

In the Mud up to Your Neck  
Rev. Michael Blackwood  
United Church of Broomfield  
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Psalms 40:1-11 Common English Bible (CEB)

I put all my hope in the Lord.

He leaned down to me;  
he listened to my cry for help.

He lifted me out of the pit of death,  
out of the mud and filth,  
and set my feet on solid rock.

He steadied my legs.

He put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise for our God.

Many people will learn of this and be amazed;  
they will trust the Lord.

Those who put their trust in the Lord,  
who pay no attention to the proud  
or to those who follow lies,  
are truly happy!

You, Lord my God!

You've done so many things—  
your wonderful deeds and your plans for us—  
no one can compare with you!

If I were to proclaim and talk about all of them,  
they would be too numerous to count!

You don't relish sacrifices or offerings;  
you don't require entirely burned offerings or compensation offerings—  
but you have given me ears!

So I said, "Here I come!

I'm inscribed in the written scroll.

I want to do your will, my God.

Your Instruction is deep within me."

I've told the good news of your righteousness  
in the great assembly.

I didn't hold anything back—  
as you well know, Lord!

I didn't keep your righteousness only to myself.

I declared your faithfulness and your salvation.

I didn't hide your loyal love and trustworthiness  
from the great assembly.

So now you, Lord—

don't hold back any of your compassion from me.  
Let your loyal love and faithfulness always protect me,

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"The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of [time] in a way that [people], in some strange way, are responding – something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And where they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee – the cry is always the same – "We want to be free."<sup>1</sup>

These words were spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King in his last sermon, delivered on the eve of his assassination on April 3, 1968.

It is more than 50 years later; some will argue that those very same words are entirely applicable to the nation we're living in today? It's not only sad, but disturbing that that bears truth.

- In 2018 there were more than 1800 anti-Semitic incidents documented by the ADL, including a drastic increase in physical assaults. Five years prior the number was less than 800.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2018, the FBI reported that "personal attacks," whether verbal and bodily, reached a 16-year high. They were primarily targeting people of color, followed by one's religion/ethnicity (Muslims/Middle-Eastern heritage). Specifically, aggravated assaults rose by 4%, simple assaults rose by 15% and acts of intimidation rose by 13%. And...the FBI report reminds us that more than half of hate-crime victims never report their assaults.<sup>3</sup>

Fifty years after the civil rights movement – and where are we? In a 2018 article, Eddie Glaude, professor and chair of the Dept. of African American Studies at Princeton University said, "The fact is that Americans have grown comfortable with racism resting just beneath the surface of our politics — to be activated whenever a politician or a community needed it, or some racist incident exhumed it only for us to bury it once again. What has resulted is an illusion that blinds us to what was actually happening right in front of our noses and in our heads — we believed that our country had become less racist, because we were not as brazen as we once were."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "I see the Promised Land," A Testament of Hope, p280. Originally from Flip Schulke, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr: A Documentary...Montgomery to Memphis* (New York and London: Norton, 1976), 222-23.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rise-in-anti-semitic-incidents-goes-beyond-recent-violent-attacks-11576611407>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/us/hate-crimes-fbi-report.html>

<sup>4</sup> "Don't Let the Loud Bigots Distract You. America's Real Problem With Race Cuts Far Deeper." Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Time Magazine, September 6, 2018.

That illusion has been shattered within the last few years as racist and xenophobic comments and actions have not only resurfaced in loud and blatant displays, but they've been lauded and even encouraged.

- Our nation's first black president had his citizenship incessantly questioned.
- Mexicans have been scapegoated as rapists and criminals.
- Attempts at banning all Muslims from entering the country have been proposed
- Who is or isn't allowed into this country is changing because "the wrong kind of people" could change the character of this country. Immigrants from Haiti and Africa aren't wanted, while those from countries like Norway are preferred.
- Incidents of white supremacy, racism and anti-Semitism have shockingly increased. The Unite the Right Rally, in Charlottesville, VA in August of 2017 is a notorious example.

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It is discouraging. It can drain our hope to think that we thought we'd come so far; we believe the world is a better place....or at least, it should be. There is goodness in this world. Like Dr. King, I do see God working in this working – people making a difference and rising up. If we're going to keep moving forward, it's imperative that we remain vigilant in our hope. How do we keep our hope alive?

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he reminded them, "You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise. (3:26-29).

Even though we live in a world where inequality exists and seems to persist, we must remember that this not God's Kingdom. God's Kingdom is coming and when it fully arrives there will be no inequality in it. In God's Kingdom there is social justice and equality for all. It's the dream that Martin Luther King, Jr. saw and spoke so articulately. It's the dream that we, followers of Christ also share. That is why the Galatians were instructed to persistently and continually pray and ask God for God's Kingdom to come. We pray not only for God's Kingdom, but we live – we live here and now according to Christ's teaching, so that our hope may become reality, on earth as it is in heaven.

Every person in the world has an opportunity. It's an opportunity that we must live and proclaim. It's the opportunity of the cross that allows an individual to be born into God's family regardless of who their parents are, where they are born, or their gender. This opportunity is not just for the rich or the poor; the educated or the uneducated. This opportunity is for all. As Dr. King said, "Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

In this human family we are all one; total unity void of friction and schism. One. Basic and simple to understand. What makes us one? Jesus. Following his teachings to be gracious, to show mercy, to seek justice, to focus on caring for the oppressed, excluded and marginalized - to love. Love God. Love each other.

We are baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. Race, gender and social status are all gone and we are all treated equally and operate as one. We are part of one body ministering at the point of need in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the midst of an unjust world. As children of God, we have God's Kingdom deposited within us and we have a responsibility to help usher in God's coming Kingdom.

We have work to do – **to keep doing** – rising up against oppression; seeking justice incessantly. We shouldn't lose hope because the strength of God goes with us. In the words of Saint Mother Theodora Guerin, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French American nun, we must remember that “we are not called upon to do all the good that is possible, but only that which we can do.”

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Are we better off than we were 50-60 years ago? Yes. In general, Americans are better off today when we look back at life as it was during the Civil War, Reconstruction, the New Deal and the Civil Rights movement. Those were dark and challenging times, but things got better. Certainly, not ideal, but better.

It is our obligation as Christians to recognize that even though progress may be slow, it is still progress. We must keep our faith in fighting against oppression because we know that there will certainly be dark moments before us, yet again – moments that will require prayer, hope and action.

We are motivated by the words of Dr. King who said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

We are reminded by Barack Obama who echoed Dr. King's words when he said, “Yes, our progress has been uneven...For every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back. But the long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion.”<sup>5</sup>

We are encouraged by today's Psalm from King David;

Psalm 40 tells a story of a young David out in the wilderness with his troop of men hiding from a crazed king, exploring the land. Suddenly David stumbles into a swamp, sinking into mire - stuck in the mud alone.

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<sup>5</sup> Barack Obama, “President Obama's Farewell Address,” January 10, 2017, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/farewell>.

He cries out: Help me! Anyone?! Lord!!? Help!

Then comes the waiting, trying not to struggle - slime rising up his legs - panic rising in his blood. If you fight the mud it claims you. You must fight the fear and keep still - you have to be patient all you can do is cry for help.

Here I am!

And help comes. Friends come running. Stop! careful! Extracting a man from mud requires thought and planning, teamwork and tools, lest another is lost.

Slowly, with strength and gentleness David is pulled up and out; feet connect with rock - He has never been so grateful for solid ground.

He drew me up from the pit of tumult, 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.

Happy are those who trust in the Lord.

Lord you have multiplied your love and your power in us, for us, with us! I will tell of all you have done though time itself will run out before it is told. You are beyond compare! I will sing of you, I will not hide your saving help within my heart  
Everyone must know! Great is the Lord!<sup>6</sup>

We are better off because when in the mire and sludge, in the frightening realities that are now before us, we don't forget how far we have gone --- and we continue to care. We **want** to make a difference and despite the obstacles before us, we remain hopeful and rise up. Like Dr. King and thousands of activists before us, trusting in God we speak up, step up and care for those who cannot care for themselves, so that 50 years from now, our children and grandchildren can say, "Yes, things are better."

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I want to end with a story I came across recently that fits well with today's Psalm and this message:

Admiral William H. McRaven, ninth commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, gave a commencement address at the University of Texas at Austin on 17 May 2014. He told the graduates:

The ninth week of SEAL training is referred to as Hell Week. It is six days of no sleep, constant physical and mental harassment and one special day at the Mud Flats. The Mud Flats are an

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<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Purdie, *The Mud Psalm*. <http://www.conversations.net.nz/psalm-40-the-mud-psalm.html>

area between San Diego and Tijuana where the water runs off and creates the Tijuana slues—a swampy patch of terrain where the mud will engulf you.

It is on Wednesday of Hell Week that you paddle down to the mud flats and spend the next 15 hours trying to survive the freezing-cold mud, the howling wind and the incessant pressure from the instructors to quit. As the sun began to set that Wednesday evening, my training class, having committed some “egregious infraction of the rules” was ordered into the mud. The mud consumed each man till there was nothing visible but our heads. The instructors told us we could leave the mud if only five men would quit—just five men and we could get out of the oppressive cold.

Looking around the mud flat, it was apparent that some students were about to give up. It was still over eight hours till the sun came up—eight more hours of bone-chilling cold. The chattering teeth and shivering moans of the trainees were so loud it was hard to hear anything.

And then, one voice began to echo through the night—one voice raised in song. The song was terribly out of tune but sung with great enthusiasm. One voice became two, and two became three, and before long everyone in the class was singing. We knew that if one man could rise above the misery then others could as well. The instructors threatened us with more time in the mud if we kept up the singing—but the singing persisted. And somehow, the mud seemed a little warmer, the wind a little tamer and the dawn not so far away.

If I have learned anything in my time traveling the world, it is the power of hope. The power of one person—Washington, Lincoln, King, Mandela and even a young girl from Pakistan named Malala—can change the world by giving people hope.

If you want to change the world, start singing when you’re up to your neck in mud.<sup>7</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.success-resources.com.au/blog/what-to-do-when-youre-up-to-your-neck-in-mud/>