



“Courage in the Struggle”

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Psalm 40:1-11 (Psalms Anew)***

Today’s scripture reading, and the primary text for today’s sermon, is Psalm 40:1-11. Psalm 40 is a thanksgiving psalm, with two parts. The first part, verses 1-5, are oriented toward a human audience in which the singer testifies to the trouble that s/he has experienced, to God’s rescue, and to the singer’s assurance that what God has done for her/him, God will do for others.

The second part of the psalm, verses 6-10, describes the life of faithfulness that flows from the singer’s gratitude for having been saved. Verse 11 brings closure to the movement, underscoring the singer’s assurance of God’s love and faithfulness.

The book of Psalms was Ancient Israel’s hymnal. At first glance, most Bible readers look at the book of Psalms, and they see poetry, rather than hymnody, because Psalms is written in verse form without the notations that most of us associate with music. But at the time that the biblical psalms were composed, most people were illiterate, and scrolls and tablets were rare, so local communities learned and taught the psalms aurally.

Many Old Testament psalms, including Psalm 40, are illustrative of times when Israel reached out to God for help in the midst of struggle, and received it. In times of hardship, the Ancient Israelites clung to Psalms as a source of comfort and encouragement.

Psalm 40, in particular, seems to have served the double purpose of reminding Israel of God’s saving graces, and instilling in singers and listeners a deeper sense of courage in those who strove to discern God’s hope in the face of struggle.

II

When we take a close look at the history of our forebears—both in biblical and modern times—we find approaches that have not only sustained our ancestors, but approaches that can encourage us in the midst of our own struggles.

Psalm singing has been a cornerstone of our Congregational ancestor's piety. Numerous musical settings of the Psalms can be found in a wide range of hymnals, including our own *New Century Hymnal*. For example, look in the back of the hymnals in the hymn racks in front of you, and you will find musical settings and notations for all 150 psalms.

One of the interesting factoids about our United Church of Christ history is that Israel's Psalms were so central to the worship life and piety of our ancestors that the Puritans brought a printing press to North America for the primary purposes of publishing psalm books and Bibles for use by the early settlers. *The Bay Psalm Book*, which was a "contemporary rendering" of the Psalms in 1640, was first book published in North America by The Pilgrim Press—the same publisher who published our *New Century Hymnal*.

Numerous copies of the *Bay Psalm Book* were published in subsequent years for the early colonial churches, but only a few survive to this day. Most simply wore out from use, while some, like those owned by The Old South Church in Boston, were destroyed by the Tories during the Revolution.

One erstwhile historian observed that the American Revolution was fought between the deacons of the Old South Meeting House and the vestry at All Saints Church in Boston. Old South's reputation as a Patriot meeting place had dire consequences for the Meeting House during the American Revolution.

When war broke out in April of 1775 with the battles of Lexington and Concord, the British retreated to Boston and occupied the town. The Continental Army besieged Boston for nearly a year. The patriots fled the city, while the British troops destroyed and vandalized the Old South Meeting House, and converted it into a stable and riding school.¹

The Tories desecrated the Meeting House interior. They chopped up the pews, pulpit, and galleries for firewood, and used the pastor's library, including numerous copies of the *Bay Psalm Book*, for kindling. They erected an equestrian gate for riders to practice jumps with their horses. Not surprisingly, after the British were ousted, the Meeting House was unfit for occupancy. It took the Old South congregation nearly eight years to raise the funds to restore the Meeting House for worship purposes.²

Despite the desecration of the Meeting House and the Rev. Thomas Prince's library³, a few complete copies of the *Bay Psalm Book* survive to this day. If you're interested in seeing a copy, the next time you're in Boston, make a point of visiting the Rare Books

¹ http://www.oldsouthmeetinghouse.org/osmh_123456789files/protest_and_revolution.aspx

² http://www.oldsouthmeetinghouse.org/osmh_123456789files/protest_and_revolution.aspx

³ Thomas Prince was the third pastor of the Old South Church, and first president of Harvard College. He served as pastor during the American Revolution.

Room at the Boston Public Library, just across the street from The Old South Church, in Copley Square.

III

There's no contesting the significance of the Psalms in the life of Ancient Israel or the life of our early Congregational ancestors. A close look at the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States also reveals that leaders and participants in this movement have been emboldened by hymnody—much of it based on themes from the Psalms that were incorporated into songs composed by slaves—in ways that have sustained Christians through voter registration drives, bus boycotts, sanitation workers' strikes, lunch counter sit-ins, and the consequences of courageous acts which have included beatings, incarcerations, and assassinations.

Most of us are familiar with the nonviolent approach that Dr. King took to leadership of the Civil Rights Movement in this country. We know that King's approach to organizing and activism was grounded in the study of scripture, hymn singing, and saying prayers, particularly with others in the struggle. A shared faith and common songs helped unite civil rights activists who came from many places, classes, and races. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer was another in the struggle for civil rights who subscribed to these practices, and whose legacy may continue to inspire us.

Fannie Lou Townsend was born October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi. She was the granddaughter of slaves, and the twentieth and last child born to Jim and Ella Townsend. Fannie Lou's parents were sharecroppers, who primarily raised cotton on a plantation in Sunflower County, Mississippi.⁴

Though education was important to her parents, Fannie Lou did not have the benefit of more than four months of education over the course of a six-year period. School for African American children, in those days, was only offered in the winter when the ground was fallow and there was less farm work to be done.⁵ By the time she was twelve, Fannie Lou dropped out of school to help her family full-time on the plantation.⁶

The Townsend family attended Stranger's Home Baptist Church, where Fannie Lou studied the Bible, sang in the choir, and participated in worship. According to one biographer, she regularly prayed that one day she would be able to improve the situation of her family and all African Americans.⁷

⁴ <http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc/hamer.html>

⁵ <http://www.beejae.com/hamer.htm>

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Lou_Hamer

⁷ http://www.africawithin.com/bios/fannie_hamer.htm

In 1942, Fannie Lou Townsend married Perry “Pap” Hamer.⁸ The couple were sharecroppers, like her parents, on the W.D. Marlow plantation, near Ruleville, Mississippi.⁹ Mrs. Hamer was later promoted to time keeper once the owner discovered that she was literate. She also worked evenings as a domestic, cleaning the Marlow’s home.¹⁰

Mrs. Hamer attended several annual conferences in the 1950s of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) in the town of Mound Bayou. In 1962 (when she was 44-years old) the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came to Ruleville on a voter education and registration drive. Mrs. Hamer learned through this meeting that African Americans had a constitutional right to vote, and she was moved to volunteer to register to vote the next day.¹¹ She knew that this would be a dangerous decision, but she did it any way¹²

When Mrs. Hamer and others went by bus to the Montgomery County Courthouse in Winona the next day to register to vote, they were immediately taken off the bus, jailed, and beaten.¹³ Mrs. Hamer suffered long-term psychological effects, permanent kidney damage, and partial blindness from the beatings she received in the jail that day. Upon her release, she was also thrown off the plantation where she had lived and worked most of her adult life, and began receiving death threats and was shot at. Still, Fannie Lou Hamer would not relent in her work for justice. She became a SNCC Field Secretary and traveled around the country speaking and registering people to vote.¹⁴

In an effort to bolster the resolve of the people among whom she was organizing, Hamer often sang hymns, such as "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and "This Little Light of Mine." Singing these hymns was also a reflection of Hamer's deep belief that the civil rights struggle was at the heart a spiritual struggle.¹⁵

Mrs. Hamer went on to co-found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), and in 1964 the Freedom Democrats challenged the all-white Mississippi delegation to the Democratic National Convention to admit persons of color to their delegation.¹⁶ The Freedom Democrats' efforts drew national attention to the political oppression of African-Americans in Mississippi, and presented a formidable challenge to President Lyndon B. Johnson, who was then seeking the Democratic Party’s nomination for a second term. Johnson feared that admitting the Freedom Democrats to the convention would cause the traditionally Democratic South to vote for his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater.¹⁷

⁸ http://www.fannielouhamer.info/fannie_lou_hamer.html

⁹ http://www.africawithin.com/bios/fannie_hamer.htm

¹⁰ http://www.africawithin.com/bios/fannie_hamer.htm

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Lou_Hamer

¹² <http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc/hamer.html>

¹³ <http://www.beejae.com/hamer.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc/hamer.html>

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Lou_Hamer

¹⁶ <http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc/hamer.html>

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Lou_Hamer

Mrs. Hamer was invited, with the rest of the MFDP officers, to address the Convention's Credentials Committee about their concerns. She accepted the invitation and recounted the problems she had incurred in registering to vote, and the ordeal of the jail in Winona. She also said that if the Freedom Democrats were not seated for the convention, that she questioned whether America was truly the land of the free and the home of the brave.¹⁸

Some of us are old enough to remember the day that Hamer spoke in front of the Credentials Committee in that nationally-televised proceeding. After much prayer, Fannie Lou Hamer walked to the front of the stage at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey.¹⁹ She described for conventioners and for millions of viewers the ways that African-Americans in many states across the nation were being prevented from voting on account of illegal testing, poll taxes, and intimidation tactics.²⁰ Then, at the end of her speech, Hamer began singing "This Little Light of Mine," a song which became her "signature song" in the civil rights movement.²¹ Many were moved to join in the singing, and many were encouraged in the struggle by her faith, her witness, and her singing.

As a result of Fannie Lou Hamer's speech, two delegates of the MFDP were given speaking rights at the convention that year, and the other members were seated as honorable guests.²² This decision unleashed a wave of change within the Democratic party so that, by 1968, the party adopted a clause in their rules demanding equality of representation from their states in their convention delegations.²³

Mrs. Hamer did not have the benefit of much formal education, and she died far too young (on March 14, 1977, at the age of 59,²⁴ from complications related to breast cancer, diabetes, and heart disease,) but during her lifetime she did inspire numerous people to join her in the struggle for justice through her direct discourse, her hymn singing, and her uncommon courage.²⁵

IV

Whether we see ourselves as firmly situated in the struggle for justice, mired in personal or familial struggles closer to home, or both, I wonder what spiritual songs or hymns are significant for us. I wonder what numbers may be our signature songs.

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Lou_Hamer

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Lou_Hamer

²⁰ <http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc/hamer.html>

²¹ See Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: the Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*, Penguin, 1993.

²² <http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc/hamer.html>

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Lou_Hamer

²⁴ <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spscol/crda/oh/hamer.htm?hamertrans.htm~mainFrame>

²⁵ http://womenshistory.about.com/od/civilrights/a/fannielou_hamer.htm

Personally, I've always drawn strength from many of the same songs that have inspired the great civil rights leaders in our country and around the world—spirituals and gospel numbers like the ones we're singing and hearing today. I have also been encouraged by the songs that were meaningful to my grandmothers.

I know that music gave my grandmothers a great deal of comfort and courage in the midst of the personal and family trials that paralleled farm life in the Midwest, starting with the Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the 1930s to the Farm Crisis and farm foreclosures of the 1980s.

My Grandma Nehring could play the piano pretty well. She always had the hymnal open on her hymn rack, frequently played for us when we visited, and insisted that we learn to play the piano for church. I remember that many of the pages in Grandma's hymnal included her personal notes explaining the significance of various songs to her and to our family. In the margins of "How Great Thou Art," she wrote, "Lance's confirmation hymn." (Lance was my father.) On "Jesus Loves Me," she wrote Roger Jay's name. (Roger Jay was my younger cousin who died of leukemia at the age of two.) On "Joyful, Joyful," she wrote, "Neva and Randy's wedding," and the date. You get the idea. Other songs that were well loved by Grandma included the following: "Rock of Ages," "The Old Rugged Cross," "What A Friend We Have in Jesus," and "Amazing Grace."

My Grandma Thomsen was not as accomplished a musician as my Grandma Nehring. (I seem to have taken after her with regard to my musical traits.) Nevertheless, Grandma also found a great deal of comfort and encouragement in our Sunday School songs and hymns. She taught the three-year-olds' Sunday School class for nearly twenty years, which involved singing songs, reading stories, moving paper dolls around on flannel storyboards, and playing with homemade play dough.

I especially remember, when Marlene and I were small, how Grandma would hum hymns and sing Sunday School songs when we were working in the garden, cooking in the kitchen, or polishing our church shoes. Perhaps you remember a few of the golden oldies, e.g., "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam," "The B-I-B-L-E," "Jesus Loves Me," "This Little Light of Mine," and "We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder."

V

If you grew up in Sunday School or around people like my grandmothers, maybe you have a few old chestnuts of your own. If you didn't, perhaps these or other songs became important to you, too, as you discovered them through popular culture.

I wonder what songs or hymns have moved and encouraged you through the years? I wonder what prayer practices have sustained and strengthened you? I wonder who has kept solidarity with you amidst the struggles of your life, be they personal, political, or both?

If you've got a long list of songs, meaningful ways to pray, and lots of people on whom you can count in the struggle, follow the example of the psalmist who wrote number 40 in Ancient Israel's hymnal, and say a prayer of thanksgiving for those spiritual resources today.

And if your song list is short; if you're not sure what or how to pray; and if you are wondering whether anyone is with you in the struggle today, dare to believe that Eden Church is a place and a people among whom you can begin to sing those songs, learn how to pray, and know that there are a little over two hundred people in our number keeping solidarity with you right now.

Dare to believe, and as you do, I suspect that God will put a new song in your heart that will embolden you for the days and weeks ahead. Amen.