

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2010

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Psalm 32

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. 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 sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart! (NIV)

Not far from New York is a cemetery with a grave that has just one word on the headstone: **"FORGIVEN."** There is nothing else—no name, no date of birth, no date of death, no word of praise for the departed—just the one word, **"FORGIVEN."**

And yet what greater word could possibly be written above our own last resting place? Is there anything more powerful than forgiveness? Isn't that why all of you are here today? You know what it is to have your sins forgiven. You know the peace forgiveness brings. Just earlier we confessed our sins together and heard once again the good news that God has been merciful to us and by Jesus' own authority all our sins are forgiven. Some of you in a little while will come up to this altar and receive the very body and blood of your Savior given and poured out for you for the assurance that your sins are forgiven. This morning as we turn to God's Word, may we join with David, in understanding and basking in: **The Great Joy of Forgiveness.**

But before anyone experiences the great joy of forgiveness, they need to know the anguish of their sin. What it is like trying to carry on our own the burden of sin? How does it feel to have a guilty conscience? Do we understand the misery that sin and guilt rightly brings to each one of us? The author of this Psalm certainly did. David's sin is well documented. Instead of leading his army out to war, David stayed home, saw his neighbor's beautiful wife, and committed adultery with her. He tried to cover up her pregnancy and when that did not work he made sure her husband was killed in battle. Then David made the cover up complete by taking Bathsheba in as his own wife.

For a full year David lived with this sin. This adulterer and murderer lived as a phony. He lived a lie. He may have looked good to many on the outside, but he knew the evil within. He kept this sin to himself and lived in impenitence. David describes what this guilt was doing to him. *"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 sapped as in the heat of summer."* The burden of David's sin was more

than he could bear. He suffered day and night like his bones were deteriorating. His guilt weighed on him as if God's mighty righteous hand were pressing down on him. Trying to cover his sin felt like standing in the scorching sun and being drained of all strength. In another Psalm David talks about his tears that would wet his bed every night.

Do you know the feeling? Have you even gone down the road of the prodigal son and sinned against your Father in heaven by doing what you wanted to do and living the way you wanted to live? Have we ever tried to hide our sins from God? Have we ever tried to excuse our sins as not being so bad or as something everyone else does? Have we ever tried to carry our sin and guilt on our own? Then, like David, like the prodigal son, we need to be brought to our senses. Our guilt reminds us we deserve God's punishment. Our sins damn us to hell. The wages of sin is death. If we try to carry any of our sin and guilt, it will become a heavy burden that will crush us.

That's why there is such great joy in forgiveness! Do you remember how David was brought to repentance? Since it may be new to some and good review for others, I would like to read the account. ***"The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. "Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"***

David now realized what his sin deserved. He deserved nothing from God. He deserved to die. He had nothing to offer, no excuses left, no where to hide or escape. So David simply confessed: ***"I have sinned against the LORD."*** The only thing David could do was admit his unworthiness. And do you remember the Lord's beautiful answer? ***"Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die."*** That's grace my friends. That's God's love for us in Christ Jesus. Recounting what happened, David writes in this Psalm: ***"Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"--and you forgave the guilt of my sin."***

Oh, the great joy of forgiveness! Can't you just hear it coming from David's glad heart as he writes: ***"Blessed is he (or it could be translated...Oh, how happy is he) whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed (or Oh, how happy) is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit."*** It was like a thousand pound weight was lifted off David's shoulders. God took His sins away. God covered them up so that they were no longer seen or remembered. God did not hold a single sin against David. God forgave the guilt of his sin.

Paul quotes these very verses in Romans chapter four to make an interesting point. The way God dealt with David is the same way He saves anyone. David had nothing to offer God but wickedness, no works to bring, only ungodliness to confess. Like the prodigal son who had absolutely nothing to give his father, David could offer

God nothing. Yet, without cost, without any merit of his own God justifies, that is God acquits the sinner. God freely offers forgiveness and salvation to all. These blessings are simply ours through faith.

The reason this forgiveness is available to David, to the prodigal son, to us who have absolutely nothing at all to offer God either, is because God already punished someone for our sins. God covers our sin, because He laid it all on another. God did not count David's sin against Him, because He would count it against David's Son and David's Lord. In Lent, we are reminded that while forgiveness is full and free for us, it came at a cost - a very high cost. The price was Jesus' life. The cost was Jesus' suffering and death. The price was the life-blood of God's only Son, the innocent Lamb of God whose blood was shed on the cross. Jesus suffered and died to pay for our sins in full and we have our Savior's empty grave as the proof that every sin has been washed away.

That's why David experienced the great joy of forgiveness. He knew the promises of His gracious God. But David also has some instructions for you and me and anyone who will listen: ***“Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.”*** David warns us not to be like stubborn animals that have to be dragged along by force. Don't hide your sins. Don't try to cover your guilt. The woes of the wicked are many. Instead, learn, like David, to run into the arms of the Lord's unfailing love. Put your trust in God. Take all your sin and all your guilt, confess it daily, and lay it all at the foot of the cross. Then, like David, we will understand the great joy of forgiveness. We will know peace. We will enjoy the happiness that comes with realizing our sins are not counted against us.

Have you ever heard of Augustine? He was kind of a prodigal son story in his own right. He became one of the most well known church fathers after the time of the apostles. We are told that this was his favorite psalm. In fact, when he was near death, and his strength was fading fast, he begged one of his friends to paint on the wall opposite his bed these words: ***“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him.”*** And as the darkness of death closed in, he laid on his bed gazing at these words.

Forgiven - isn't that a great word to use to describe what we are in Christ Jesus? Forgiveness is a powerful thing. It is what you and I need daily and most of all. Forgiveness is what keeps us coming back to this place again and again - it is what makes our God who He is, and it is what our Savior came to bring us. Be happy, be very happy, fellow repentant sinners, for your sins are forgiven. ***“Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!”*** Amen.

