

# The Rocky Road

Psalm 40:1-11; Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

Rev J Shannon

I wasn't here last week but I understand the reading was the Baptism of Jesus. Everybody remembers, "this is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased"<sup>1</sup>! What a dramatic finish!! Leaves a lovely taste in your mouth, doesn't it? At least Matthew starts a new paragraph before sending Him into the wilderness – while Mark gives us no such luxury. There's not a breath between beloved and ...

<sup>12</sup> At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, <sup>13</sup> and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted<sup>[g]</sup> by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.<sup>2</sup>

So God calls him, names him – and right away tests him. Not the walk in the park one would expect for the Son of God, eh?

Turn the page – well, turn the Sunday and now it's all about being called. The thing that links these passages is that they are descriptions of God summoning each personally and setting them on a path. Who will listen? Who will follow Jesus? And who will act on God's plan? Each was called in a different way for a specific task:

Our Psalm is not just a moment of praise. The writer(s)<sup>3</sup> along with praising God – also realises that offerings that make a difference are not piles of incense, but rather, themselves. They are placing their lives on the altar to do whatever is God's calling.

The instructions to the poet in Isaiah is bring the Jews out of exile – not a simple task and just when you think you've got a handle on it, God says, "oh, yes, go back and get the other ones, the Gentiles, the non-believers." This is an early clue that this is the God for *everyone*, not just Jews or later, intimidated later in Paul's letter, not just the righteous congregations.

John's gospel lets John the Baptist tell his own experience and describe his calling to be a witness. That is his purpose and he realises it in that moment God called out. Now he must tell everyone. He is on the path as a witness and a proclaimer.

In many places, Paul talks about his own calling specifically to teach and coach, to train others how to praise and pray and create 'church'. In this letter, he encourages the congregation to be saints and tell others of the good news

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:17

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:12

<sup>3</sup> There is an academic argument that it is actually 2 poems by different authors put together

We are all being called – not just as the individual disciples but in a much more public, perhaps even communal kind of way. We each have a specific task – a role and we also have a collective one. Our calling is in a context. It is not merely about private piety.

Putting this in concrete terms – we saw that love in action as this community came together for Anita’s funeral. It showed in the catering and the care, the hospitality and organisation.

But surprisingly, although we have descriptions of a time of peace – where the lamb will lie down with the lion – no one, especially God, ever said following your calling would be an easy road. I never promised you a rose garden, that’s for sure. In Isaiah, on one hand, you will be ‘despised and abhorred by the nation’, and on the other, “Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down”.

Paul’s chooses his words very carefully as this letter is to the Corinthians. He was gently but firmly guiding a congregation that pretty well thought they were perfect. They were fairly smug about having reached the pinnacle of perfection despite factionalism, elitism, exclusivity and a whole lot of other “isms”. And that is the nature of community. It pulls this way – and then another. Paul does not doubt that they have the gifts. However, in every congregation, there are difficult people and people who feel railroaded. There are opinionated people and people who are not natural leaders who are thrust to the fore and willing to try. We are not perfect and never will be.

Our readings today are offering many ways for coping with the calamities that corrugate life’s path.

That’s where the psalm come into its own – witness and recognise your calling:

<sup>1</sup> I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he turned to me and heard my cry.  
<sup>2</sup> He lifted me out of the slimy pit,  
out of the mud and mire;  
he set my feet on a rock  
and gave me a firm place to stand.  
<sup>3</sup> He put a new song in my mouth,<sup>4</sup>

There are things we can do, like...

Be open to God and offer yourself.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 40

Witness what God has already done.

Recognise and appreciate the sacrifice made to take away our sins.

Enjoy your forgiveness. You owe it. It is insolent to do otherwise.

Nadia Boltz-Webber tells a story about how in the conservative church she was raised, most of the sermons seemed to tell us how God set life up like a moral reward and punishment scheme. She said, “we were all like rats in some kind of cruel, cosmic experiment receiving shocks from God for going the wrong way and little reward pellets for going the right way. The sermons were all about how to avoid the bad things and receive rewards in God’s existential maze.”<sup>5</sup>

Churches can get all caught up in ritual and piety- especially piety. How much closer to God than I am to these others...Jesus never talked about that. He spent a lot of time and effort teaching about the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness, again and again for wayward sons, for bad employees, and a host of others. Nadia says, as a grown-up, she’s pretty sure God doesn’t set up an existential reward and punishment maze for us – she’d pretty sure the devil does. To me, it’s like the Temptation.

She says thinking like the old church sermons is poisonous – like someone whispering through the air vents “Psst! If you’ve done something bad then you are bad.” “If you really belong to God, then why is life so hard?”

But remember, Jesus came up from the waters, still glistening in his baptism and still, he was sent into the wilderness. It is life – a proving ground. It is meant to test us. Just as in the Temptation, it is not what happens but how we respond. We trap ourselves in the maze.

God’s kingdom is bigger than that. The kingdom of God is for everyone. Like the landowner generous to those who worked all day and those who did not get to work. The kingdom of God sends the one called to gather the believers and the non-believers, the Jews *and* the gentiles – everyone who is enslaved and in exile.

We are the ones trapped in our mazes of resentment and self-loathing. On the worst nights, we feel our best was the worst things we did or imagined. “Martin Luther King once said it is not God but the devil who rummages through our garbage looking for already forgiven sins to rub our noses in to say, “this is who you really are”.<sup>6</sup>

The hardest part of starting a New Year is to recognise that you have already been rewarded – that you are already forgiven... **but** that even those you don’t like, are

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<sup>5</sup> Nadia Boltz-Weber from The Corners [thecorners@substack.com](mailto:thecorners@substack.com) Mon 09/01/2023 23:50, Enjoy your forgiveness

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

forgiven too. You owe it to God to enjoy your forgiveness. That's a lot bumpier than the road you're walking.

So here we are in a new year – a dry place from which to start. No, it's not a walk in the park, – ask Jesus. Life is a rocky road and as long as we know why we are walking it, we will know where we are going. Each step should bring us closer to God.

*May the road rise up to meet you.*

*May the wind be always at your back.*

*May the sun shine warm upon your face;*

*the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again,*

*may God hold you in the palm of His hand.*

Amen