**Isaiah 59:12-20;** 2 Cor 5:20b-6:2; Lk 18:9-14 Ash Wednesday, February 10, 2016

Dear Fellow Penitents, Searching for Forgiveness in Our Savior,

I turned on the car radio at just the right time this morning. Can you guess the first news I heard? Yesterday’s primary vote in New Hampshire? Good guess. No. The first news I heard was, “At 12 o’clock midnight, Mardi Gras ended.” The party was over. Most big parties are just getting started at midnight. Do you know why the party had to end early? Because Ash Wednesday began at midnight. Of course, little to nothing was said about Ash Wednesday. And if news stories about Mardi Gras mention Ash Wednesday at all, they portray Ash Wednesday as the moment when the frowning, frumpy, sad-faced religious people declare that the fun-loving partiers need to stop having fun; the victory of the unhappy over the fun-loving is how it sometimes comes off.

In truth, that is kind of how it looks. Thousands turn out for Mardi Gras. They line the streets for parades day after day, business is booming, lots of laughter. But Ash Wednesday? Nobody loves Ash Wednesday. No parades, no smiles.

Lent starts today, on Ash Wednesday. Our Lenten sermon series is What the Prophets Said about the Suffering Servant. Now, when we talk of the Suffering Servant, we should know that is Jesus. Tonight, the prophet Isaiah begins that series by telling us,

**“Why He Had to Come as a *Suffering* Servant?”**

The 59th chapter of Isaiah makes no mention of ashes, but it breathes the spirit of Ash Wednesday. It says, ***“Our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities: rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God…”*** and that is only the beginning. It’s a list, a repetitive list. ***“Our offenses… our sins… our iniquities…”*** “Yah-da, Yah-da, Yah-da.” Saying the same thing over and over again. Let’s make some progress here.

But when you really do feel guilty about having done something bad, isn’t that how it is? It just keeps going round and round in your head. You keep remembering, wishing you could forget, but you can’t. “My sin, my offenses, that was so stupid, I wish I could take it back, it’s too late now, my reputation is ruined.” And so it goes.

In the Gospel reading it was all so neat and clean. The tax collector, a man with more than a few sins to his name, the tax collector walked into the temple and simply said, *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner,”* and Jesus says that he went home forgiven. But it isn’t that easy, is it!

It really is that easy. And yet it is not because we are such stubborn sinners. I wonder what went on in that tax collector’s soul before he went to God’s house that day? Before he stood at a distance, not even looking up to heaven, literally beating himself up over his sin. How had he slept the night before? What was he thinking on his way to God’s house? I imagine it was something like our reading. ***“Our offenses… our sins… our iniquities.”***

If there is anyone inclined to start pointing fingers at tax collectors when sins get mentioned, notice that the prophet Isaiah includes himself in the indictment. Listen to his words, right from the very beginning: ***“Our offenses are many…our offenses are ever with us… our sins testify against us…we acknowledge our iniquities”*** (12) He had not worshiped at idol temples like many Israelites. Isaiah was probably a very honest and upright man who rarely, if ever, told a lie. But he still confesses, ***“Our offenses…our iniquities.”*** He knew his status before God: Law Breaker.

Every Christian, yes, every pastor should remember this about Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is not about the evils of society around us. It is about our own role in the sins of this world. It is about how my own actions and thoughts and words have put me in a hopeless place.

Is it really hopeless? The world around us would tell us it is not hopeless. It would tell us to get rid of those antiquated notions of sin and a punishing God. The popular attitude is that God is a super-tolerant god who will put up with anything. He won’t ask questions, he won’t issue condemnations, he won’t make demands, and he certainly would never ask anyone to admit that they are wrong. That is the god of our age. And it is an idea that the sinful nature very much likes, because if you can never be wrong, then you can do whatever pleases you. There is no reason to tell yourself “No”. Whatever we can imagine should be our goal.

Whoever thinks this is a portrait of God, they are not thinking of the God of the Bible. Isaiah knew the true God. He was a prophet, yet the only thing he professes about himself in our reading is a shocking awareness of his own sin.

God has declared what is right and wrong. And at every point where our thoughts, words and actions are at variance with God’s Word, the only thing we can do is listen to the pronouncement against us. And this is the pronouncement: ***“The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice… According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath… and retribution.”*** (15,18)

Yet while God declares what is right and wrong, and will never negotiate on anything he has said, he is loving. That is why we read, ***“The Lord saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.”***

The Lord knew that in view of his divine decree about justice and sin, we were hopelessly lost. So he worked. He did not change the rules. Remember, God is neither weak-willed nor fickle. But he decided that he would save people who had no way to save themselves.

***“His own arm worked salvation for him.”*** The Only-Begotten Son, went to work. It began with a little baby born in Bethlehem, then in Egypt, then Nazareth, then the Jordan, then the desert, and so forth the Son of God spent 33 years obeying every single law of God in thought, word and deed. He said “No” to all temptations. He did all that was required. And then it ended, not the way it should end for a person who had never done anything wrong in his entire life. It ended in a terrible, tortured death. That is what the prophet Isaiah meant, probably beyond his own understanding, when he described the Suffering Servant this way, ***“His own arm worked salvation.”*** He worked not his own salvation, but our salvation.

Our God, saw our sorry state, and he saved us. He bore all the costs. He paid all the penalties. Now, he says, ***“The Redeemer will come…to those…who repent of their sins.”*** (20). Repentance means saying, “I was wrong. I am sorry. I need you to forgive me because there is nothing I can do. You have the power.” To all who repent, we are granted a reprieve for our eternal death sentence for sin.

That is Isaiah’s answer to why the Only-Begotten Son of God had to come as a Suffering Servant.

Ash Wednesday can never be a popular day, because it requires us to do something we don’t want to do. But it is an important day, because it is a day where we come to do what needs to be done. More than any other day of the year except maybe Good Friday, we come and say that we are sorry that Jesus had to do so much for us and our sinful, shameful ways.

Walk away from Ash Wednesday, cleansed. You have confessed all that was and is wrong in your life. Know for certain that you are forgiven in your Savior, the Suffering Servant. Amen.