

Trish King  
Jan. 20<sup>th</sup> Sermon  
Psalm 40

## A Higher Rock

Good morning. As a parent, one of the hardest things that we have to do in life is to begin to learn to let our kids go. When a new baby gets here, our job as a mom or a dad is to love that baby and take care of it and protect it. You know, relatively speaking, that's easy stuff. I have been a parent long enough now to know that it is much more difficult to let them go. To give them wings to fly when you want to keep them grounded in your arms.

We have watched one of our kids head off to college, and we have another one who will be leaving us in August. It seems like it was just yesterday when I was walking them, hand in hand, to kindergarten. This is tough stuff, this letting go.

I brought one of my favorite paintings today. This one was done by my Aunt Jean. I adored my Aunt Jean, and I am thrilled to have it. Jean, (or Jeano, as we used to call her) had been stricken by rheumatic fever when she was eight years old. An active child who enjoyed gymnastics and dance, Jeano found herself with increasingly achy joints. By the time she was in her late teens, a severe form of rheumatoid arthritis had completely changed her life. She was able to walk a bit with her cane, but a wheelchair was her primary mode of transportation. Her hands and feet were completely gnarled and distorted. She had difficulty getting up and down from a sitting position, so a stool like her red one painted here was essential. At times her body was completely frozen by the severe inflammation in her joints, and she was bedridden.

She discovered that life is often a process of letting go. She had to let go of gymnastics and dance. She had to leave her studies at the University of Chicago. You see, those were the days before handicapped access and wheelchair ramps. She simply couldn't get to her classes. She had to let go of her hopes for self-sufficiency and independence. The barriers were numerous. She often felt walled off from the rest of the world by her

disability. This picture, this self-portrait, illustrates the isolation, the loneliness, the distortions, and the patent unfairness of her life.

Today's Psalm, (Psalm 40) paints a picture, doesn't it? It begins with "I waited patiently on the Lord." I would declare to you, my friends at Bering, that this is the biggest challenge of this Psalm. To wait patiently. I know that I don't wait patiently often enough. I get in the line at the grocery store and some goofball in front of me has 85 coupons that they are trying to cash in and all I'm trying to do is buy a lousy gallon of milk. Does that sound familiar? Or I sit in my car and squirm while waiting in traffic on 59. We struggle with waiting for the trite and mundane things in life. How, then, do we wait patiently on God when the really difficult things happen?

Many Christians have written about the spiritual struggle of waiting for God. They had gone through periods in their lives when God's presence eluded them, when that peace that passes all understanding seemed unavailable. St. John of the Cross wrote of his Dark Night of the Soul, an account of his long and painful spiritual journey of having felt the presence of God so powerfully, and then seemingly having lost that presence for so many years. Recently, extensive attention has been given to the letters of Mother Teresa that speak to the ebb and flow of her spiritual experience. She writes, "I am told God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. What tortures of loneliness. I wonder how long my heart will suffer this?" And yet, through all of these spiritual struggles, Teresa persevered and continued to do the extraordinary work that God had called her to. She had no illusions of self-sufficiency. She knew that all of her days were empowered by God. She had no illusions of control. God's presence would be felt again on God's time. And, most importantly, she never lost the big picture. Her worship and praise for the one who gave her life and empowered her service did not end. She knew that she would eventually rest with the God that she had served so faithfully for so many years. She waited patiently on God.

I recently headed over to Rothko chapel to attend a speech by war correspondent and writer Chris Hedges. Some of the Bering Academy faithful were there as well. His talk was provocatively titled “Why I Don’t Believe in Atheists.” Hedges noted that atheists and Christian fundamentalists have much in common. Both believe that they are capable of attaining a moral high ground. Blind to their own inevitably sinful nature, both those who tout scientific reasoning and those who claim possession of moral absolutes fail to recognize human limitations. To “know thyself” is to know that each of us has a dual nature. We are inevitably broken, full of limitations and failures. We simply cannot, through reason and science or through claims of biblical correctness, rescue ourselves by our own power. To know that, to know that we cannot save ourselves, is to reject our illusions of self-sufficiency. Instead, we wait upon God.

I love the emotional honesty of the Psalms. The Psalmist tells of waiting, and here is when waiting for God is incredibly hard. When you are desperate. When you are afraid. When you are hurting. When you are stuck in something that you don’t think you are ever going to be free of. The Psalmist waits, though, and God comes. See, you only are waiting when you know something or somebody is coming. That’s waiting with confidence. That’s knowing how our loving God will act. Listen to the extraordinary imagery here, the way that the Psalmist paints a picture. “God lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the miry bog.” I’m picturing a great mixture of Texas gumbo, that heavy, heavy mud that sticks to you. The kind of stuff that you step and in can’t pull your feet out of. The muck of our lives; the loneliness, the separations, the rejection, the fear, and the desperation that threatens to pull us down and render us completely immobile. We are stuck. And the only way to get out is to let go of the idea that we can climb out on our own, and call on the One who lifts us up, the One who pulls us out of the mess and puts our feet on solid ground.

The fact is, no matter how much we try, we can’t control the events of our lives. It takes humility to admit that. We can’t stop some of the awful things that fly at us and hit us when we least expect it. It’s like running through a field while a whole bunch of people are playing Frisbee. You never know when you are going to get pegged in the back of

the head. We get nailed by stuff when we least expect it, and we learn that life is full of losses. Life is full of Frisbees. We get hit with a job loss, a loss of a relationship, the death of a loved one, the loss of plans and dreams, the loss of independence from AIDS and cancer. The losses just keep piling up. And we keep letting go. And we wait patiently on the Lord.

Every Wednesday morning I go to Omega House. As most of you know, Omega House is our hospice affiliate for AIDS patients who are in the final stage of life. I am blessed by the conversations that I get to have while I am there. Often I find myself spending a lot of time trying to undo the damage done by Christians. There is a horrible tendency deep within our faith tradition to depend upon human explanations for tragedy, illness, and loss. Our limited understanding of the divine has led many Christians to wholeheartedly embrace a God who smites us. Step out of line, and a good smiting is guaranteed. These Christians may mean well, but their relentless judgementalism and their disconnection from grace makes them a destructive force of intolerance and cruelty. They are so busy trying to make God reasonable and controllable that they have forgotten that we all stand in need of God's grace, and that God's grace exists without regard to human boundaries.

One of the ladies that I have been visiting with every week for the past five months will probably die soon from liver failure. I adore her, and I will miss her when she is gone. Most of her family and most of her friends have rejected her and do not visit her at the hospice. They believe that her illness was brought on by sinful behavior, and that God is punishing her with AIDS and Hepatitis C. They have fallen into that illusion of control that we seem to want so desperately, some sort of explanation for life's tragedies that somehow might lessen our chance of getting nailed by a Frisbee. We have talked a lot about just where God is in all of this, and we pray a lot. Sometimes the presence of God is so palpable that it fills the room, and we rejoice. Sometimes it is not.

What I can tell her, with absolute certainty, is that God loves her. And I can say, without a doubt, that one of these days God will pick her up out of the desolate pit, out of the

miry bog, and she will be gently placed on a higher rock. In the end, our loving God will give her a firm place to stand. And so she waits patiently on the One who comes.

I love the way this Psalm paints a picture. There is power in imagery. One of the best sermons that I have ever experienced had no words. I was in a bit of a pit, I felt horribly stuck, and I had attended a new church hoping for a word of hope, a rock to cling on to. The sermon for that day consisted of looking at the art that various congregation members had on display – both sculpture and painting. And I was deeply touched by one of the paintings. I seemed that I was finally able to see what I was unable to hear. God used this painting to pull me out of the mud and the mire, and onto a high rock. It contained images that said, I know where you have been, and I have been there too, and this I know to be true; there is redemption and healing and hope ahead of you.

Rev. Andy and Mark Albright are planning to establish a Heritage Hall here at Bering. I'm excited about this. Mark has been a steward of the rich history of this church, and the pictures need to be shown and the stories must be told over and over. The thing is, folks, the history of this church is still being created. The stories of healing and hope are still being formed. Perhaps the act of painting or drawing or sculpting your story would be helpful for you. I know that it was for my Aunt. From the first day that I stepped foot in this church, I knew that we could have a visual arts ministry here at this church. Come and see who we, the people of Bering, are. Come and see how God has worked within our lives. Come and see. We have long, beautiful hallways with bare walls with lighting set up to display pictures. We have a community room with bare walls. What if the walls of this church held the stories of your lives? What if these walls testified to the redemptive power of God? What if these walls drew people to this place who said; Look at this. This picture cries out to me. I am not alone.

Over and over again, Jesus says in the Gospels, come and see. Come and see who I am. He says that in our Gospel lesson today. I know that this congregation welcomes and holds people who have experienced the very depths of the desolate pit. People who have waited on God. The walls of this church could become a Psalm, a testimony to the One

we are waiting for, and the One who has come. A testimony to hope and healing. A testimony to the One who comes and places us on a high rock. Come and see who we are.

My Aunt Jeano died when she was only thirty-six years old. I still miss her. We never stop missing the people we love. What I have left of her is the wonderful poetry that she has written, her stories, and (of course) the paintings that she left behind. I take great comfort in this picture because of one fairly small element in the painting. See that stream of water cascading over the barriers? That is living water, a testimony to the One who comes. The One who brings us living water. There is hope and healing in this story. I am blessed with memories of a woman who gracefully learned to let go, and who fully embraced the One who finally came to place her on a higher rock.

And so, we wait patiently. We know, thanks to a loving and gracious God, how it all comes out in the end. Patience comes from recognizing that we are not in control. Patience comes from losing our illusions of self-sufficiency. We wait with the comfort and peace of knowing with absolute certainty how the story ends. Through our frustration and our losses and our tears, we know that God will indeed pull us to a high rock. We pray knowing that we will not be subject to the brokenness of our lives, because our future is with Christ. God will lift us up. God will carry us to a higher rock, in this world and the next. A-men.