

Lent 1, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
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Today is the first Sunday of Lent,  
the first Sunday of the season  
when we, with our savior, turn our faces  
toward Jerusalem,  
the cross,  
and finally  
the resurrection.

But to get there  
we have these forty days, an echo of the forty days  
that Jesus spent in the wilderness,  
preparing  
for his public ministry.

Traditionally  
Lent was a time of penitence,  
a time to remember  
the things we have done wrong  
and to express to God  
our sorrow  
and our need  
for forgiveness.

That led to the tradition of “giving up something.”  
It was originally about  
expressing that sorrow,  
a tangible sign in our lives  
that we were sorry,  
a kind of self-imposed punishment  
to really really show God  
that we were repentant.  
But over time it lost that connection to repentance,  
and simply became about self-denial and self-improvement.

More recently, the focus has begun to shift again,  
to Lent being a time  
to focus on drawing near to God,  
to let go of those things  
that keep us from God

and to do those things  
that help us connect with God.

That's a helpful corrective,  
but I suspect we are in danger  
of forgetting that original focus,  
our need for forgiveness for sin.

Sin is not something  
that we like to talk about much.  
Unless you are a celebrity,  
and willing to parade it publicly,  
tell-all magazine stories and TV shows  
just adding to your media exposure and fame.  
Or we're at a dinner party,  
and after a few drinks,  
start to tell the stories of our misbegotten youth.  
But there are those other sins, those ones that we  
are truly ashamed of,  
things we keep hidden,  
swept under the carpet  
or perhaps even hiding under the bed  
waiting to emerge  
at the worst possible  
time.

For the most part  
we don't like  
talking about sin,  
and even more  
admitting that we  
were at fault.

But like it or not  
it's something we can't avoid in Scripture.  
The bible is over a thousand chapters long,  
but it takes less than three chapters  
for sin to rear its ugly head, as we saw in our first reading.  
And when we get to the psalms  
it is inescapable.  
The psalms are prayers,  
and time and time again  
they lament the effects of human failure, human sin.

And nowhere more  
than in the seven psalms known since the sixth century  
as the penitential psalms, psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 130 and 143.  
And if the psalms as a whole  
are like the prayer book of the bible,  
these penitential psalms are like the confession,  
prayers addressed to God,  
expressing failure, asking for forgiveness.  
We read one of them, psalm 51, in our Ash Wednesday service;  
another of them  
was our psalm for today.

And what is most noticeable about it  
is that it begins not with a lament for sin  
but with a promise.

“Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven,  
and whose sin is put away!”  
Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt,  
and in whose spirit there is no guile!”

Often we think of forgiveness  
as something  
that belongs primarily to the New Testament,  
something that only came in  
with Christ,  
but here it is  
right up front  
way back in the psalms.  
The promise of forgiveness.

Sometimes you hear people say  
that the God of the Old Testament  
is a God of wrath and judgment  
and the God of the New Testament  
is a God of love and forgiveness.  
But nothing could be further  
from the truth.  
God is the same,  
yesterday, today and forever.  
The God of the Old testament and the God of the New Testament are the same,  
and the promise of forgiveness  
is woven throughout our scriptures.

Yes, as Christians, we believe that we are forgiven through Christ,  
but the way the letter to the Hebrews explains it,  
the saving work of Christ  
is for all time.  
It works retrospectively  
as well as prospectively,  
backwards  
as well as forwards  
in time.

God's promise of forgiveness,  
That's the basis of all our confession,  
knowing that God is indeed faithful and just  
and will forgive us our sins.

But having made that confident assertion  
the psalm now turns  
to what happens  
when the psalmist was unwilling to confess, unwilling to  
be honest with God.

“While I held my tongue, my bones withered away,  
because of my groaning all day long.  
For your hand was heavy upon me day and night;  
my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.”

Have you ever felt  
really guilty?  
Some time  
when you did something  
and you knew that you really messed up.  
It may not have been a huge thing  
seen from the outside,  
but to you  
it became monumental.  
You were ashamed of it.  
You wanted it to go away.  
And the more you tried to make it disappear,  
the more you hid it under that figurative bed,  
the more it sneaked back out,  
reappearing  
when you least wanted it to,  
interrupting

precious time with family,  
keeping you from sleeping,  
sapping your energy.  
Guilt possessed you.  
You began to feel like  
your life was draining away.

No wonder the psalmist  
uses the image of the desert,  
a place where the moisture is sucked out of you,  
where you have no strength,  
where it seems almost easier  
to die.

“Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and did not conceal my guilt;  
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.”  
Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.”

We don’t know what the psalmist’s sin was;  
we don’t know why the psalmist finally got round  
to confessing it.  
But somehow, something,  
prompted him to do it.  
Maybe it was some remembered promise of God’s grace.  
Maybe it was a hope that somehow “getting it off his chest”  
would help.  
Maybe it was just exhaustion,  
the lack of energy  
to keep on denying it.

But the psalmist did.  
And there, in that last phrase  
that passes so quickly  
that you could almost miss it  
are those incredible words,  
“you forgave me the guilt of my sin.”

The psalmist confessed.  
God forgave.  
It was as simple as that.  
No self-denial, no lengthy rituals.  
Just admitting guilt,

and the grace of forgiveness.

And just what that grace is,  
the psalmist goes on.

“Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble;  
when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them.

You are my hiding-place;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with shouts of deliverance.”

The grace is  
that connection to God,  
a God who is no longer feared  
as one who will destroy you because of your sin  
but one who will rescue you,  
a God who you can pray to,  
a God you can trust  
to deliver you.

And then we have a brief excursus:  
the psalmist  
begins to quote God,  
"I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; \*  
I will guide you with my eye.  
Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; \*  
who must be fitted with bit and bridle,  
or else they will not stay near you."

It's an echo, an echo  
of the things that God said to the people  
way back in Deuteronomy,  
back when the people of God were first given  
instruction  
on how to live.  
Listen to God, the psalmist seems to be saying,  
listen, and take heed.  
Because if you do  
you might not get to the place I was,  
you might not get to the place  
where your strength is gone,  
and your life drained away  
and your sin  
became your ruler.

Instead,  
turn to God.  
Because God  
is merciful.  
God is merciful.

“Great are the tribulations of the wicked;  
but mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD.  
Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the LORD;  
shout for joy, all who are true of heart.”

Sin is real,  
says this psalmist.  
Sin is real,  
but so is grace.

Face up  
to what you have done.  
Big or small, face up to it;  
confess it;  
admit your guilt.

And then receive  
the glorious gift of forgiveness  
that sets you free.  
And rejoice.

I almost wish  
that we hadn't begun our service today  
with the Great Litany.  
It's a tradition to do it  
this first Sunday of Lent.  
But somehow  
the wordiness seems to almost obscure the act of contrition, of repentance, of confession,  
and indeed  
this glorious promise  
of forgiveness.

And so, now, I invite you  
to spend some time in silence  
confessing your own sins  
before God.

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Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

Thanks be to God.