called synesthesia and usually comes to those who also have the gift of perfect pitch. The root of the word is Greek, combining the roots "Syn" meaning "union" and "Aesthesia" meaning "senses". Those with this ability can feel colors and notes that for the person, connects the particular notes to particular colors.

Franz Liszt,



Alexander Scriabin,

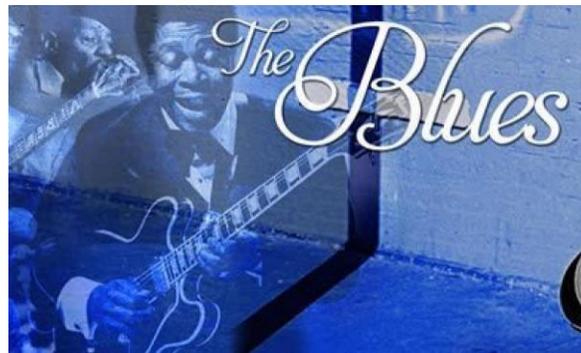


and Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov



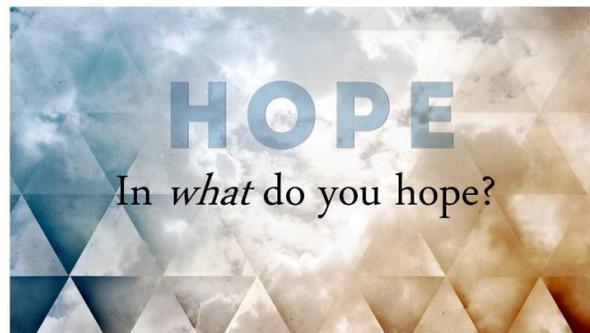
all had this unusual gift.

And even if *you* don't have this ability, you are all aware that in popular music there is a whole genre called the "Blues."



And in that genre of music are chords which aptly depict the sadness and heartache of those from whom the music originated – African Americans in the South during the Jim Crow era. The Lyrics of the Blues articulate the pain of a trust that has been lost or a heart that has been completely broken – usually in a relationship between a man and a woman. But the music speaks of a particular kind of pain that is not only heavy but appears unending. Indeed, the only relief for the genuine singer of the blues is to turn the feeling into music.

Might the blues capture where life has taken you or someone you know right now?



In *what* do you hope?

Psalm 40 tells us that *That* in which we hope determines the music that fills our lives. *That* in which we hope determines the lyrics we put to the music. *That* in which we hope determines the palette we use to color our lives.



United Church of Christ pastor Mark Longhurst uses a palette of hues and tints that paint suffering and hope, darkness and light in ways that strengthen faith. He does this with words.



In his blog, he describes how both light *and* dark are essential for painting a canvas of trust.

“In spirituality,” he says “. . . we tend to elevate the light over the darkness and praise the light and expel the darkness. Light conquers the darkness, the darkness will not overcome the light, John’s Gospel says [1:5]. . . . But the more Genesis works its wisdom on me, though, the more light and darkness seem bound up together. . . . at the beginning, says Genesis, God separates light from darkness, but they both need each other, and they *both* bear the breath of God. This, too, I think, is the truth of our lives. The light *and* the darkness are bound up with one another. Spiritual transformation does not happen only on the light level. We have to do the inner work of facing the shadow, or repressed realities, of who we are, both the beautiful and the bad. Some of our most painful experiences in life—whether death, divorce, or disease—often turn out to create a capacity in us for greater love and creativity. What we think is light shows up in what we think is darkness—and vice versa.” Mark Longhurst, “Beyond Light Supremacy: Let There Be Light *and* Darkness,” *Patheos* (October 11, 2019), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ordinarymystic/2019/10/beyond-light-supremacy-let-there-be-light-and-darkness/>.

Indeed. Periods of seemingly fruitless darkness may in fact highlight all the ways we rob ourselves of wisdom by refusing to do anything but look at the light. But whoever grows by only

looking on the bright side of things? It is only when we lose our certainties about the light that we will be able to deconstruct our false images of God to discover the Absolute Reality beneath all our ego driven fantasies and fears.

I saw this being worked out right before my eyes three years ago at Christmas when I returned to the home of my parents and siblings, all of whom live in Chester, VA. In fact, my sister, Jill, and her husband Craig live across the street from my parents. Craig's father died late in the summer of '19 and his mother, Dorothy soon began to deteriorate. So, around the 1st of October, Jill and Craig brought Dorothy into their home to live so they could care for her.

Although I had always experienced Dorothy as pleasant and easy to be around, she was none-the-less one of those Christians who was always so absolutely certain about who and what in this world belonged absolutely to the light and who and what belonged absolutely to the dark. Well, apparently, that attitude began a painful transformation shortly after she moved in with Jill and Craig.

Much to the angst of my sister and her husband, as Dorothy entered what we now know were the last few months of her life, she also entered what I would call the dark night of her soul.



Figures, including a strange unknown girl, her dead father and his dead brothers all came and lived right there in my sister's house with her. They were as real to her as I was sitting right next to her. I was intrigued and saw this as unfinished work rather than as meaningless suffering.

So I sat and held Dorothy's hand, entering her haunted world. As I did, I discovered that these specters all exhibited behaviors and carried attitudes that she found personally appalling. But the interesting thing was that she was not so much worried about what they would do to her but how their behavior would be perceived by those still living – especially by her son Craig and a minister like me. Her real fear was that these dead people (and she knew absolutely that they were dead). These ghosts of those she had loved (which were now parts of her own psyche) would not be accepted by the likes of us perceived "Men of The Light." These ghosts had suddenly and without warning appeared and become a threat to the way she related to the world – particularly of men and to the only God she knew who was definitely a Masculine God.

She wanted her father who was acting in angry ways and with terrible behavior and language to go back to his grave. But he would not go. God was trying to help Dorothy integrate a lifetime of Darkness before she left this earth – Darkness that *until* now had been banished to inner

hinterlands – but now had returned with a vengeance. Her task was one of finding compassion for the darker parts of herself she heretofore had not been able to accept. This was not the devil’s torture. This was Dorothy’s Gethsemane. This was Dorothy’s cross.

So, I reassured her about those specters – that I found her father’s language humorous at times, that it was OK that he was here and that people did not come back from graves without a God-given good reason. So Dorothy then asked me to pray for her and her father which I did. I wish I could say this completely ended Dorothy’s troubling visitations once and for all; it did not.

But I will say this: by the grace of God, Dorothy had allowed me to enter her suffering in a quite intimate way so that for one brief, brilliant moment we connected deeply around that suffering – suffering related to the struggle with the subtle hues of darkness and of light. I can honestly say that it was by far, the highlight of my time with my family. While Christmases come and go and they all seem to run together, that one will forever stand out in my mind.

And it was not long after, thanks be to God, that Dorothy’s suffering came to an end. Her work on this earth was finally complete. By God’s grace, Dorothy died peacefully in her sleep early one Thursday morning in January. Resurrection was now hers. The hope in Christ that we had clung to together in that one shining moment late in December had now become a reality – at least for Dorothy.



Craig M. Gay, in his book *The Way of the (Modern) World, Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live as If God Doesn’t Exist* writes: “Christian hope frees us to act hopefully in the world. It enables us to act humbly and patiently, tackling suffering in the world around us without needing to be assured that our skill and our effort will somehow rid the world of injustice altogether.

Christian hope, after all, does not need to see what it hopes for (Hebrews 11:1); and neither does it require us to comprehend the end of history. Rather, it simply requires us to trust that even the most outwardly insignificant of faithful actions — the cup of cold water given to the child, the widow’s mite offered at the temple, the act of hospitality shown to the stranger, none of which has any overall strategic socio-political significance so far as we can now see — will nevertheless be made to contribute in some significant way to the construction of God’s kingdom by the action of God’s creative and sovereign grace. Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World, Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live as If God Doesn’t Exist* (Eerdmans, 1998), 77.

Indeed, that is what our hope in Christ has the capacity to do: to turn our tragedies into the defining events of our lives that in retrospect we would not trade. That’s why the Apostle Paul speaking to those in difficulty in Ephesus can yet say:

“...sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father *at all times* and *for everything* in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”



Last Monday was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and if ever there was one of the saints who knew the meaning of singing in times of trouble, it was him along with all African Americans who suffered under the political climate of the times. King said and I quote,

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge, suffering and controversy.”

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge, suffering and controversy.”

And where we stand has everything to do with where we place our hope. In what does *your* hope lie?



As my closing prayer this morning, I use the prayer written by the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1926. Let us pray:

“God, grant us all the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as the pathway to peace; taking, as Christ did, this sinful world as it is, not as we would have it. Trusting that He will make all things right if we will surrender to His Will; that we may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.”



And now O lord, bless these gifts and offerings we bring that they may indeed be used to instill hope where there was none. Amen.