

STUCK IN THE MUD

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Psalm 40:1-11

When I was a kid, probably about 8 years old, I remember being invited over to a friend's house to play after school. We attended school in Mobile, but this boy lived in Fairhope, on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay. His house was on the water. It was winter when I was invited over but this being coastal Alabama it wasn't cold. I was dressed in long pants and I wore a light coat, but I also was wearing my boots. I loved those boots. They were black rubber and were kind of like wellingtons but not as tall. They zipped up on the inside. Because this was south Alabama, there wasn't much occasion to wear boots like this, but when I learned I would be going to a house on the water and that there was a good chance we would be playing on the beach, I begged my mother to let me wear my boots. She relented, but for some reason she added, "Just don't lose them." How could I possibly lose a pair of boots?

At my friend's house, after a snack, we headed down to the edge of the water and started exploring. We walked up and down the beach looking for turtles; we walked out on different wharfs; we threw sticks at seagulls; we picked up hermit crabs just to see how far we could throw them back out into the water. You know, boy stuff.

We walked a pretty good ways down the beach but had enough sense to turn back toward the house because the sun was starting to set and the temperature was dropping. Because I had been poking around at some sand crabs, my friend got ahead of me and had disappeared around a bend in the shoreline. I came to a place where a small creek emerged from the woods and emptied out into the bay. The mouth of the creek at the beach spread out in a wide delta. I was anxious to catch up with my friend because I wasn't confident I would remember which house was his. Instead of going around the delta and just stepping across the creek where it was narrow, I decided to walk straight through. The tide was out and the passage looked dry and what did I care, I was wearing boots. So, I started running. The first step into the delta felt okay but the second one seemed a bit sticky. On the third step my right foot sank in and refused to move, and on the fourth step my left foot got stuck as well. The bed of that creek was not sand like the beach. It was mud—thick, viscous red clay mud. I'm sure the Pawokti Indians used this very clay as the basis of their pottery. I was stuck in the mud and all alone and I was sinking fast. I would try to lift up one foot and but the other just pushed down lower. The mud was starting to reach the top of my boots and I began to panic. All the stories about quicksand flooded my young imagination.

I finally decided that I had to do something, so I pulled on my right foot as hard as I could. And with some success. Sort of. My foot came out, but the boot stayed in

the mud. Surprised at this, I lost my balance, fell on my backside, and ended up sitting in the mud. I struggled to get up but couldn't get my balance. I'm not going to say that I started to cry but

About this time, I heard a voice behind me. I turned around to see a man walking up the beach. He had his dog with him. "I see that the mud got you," he said gently. "Hold on. I'll get you out." He picked up two pieces of driftwood—planks that had broken off someone else's wharf—and he laid them on each side of me. He then walked out with a foot on each plank and reached down and wrapped his arms around my chest and hoisted me out. As he pulled me free, my left foot slipped out of its boot and my right foot came out of its sock. The man swung me back around to the sand. I started to go back to get my boots, but the man stopped me saying, "Son, those boots belong to the mud now." He asked where I was staying and I told him and he said, "That's not far. I'll get you there."

I showed up at my friend's house missing two boots and one sock and covered in mud. His mother called my mother. She then made me strip on the porch and directed me to a shower. She gave me dry clothes to put on.

Now, that was along time ago and it is not the only time I've been stuck. I've even gotten cars stuck in the sand and the snow. But, I believe, that was the most traumatic.

The writer of Psalm 40 tells of a similar experience of being stuck. The psalmist describes being in *a desolate pit, a miry bog*. That is all we are told, but it is enough. The details aren't important. The point is that this person was in an untenable position from which they could not extricate themselves alone. They needed help. They were stuck in the sludge that life hurls at us.

Pits and bogs come in all shapes and sizes. They are the setbacks and challenges in our lives, the moments when we are most alone, whether it is failing health, a deteriorating relationship, loneliness, mental illness, getting fired, being lied to, being trapped in addiction, and more.

Each person responds differently in each situation. When you are an eight-year-old boy, you may fight and struggle but eventually you give up crying in the mud.

The psalmist, however, provides a lesson for us in how to react in these moments. He (or she) offers this lesson in the opening words of the psalm: *I waited patiently for the Lord*. The psalmist doesn't provide the backstory of how they got into their predicament. They jump right in at the height of the action. Something is not right: *I waited patiently for the Lord; [and] he inclined to me and heard my cry*. The psalmist wasn't sitting quietly just waiting for God to ride to the rescue. The psalmist was still crying out from the pit, "Help me. Save me." The psalmist cried out in distress (as we all do) but with the knowledge that God would come to them. *I*

waited patiently for the Lord; he [turned] 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. From my own experience as an eight-year-old, and many times since, I know that feeling of being lifted up out of miry place and set on solid ground. The entirety of the story is found in those brief, opening words. The psalmist then uses the rest of the psalm to reflect on her relationship with God.

The first thing she reports is that God set a *new song* in her mouth. No longer does she cry out words of despair as she did from the bottom of the pit. Now, she sings a song of praise to God. And because of what God had done for her, others can comprehend what she experienced and can put their trust in the Lord.

Those who put their trust in the Lord are happy; they are blessed. They can rely on God's strength. There is no need for them to turn to gods—gods that are false.

The psalmist then reflects on all the great deeds God has performed. Being pulled from the pit was not a one-time occurrence. It is what God does. As the psalmist writes, *Were I to proclaim and tell of [God's actions], they would be more than can be counted.*

Then the psalmist reminds us that what God desires more than anything is to have a relationship with us. We assume God wants sacrifices and offerings. No. God wants us. God offers to us an open ear so that we may talk with God anytime, so that we will open our hearts to our Lord. We don't need offerings and sacrifices in order to speak with the Lord. But we don't have to bribe God.

Then, the psalmist publicly confesses her faith and tells the world of what God has done for her. She explains, *I have not hidden your saving help within my heart. I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation.*

Finally, the psalmist concludes this passage with a plea that God will continue to watch over her: *O Lord, do not withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.*

In this psalm, the psalmist provides the world with one of the greatest expressions of faith to our Lord. It is the admission that at some point, we are going to find ourselves in situations that are beyond our control. We will be tempted to turn to people who claim to be powerful believing that they can help us. We will be tempted to turn to gods that are not gods at all. We will follow false promises. But all we must do is call to our own Lord, our God the creator, whose ear is always open to us. God will answer; God will bring salvation, but that salvation is no guarantee that we will get what we want. The cancer may progress, the relationship may fail, and you will likely lose your boots forever. But God will be with us lifting us up, holding us tight, guiding us home. And we will be with God. And that is more than we can ever hope for.