

Psalm 40

I put all my hope in the Lord.

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

2 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.

3 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.

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

5 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!

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

7 So I said, "Here I come!

 I'm inscribed in the written scroll.

8 I want to do your will, my God.
 Your Instruction is deep within me."

9 I've told the good news of your righteousness
 in the great assembly.
 I didn't hold anything back—
 as you well know, Lord!

10 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.

11 So now you, Lord—
 don't hold back any of your compassion from me.
Let your loyal love and faithfulness always protect me,
12 because countless evils surround me.
My wrongdoings have caught up with me—
 I can't see a thing!

There's more of them than hairs on my head—
my courage leaves me.

13 Favor me, Lord, and deliver me!
Lord, come quickly and help me!

14 Let those who seek my life, who want me dead,
be disgraced and put to shame.

Let those who want to do me harm
be thoroughly frustrated and humiliated.

15 Let those who say to me, "Yes! Oh, yes!"[a]
be destroyed by their shame.

16 But let all who seek you
celebrate and rejoice in you.

Let those who love your salvation always say,
"The Lord is great!"

17 But me? I'm weak and needy.
Let my Lord think of me.

You are my help and my rescuer.
My God, don't wait any longer!

Mark 7:1-23

The Pharisees and some legal experts from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. 2 They saw some of his disciples eating food with unclean hands. (They were eating without first ritually purifying their hands through washing. 3 The Pharisees and all the Jews don't eat without first washing their hands carefully. This is a way of observing the rules handed down by the elders. 4 Upon returning from the marketplace, they don't eat without first immersing themselves. They observe many other rules that have been handed down, such as the washing of cups, jugs, pans, and sleeping mats.) 5 So the Pharisees and legal experts asked Jesus, "Why are your disciples not living according to the rules handed down by the elders but instead eat food with ritually unclean hands?"

6 He replied, "Isaiah really knew what he was talking about when he prophesied about you hypocrites. He wrote,

This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far away from me.

7 Their worship of me is empty
since they teach instructions that are human words.

8 You ignore God's commandment while holding on to rules created by humans and handed down to you." 9 Jesus continued, "Clearly, you are experts at rejecting God's commandment in order to establish these rules. 10 Moses said, Honor your father and your mother,[b] and The person who speaks against father or mother will certainly be put to death. 11 But you say, 'If you tell your father or mother, "Everything I'm expected to contribute to you is corban (that is, a gift I'm giving to God)," 12 then you are no longer required to care for your father or mother.' 13 In

this way you do away with God's word in favor of the rules handed down to you, which you pass on to others. And you do a lot of other things just like that."

14 Then Jesus called the crowd again and said, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand. 15 Nothing outside of a person can enter and contaminate a person in God's sight; rather, the things that come out of a person contaminate the person."

17 After leaving the crowd, he entered a house where his disciples asked him about that riddle. 18 He said to them, "Don't you understand either? Don't you know that nothing from the outside that enters a person has the power to contaminate? 19 That's because it doesn't enter into the heart but into the stomach, and it goes out into the sewer." By saying this, Jesus declared that no food could contaminate a person in God's sight. 20 "It's what comes out of a person that contaminates someone in God's sight," he said. 21 "It's from the inside, from the human heart, that evil thoughts come: sexual sins, thefts, murders, 22 adultery, greed, evil actions, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from the inside and contaminate a person in God's sight."

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's always dangerous to begin an ecumencial service with Jesus's critique of the religious elite. Everyone starts to shift in their chairs, with a not so subtle glance side to side, wondering, "so which denomination is he going to call the Pharisees and legal experts?" While this makes some of you are nervous, maybe a few of you - or maybe more than a few - are a little too excited that I might somehow say that you're right and someone else is wrong. "Who's he going to call the hypocrites, huh?" So, let's dispel that myth right now: Lutherans are Pharisees. Catholics are Pharisees. Episcopalian and Presbyterians too, are Pharisees. In fact, Baptists and non-denominational Christians and Pentecostals, Reformed and Orthodox, we're all Pharisees in this season of Lent. Because, at some point in our lives, all of us have looked toward Jesus with that accusatory stare and gasped, "Oh...he's, he's breaking the rules. That can't be right, can it? It's so ungodly." So say we all of God.

We've all been the Pharisees. We've all looked with incredulity that work Jesus is doing and questioned it. We've believed that the letter of the law, rather than the Spirit of the Living God, is what determines our salvation, and so we've committed ourselves to legalism opposed to God's abundant life. Lent, it seems to me, is a season defined by this tension between the letter and the spirit of the law. Many of us either give up certain things or take on certain behaviors to create new habits of holiness, which is, in the words of the old Lutheran Service Book, "right and salutary.". Of course, if we believe doing those things makes us more holy, we've misunderstood two thousand years of Christian teaching. Not so salutary, and definitely not right. If we instead recognize that, through these changes, we come to rely on God's holiness more, and through them, we become more like God, then we've grasped the spirit.

That's why the direction of this Lenten journey is so important. We travel toward the cross and the empty tomb, the locations of God's transformative death and resurrection. We walk deeper into God's work rather than our work. Our voyage isn't primarily about us, but about God. Now, through Christ's transformation from death to life, we too may experience transformation. That is the promise of salvation. God's life becomes our life. Rather than whitewashed tombs, pleasant on the outside and dead on the inside, Christ cleans us up from the inside out.

The Lenten journey, and our disciplines herein, thus isn't about how holy we can be, but rather how much of God's transformation we allow to flow through our bodies. Our habits, the changes that occur, can and should reflect more than a trite acknowledgement of God's suffering in Christ; indeed, at their best, these transformations in our behavior reflect the transformation in our life brought by Christ's death and resurrection. If we say a picture's worth a thousand words to tell us the truth of something, then how much more accurate a depiction of our faith in Christ are the deeds of Jesus lived out in our very own lives? What we have to keep in mind is simply the order of these things. We don't do them in order to earn our salvation, for that is God's work. Rather, because God's offered us salvation as a free gift, we are able to live lives transformed by the power of God alive in us.

This is something we know to be true, that actions are reflective of our priorities. A former pastor of mine once told me, "if a person truly wants to explore their discipleship, I ask if they're willing to share two things with me: their calendar and their checkbook." Today, we might instead say our credit or debit statements, but the point remains. To our American sensibilities, this seems like an incredible invasion of privacy, but isn't the incarnation of God into human flesh the most radical of invasions into our lives? Isn't the presence of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us from that moment of baptism, an incredible incursion into the most intimate parts of our lives?

That's the thing about discipleship: nothing should remain untouched by the presence of God in our lives.

And of course, the way we spend our time and the way we allocate our money is a picture worth 10,000 words at least. They reveal what priorities we have set. Now, some may want to say that those aren't the things we truly care about, but I'd challenge that notion. They may not be the things that you'd ideally participate in, that you feel you have to do out of obligation, but these are the things that you've chosen to pursue. They're tangible signs of the priorities we've set.

So the question before us, as we enter these last few weeks of our Lenten journeys, is this: are our priorities a roadblock to God's priorities in our lives? Does the way we structure our schedules and our wallets act as a conduit to God's work or as a fence that restricts God's activity through us? Is what's coming out of our lives reflecting God? If not, then these last few weeks of Lent are a perfect time to tear down the walls that we've built to try to keep the Spirit from moving in every aspect of our lives and exploring what kind of change is possible through the active presence of God.

As you do that arithmetic tonight, though, remember the order of the formula. We don't undertake our Lenten disciplines as a way salvation. That's God's work, and in this season we rediscover all over again that God completes that work not just in life, and not just in death, but in resurrection as well. And through that life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God enables us to live lives transformed by the power of God alive in us. So, in a way, the good news is this: we're all hypocrites. And God saves us anyway. There's always another chance with God to be something more, something meaningful: children of God. No matter what denomination we come from. Amen.