

“Trust Fall”

Matthew 17:14-21; Psalm 40

September 17, 2023

I'll never forget my fifth-grade year at school. It was only my second year at Charlotte Country Day but it was my first at their new “middle school campus.” It wasn't a particularly great year, there were bullies and teasing that wasn't much fun, but there was one highlight of that particular year, “School in the Woods.” School in the Woods was a yearly experience that began in the Fifth grade and lasted throughout middle school. During School in the Woods, the entire grade was taken to a campground, like Camp Thunderbird, where we would live together for several days and participate in lots of group-building activities. I don't remember quite where we were that particular year, I want to say Thunderbird but I'm not entirely certain. Anyway, on the first full day of the camp we were summoned in our small groups to a place where a large tree stump lay. The stump was large and elevated above the ground by several feet or so. It seemed relatively innocuous until the counsellors told us what we were going to have to do. They explained to us that we were going to do a trust fall. What that entailed was that one of us would stand upon that tree stump, with our back toward the assembled group down below. The people on the ground, all linked their arms together, facing one another. Then, we were told what would happen next. The person standing on the tree stump would winging fall backwards. I mean free fall backwards. Thankfully, of course, they'd be caught by the outstretched arms of the people below them.

What makes the experience stand out in my mind so vividly is that for some strange quirk of circumstance, I was selected to go first on the tree stump. Now consider this, that trust fall becomes a whole lot more palatable when you see it done a few times. Just watching a few other people get caught goes a long way towards easing your mind that, as you fall backwards, that you're going to be caught. I didn't have that luxury. So, there I was, I must've been like 10 or 11 years old. I'm standing on a tree stump several feet above the group. There's someone telling me that I need to fall backwards into the arms of people I hardly knew. Let me just say this, it took me several moments and a lot of cajoling to do it. But I did it. And, yes, they did catch me.

You know, the more and more I live this thing called life, I find that my life takes me to plenty of places just like standing on that tree stump so many years ago. After all, the future is unknown and, in its uncertainty, always hair raising. We don't know quite what lies in tomorrow but, given all that we've seen, we're not sure we want to find out, right?

What can make those hours on the stump even more unbearable is a lack of faith. When we don't know or, worse still, don't trust whatever it is that's supposed to catch us, our fears amplify and we freeze, uncertain of what to do next. But one thing's for certain, you can't live your life very successfully or very productively, cowering on a tree stump, unable to move.

Psalm 40 speaks to us about a time in David's life where things weren't all hunky dory. David, as we'll remember, is a remarkable man of God. He's God's anointed successor to lead His people following the debacle that was Saul. David is known to be a great man of God with a great heart for serving the Lord. But even though he was selected by God for leadership, it isn't the case that David had an easy, placid life. No, for quite some time he was on the run from Saul and, even after that, witnessed many battles and experienced great challenges. Throughout it all, David maintained his faith towards God and saw it grow.

An even though our lives are different, we all find ourselves in difficult times, uncertain of what to do next. There are medical diagnoses that keep us up at night, difficulties within our families that are beyond hair-raising. Then there are the worries about the world and our loves one that always keep bubbling to the surface to say nothing of real times of crisis. It doesn't matter what it is, we all reach those moments on top of the tree stump.

David likely wrote Psalm 40 on the run, in exile or perhaps in the earliest days of his kingdom. Either way, they were dark and difficult days. We know that because he refers to them as a slimy pit. And sometimes, as mixed as the metaphor may be, we're both in a pit and on a tree stump at the same darned time.

I'll never forget around that same time, I went to a baseball camp. It was one there at the school and it was a day camp. During my time there, they made an announcement about our activities on

Thursdays. We were specifically told to bring a change of clothes, that we were going to be getting dirty. Well, I was as good then as I am now at paying attention which is to say, no so great. Believe it or not, I missed that message and arrived that fateful day without a change of clothes. The reason that we were tasked with doing so is that on that particular day, we were going to practice sliding. And the best way to do that, minimizing the danger of injury? Well, in order to do that, you wet the field and make it, you guessed it, really muddy. Mud slides more easily, I guess. So that's what we did. We practiced sliding in the mud all day. It was fun...at first. Then, as the Carolina heat rises, that mud starts to dry and the flies begin buzzing around and you're sweaty and feel caked in dirt. I know, it wasn't a good feeling made worse by the fact that I didn't have any clothes to change in to.

We get to places in life that make us feel that way. John Piper notes – “When you are in distress, your cry becomes more honest and fervent. David, in his darkest moment, cried out to God from the depths of his soul. In Psalm 40:1, we read, 'I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.' The psalmist's cry was not a polite request; it was a passionate plea from a soul in turmoil. Even when you're in a pit of darkness and hopelessness, God hears your cries." That's right. One of the great awareness's that comes the more and more you read Scripture is the sure knowledge that God not only hears our prayers but that he does indeed respond.

Prayer is the means by which we reach up to God with our pain and our distress. Sometimes, the fact of the matter is that, in crisis mode, we forget to go to the Lord with the full force of our sadness and our fears. Perhaps we forget, perhaps it's part of the devil's plan to keep us all miserable but the fact of the matter is sometimes, when things are stacking up against us, we forget God.

But David cries out to God. Now, crying out is a strange thing to us Presbyterians. After all, we're the frozen chosen and some of our defining traits is to be staid and cool. But David's anguished cry gives us a clue as to what we're supposed to do. In the depths of Psalm 40, we find a raw and heartfelt cry for help from none other than King David himself. But what makes this cry so powerful is not just the fact that it's a plea for assistance; it's the honesty and vulnerability with which David approaches his God. Imagine, if you will, the feeling of being in a pit—a place of darkness, hopelessness, and despair. It's a place where all seems lost, where the weight of life's challenges becomes almost unbearable. Perhaps you've been in a similar situation, a place where you felt stuck, unable to climb out of the darkness that surrounded you. David's cry in Psalm 40 isn't a scripted, polished prayer. It's not a display of false bravado or stoic indifference. No, it's the desperate plea of a soul in turmoil. It's a genuine expression of his feelings—a moment where the weight of life's struggles overwhelmed him. David's cry for help teaches us an essential lesson about our relationship with God. It's that we can approach Him with honesty and vulnerability, just as we are. We don't need to wear a mask or pretend that everything is fine when it's not. God invites us to come to Him in our brokenness, with our fears, doubts, and anxieties laid bare. The words of David in Psalm 40:1 remind us of this truth: *"I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry."* The psalmist's cry wasn't a polite request; it was a passionate plea. It was an admission that he couldn't do it alone, that he needed divine intervention to rescue him from the depths.

Throughout history, theologians like Augustine of Hippo have explored the depths of human suffering and the cry for divine assistance. Augustine once said, "The darker the night, the brighter the stars." In our moments of deepest darkness, God's light shines the brightest. When we find ourselves in the pit, remember that God's grace is sufficient, and His help is only a prayer away.

So, today, if you're in a place of darkness, if you're carrying burdens that seem too heavy to bear, take a cue from David. Cry out to God with honesty and vulnerability. Lay your troubles at His feet, knowing that He hears your cry. In your most authentic moments of need, you'll find that God is near to the brokenhearted and ready to save the crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18). But it isn't the case in the Psalm or in our life that the deliverance that we seek is immediate. David's cries assure us that he, just like us, went through times of anxiety and fear. And, if anything, that's what the world's drowning in these days through its lack of faith in God.

God is going to catch us, as we fall backwards into uncertainty, fears and doubts. His outstretched arms will always deliver us. But sometimes, we've got to do exactly what David suggests – waiting patiently. I don't know about you, but waiting patiently under duress hasn't always been more forte.

I've gotten better about it through the years but I can unfortunately remember many occasions where it wasn't the case. I remember a time after Benjamin was born that was particularly hair-raising. Even though Natalie had two health insurance policies at the time, for some reason, the hospital determined that we were going to have to pay the whole bill by ourselves. I won't bore you with the details why but let's just say such a raw bill from a hospital for a delivered baby can roll your eyes back in your head. With the new baby and the stress involved, I just lost it once with a poor telephone support person. Not my finest hour, to say the least.

So how do we do it? How do we bear the hours. How do we wait patiently for the Lord's deliverance? Well, to begin with, we seek out the Lord in our prayers and in daily meditation. Now, prayers we might understand pretty easily but what is meditation? Christian meditation is a contemplative practice that encourages believers to engage in deep reflection, prayerful thought, and a profound connection with God. Unlike Eastern meditation practices that often emphasize emptying the mind, Christian meditation centers on filling the mind and heart with God's Word, His presence, and His love. It is a means of drawing closer to God, listening to His voice, and fostering spiritual growth.

Psalm 119:15: *"I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways."* This verse underscores the value of meditating on God's commandments and divine guidance. **Psalm 19:14:** *"May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."* It highlights the connection between meditation and aligning one's thoughts and words with God's will.

Meditation is a great practice for making those tough times, those up on a stump or down in the miry bog times. If you're curious and you would like to learn more, there's a great book I often suggest. A workbook really as it guides you through a 21-day course on meditation. Called, "Real Happiness" the book is a gem as it literally guides you in types of meditation you can use. It begins assuming that you've never meditated and continues from there. I may still have a copy of it for you to borrow if you're interested.

Now, let's shift our focus to verse 4. Here, David highlights the importance of waiting patiently for God's timing. But we all know that waiting can be a challenging ordeal. It can test our patience, breed doubt, and even lead to impatience. *"David's ability to wait patiently for God's deliverance is a testament to his trust in the Lord's sovereignty."* How many times have we found ourselves anxiously awaiting answers, healing, or solutions? Waiting can feel like an eternity, and it often brings us face to face with our doubts. But remember, friends, that David's emphasis on waiting patiently for God's timing is a message of hope. It reminds us that our sovereign God has a perfect plan, even when it doesn't align with our own.

Psalm 27 reminds us to find strength and courage in our waiting. God's timing is perfect, even when it doesn't align with our own. In Psalm 27:14, we hear a similar message: *"Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"* These words resonate through the ages, reminding us of the importance of patience and strength during our seasons of waiting.

Consider the story of Joseph, a man who endured a prolonged period of waiting that tested his faith. Joseph found himself unjustly imprisoned, separated from his family and dreams. His situation seemed bleak, and he could have easily lost hope. But he chose to trust in God's timing, even when it made no sense. Joseph's story is a powerful testament to the rewards of patient waiting. His unwavering faith led to God's remarkable deliverance. Joseph's faithfulness and trust in God eventually led to his release from prison and his rise to a position of authority. His story is a testament to the rewards of patient waiting. In the darkest of moments, Joseph continued to hope and trust in God's plan.

As we navigate our own seasons of waiting, let's draw strength from Joseph's example and the words of Psalm 27:14. Waiting patiently for the Lord isn't a sign of weakness but of faith. It's an acknowledgment that God's timing is perfect, even when we can't see it. So, let us find courage in our waiting and trust that God's deliverance will come, just as it did for Joseph and countless others throughout history.

And, as we all know from the Tom Petty Song, the waiting is the hardest part.

And that may well be where you find yourself personally these days. But, as all of the Elders here at Cook's Church know, that we the church are in a season of waiting, as well. As we continue the process of recovering from the catastrophic crash of that tree into the Fellowship Hall, we now must wait with a great deal of uncertainty. While things are getting sorted out, we've had to cancel or change our plans for a great many outward-facing events. This lack of ability to showcase our church and its wonderful fellowship couldn't come at a worse time. Our attendance numbers have been sagging for over a decade now. The future is one clouded with uncertainty. Thank God we have Psalm 40. For it tells us of a God that can and does save, that can and will deliver God's people from the miry bog and deliver them into the promised land.

What it will take for us to do, is to find ourselves there on the stump. Remembering God's promises, we've got to stand on that tree, close our eyes and just fall backwards, knowing that we'll be caught in the arms of our great and glorious God.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.