



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 13TH PENTECOST
MARK 7:1-13 AND ISAIAH 29:11-19
AUGUST 22, 2021
“LOS 33”

In August 2010 the ground rumbled above the heads of 33 miners at the San Jose copper mine in Northern Chile. The miners soon realized they were trapped by the collapse overhead – they were 700 meters underground and 5 kilometers from the entrance of the mine. Seventeen days after the collapse, a note was found taped to a drill bit when it returned to the surface of an exploratory borehole: *“Estamos bien en el refugio los 33”* (We are well in the shelter, the 33 of us). Agencies from around the world including NASA were immediately employed to design, build, and carry out a rescue attempt. 52 days later, their 70th underground, one by one, all 33 men were pulled through the earth to safety. It was a moment of international rejoicing – and the end of what one of the miners called *“an especially long shift”*!

Rescuers were startled at the ability of the men to maintain personal optimism and interpersonal unity through it all. Contributions to the success of the rescue and recovery of the men afterward came from geologists, engineers, nutritionists, and psychologists. Water, food, and medicine were the first things sent to them in plastic capsules called *‘palomas’* (referred to as “doves”).

How appropriate – since most of the men were Catholic, and they soon requested those “doves” be filled with Bibles, crucifixes, statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints. Pope Benedict XVI sent each man a rosary. One of the miners was a lay preacher and led daily prayers. They converted benches in the mine into an altar. Well did our Lord say *“man does not live by bread alone... One of them said, “we knew that if our unity broke down, we’d all be doomed.”*

Trying to connect the dots between what these Chilean miners experienced, and our everyday existence would be difficult. But their story does illustrate a spiritual truth – we are a people trapped by our sin and unless there is dramatic intervention, we’d have no hope. Early in their ordeal, the men buoyed their spirits by trying to find an escape route. When that proved futile, and with no communication from above, to a man they said they nearly gave up. But when that first drill bit reached them and with it a little light from above, they became determined again. Even the sobering news that a rescue might take up to four months did not overwhelm them.

They had hope – amidst a myriad of emotions – fear, grief, anger at their situation and how safety warnings at the mine were ignored. Their dimly lit altar adorned with sacred images – their personal rosaries that had come from the hands of a real pope, of course helped, but none of that could replace what God placed inside these men well before they made their way down five kilometers of circuitous tunnel to their work site one August morning. Their ordeal did not wring faith out of them – like “deathbed conversions” or “foxhole prayers” we hear of might suggest. One of the men put it plainly, *“I was with God and with the devil... and God took me.”*

The plain truth is these men could not climb to safety – they could not rescue themselves, and neither can we climb out of our sin. So, our worship helps us with that – we do not in vain begin our worship confessing that *“if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves – the truth is not in us.”* We’ve another version of that confession that goes even further, saying, *“we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.”* That’s the spiritual equivalent of admitting we’re 700 meters underground and all the escape routes we’ve tried are clogged with rock.

One of the popular notions of Christianity is that we can free ourselves – if we become better versions of ourselves or become more “Christlike” which when you drill down into that term usually means more determined to climb out of our sin or grief or confusion through better attention to the details of faith – the Christian faith yes, but for some the religion of the realm – good ol American “self-help.” That popular notion is spectacularly wrong.

Our story today from Mark illustrates that. Most folks get lost in the details of the discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees. It helps that we read the passage from Isaiah 29 so you can hear that Jesus quotes Isaiah when challenging the Pharisees – *“this people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me – in vain do they worship me, teaching as truth the laws of men.”* Folks these days might spring up out of their chair and say “atta boy Jesus.” They would say this has always been the problem with religion – in the hands of humans God’s truth is a consistent casualty to trivial, empty customs and syrupy words from polished professionals.

Folks who read the story of Jesus and the Pharisees that way would be wrong – or at least no more than half-right. The notion that Jesus rejects an out of touch religion of externals (in this case Judaism) in favor of an internal “spirituality” is way oversimplified. Jesus’ mention of the *“washing of cups and bowls and pots and hands”* gets read as disdain for ritual. But Jesus observed ritual – our most sacred one, the Eucharist, has its origin in Jesus meticulous observance of the Jewish ritual of Passover – albeit with our Lord’s radical re-interpretation of its penultimate action – the sharing of a cup of wine and loaf of bread.

The Pharisees dedication to all that washing was their attempt narrow the distance between man and God, to bring the order and beauty of God’s law down into the mundane stuff of life - to get the beauty of *“you shall have no other gods before me”* into the everyday, and that’s not a bad thing. Still, it demonstrated a form of spiritual illusion that our journey is a climb heavenward and truth be told, those routes are all blocked. Yes, God’s light is in his law – the Pharisee’s were only half wrong in their thinking, but still wrong enough to need correction. You see God never asked us to save ourselves – the law was given to show His greatness, not test ours.

There’s a wonderful county music song by Garth Brooks that says *“I got friends in low places...”* Our worship will never devolve into *“rules taught by men”* so long as we allow it to remind us that God has friends in low places too – low, hard places at that, and that you are one of those friends. Jesus comes to us through the law – he is the light that shows us the way, the light that will come for us. While we wait the final journey heavenward, all he asks of you is to care for those around you, keep the unity of the faith, always remembering that the as long as we breath the grace of his Son – *‘we too are well in the shelter, all of us.’*

AMEN