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November 15th: Psalm 40 & Acts 15:36—16:5

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Lifted up from the pit. The start of the second missionary journey.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalm 40 To the Choir Master, a Psalm of David I waited patiently for the Lord. He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord. Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie.

You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us. None can compare with you. I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told.

In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, Behold, I have come,

in the scroll of the book it is written of me.

I delight to do your will, O my God. Your law is within my heart. I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation.

Behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord. I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart. I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation.

I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation. As for you, O Lord, you will not restrain your mercy from me. Your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me.

For evils have compassed me, beyond number. My iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head.

My heart fails me. Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me.

Let those be put to shame and disappointed altogether, who seek to snatch away my life. Let those be turned back and brought to dishonour, who delight in my hurt. Let those be appalled because of their shame, who say to me, Aha! Aha! But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.

May those who love your salvation say continually, Great is the Lord. As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer.

Do not delay, O my God. Psalm 40 is quoted at a key juncture in Hebrews chapter 10, its expression of complete personal devotion to the performance of the will of the Lord being placed upon the mouth of the Eternal Son coming in the flesh. The psalm initially takes the form of a testimony concerning a past deliverance.

The psalmist, David, has experienced a great deliverance by the Lord in the past, and he declares what was done for him. In his trouble he waited patiently for the Lord, looking to and calling upon the Lord for deliverance, trusting in Him to act in his cause. The Lord responded to David by listening to him, inclining to him and hearing his cry, by delivering him, drawing him out of the pit, by establishing him anew, setting his feet upon the rock, and by putting a new song of praise for deliverance in his mouth.

The imagery of the pit in the Miry clay is an evocative one. It is a place where one is trapped, overwhelmed, and likely to sink to one's death if no one comes to your rescue. The pit is an image connected with Sheol and the grave.

One might also think of the pit into which Jeremiah was placed in Jeremiah chapter 38, or perhaps the pit that Joseph's brothers left him in, although that pit was empty of water. Others in the history of interpretation have seen an allusion to the story of the Red Sea crossing in these verses. Whether or not such an allusion is present, it does follow the

same pattern.

In delivering David, the Lord places his feet on a secure rock, a place where he can stand fast against all threats. The imagery of the rock is elsewhere used of the Lord himself, who is the refuge and source of strength and security for his people. One of the immediate results of the deliverance is to provoke a joyful song of praise in the mouth of the psalmist.

The experience of deliverance produces praise and testimony. These, in their turn, draw in others. When they see the Lord's rescue of the psalmist, listen to the psalmist's testimony of the Lord's goodness, and hear the joy that it has produced, they in their turn will learn reverence for the Lord, placing their trust in him.

David draws out the implications of his deliverance for others. The person who trusts in the Lord is blessed. The Lord has regard for those who aren't proud or drawn after the lie, possibly idolaters in the context.

Rather, he answers those who look to him in dependence. From relating his own experience and making a general statement about the blessedness of those who wait upon the Lord, David turns to address the Lord directly, praising him for his many great deeds on behalf of his people. He wishes to proclaim all that the Lord has done, but discovers that there is far too much of which to tell.

In verse 6 we return to David's response to his experience of deliverance. Within it, he lists a number of the sacrifices of the book of Leviticus, in order the peace offering, the tribute offering, the ascension or whole burnt offering, and the sin offering. He declares that the Lord does not delight in these or require them.

This, of course, is hyperbolic. The Lord had ordained the sacrifices. However, the Lord does not care about these in the way that he cares about obedience and faithfulness from his people.

The sacrifices were supposed to be a means of performing the approach of the person to the Lord. Similar statements can be found elsewhere in scripture. 1 Samuel chapter 15 verse 22 has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord.

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. Hosea chapter 6 verse 6 For I desire steadfast love, and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. What the Lord is really concerned about is the integrity of heart and action.

The sacrifices were always to be confirmed in obedience. People were supposed to present their bodies as a living sacrifice in faithful worship and then in obedient practice. The expression, you have given me an open ear, or more literally, you dug ears for me,

is not clear in its meaning.

The ear is the organ of submission and obedience. It is how we hear and obey. Perhaps that is the point.

James Jordan has suggested another possibility, a connection with the ritual described in Exodus chapter 21 verses 5-6. But if the slave plainly says, I love my master, my wife and my children, I will not go out free, then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave for ever. If this were the connection, David would be describing himself as the loving bond servant of the Lord, who has willingly been bound to the Lord in his house.

Some versions of the Septuagint have body instead of ears here, which provides the version of these verses used in Hebrews chapter 10. David has come before the Lord like an offering himself. He presents himself as like a living sacrifice, which was always what was supposed to happen.

He has come to fulfil the word of the Lord, the intent of his law, in faithful action and obedient mission. Hebrews chapter 10 verses 5-10 relate these words to Christ. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.

In burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book. When he said above, You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings, these are offered according to the law.

Then he added, Behold, I have come to do your will. He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Animal sacrifice always related to the communication and offering of oneself and one's works to God. The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 40 verses 6-8 as if it were the statement of Christ just before taking human flesh. Animal sacrifices were unable to deal with sins and establish righteousness.

They constantly recalled the presence of an obstacle and the need for something to deal with it. And while they might symbolize the solution, they were unable to affect the solution themselves. They were not ultimately pleasing to God.

God wanted something more, the true obedience and self-offering of human life. David's words to the Lord in the Psalm are most fully realized in his greater son who accomplishes the true will of God by coming to render the true service and human offering that the sacrifices were unable to achieve. The original reading is ears you have

prepared for me, but Hebrews expresses it as a body you have prepared for me.

Perhaps the author of Hebrews wants his hearers to hear the divergence from the original text and to recognize that he is unpacking the point of the original. The open ear or the prepared ears are bodily instruments given and prepared by God for obedience. Christ in his incarnation realizes and more gloriously fulfills what the psalmist is speaking of.

And the author of Hebrews' tweaking of the verse, which follows some versions of the Septuagint, makes this more apparent. It reinforces the argument. Christ's incarnation body is a God-given means of full obedience to the will of God, a means by which what God always most deeply desired from humanity can be realized.

God the Son became man in order that the will of God might be fulfilled in true human obedience. This was written of in the scroll of the book, which now refers not merely to the law of kingship or even to the Pentateuch more generally, but to the entire Old Testament, which anticipates and speaks of its expected fulfillment in the obedience of one who is to come. When such human obedience is offered and we are by the Spirit caught up to participate in Christ, animal sacrifices and offerings are no longer needed and indeed can be done away with.

The once for all, decisive and final offering has now occurred. Animal sacrifices are nullified now that the true human obedience that the law always anticipated and awaited is established. In response to the deliverance of the Lord, we have a duty to bear witness to the Lord's goodness, both to us in particular and more generally.

David declares that he has shared the news of the Lord's deliverance to him before the congregation, openly praising the Lord's grace and faithfulness to the entire people. The psalm takes an unexpected turn at this point. We might to this point have thought that we were hearing a psalm bearing testimony to a past deliverance, but David now turns to prayer.

The testimony concerning the past deliverance is a basis for confidently appealing to the Lord in the present. Recalling what the Lord has done for him in the past, he can look for the Lord to act on his behalf in the future. He is once again in a difficult situation and in need of the rescue of the Lord.

His current troubles are at least in part of his own creation, a result of his iniquities. He needs forgiveness, restoration and deliverance, for he is once again overwhelmed. And he calls upon the Lord to act speedily in his defence and rescue.

In particular, he prays that those who seek his life would not be given cause to rejoice in his downfall. He may be suffering on account of his sins, but he does not want to give the enemies of the Lord cause for rejoicing. Their celebration of his fall would be from a

delight in the failure of the righteous.

Rather, David calls upon the Lord to act in a way that encourages all those who wait upon him and look to him in faith, dismaying the wicked rather than emboldening them. David's former deliverance produced praise to the Lord, which led many others to turn to and fear the Lord. In the Lord's mercy he hopes that this might happen again.

He is weak and in a situation of desperation. He has nothing to commend himself to the Lord's favour. However, the Lord is graciously mindful of him and so he looks to the Lord, waiting patiently upon him in much the same way as he had in the experience with which he began the psalm.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we can find comfort, encouragement and assurance as we reflect upon past deliverances, spurring us in our prayer in our current troubles? Acts 15.36-16.5 And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord, and see how they are. Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.

But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

But Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra.

A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. At the end of Acts chapter 15, Paul's second missionary journey begins.

Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch after their Jerusalem visit. Having ministered for a while in Antioch, they determined to go back to the churches that they had visited on their first missionary journey and to see how they were progressing in the faith. They were very young in their faith, and one can imagine that Paul and Barnabas would be anxious to hear that they were progressing.

The fact that these churches would be facing persecution and there were potentially

false teachers going around might also have increased their concern to engage in such a mission. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. John Mark was the son of Mary in whose house Jerusalem Christians had met for prayer in chapter 12.

John Mark was Barnabas' cousin, as we discover in Colossians chapter 4 verse 10. John Mark has traditionally been identified with the author of the second gospel. Barnabas and Saul had a major falling out over the inclusion of John Mark.

He had originally accompanied them on the first missionary journey, but he had abandoned the mission in chapter 13 verse 13. The disagreement that they have is a very serious one. We are given the impression that it was very heated.

It is so sharp a disagreement that they have to part ways at this point. Reading through the book of Acts, in many respects we are seeing the highlights of a period stretched out over almost three decades in several different locations. We have just had a high point in the events of the Jerusalem Council, which had followed a very troubling period, as there had been a serious dispute between Peter and Paul themselves in Antioch, and teachers from Jerusalem had threatened the entire mission to the uncircumcised.

Now there is another setback, with a falling out between two key people whose shared mission had been so pivotal in the last few chapters. One can imagine that with such a young movement, and with so much riding upon particular key relationships, relationships that would have constituted bonds between churches, we should remember that Barnabas is originally from Jerusalem, and likely the strongest personal tie between the two most important churches, this would certainly have been a very serious discouragement and setback, potentially throwing much into uncertainty. As readers of the book of Acts in the 21st century, we know how the story turns out, but we should try to enter into something of the feelings of the early Christians, and to recognise just how vulnerable they might have felt at some of these junctures.

Knowing of the incredible success that the church has experienced from the days of the apostles onwards, we don't feel the full blows of the discouragements in the text. For those living through such history however, it might have felt like riding a roller coaster at times. Barnabas took along John Mark with him to Cyprus, as we should recall from chapter 4 Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas to accompany him and goes throughout Syria and Cilicia to encourage and strengthen the churches.

These missions were incredibly important in forging a robust church. Much of the formation of the church at this stage was not merely about the development of lots of local churches, but about the development of a lively network between many otherwise isolated churches across Judea, Syria and at this point Asia Minor. Forging bonds of mutual love and trust would enable the movement to grow in ways that it could not if every church was isolated from the others.

Many of the new churches may not yet have had mature Christian ministers, but would have depended heavily upon visiting teachers, prophets and missionaries. Paul returns to Derbe and to Lystra. While at Lystra he encounters a disciple called Timothy, who is held in high esteem by the Christians in the region.

Timothy's mother was a Jew and his father was a Greek, which would certainly have provoked severe disapproval in some more observant Jewish quarters, although some diaspora Jews may have been more relaxed about it. The problem was not chiefly an ethnic one, but a religious one. Intermarriage with people outside of the covenant was seen as a very serious matter in many parts of the Old Testament.

From 2 Timothy 1.5 we learn that both Timothy's mother and grandmother were faithful persons and that he was taught the scriptures from a young age. So we should not suppose that Timothy's mother was indifferent towards her Jewish faith. We can speculate over whether or not Timothy's father was a God-fearer associated with the synagogue.

However, the fact that Timothy had not been circumcised raises the possibility that his mother's marriage was less than ideal, perhaps arranged by an unbelieving father. Timothy's religious status would have seemed rather ambiguous then and might perhaps have been a cause of scandal to some. Timothy himself though is a living example of a Jew and Gentile union.

He straddles these two worlds in his very person. Considering the obstacle that Timothy's ambiguous status might provide for the mission though, Paul determines that it would be best to circumcise him, a course of action that might seem surprising given how strongly Paul has recently opposed the circumcision of Gentiles. Timothy however is not a Gentile but a Jew of ambiguous origins.

Paul's concern is not circumcision but the cause of the mission. Circumcising Timothy will help them to accomplish this. The principle that Paul is following here is that which he describes in 1 Corinthians 9 verses 19-23.

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. In

circumcising Timothy, Paul plays the part of a father to him. Timothy will come to be immensely important in Paul's later ministry, serving as Paul's personal representative.

Timothy is Paul's shaliyach, the one who personally represents Paul where Paul himself cannot be. As such, Timothy would come to participate in the exercise of Paul's apostolic ministry. He is the co-author of epistles, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon.

He acts as Paul's personal emissary in places like Acts 19 verse 22 and 1 Timothy chapter 1 verse 3. He is the one who served Paul so that Paul could give himself to the primary task of preaching without any distraction, something that we may see in Acts chapter 18 verses 1 to 5. Timothy could participate directly in Paul's exercise of his apostolic power. Paul and Timothy are a pair. They are bound together in a single apostolic mission.

On occasion the distinction between them is made very plain. Only Paul is the apostle proper, while on other occasions their alignment is stressed. Timothy is a co-worker, he is a helper and sharer in Paul's calling.

Relative to the churches to which they were ministering, Timothy was to be treated as a bearer of Paul's own authority. However, relative to Paul, Timothy was a subordinate, without an independent commission of his own, but rather a share in Paul's. The relationship between Paul and Timothy is exceptionally close, and Paul speaks of Timothy as his own son.

The language here is not merely that of emotional closeness, but of representation. The son represents the father, his authority, his presence and his interests. It also points to a relationship similar to that which pertained between Old Testament leaders and prophets and their shaliaks.

In Numbers chapter 13 verse 16 we see that Joshua's name was given to him by Moses, who also lays his hands on Joshua in Deuteronomy chapter 34 verse 9. A similar relationship exists between Elijah and Elisha. Elisha receives a double portion of Elijah's spirit, the inheritance appropriate to the firstborn, and as Elijah is taken into heaven, Elisha addresses him as his father. Matthew Calvin observes, that Timothy is a virtual copy of Paul is underlined by 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 16-17.

I urge you, imitate me, for this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. The charge to imitate Paul then is accompanied by the sending of Timothy toward the fulfilment of this end, as the son is the pre-eminent imitator and representation of his father. As a participant in his father's ministry, and as Paul's right hand man, Timothy would come to have immense authority to wield, even being given the commission to choose and appoint church officers as Paul's representative.

As the apostolic ministry was temporary, upon Paul's death Timothy would cease to be the Apostle's apostle, and would presumably become a bishop. Timothy might not usually be in the foreground of the story in the book of Acts, but his importance for Paul's missionary work should not be understated. As Timothy accompanies Paul and Silas, they pass through the cities, giving them word of the judgment of the Jerusalem council, encouraging them and strengthening them in the faith, knitting them in with the wider body of the church that has been formed in various parts of the world.

A question to consider. Considering what we know of Paul and Barnabas's different characters, what might have been some of the factors influencing their falling out concerning John Mark?