**“Playing in the Dirt”**

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**Psalm 40:1-11**

**January 19, 2020**

1 I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.2 He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.3 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. 4 Happy are those who make the Lord their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.5 You have multiplied, O Lord my God your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. 6 Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required. 7 Then I said, ‘Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. 8 I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’ 9 I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord.10 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. 11 Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe for ever.

Much has been written about the value of communing with nature. When we get outside…as I’m sure many of you have done the last few days, when it wasn’t raining, to enjoy the warm temps we have had…yes, we do live in Georgia where one weekend in the winter you have 20-degree weather and 70-degree weather the next…much has been written about the fact we often feel better when we take a walk on the beach, a stroll through the park, or tend to our garden.

I now know why I like to play in the dirt! Research shows there’s a natural antidepressant in soil called *mycobacterium vaccae,* which has a similar effect on neurons as the antidepressant medication Prozac. *Mycobacterium vaccae* may stimulate the production of serotonin, which may explain my love for making mud pies as a child and why I so enjoy anything to do with gardening and playing in the dirt. It is a well-documented fact that a lack of serotonin has been linked to depression and anxiety.

We gardeners have long extolled the therapeutic virtue of getting our hands dirty. For years, I’ve jokingly called my gardening *dirt therapy.* Turns out I wasn’t too far from the truth!

Before I go any further, let me insert a caveat. If you have been diagnosed with depression and have been prescribed medication or a combination of medication and talk therapy, **do not** misconstrue this sermon as encouragement to discontinue any of that. Depression is a disease just as real and potentially fatal as heart disease and diabetes. Just as people take medication and do other things to help with the effects of those diseases, so do people who have the disease of depression.

When we feel stuck and mired in the mud, as was the writer of today’s Psalm, and when the way ahead appears murky and unclear, can the answer really be as simple as *playing in the dirt*?

*Playing* in the dirt is one thing. *Getting mired in mud* is another!

King David, who is said to have written some of the Psalms, may have been the one who found himself in a “desolate pit” and “miry bog” in this Psalm. If David was the writer of this Psalm, he may have felt overwhelmed because of an ill-advised action he had taken. There was that incident with Bathsheba and David sending her husband Uriah to be killed in battle…or perhaps it was one of those times David’s enemies were plotting his destruction.

Whatever was going on, like the writer of this Psalm, we can find ourselves feeling as the psalmist did. Those things that draw us into the depths of despair comprise a long list.

Each one of you has things that have caused you despair at one time or another. You lost a job or didn’t get into the college you wanted to attend. Your pet is very ill and you’re not sure she is going to survive. Your teen has looked you in the eye and told you they hate you. You realize you drink a bottle of wine just about every night after getting home from work or putting the kids to bed.

Difficult situations can put us knee deep in mud that really feels like quicksand. It seems the more we struggle in that mud, the harder its grip on us.

Again, *when* we aren’t dealing with depression or some other mental illness, our question is, “How do we get out?”

*We don’t get out by blaming someone else for a miry bog situation we know we’ve created.*

It’s much easier, when we’re mired in the mud of our own making to blame someone else. When we blame someone else for our miry bogs, we think we free ourselves from working out *why* we ended up in that miry bog…instead we circumvent the important work of figuring out **why** we are in that miry bog. Blaming someone else *may* help us feel free from responsibility and might allow us to move in the murkiness…but the easy way out isn’t always the right way.

We might think blaming someone else is a way to get ourselves out of the muck…but it doesn’t. When we refuse to look head-on at the circumstance that put us in the miry bog in the first place, we risk remaining being stuck in that bog. Bottom line, the person we want to blame may not even care that we are in the muck and even if they do, they may not be able to do anything to help us get out of the muck.

*One way to get out of the miry bog is to step outside.*

In an article titled *Natural Medicine,* Gayle Boss has written, “Of course, we try to make sense of things; that’s human nature…but logic doesn’t usually help much in shoring up our hearts.”

Poet Mary Oliver, whose poetry we will use during the upcoming season of Lent, suggests a way to restore our hearts: “Step out to the shore—or the mountain or the riverbank or the desert. And pay attention.”

Step outside…literally. To get out of the muck of despair, it’s helpful to get into the real mud of the natural world…play in the dirt…breathe in the outside air and feel the difference of it as opposed to the air inside your home or office or school. Take a walk in the woods. Plant a tree. As you do any of these things, as Mary Oliver said, pay attention. Listen to the sounds around you…hear the pinecone when it drops to the ground. Appreciate the different aromas you smell…the smell of freshly mown grass. Look at the difference between the leaves on an oak tree and a maple tree. Bend down and feel the velvety softness of a lamb’s ear plant.

You can also step outside of yourself. Do something for someone else. Take your mind off yourself and your miry bog and lend a hand to someone else who is in their miry bog. Invite them to go on that walk in the woods with you!

*Another way to be delivered from the muck of desolation and despair is to shift our position.*

A hiker in the deserts of the southwestern United States had missed the entrance to a canyon he had hoped to explore. Retracing his steps, he noticed a thin crack in the sandstone. Only by shifting his position and altering his perspective did he *see* that crack was indeed the entrance to the canyon.

When there appears no way out, we need to *shift our position* and in doing so we can see new possibilities.

To *shift our position* means to attack a problem from a different point of view.

To *shift our position* is to let go of some of our assumptions.

To *shift our position* may involve embracing some new ideas we’ve previously resisted.

To *shift our position* may mean acknowledging we are wrong and someone else is right.

A shift in position changes our perspective. *The way we have always done things doesn’t always work* when we are stuck in the mud. We need to look at other possibilities…*shift our position...*to recognize there might be another way.

*Another way we can get out of the mire is by expressing gratitude.*

The writer of this Psalm writes: “He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.” Yes, it is hard to praise God when we are stuck in the mud, but doing so may help us see things in a different way. Trusting God’s presence with us while we are in the muck - even though we may not feel God’s presence - changes our perspective and changes us.

Do you doubt that?

A book written about twenty years ago, Sleeping with Bread, speaks to the power of presence. The book opens with the story of children who had been left orphaned by the ravages of war.

One night the people who ran the orphanage where the children lived discovered some of the children had taken bread from their dinner to bed with them. The children were literally grasping the bread in their little hands as they slept!

Here is what the people of the orphanage discovered: Prior to coming to the orphanage, the children would go days with little to eat. Often, they did not know when they would get their next meal. Although they now had regular meals at the orphanage, they found comfort in the presence of the bread cupped in their little hands. If they held onto that bread, they were assured they would have *something* to eat the next day. The book goes on to encourage people to focus *daily* on those things that give them life and to give thanks to God for them.

Trusting in God’s presence with us will change our perspective. It reminds us we are not alone.

No, our circumstances haven’t changed. What put us in the muck hasn’t changed. But our perspective will have changed.

A miry bog can lead to treacherous areas of quicksand…or…it can eventually lead to solid ground! We can waste energy pointing fingers or we can let go of the blaming and change our perspectives. We can flounder in the foggy desolation or be still and allow ourselves to be enveloped in the presence of a loving God.

There is playing in the dirt and there is being buried in it. Choose to ***play*** in the dirt rather than be ***buried*** in it! Take a lesson from the ugly bulb that even now is slowly pushing its way upward through the dirt and will in due time become a beautiful daffodil or iris or daylily.

You may be in the miry bog, but God is there with you also. Just as surely as those children held that bread in their little hands to remind them there would be food for them the next day…the Bread of Life is with you and remains with you, wherever you find yourself.

Thanks be to God!!