

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C: MARCH 06, 2016

Readings:

First Lesson: Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm: Psalm 32
Second Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Gospel: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Call to Worship:

O Lord, open our lips,
And our mouths will declare your praise.
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or we would give it;
You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise
[Psalm 51:15-17]

Prayer of Confession:

Most merciful Father, we confess that we have sinned against you. We have foolishly attempted to cover our iniquities and conceal our transgressions, but you, Lord, have searched us and known us. Have mercy upon us and forgive us – surround us with your steadfast love – that we may ever praise you in righteousness and uprightness of heart. Amen.

Discussion Partners: Rachel Steele and Myles Hixson

Closing Benediction:

And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be among us and remain with us always. Amen.

Rejoice in the Refreshment of Forgiveness – Psalm 32

Raise your hand if you've ever needed a break.

Have you ever been so stressed-out, so overwhelmed, that you felt like throwing your cares to the wind, your hands in the air, and yelling "I can't take it anymore!"? Well, if the penitential season of Lent has begun to feel that way for you, I have good news! Today, the Church calendar gives us a bit of a break from all the somber penitence of Lent, and that is why the Fourth Sunday in Lent is called Laetare Sunday, from the Latin for "rejoice."¹ It's also known as Refreshment Sunday. So, if you, like me, are tired, stressed out, and need a break this morning, let's take a deep breath, and pray, before talking about rejoicing in the refreshment of forgiveness.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for being so forgiving and merciful. We ask you for the courage to confess our sins to you, that we might rejoice in your refreshing forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

When preaching, it's usually a bad idea to begin with an apology or confession. Unless, that is, you're preaching on an apology for confession! And that's what our text is this morning: Psalm 32 is an apology, a justifying explanation of confessing sin and receiving forgiveness.

That being said, I must confess to you the desire, in preparing this sermon, to overcomplicate things. To come up with some sort of clever introduction or framework to really *dazzle* you – to really earn a good grade this semester. And then I realized: David didn't feel the need to do that when he penned this psalm! In fact, he states the main point in the first two verses, which read: "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit."

Perhaps I should do the same thing with this sermon, so here's my main point: **If you want to rejoice in the refreshment of forgiveness, you need to confess your sins.**

If you want to rejoice in the refreshment of forgiveness, then you need to confess your sins. Psalm is not just a psalm of penitence or thanksgiving, this is also a *wisdom* psalm – about how to live the good life, according to God's ways.²

Do you want to live a good life, sinner? Then confess your sins to God. As Proverbs 28:13 puts it: "whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy." If you want to rejoice in the refreshment of forgiveness, then you need to confess your sins.

You'll notice what's assumed in both my main point and the biblical text: **you and I have indeed sinned.** In fact, psalm 32 uses three different terms for sins to reflect just how comprehensive our sin problem is:

1. "transgression," meaning "rebellion against God"

¹ George Cyprian Alston, "Laetare Sunday," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 8 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910). Accessed 2 Feb. 2016 at <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08737c.htm>>.

² Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 265; Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 310; Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976), 133; Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms 1-72*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 544.

2. “sin,” meaning “turning away from the true path”
3. “iniquity,” meaning “distortion, perversion, evil, disrespect for God.”³

Ever since Genesis 3, we humans seem to have a bit of a problem when it comes to living life God’s way. Notice that the psalm does not say: “blessed is the one who has never sinned” – for such a person does not exist! Read the papers! Watch the news! Look in the mirror.

As if such a comprehensive sin problem weren’t bad enough, we humans try to cover our sins with deception and silence. We try to be actively unaware that there is anything wrong, but then we quickly discover that unconfessed sin is a bitter pill to swallow. It’s a poison pill to swallow, in fact, and the refusal to confess slowly kills us from the inside out.

Have you been there? I have. So has David. In verses 3-4 he vividly describes it: “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.” Remaining silent about his sin dried him out and drove him to despair. He felt the heavy hand of God upon his conscience – a hand which only feels heavy when you try to resist it! But when you resist confessing and repenting – what a weight that is to bear. I imagine it’s a burden some of us carry this morning.

Our gospel text this morning from Luke 15 is helpful here. Do you want another picture of what unconfessed sin looks like? Look at the prodigal son, slowly starving with the pigs in a foreign country. He knows the way home, and he knows what he’s done. But he lingers and languishes until he chooses to do one thing: **confess**.

Picture confessing your sins as returning from a foreign country into the welcoming arms of your father. David experienced the same sort of immediate transition from bitter estrangement to welcoming embrace. Look at Psalm 32:5, which reads: “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” David decided to acknowledge his sin – to unveil his transgressions, as it were, to the God who could already see them. And how did God respond? He forgave the iniquity of David’s sin, without an intervening rebuke or punishment.⁴ Once David stopped trying to cover his sin with deceptive silence, God covered his sin and held it against him no longer.

How often we humans foolishly try to hide our sins through deception and silence, which is rather like a child playing hide-and-go-seek by merely putting their hand over their eyes! But, with what does God cover our sins?

Through Jesus Christ, he covers our sins with his own blood.

Therefore, I need to revise my main point: **In order to rejoice in the refreshment of forgiveness, you need to confess your sin and cling to Christ.**

The Revised Common Lectionary is especially good to us today, for our second lesson, from 2 Corinthians 5, gets to the heart of the matter. As 2 Corinthians 5:19 states, “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” Verse 21 of that text says: “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” A beautiful exchange: sin, iniquity, and transgression for

³ Wilson, 545; cf. Craigie 266.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 161.

righteousness, reconciliation, and eternal life with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Spurgeon comments upon our psalm, “the trinity of sin is overcome by the Trinity of heaven. Non-imputation is of the very essence of pardon: the believer sins, but his sin is not reckoned, not accounted to him.”⁵

Thanks be to God for his gracious forgiveness! How should we respond?

Well, back to our psalm. You’ll notice in verse 6 that David can’t help but respond to forgiveness by offering instruction. The same transition takes place in Psalm 51:12-13: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.”⁶ I think we can learn something from David’s experience and instruction.

First, and most obviously, as verses 8-9 teach us, **we need to quit acting like stubborn mules and confess our sins to God** – not just to *become* Christians, but to *live* as Christians. We don’t just cling to the Rock of Ages once, and then take it on our own from there, pretending like we’ve got it all together. No! As Paul reminds us when he appropriates the words of this Psalm in Romans 4:6-8, we can never rely upon our own efforts, we can never coast along in our own righteousness. We must confess our sins to God – frankly and honestly admitting our guilt and brokenness – and cling to him for our righteousness and, as Psalm 32:6-7 remind us, for our protection amid the chaos of life: “Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.”

Well now, doesn’t that sound great? But, what if the prospect of confessing your sin absolutely terrifies you? I mean, let’s not pretend like this is an easy thing to do! However, it is the best thing to do, because God already knows our deepest, darkest secrets. But, consider verse 10: “Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD” – the one who trusts in the Lord enough to confess their sins to him. As 1 John 1:9 reminds us, “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The danger isn’t in coming clean to God, it’s in trying to deal with our uncleanness on our own, in secret.

So, first, we must confess our sins.

Secondly, and finally, we must **worship**. Verse 11 says: “Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!” Even if we good Anglicans aren’t supposed to say “Hallelujah” during Lent, we must not forget that the purpose of penitence isn’t to just to feel bad and walk around with somber expressions. No! The purpose of penitence is forgiveness which enables pure worship. This is the refreshment of forgiveness, in which we rejoice: unbroken fellowship with the Triune God, which should inspire endless, sincere, and **joyful** praise – even and especially during the season of Lent, as we prepare to commemorate and celebrate the events which make refreshing forgiveness possible – the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ our Lord.

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1966), 82.

⁶ Brueggemann and Bellinger, 161.

Are you hiding something? Are you attempting to cover your own sins? Is it eating you up inside? The good news is that there is still time to confess your sins today, as we approach the central act of Christian worship at the Lord's Table. Today, there is still "time when [God] may be found," as Psalm 32:6 puts it, because he is still made known to us in the breaking of the bread. If you want to rejoice in the refreshment of forgiveness – including partaking of the Lord's Supper this morning – confess your sins and cling to Christ.

For "blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit" (Ps. 32:1-2).

And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep our hearts and our minds in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord,
who removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west;
and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always.

Amen.

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