

SERMON- Epiphany II (A)

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Isaiah 49:1-7

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

St. Timothy's, Herndon

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Psalm 40:1-12

John 1:29-42

OPENER:

From Psalm 40:

*God lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay;
God put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.*

Bono, the lead singer of the band U2, was raised in Dublin in the Church of Ireland. He has this to say about his memories of the Psalms in church growing up: “great words, shame about the melody.”¹

Fortunately, things did not end there, as Bono's relationship with Scripture would go on to inform the music of U2 for four decades, no more prominently than in the song “40”—inspired and named for today's Psalm.

A prominent inspiration for Bono's faith was the scholar and Presbyterian minister Eugene Peterson. The story goes that, a few years back, word got to Peterson that Bono, global rock-star celebrity and renowned humanitarian who commanded audiences with presidents and popes, wanted to meet the humble Peterson.

Peterson was in the middle of his life's work, *The Message*, a 21st century translation of the Bible, and was, at that moment, working on a difficult part of the Old Testament.

So when Peterson declined Bono's invitation, his friends and family were surprised and shocked. They said:

“You may be the only person alive who would turn down the opportunity... I mean, come on. It's Bono, for crying out loud!”

Peterson replied:

“It was Isaiah!”²

¹ Bono & Eugene Peterson / *THE PSALMS* (April 16, 2016) <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/bono-eugene-peterson-psalms/>

² Bono & Eugene Peterson / *THE PSALMS* (April 16, 2016) <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/bono-eugene-peterson-psalms/>

PSALMS:

Here is Eugene Peterson's translation of our Psalm for this morning, Psalm 40:

I waited and waited and waited for God. At last he looked. Finally he listened. He lifted me out of the ditch. He pulled me from deep mud, stood me up on a solid rock to make sure that I wouldn't slip. He taught me how to sing the latest God-song...³

"He taught me how to sing the latest God-song."

What a wonderful way to describe a Holy Calling, to describe how God sees us and imparts his grace to us, to describe how God's light can shine even through the darkest of nights, and from the unlikeliest of sources.

Our lessons today are a constellation of stories that sparkle with examples of how God reveals himself in the world and how such epiphanies are then reflected in how we respond to God's call.

But I kept coming back, as I was preparing this sermon and reading and re-reading our lessons for today, to the music of Bono and U2.

A few examples beyond the song "40":

Did you know that Bono's real first name is Paul? The author of 1st Corinthians.

Did you know that his middle name is David? The assumed author of Psalms.

Did you know that Bono frequently reads aloud, to the audience, Eugene Peterson's translation of Psalm 116 prior to his concerts?

Did you know that one of U2's most famous songs, "Pride (In the Name of Love)," is about the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose memory we recognize in our secular calendar on Monday, and elsewhere in our church calendar?

Now all these little starbursts might not be enough, particularly if you are not a fan of U2, if you think their music is a little too.... Preachy... Bono's humanitarian work a little too.... Self-righteous?

Maybe you are still remembering/ recovering from the appearance, a decade or so ago, of the "U2-Charist"-- a modified form of our Eucharistic liturgy, where the music of U2 was used as the hymns and the service music in Episcopal churches.

³ Peterson, Eugene H. 2004. *The Message: Psalms*. Colorado Springs, CO: Nav Press

Maybe you are aware of the following joke:

“What is the difference between the HOB0 down the street who claims to be Jesus and Bono?”

One of the two knows that they are not ACTUALLY Jesus.”

SHIFT:

So let’s get back on firmer ground.

Here is what Eugene Peterson had to say about Bono’s version of Psalm 40:

“It’s one of the songs that reaches into the hurt and disappointment and difficulty of being a human being. It acknowledges that in language that is immediately recognizable. There’s something that reaches into the heart of a person and the stuff we all feel but many of us don’t talk about.”⁴

Bono, meanwhile, would liken the writing of the Psalms to the “blues”—he said that the author was shouting at God, using the language of lament to speak the truth, and somehow drawing closer to God in the process.⁵

“How long, how long, must I sing this song?”—Bono had paraphrased the Psalmist. So similar to the cry from Isaiah: “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity”⁶

So similar to the most heart-breaking words in Scripture, Jesus quoting the Psalms in the Garden the night before he died:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”⁷

That’s Blues Music.... Gospel..... music for any place and time.

God’s people have lifted up such songs continually, all throughout history, from the Israelites in Isaiah’s story,

to the words of the Psalmist,

to Dietrich Bonhoeffer bringing Gospel music back from the African-American church back and playing it in when he was in a Nazi prison,

to the cries of the disadvantaged and dispossessed in our own time.

⁴ Bono & Eugene Peterson / *THE PSALMS* (April 16, 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-l40S5e90KY>

⁵ “Bono on the Psalms.” *PBS Religion & News Weekly* (March 1, 2002) <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2002/03/01/web-exclusive-bono/18979/>

⁶ Isaiah 49.4

⁷ Matthew 27.46; Psalm 22.2.

God responds by saying: “I am with you, I have known you since before you were born, I still love you. And in your very mired-ness, that brokenness, that very suffering that you speak of, is why I have chosen to do my work through you.” God tells us: “you cannot see it now, but through you, through the despised and despairing ‘you’, I will transform the world.

I will make all things broken new.

I will be responsible for new creation.”

God sees the most hopeless and uninspiring pieces of clay and says “I can work with that!”

Be it the Jewish people in exile,
be it African-Americans in this country in the Jim Crow South,
or be it members of the Resistance in Nazi Germany,
Be it a random collection of fishermen and peasants from Galilee,
or even be it 4 punk rocker teenagers in 1970’s Ireland, God proclaims:
God says: “I will put words in your mouth and help you sing a new song, form a new community.”
“God is faithful” and will lift God’s people out from the depths of despair.⁸

CONCLUSION:

Our Psalm starts with a solitary cry from a desolate pit, and it ends on top of high cliff with the whole congregation.

Our Gospel starts with John the Baptist crying in the wilderness with disciples milling about in ones and twos, it too ends on a rock, with Jesus calling Peter and naming him and us (the church) the rock and foundation which will carry on his work.

Both are the message of this Epiphany season, that when people perceive God’s light shared in their lives, we are called and motivated to respond by sharing that light with others.

We cannot help but to sing that song with our neighbors, cannot help but be called to share that Light even to all nations, with all peoples, and in all the ways that humanity can see and hear.

AMEN

⁸ 1st Corinthians 1.9