

## **1 Corinthians 1: 3-9**

<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup>I give thanks to my <sup>[b]</sup> God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup>for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— <sup>6</sup>just as the testimony of <sup>[c]</sup> Christ has been strengthened among you— <sup>7</sup>so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

## **The Message to Laodicea-Revelation 3**

<sup>14</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin <sup>[a]</sup> of God’s creation:

<sup>15</sup>“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. <sup>16</sup>So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. <sup>18</sup>Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. <sup>19</sup>I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. <sup>20</sup>Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. <sup>21</sup>To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

# Psalm 40

## Thanksgiving for Deliverance and Prayer for Help

*To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.*

<sup>1</sup>I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
<sup>2</sup>He drew me up from the desolate pit,<sup>[a]</sup>  
out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my steps secure.  
<sup>3</sup>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.  
<sup>4</sup>Happy are those who make  
the LORD their trust,  
who do not turn to the proud,  
to those who go astray after false gods.  
<sup>5</sup>You have multiplied, O LORD my God,  
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;  
none can compare with you.  
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,  
they would be more than can be counted.  
<sup>6</sup>Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,  
but you have given me an open ear.<sup>[b]</sup>  
Burnt offering and sin offering  
you have not required.  
<sup>7</sup>Then I said, "Here I am;  
in the scroll of the book it is written of me."<sup>[c]</sup>  
<sup>8</sup>I delight to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart."  
<sup>9</sup>I have told the glad news of deliverance  
in the great congregation;  
see, I have not restrained my lips,

as you know, O LORD.

<sup>10</sup>I have not hidden your saving help 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.

<sup>11</sup>Do not, O LORD, withhold  
your mercy from me;  
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
keep me safe forever.

<sup>12</sup>For evils have encompassed me  
without number;  
my iniquities have overtaken me,  
until I cannot see;  
they are more than the hairs of my head,  
and my heart fails me.

<sup>13</sup>Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me;  
O LORD, make haste to help me.

<sup>14</sup>Let all those be put to shame and confusion  
who seek to snatch away my life;  
let those be turned back and brought to dishonor  
who desire my hurt.

<sup>15</sup>Let those be appalled because of their shame  
who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"

<sup>16</sup>But may all who seek you  
rejoice and be glad in you;  
may those who love your salvation  
say continually, "Great is the LORD!"

<sup>17</sup>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.

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**The Glad News of Deliverance**

**Psalm 40, Revelation 3:14-22, 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9**

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*Behold! I stand at the door and knock.*

How many of you see a particular picture in your mind when you hear that Bible verse? Just about every Sunday school used to have the “Christ at Heart’s Door” print by Warner Sallman who also did “The Head of Christ” both of which kind of look like Jesus had a portrait sitting done at Sears. It’s 20<sup>th</sup> Century nostalgia now, the “Velvet Elvis” of Jesus portraits, as one Methodist writer recalled the painting hanging prominently in his pastor Father’s office.

Much has been said about the artist’s conception of Jesus knocking at the door of one’s heart. Presumably there’s no outside handle because one “has to open the door from within,” and the soft tapping portrayed almost makes it seem like it might be early in the morning or late at night and Jesus doesn’t want to be too intrusive.

That interpretation tells me that the painting has supplanted our true understanding of this verse in its relative context. To understand scripture, we have to go back to what is being written in the book of Revelation. It’s no polite neighborly Jesus knocking at the door. Jesus is knocking at the door with the purpose of reproof and disciplining the people that he loves. He wants to wake you up from your life that’s gone on autopilot. He is offering to sell you actual heavenly riches to replace the trinkets you thought were giving your life value. He’s going to give you new clothes to replace the outer layers that have come between you and the world. And he’s going to rub your eyes with a medicinal salve to open them from their blindness. Once that’s happened, he’s

going to throw open the door and demand that you sit down to dinner with him – just the two of you together so you can have a real “come to Jesus” talk about the repentance you need in your life. I’m so imagining a very different kind of painting here.

In Revelation, the author is writing letters addressed to the angel of the church of the 7 different churches of the vision. Each church that gets a letter is described as being a certain way. They are like this or like that. Laodicea is the very last church mentioned and when all those letters are put together, the final remark is, “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” The church at Laodicea should sound somewhat familiar to a pretty good swath of American, Protestant, mostly white, at least modestly well-off congregations. They are described as being lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. They are so rich in things that they believe they need nothing, not even from Jesus. It’s a harsh critique – believe me. I worry about this judgment more than most others. We can be charitable and neighborly. We can be kind and patient. We can be avid scholars of the Bible, and fervent in our prayers. But what is it all for, if Jesus has to kick in the door to get our attention?

This is where it comes to MY attention that this is Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend, and I no longer want to be perceived as lukewarm when it comes to speaking up and speaking out for human dignity for all people. Lukewarm churches might make a casual mention of MLK weekend, use his confession in the liturgy, sing a spiritual, or something like that. We might find our favorite Martin Luther King quotes, the ones that don’t upset us too much about having a dream that our children may grow up together not being judged for the color of their skin but the content of their character. But then after worship, we return to our daily lukewarm lives, not paying much attention to the rise of hateful rhetoric in our own communities, not repenting of

our part in it, not willing at all to sit down to dinner with Jesus and reorient our own lives to include people we often label as different from ourselves.

Right down the road in Richmond, the Governor has declared a state of emergency for this weekend, MARTIN LUTHER KING JR WEEKEND and banned ALL weapons on state grounds. On a weekend where the Commonwealth has routinely encouraged citizen groups to come and make their values and desires known to their state government, sometimes from very different perspectives, threats of violence have changed the dynamics for this year. These threats come from a group called *The Base*, a Neo-Nazi, white supremacist group that promotes violence against minorities, wishes to escalate the downfall of the US government, and calls for the creation of a white ethno-state. So far, six of their members have been arrested, three in Maryland, three in Georgia. Through FBI investigations of their communications, it became clear that this organization was making plans to come and stir up trouble at the gun lobby rally scheduled for Monday as a response to current lawmakers considering and voting on gun regulations. This has become such a concern that the Virginia Center for Public Safety along with the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence have decided not to attend for their own safety for the first time in their 28 years of organizing an MLK day rally. AND it was also interesting to me to note that they AND gun rights activists have spoken up for their concerns, on the same day, side by side with each other, from the early 2000's up until this year. Perhaps it has been uncomfortably so, nevertheless in all those years no one was injured or killed. You can look this all up on a variety of news sources. These are the basic facts – though much of what is being said about Governor Northam, and the gun lobby, and the sides being taken is becoming sensationalized to get attention and to continue to stir up animosity. And it's not only what's happening in and around our country. It's happening in the very place where we live our lives.

Now the accusation I find most appalling in my own life is just how easy it could be to ignore this as just the frenzy of another news cycle. This too will get swept to the side whenever the next day's news comes to pass. In a few weeks, there will be yet another reminder that we are not doing so well in how we treat our fellow human beings – particularly those who have darker skin, or are religious minorities, or are part of the LGBTQ communities. I may not be harboring such vile hate myself, but because I'm also not having to face such animosity every day either, I can be complacent, content with my own life, lukewarm. I can dismiss it as – well – the FBI got the bad guys and we can move on now. Except what is so concerning is that violence is becoming an expected part of the day's events and the normalization of that violence is coming from our own national leaders. We are seeing more hate crimes against Jewish communities. More murders of transgender people. Fatigue for trying to care about the brown skinned people at our borders when nothing changes. Greater fear being stoked between impoverished people as low-wage work isn't enough to sustain life. And more looking the other way from people, like me, who are just trying to live their lives the same way we've always done – comfortably and in my own neighborhood.

*Jesus says to the lukewarm Christian: For you say, I am rich. I have prospered and I need nothing. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*

Do you hear Jesus knocking? I do. It's a reminder that I can, and often do, look the other way when others are suffering. The problem is that suffering is usually overcome when we recognize that when one suffers, we all suffer together. We must re-envision the beloved community that Martin Luther King, Jr. was dreaming about. I too am wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. What I have to remember is that God is the deliverer. God sees the miserable treatment of his people, and becomes enraged. God is also the creator and source of human love. God sees the

miserable treatment of his people, and calls us to greater love for one another. So, either way – God is going to move us to love, OR let justice roll down like water, maybe AND let justice roll down like water. Jesus knocks on the door of our hearts to enrich us, to give us the spiritual gifts, and help us conduct what the more anabaptist traditions would call spiritual warfare. We don't want to be lukewarm in this regard. We don't want to be the people who looked the other way as hatred continues to gain momentum and becomes a normal part of our everyday existence.

It will cost us. It should cost us to be faithful to Jesus Christ in our daily lives. You can't call yourself a Christian and harbor hate for other people. That's a biblical truth, and I'm sticking to it. What we can do though is get angry, and get tough on calling out the ways in which human dignity is being denied to certain groups. Therefore, I'm even beginning to wonder if you can call yourself "neutral" and still be a Christian. The glad news of deliverance from oppression should be a freedom we are all working toward, and yet we find ways around being that voice that speaks up against hate or takes the time to listen to the voices of those who have felt silenced in our society. I don't know how or where you will find your voice. I don't know if we will be those Christians who open their ears and hear. I'm not even sure what to do but keep on preaching love and deliverance, but I know we can't let "The Base" and those who think like they do control the narrative. We must resist those who would have us become a white ethno-state, propped up on false religious teachings that some human beings are more valuable than others. I guarantee that every predominantly African-American church is telling Martin Luther King, Jr. stories this weekend. Those churches are remembering those who spoke up for their humanity, they are remembering those who encouraged them to be proud of their own voices, and they are remembering those who stayed silent when hate came to town. Let us not be the

ones remembered for being silent in a time when the human dignity of our neighbors, our friends, our children, or any child of God is being questioned or denied. Amen.