

Dear Friends in Christ,

Preface: A Sermon on a Psalm?

“Today, I am going to preach without a Bible reading!” If that were true, even though you are a bunch of friendly people, I would expect that after church, a few of you would call me on the carpet. At least I hope you would!

It is the proud heritage of the Lutheran Church that we *always* base our sermons on the Word of God. A month ago, during Reformation, there was a banner in the fellowship hall. Three short phrases in Latin: *Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, Sola Scriptura*. These three phrases are the motto of the Lutheran Reformation: *Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, Sola Scriptura*. Even though it’s Latin, you can pretty well get it. “Faith alone, Grace alone, Scripture alone.” No human psychology or philosophy. “Scripture Alone!” If you ever catch me preaching a sermon not based on God’s Word, ask me the hard questions.

But what about today? Today’s reading is a psalm. The Bible readings, well, we print those out in the bulletins—direct quotations from the Bible. But we always sing our psalms from the hymnal. Are psalms really on par with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; with Genesis and Isaiah?

If you read your Bible often, you know the answer. Psalms is one of the 39 books of the Old Testament. It is quoted by Jesus more than any other Old Testament book. And Jesus tells us that the Psalms are not just godly words, but God’s Word. When he quoted the second Psalm, Jesus said that King David was “*speaking by the [Holy] Spirit*” (Mt 22:43). Yes, the book of Psalms is God’s word.

But let me add one more thing by way of introduction. There is something very special about the book of Psalms. Basically, all the other books of the Bible are God speaking to us. But in the book of Psalms, the believer, by the Holy Spirit’s guidance, speaks to God. All the feelings and emotion we have, positive and negative, are given expression in this special book of the Bible. That is why every single person I know who regularly reads their Bible has a special place in their heart for Psalms.

So let’s read our sermon text, Psalm 130:

¹ *Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD?*

² *O Lord, hear my voice.*

Let your ears be attentive

to my cry for mercy.

³ *If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins,*

O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ *But with you there is forgiveness;*

therefore you are feared.

⁵ *I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,*

and in his word I put my hope.

⁶ *My soul waits for the Lord*

more than watchmen wait for the morning,

more than watchmen wait for the morning.

⁷ *O Israel, put your hope in the LORD,*

for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

⁸ *He himself will redeem Israel*

from all their sins.

WHY FEAR GOD?

I. Because We are Sinful!

Psalm 130 is called a “penitential” psalm, or a psalm of repentance. Not all of the psalms are this way. In fact, very few are; about 7 or 8. Dozens exude the confidence and joy of saved believers. But this Sunday, 21 days before Christmas, we heard John the Baptist tell us that the right way to prepare for the coming Savior is repentance.

That doesn’t sound very Christmassy! “’Tis the Season to be jolly...,” “Merry Christmas”, parties at work, parties at home. And here we are saying that proper Christmas preparation is sorrow and repentance?

We don't know who wrote this psalm, and we don't know why. Apparently God didn't think it was important for us to know. More important is the message. And this is how it starts: ***“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy”*** (1).

Have you been there? When you get yourself into so much trouble that you can't get out. When you have done something you can't undo? One person who knew about that, someone who *did* write some of the *other* penitential psalms, was Israel's King David. His lust led him into adultery and then into the murder of one of his faithful infantry officers. David lived the lie, trying to cover his tracks, even while most of his kingdom knew about it and talked about it behind his back. David wanted it to all go away, to unhappen itself, because he couldn't undo it.

And you have those moments, maybe not murder and adultery (or maybe so), you have said things that hurt people for the rest of their lives. You betrayed people near and dear to you. You failed people who relied on you. Those are the ghosts that haunt you. And while sometimes we can have enough fun or distract ourselves enough or even drink the ghosts under the table, they still come back, and finally we let the truth out, even if to no man, then to God, ***“O Lord, out of the depths I cry to you. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.”*** That despair is the beginning of repentance. That is the repentance that John the Baptist urged upon the people waiting for the Christ-child.

Every Sunday we have a confession of sins. Is that how you feel when you speak those words printed on page three of our bulletin? Do you feel the disappointment in self, the near despair of your oh-too-familiar failings? You should. That's what repentance is. Repentance means a despair of self. Repentance means that the only thing we can cry to the Lord is, “Please don't do what you have every right to do!”

In living memory of many of us, when people came to the confession of sins on page three, do you know what they did? They knelt. We stopped kneeling years ago. The kneelers got in the way. As the population aged, some people could only kneel with great difficulty. So we stopped kneeling. And when people came forward to receive the Sacrament—do you remember it?—when we came forward to receive the Sacrament, we used to kneel down in humility before our Lord. But we stopped kneeling there too. And I understand all that, and I am not questioning people's motives – except a little bit. I think the reasons for stopping kneeling were understandable, if not good. But I do think that ending kneeling has a little something to do with the fact that human nature likes to bend the knee before no one; to not really repent to the degree that Psalm 130, verse 1 speaks, ***“Out of the depths I cry to you. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.”***

The Psalmist goes on: ***“If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?”*** Every sin against God's will is a reason we cannot stand before him. No one, not you, not your kind gracious mother, not Mother Theresa, not Mary mother of Jesus, no one can feel anything better than despair over their sins.

Repentance is an admission of myself and my choices as the problems.

What we desperately need is not someone who is going to reduce the payments or extend the loan a few more years, we need someone who is going to make full payment for us and hand us the title deed. ***“If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness.”***

II. Because He Forgives

Now I would like to say that God simply clears our record. But there is a little word at the end of the reading that reminds us that it actually wasn't all that easy for God to forgive us. Listen for it. At the end of the psalm it says, ***“with [the LORD] is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.”*** That little word “redeem” reminds us that forgiveness came at a price. That word redeem has at its base a payment. You can't have redemption without a payment being made.

This is the miracle of our forgiveness. The one who was dishonored disobeyed by our sins is the same one who pays for our sins. Can you imagine that? It is marvelous and wonderful when people forgive others, when victims of crimes forgive those who hurt them. You hear about that sometimes. But God goes even farther than the father or mother who forgives his child's murderer in the courtroom. God goes even a step further than forgiveness, he redeems. He makes the payment. It's like he says to the judge, not only do I personally forgive this person, but I want to pay the fine, I want to serve the time. Not only is this person forgiven, but their debt is paid.

That was Jesus. Forgiveness was not free. It was an act of redemption.

Let's do a little fill in the blank here. What word do you think goes in this blank ***"With you is forgiveness, therefore you are _____."*** Maybe "loved" or "praised" or "honored." No. Here is what Psalm 130 says, ***"With you is forgiveness, therefore you are feared."*** Why "feared"?

This is one of the tricky words of the Bible. "Fear" is a tricky word partly because the word has changed from what it once meant. Let me ask you: Is it good for children to fear their parents? I think all of us almost instinctively say, "No. Good parents will not be 'feared' by their children." In our minds, children afraid of their own parents is awful. Then what is the meaning of the old King James Version when it says, ***"Every man shall fear his father, his mother"*** (Lev. 19:3). And what does our Lutheran Catechism mean when it says, ***"We should fear, love and trust in God above all things."***

This word "fear" in certain contexts, used to mean "respect" more than it meant to be afraid. Our forgiveness came at a great cost to God. Therefore we respect him. We acknowledge that he has done something wonderful for us, something we had no right to demand and no ability to do. Our relationship is not a relationship of equals, but of a fly and an elephant.

The Christian response to forgiveness is fear in this sense: that we have utter respect for God. Like the police of our day have authority for our good, therefore we respect them and yes we even look up to them and are grateful for them. But if you are determined to cross their authority, then your respect should be a fearful respect. And so with God. When we humbly come before him acknowledging our need for his forgiveness, "fear" is loving respect. But if our feeling toward God is that he has no reason to be asking us questions, then be afraid.

No, we fear God like a young child respects his father—the strongest man in the world, the one who makes things right, who knows the answers to all the questions. But our heavenly Father really is all those things. And so we say—even as we "fear" God—we say, ***"My soul waits for the LORD more than watchmen wait for the morning."***

Do you notice what has happened to the light? No, I am not talking about the light out these windows in the fifteen minutes since I began this sermon. Notice what has happened to the light in Psalm 130. It began in the darkness of despair, ***"Out of the depths I cry to you..."*** and now light is dawning. Even as the Psalmist cried out to the Lord for forgiveness, he knew the answer. He knew that God is even more willing to listen than we are to cry out to him. And so instead of darkness he looks to the east and sees the orange glow of morning's dawn. ***"My soul waits for the LORD more than watchmen wait for the morning."*** Forgiveness is his. He looks to the eastern horizon, waiting for the first sliver of the sun to appear over the horizon, when God will take him to be with him forever. When all the daily worries over life and the guilt feelings of sin will disappear forever like a nightmare melts before the morning light and after an hour you can no longer remember it. So will be all the things that we spent our lives worrying about, feeling guilty over. We will feel God's forgiveness in a measure we cannot yet know.

With this knowledge, let us announce to the world around us, ***"Put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption... With him there is forgiveness, therefore he is feared."*** Amen.