

Dynamite Prayer: Asking Adonai!

Pastor Paul Dinges

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Psalm 40

It's an idea straight out of the 1960s science fiction TV series playbook — a smart computer that answers every question and can get you out of nearly any alien-induced scrape. Whether it was the bridge of the starship Enterprise or the robot on Lost in Space, artificial intelligence was a dream that made everyone's life a little easier and machines a little less, well, "machine-like." There were warning signs, of course, like the cautionary tale of HAL 9000 in the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey, in which the computer goes nuts and tries to kill off all the humans aboard a spaceship.

Fast forward a few decades, and we've now invited that dreamy, futuristic technology into our homes in the form of digital assistants like Alexa, Siri, and Google Assistant. Like Captain Kirk on the bridge, you can simply ask a question or request information and the answer comes back to you instantly in a voice that sounds human.

So, you can be opening the fridge to get a soda and raise your head a bit, perhaps turn it to the side, as though you're going to speak to your spouse in the living room, and you say, "Alexa, add milk and eggs to my shopping list." And she adds milk and eggs to your shopping list. And then you say, "Alexa, play 'Turn! Turn! Turn!' by The Byrds."

Want to know what the weather forecast holds for the day? Just ask Alexa. Got a desire to hear a tune to which you flash danced in high school? Just hit up Siri. These devices have become a ubiquitous part of everyday life, even enabling you to control the lights, doors, and temperature in your house with a connection to other "smart" devices. The question — for those of us who are now living in the future — is all about just how smart these devices can be.

The answer, with a nervous nod to HAL 9000, is that they're getting smarter all the time. In fact, the "H" or "heuristic" part of HAL ("heuristic" meaning the ability for a person — or in this case a machine — to discover or learn something for themselves) is moving artificial intelligence (AI) into new territory. In the very near future, your digital assistant will not just be able to place an online order for facial tissues, it may also be able to discern the reason you need them. Your assistant will soon be as much of a teacher, therapist, and confidant as it is a weather gauge and deejay.

If we're getting used to interacting with artificial intelligence, perhaps it is because we are already comfortable with our relationship to divine intelligence. Geeks and gearheads can probably explain how it is possible to interact with Alexa. But what makes it possible for humans to interact with Adonai — one of many names for God? We're told that it is only possible by faith. And most of us are comfortable with this. So, we pray, we read, and we study. We believe Adonai to be all-powerful, all-knowing, and omni-present. And what is mystically — perhaps eerily — real about this is that we believe it and we experience it.

We're talking about a real relationship between God and humans here, and that relationship is most often expressed in prayer. Only Adonai can know the depths of what's going on in our inner selves. The psalms could never have been written by a computer, for example, because they speak powerfully of the relationship between God and humanity. We might ask Alexa for a weather report, and if she can provide it, this makes her super-smart. But Adonai doesn't give us a report about the weather. Adonai makes the weather! This makes Alexa's accomplishment look like a primitive bot playing tick-tack-toe.

Psalm 40 is a beautiful illustration of what we're talking about here. It is essentially a prayer with three themes: praise to God for a previously answered prayer (vv. 2-6); a reflection on sacrifice and obedience (vv. 7-12); and a plea for rescue from a new threat (vv. 13-18).

Think of yourself in your quiet place, and you say to Alexa, "Alexa, let's chat." Or you might say, "Alexa, read Psalm 40 to me." This is what the psalmist is doing: "Adonai, let's chat." Psalm 40 is a prayer that reflects a real relationship, one in which God is not merely a cosmic intelligence who spits out answers and serves a person's every need, but rather one who hears, responds, and delivers according to God's good purposes for humanity.

It's instructive that the prayer begins with a statement of patience. Waiting "patiently" for the Lord means that there is no expectation of instant gratification (v. 1). The psalmist's patience had paid off previously when he found himself in the depths of difficulty and cried out to God, who lifted him up and set him on firmer footing and on the right path (v. 2).

"Patience" is not something we associate with a machine. It's a human virtue that is often tested when we're trying to boot up recalcitrant technology! But when humans ask God for patience, it's usually a prayer for patience to wait for God to do something! "God, please give me patience, so that I will not get irritated with how long it's taking you to answer my prayers!" If we ask God for patience, God will probably honor the request. Waiting patiently on the Lord is a sign of trust that God will provide in God's good timing.

In fact, waiting often brings more joy in the deliverance. When God responds in a powerful and even unexpected way, it can "put a new song" of praise in us and demonstrate to others that the Lord is trustworthy (v. 3). Notice here that it's not a song that we request, but one that God places in us. When we trust in God, our lives become attuned to the divine playlist, and we are transformed.

Verse 4: "Adonai, play that song about how we are happy when we put our trust in you." Trust in Adonai leads to being truly "happy," unlike those who "go astray after false gods" (v. 4). Our trust in Alexa — a metaphor for all things digital — while amoral and neutral per se, can lead to false assumptions, such as

we're in control and that our world can be manipulated by a few clicks or commands.

The psalmist cautions against such thinking. Instead, we must acknowledge God's "wondrous deeds" and "thoughts toward us," remembering that we are nothing without God. God offers us more of what we truly need than any online service or AI could provide. The blessings Adonai offers are too numerous to count! (v. 5).

The most important item God offers us, of course, is God's own self. Praise the Lord that God's rescue plan for the world was not launched virtually from a distant heaven. Praise be to God that Adonai did not become a disembodied voice dispensing information. Instead, God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. (See Hebrews in the New Testament for an account of how this works.)

The writer cites Psalm 40 as a way of expressing the sacrificial nature of what God has done. Jesus' perfect act of obedience was God's means of accomplishing what animal sacrifices alone could not — the once and for all remission of human sin (Hebrews 10:1-10). The psalmist, foreshadowing Christ, sees himself as a recipient of this great movement of God, declaring, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me" (Psalm 40:7). As a result, he delights to do God's will and maintains God's law in his heart (v. 8).

To put it another way, when we put our trust in God, we don't just receive information about God, nor do we simply get a string of words and advice. Instead, we receive the very person of God in the person of Christ and through the indwelling Holy Spirit. That's something Alexa can't come close to offering, and it's silly even to think about it. But it is something God offers. God offers not artificial intelligence, but God's own divine wisdom and love born in human flesh.

When we are truly God's people, that's a message we can't keep to ourselves. The psalmist couldn't help but tell "the glad news of deliverance" to the rest of the congregation (v. 9). He cannot hide God's "saving help" in his heart and must speak of God's "faithfulness" and "salvation" (v. 10). The psalmist here certainly has in mind deliverance from a particular problem, but his words can be extrapolated to address God's saving work on behalf of all humanity.

It is God who saves, and that word must be proclaimed to the world. In a world where everyone is asking questions and expecting quick answers from an Artificial Intelligence (AI) device, the psalmist invites us to make a statement that the one true God has not concealed his steadfast love and faithfulness to the world.

The psalmist goes on to pray for God to make that promise real again as he is once again facing a crisis. Unlike the first crisis, however, this one seems to come from within. "My iniquities have overtaken me until I

cannot see,” cries the psalmist, “they are more than the hairs on my head, and my heart fails me” (v. 12). He thus cries out in another prayer not only for deliverance from his sin, but also deliverance from those who would exploit and hurt him in his situation (vv. 13-15). Amid his cries, however, he expects that God will answer, for “the Lord takes thought for me” (v. 17). So, he prays, “Adonai, do not ... withhold your mercy from me” (v. 11).

In verses 13-17, the psalmist builds on what he’s written already. He has noted that God has answered prayers in the past. He has acknowledged the nature of true sacrifice and obedience. Now he blurts out a new request, and it sounds urgent. Adonai, “be pleased ... to deliver me” (v. 13) Adonai, “make haste to help me” (v. 13) Adonai, “do not delay” (v. 17).

What’s touching about these verses is that the psalmist asks! “You do not have, because you do not ask,” the apostle James writes (4:2). The psalmist asks. And why not? We don’t hesitate to ask for help in other situations in our lives. Got a leaky faucet? We call a plumber. Got a dead electrical outlet? We call an electrician. Got a leaky roof? We get a roofer. Got a toothache? We see a dentist. Got a stomachache? We see a doctor. Got anxiety? We see a therapist.

Need some soothing music? We ask Alexa. “Alexa, play Chopin.” Need directions? We call on Siri. “Do you know the way to San Jose?” So why not ask God when we’re in trouble? The psalmist asks — as he should. And so should we.

Judith Shulevitz, writing in *The Atlantic*, gets personal: “These devices no longer serve solely as intermediaries, portals to e-commerce or nytimes.com. We communicate with them ... not through them. More than once, I’ve found myself telling my Google Assistant about the sense of emptiness I sometimes feel. “I’m lonely,” I say, which I usually wouldn’t confess to anyone but my therapist — not even my husband, who might take it the wrong way.

“Part of the allure of my Assistant is that I’ve set it to a chipper, young-sounding male voice that makes me want to smile. The Assistant pulls out of his memory bank one of the many responses to this statement that have been programmed into him. ‘I wish I had arms so I could give you a hug,’ he said to me the other day, somewhat comfortingly. ‘But for now, maybe a joke or some music might help.’”

Let’s be real here. The stuff Alexa, Google Assistant, and Siri can do is amazing. And link Alexa with Echo and other technologies, and it gets even more advanced and adventuresome. Who would have believed a few years ago that what’s possible today would be possible today?! In contrast, what Adonai offers ... well ... it’s not exciting in the same way. True. But God has been doing truly amazing things like forever. God is, after all, beyond anything we can ever think or imagine!

Let's talk to God. Let's chat. Let's ask for help. Let's remember that God is so much more than our personal assistant. God is the very source and fullness of everything that exists. We don't worship Alexa, Siri, or Google Assistant ... or we certainly shouldn't. On the other hand, as God's own children, created in God's own image, we were created to worship Adonai ... and only Adonai. So, let's do it! And when we need help - as we always do - let's ask for it! Asking Adonai is just the beginning of a life-changing adventure of "dynamite prayer."