

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"I/O"
Dr. J. Dent

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Third Sunday in Lent

The Bible is a book that addresses us throughout all the seasons of our lives. When we are thirsty, Isaiah invites us to come, or if we are hungry, there is a spiritual buffet which is unrivaled. In fact, whenever we have even the slightest twinge of desperation, that is where God often meets us. I've tried to bring that good news to the two families whose funerals I've done in the last week, in the midst of loss where else can we go?

But it may be difficult for you to establish where you are on the desperation scale. How thirsty are you? In the desert, it is matter of life and death. For most of us, it is more simply staying a bit more hydrated than usual. And so we rate fairly low on the desperation scale.

Now occasionally that desperation goes up, sometimes in relation to newer electronics we might buy. So you get the brand new computer or cell phone or upgraded sound system, and all of sudden you realize, you haven't got a clue how to turn the thing on. It doesn't matter how many bells and whistles it contains, or how wonderful a machine it is, if you can't even find out how to turn it on. Your sense of desperation goes to the top of the scale, and if you're like me you can sense your blood pressure increasing in a significant way. Now usually on many machines of various kinds there is a I / O symbol somewhere on the side of the machine in a place you would be least likely to look. On most cell phones you usually have to push for at least two or three seconds on the off button to turn it on. This is counter-intuitive at best, at least when you first come across it, it simply doesn't make sense.

So where do we go with our desperation? This is a Lenten question. How desperate are we? This too is a Lenten question. If your local grocery store is stocked full, and you're not hungry, generally there is no panic. But if a big storm is coming, have you noticed how full the grocery stores become, probably because we are living on an island and people want to stock up. Or even worse, in a place like Conception, Chile where they've had numerous aftershock earthquakes, on a greater scale than most other major earthquakes. There they've had to line up for six hours to get some groceries, let in to the grocery store ten people at a time by the military. That's desperation.

God asks us again today how desperate we are. Do we really need God, or is it something we do as a pastime, as a hobby or recreational activity when we can fit it in? Being in touch with our need of God and other human beings is a major theme in Christian spirituality.

Addicts can be in touch with their need, as they lie and cheat and steal to feed their addiction. But what about the rest of us; are we truly hungry and thirsty for what God has for us?

God assures us in Isaiah 55 that he has a rich banquet waiting for us which we don't have to pay for. The question then becomes do we have time to come? We may have business elsewhere or priorities in another part of life. Perhaps we think we have heard it all before, so what more is there to listen to?

Paul warns us in 1 Corinthians 10 about saying how much more we would believe and trust God if we saw miracles and miraculous interventions of various kinds. He reminds the Corinthians that everyone of the people who got out of Egypt by the miracle of parting of the Red Sea, who ate the miraculous manna, who experienced their clothes not ever wearing out in the forty years in the desert, almost all of them chose not to believe. They saw drinkable water released from various sources by Moses but still complained within days and weeks. They had what they needed so they would not seek God, but rather complain or commit sexual sin. Today complaining and sexual sin are as common as having plenty of food and water in our diets. We don't even know culturally what a sexual sin is, unless you talk about pedophilia or sexual assault, and even then some would disagree.

Paul warns us to examine ourselves, if we think we are any better than those in the desert who had been rescued from Egypt. He says, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10: 12) In Lent, we are to bring our struggles to God and be honest about them. We should probably do this all year round, but particularly in this season, we look to be completely honest and transparent before God. Where do you need help? Be aware that you are not alone in your trouble, in your temptations and in your sins. Verse 13 says, "No temptation has overcome you except that which is common to us all." In other words, we may think that we are the worst sinners on earth, with terrible secrets and horrible thoughts about ourselves. We may even hate ourselves and others. But such

things are common. It is only the devil that wants to divide us and whisper in our ears how bad we are with no way of escape from such condemnation. God, on the other hand, wants us to know that there is a way to escape our worst faults and sins. There is a way of transformation available to us, as we share with others, as we love each other, as we listen and as we pray for each other.

Nothing is too big that God and other believers cannot help us through. So the key again is not to isolate yourself, but rather to open yourself to help, and to be honest. It is hard for many of us to be honest because we have been so badly hurt when we have told the truth, we may change details or distort reality simply to avoid the pain of others' reactions. But in Christ, we are given a chance to open up both in prayer, and with other human beings who will listen, love, care and forgive. This is one reason why I push small groups so much here, and why I am offering a small group for men who want to be vulnerable about their needs, whatever they are. I will begin this, this coming Wednesday and I'd appreciate it if you would talk to me if you are interested in this. Men particularly have been shut down in so many ways. I hope to have a few gather from various churches for help and wholeness and listening.

And if you'd like to start a group or be a part of one, please look at the ten groups that are currently meeting regularly here at St. David's on the back of the bulletin. Or if you'd like to start a new one, please talk to me or one of the elders.

Jesus was reading the newspaper in Luke 13 and noted some of the headlines. He confronted what some people thought was God being extraordinarily harsh on some individuals. There were those unfortunate persons who Pilate had killed and had their blood mingled with his pagan sacrifices, a kind of ultimate denigration for a Jewish person in that day. He was also reading about those who had died in a building that collapsed. Others were wondering if they had sinned especially badly for this to happen to them. But the answer was no. Instead Jesus points to each one of us and asks us what it means to repent. What does it mean for you to turn from your ways of rebellion toward God, to turn from your impatience, your anger, your unkind and judging thoughts? How can you and I turn from thinking we know best and turn more to God's point of view? How can we change from our irritable and unreasonable ways and experience peace in the

midst of our conflicts? In the end, it is our responsibility for our decisions about our time and resources for which we will be held accountable.

Jesus ends with a parable of a fig tree. He talks about an owner who is fed up with a tree that has produced no fruit over a few years. That owner tells the gardener to chop it down.

We are the fruit tree. We are the ones without the righteousness and peace that we should be living out.

The gardener is Jesus. He says, "Give that tree another year, fertilize around it, and perhaps it will produce fruit."

Jesus and supportive friends come around us when we are honest about our faults and sins. They give us a chance to be loved and to change our wayward ways.

That fertilizer the gardener uses in our lives may not always smell the best, nor something that we like. Some translations use the word "manure" and rightly so. God uses the crap in our lives to produce fruit through us, just as he wants to do through that fig tree in the parable. What are these areas in your life? What is God using in your life to produce a fruit which will bless you and many others around you?

The other meaning of I / O is the input – output function in a computer or machine. What goes in effects what goes out. And yet as we invite God into the process, we can experience a different output from difficult inputs.

As we look into these Lenten questions, may God give us the strength to be honest, peace in the midst of what we cannot change, courage to change what we can, and wisdom to know the difference.

Let us pray.