

7 March 2021

Giving Up for Lent . . . Envy
Psalm 73

We read Psalm 73, verses 1-3.

A Psalm of Asaph.

¹ *Truly God is good to the upright,
to those who are pure in heart.*

² *But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
my steps had nearly slipped.*

³ *For I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

During Lent this year we've been talking about things we could give up. So far we've talked about keeping score in relationships and obsessing with guilt over things that have already been forgiven. You see the kind of thing we're after: things that might actually draw us closer to God and others, but also things that are manageable. These aren't the sort of small goals that are often adopted during Lent, like giving up desserts for those forty days, not only because those are trivial but also because at heart those don't really have much to do with our walk of faith. If I gave up sweets during Lent, for instance, you could justifiably wonder if I'm doing it for the sake of spiritual growth or if I'm just getting ready for bikini season. (Just wait for the church picnic!) On the other hand, we're trying to avoid the huge stuff, too. I'm not asking you to give up getting angry at the government, for instance. No, we've been looking for the middle ground: significant, but attainable, steps toward better relationships and stronger faith. This week: envy.

But wait! you're thinking. Those of you who keep track of mortal sins (you know who you are) are wondering, "Isn't that one of the big seven? How can you call that a moderate goal?" True. So let me narrow the focus. I don't want to talk about wishing you had things that you don't or wishing you were something you aren't. That *would* be maybe a little too much to bite off. But I do want to suggest that we could give up wanting things *just because someone else has them*. This is what the poet is struggling with in Psalm 73: 'I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.' He goes on to describe his feelings more fully. As you listen, notice how angry and resentful the psalmist gets.

⁴ *For they have no pain;
their bodies are sound and sleek.*

⁵ *They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not plagued like other people.*

⁶ *Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them like a garment.*

⁷ *Their eyes swell out with fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.*

⁸ *They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.*

- ⁹ *They set their mouths against heaven,
and their tongues range over the earth.*
¹⁰ *Therefore the people turn and praise them,
and find no fault in them.*
¹¹ *And they say, 'How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?'*
¹² *Such are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.*

We should start by acknowledging the psalmist's sense of injustice. He's right. There doesn't seem to be any particular justice in why some people are rich and some are not. It has nothing to do with goodness, or even, really, about hard work. In America we cherish the story of the self-made millionaire, the idea that anyone can succeed with talent and hard work. And certainly talent and hard work are helpful. But for every hard-working success, there are thousands of equally hard-working people who never seem to be able to get ahead, and the difference is not just ability. Bill Gates is brilliant – no question – but he also went to the high school that had the most advanced computer lab of any school in California, and that also had an arrangement with the local university computer lab, so that Gates was able to spend thousands of formative hours with the best computers in the country. Sure, he made the most of it, but the fact that it was available to him was pure luck. And you can do this with every story of success at some level. You can always point to something and say, "That's not fair!"

But the psalmist here goes a little over the top, doesn't he? He looks at the comfortable people he envies and says, "They have no pain." Slight exaggeration. If they're human, they have pain. Then the psalmist just lapses into name-calling in verse 7: "Their eyes swell out with fatness, and their hearts are full of folly." Translation: they're stupid, ugly pigs. And this is what happens when desire ("Gee, I sure wish I had something I don't have.") transmogrifies into personalized envy ("I wish I had what *she* has.") This is where the random injustice of earthly success becomes nasty. It becomes "They don't deserve all that!" which then becomes "But I do!" Verses 13 and 14:

- ¹³ *All in vain I have kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.*
¹⁴ *For all day long I have been plagued,
and am punished every morning.*

Now, for all the bitterness that the poet expresses, you need to know that he is not a nasty person. The superscription on the psalm says that this is "A Psalm of Asaph," who was one of the musicians of the sanctuary during the time of David. Now we have no idea if that phrase means that Asaph actually wrote the psalm, but either way the poet was probably a Levite serving in the sanctuary – a church musician, whose life was leading worship. And so, when he reaches this point of resentful, personalized envy, he goes to the temple of God. We read verses 15-20.

- ¹⁵ *If I had said, 'I will talk on in this way',
I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.*

¹⁶ *But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I perceived their end.
¹⁸ Truly you set them in slippery places;
you make them fall to ruin.
¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!
²⁰ They are like a dream when one awakes;
on awaking you despise their phantoms.*

What the psalmist – let’s just call him Asaph – gets from turning his attention to the sanctuary is a new perspective. He perceives a deeper justice and realizes that all those people he was envying are just as frail, just as temporary, just as needy as he and every other human being are. They come to the same end, and all their wealth and popularity and success turns out to be “like a dream, when one awakens.” Then Asaph realizes what he does have, has always had, will always have. Verses 21-28.

²¹ *When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
²² I was stupid and ignorant;
I was like a brute beast towards you.
²³ Nevertheless I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,
and afterwards you will receive me with honor.
²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
²⁷ Indeed, those who are far from you will perish;
you put an end to those who are false to you.
²⁸ But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
to tell of all your works.*

I’m not suggesting today that we should give up wanting things we don’t have. That would be to deny our very nature: we are a questing beast. We’re always looking for the next piece of the puzzle that is us. It’s how we’re made. But I *am* suggesting, along with Asaph, that the most important piece of our personal puzzle is already in place: “Whom have I in heaven but you? There is nothing on earth I desire but you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my life and my inheritance forever.”

And secondly, I’m suggesting that as we quest, as we hope, we ought to base our aspirations on who we are and where we find ourselves, not on other people. Let us give up defining our hope for happiness by what someone else has. Let us give up the nagging, resentful feeling that we *deserve* that car, that house, or that job that someone else has. Let us give up

assessing our own beauty by how someone *else* looks in a swimsuit. (At a church picnic, say.) To go back to the language of Psalm 73, let us no longer be embittered and pricked in heart. Let us stop being like ignorant brute beasts. We don't have to be. We are continually with God, who holds our hand, and who receives us with honor now, as we are.