

Dear Friends in Christ,

In his book "An Outline of the Christian Year", Frank E. Wilson writes of Ash Wednesday that it is "when the season of Lent is formally opened. The penitential spirit is strongly stressed. We are reminded of our human estate of the frailties of human nature. (Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1967, p. 50) "The frailties of human nature" would probably be, for some, an easier to digest euphemistic substitute for "The soul who sins shall die." (Ez. 18:20a) And this from our Epistle lesson for this morning: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." (Rom. 5:12)

As I thought about our text for this morning and the beginning of this Lenten season, my thoughts were taken back to a long time ago when a relative of one of our members was brought from out-of-town to one of the hospitals here. I mentioned this many years ago. I was asked to call on him. After entering the room and introducing myself I said, "Your family asked me to stop by and see you." He looked at me with a very sad face and tears instantly forming in his eyes and said, "Pastor, I've been a terrible sinner."

He was a Christian. He knew Jesus and confessed Him. But guilt and regrets were beating him to a pulp. We talked. We prayed. The Lord gave Him comfort. I left. I'm guessing that many of us, at one time or another, have experienced what that brother experienced. It takes us to our overriding theme for these Sundays of Lent: "Calvary's Climb Confronts Us With..." and specifically the theme for this First Sunday of Lent: *Confronts Us With . . .*

THE ONLY SAFE PLACE

I. He Will Deliver. (vv. 1-6)

Our understanding of God as "The Only Safe Place" isn't a promise of a life free from hardships, sad moments, or even tragedies. It's the promise that God will see us through this world to the world to come. It's the Safe Place He provides here that lifts us into eternity. It's the first two verses of our text:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." (vv. 1,2)

When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they entered into a most horrible journey; the one God promised for disobedience: "...the day you eat of it you shall surely die." We're told they immediately "sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin cloths" because of their shame and nakedness. Then we're told, "they hid themselves from the presence of the Lord." (Gen. 3:7b) They were ashamed and ignorant and condemned to death because of the naked reality of their sin against God. But God intervened. He said to Satan: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise your heel." (Gen. 3:15) It was the promise of the coming Christ who would crush Satan's power forever. But, there was something else that followed the promise: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them." (Gen. 3:21) He covered and would care for them; would cover them with a more durable and more lasting covering.

The covering God made for Adam and Eve cost the lives of animals. Blood had to be shed. Concerning Christ and the first covenant inaugurated at the time of Moses the writer of Hebrews writes, "...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Heb. 9:22b) We might say, there is no covering to hide the condemnation of our sin. Christ's blood removes the guilt of our sin; covers us. God sees and accepts us as His beloved children through faith in Christ. John writes what you well know: "(God) loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation (the gift to gain favor, the covering) for our sin." (I Jn. 4:10b) And this: "The blood of Jesus His son cleanses us from all sin." (I Jn. 1:7b) Christ is our only and forever safe place as we travel this world! Our text uses a number of terms directing us that way starting with "we will abide in the shelter of the Most High." And then terms such as "refuge, fortress, cover". And then this from our text, portions of verses 3-8 . . .

II. We Will See. (vv. 7,8)

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence...under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day... A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. (Portions of verses 3-8).

Commentator John F. Brug writes:

The psalmist describes the security of believers with two pictures. Believers are pictured as birds who escape from the trap of the hunter and find shelter under the wings of the mother bird. The hunter and his trap may well represent Satan and his schemes. Believers are also pictured as people trapped in a besieged city, who nevertheless are delivered from plague and the assaults of the enemy. ...these (pictures) represent all the dangers a believer faces in this life. (John F. Brug, *Psalms II*, CPH, p. 87)

Brug's insight is important to understand: "these (pictures) represent all the dangers a believer faces in this life." The dangers are there. They hit us. At times they bring many tears and deep sorrows. And then there's the guilt of sin that often dogs us. The reality that we are unworthy and undeserving of God's love. The reality that Satan is there to remind us of our sin, to drive us to despair, to destroy us and pull us into the darkness of hell.

Listen again to these words from our text: "You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked." We will see. And the supreme "wicked" is Satan. Jesus said of him and his work, "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (Jn. 8:44) That's what we see in our Gospel text for this First Sunday of Lent, The Temptation of Jesus. We see Satan tempting, lying, twisting Scripture with the goal of persuading Christ away from winning our forgiveness and eternal life; our Lord's delivering us "from the snare of the fowler and the deadly pestilence" - delivering us from the greatest murderer!

The charges, the condemnation, the shoveling of guilt and lies and twisting of God's Word can smother us in guilt and fear of hell itself unless....unless....we hold on to these words of our text:

III. Our Safe Place.

Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place - the Most High, who is my refuge - no evil shall be allowed to befall you (that is, destroy you and drag you into hell), no plague come near your tent (that is, to give you spiritual rot and drag you into hell!). For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.

Concerning Adam's fall into sin, our Epistle lesson for this morning states, "For the judgment following one trespass (Adam's sin) brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses (our unnumbered sins) brought justification." (Rom. 5:16a) Justification defined is "that act of God by which He removes the sentence of condemnation, to which man is exposed in consequence of his sins, releases him from his guilt, and ascribes to him the merit of Christ." (Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, p. 424)

Justification is there when our hearts are crushed with the awareness of the on-going presence of sin; when we suffer from insufferable guilt and fear that God might have had enough of us; when we grow in the faith and truly understand how hellish and despicable what we might think the smallest sin; when we truly understand that the unfathomable love of God immeasurably outdistances all our worldly hopes and dreams and wants and loves - when these things enter our lives in the most intense ways - then, and only then will our saddened faces and tearful regrets be most receptive of Scripture: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom 3:23,24)

Jesus goes in front of us on the path that leads to beating, whipping, thorns, and nails. Suffers hell. Will die. We will hear Him say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Lk. 23:34) What He does covers us with the pronouncement: "Not guilty!" And whoever believes will have eternal life. Justified by grace through faith. Truly, He is ***The Only "Safe Place"***.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott

First Sunday in Lent

March 1, 2020

Psalm 91:1-13

“The Only Safe Place”

- I. He Will Deliver. (vv. 1-6)
- II. We Will See. (vv. 7-8)
- III. Our Safe Place.

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