

Sermon: "Surprised by Sin"

Penitence – which in large part is the act of holding oneself accountable – is a central theme of Lent and is the whole point of the psalm I just read. The circumstances of the sinner – and there is no other label for this person that fits – are extreme, but with a purpose. If this passage simply spoke about an angry word exchanged with a spouse, or a little accounting sleight of hand that resulted in a favorable outcome on a tax return, then there would be little to capture and hold our attention. We're all guilty of misdeeds like that, but they are not the stuff on which psalms are built.

No, the penitential psalms draw our thoughts to something we'd rather not acknowledge, which is that sin – as much as love, or joy, or hope – is the human condition. Given the headlines of the past week – and I'm referring here to the various Federal court proceedings and even the college admissions scandals -- I should point out that unlike those episodes in our national life, not all sins are crimes. You can be greedy, or prideful, or lustful without violating a criminal code. So it's important right away to separate what human beings deem to be punishable behavior, from what God does.

Still, it's possible that the figure of Psalm 38 has committed an act that both God and human law agree to be unacceptable – like murder, or robbery, or assault. But even one of those hefty moral and legal infractions don't quite explain the anguish our psalmist is experiencing before God.

"There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me."

Sounds like a person drowning, doesn't it? The person is infused to the core by sin; he or she is engulfed by "iniquities". Here I need to add a little technical note; otherwise we would be saying words like "sin," "iniquities," and "transgression" all mean the same thing. Sin, as I said earlier, is an inescapable human condition; it's why another penitential psalm – the 51st – famously says, "I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." Scholars debate whether that means original sin, but it's close.

But the Hebrew word for iniquity is "avon," which means to twist, bend, or distort; in this context of the psalm what has been done is a corruption of God's law. Then there is "transgression," – pasha in Hebrew -- which in biblical terms is a deliberate act of rebellion done to spite God. John Milton's famous Puritan poem, *Paradise Lost*, describes pride as Satan's great sin, leading him to the transgression of rebelling against God. Iniquities and transgressions are both sins, but distinguishing between them allows us to be more aware and precise about just what it is we are confessing to God. Psalm 38 does not mention transgressions, but other penitential psalms do.

So, while we don't have an exact accounting of what the psalmist has done wrong, we do know that he or she at least done something corrupt, twisted, deformed, morally speaking. And what's most striking about Psalm 38 is that even as we lack details of the offense, the consequences are frighteningly clear:

"My wounds grow foul and fester...my back is filled with searing pain ...I groan because of the anguish of my heart."

Psalm 38 argues that a state of the spirit takes a physical toll. In fact, the most vivid images Psalm 38 communicates are apparent right on the surface: ever seen anyone with an open wound or sore; know anyone who is wracked with back pain; ever looked into the face of a person torn apart internally, i.e., in the heart? Psalm 38 is not saying that all physical ill health is the result of sin; the psalm is not making that mistake which Jesus himself debunked. But these verses are saying that where sin does exist, it can ruin a person's life, physically.

And this passage makes another claim, which like the physical one, I think many of can say we have witnessed ourselves. I'm speaking here of the social repercussions of sin. Just as vivid as the "festering sores," Psalm 38 testifies to the damage to relationships that erupt where sin exists: *"My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbors stand far off."*

Ever been shunned? Imagine how deeply that hurts. Where you are so socially repulsive – maybe even physically – that your closest friends won't come near you. Don't think this happens? Talk to ex-offenders about their experiences of re-entry; especially those saddled for life with the public stigma of their sin, like pedophiles. For some, sin is a stain you cannot wash off, at least socially.

But it gets worse, as the psalmist points out, because not only do your friends abandon you, but your enemies get to gloat, and plot against you in your weakness and pain: *"Those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin, and meditate treachery all day long. ...Do not let them rejoice over me, those who boast against me when my foot slips."*

All of this – spiritual torment, physical anguish, social ostracism, vulnerable to attack – the costs of sin. Surprised? You might be because the modern church so seldom talks outright about sin. You don't want to hear it as a steady diet one Sunday to the next, and I don't want to preach it. But a timely reminder of sin's scope and depth cannot hurt, and in fact is a mandate of the church. And what could be more timely than Lent?

Because it is in Lent that we are reminded that sin need not be the end state of our existence. It may be pervasive and it may be hard to shed, but sin can be overcome, in penitence, which is the real message of Psalm 38, and all the penitential psalms.

I've quoted from the catalogue of dire consequences of sin that this psalm confirms. I didn't do that to make you and me squirm or to throw a pall over this service. I did it to reach the moment

of truth the psalmist did, when he cries out: “I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin,” and then goes on to plead: “...Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, do not be far from me; make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation.”

That’s how Psalm 38 ends, on that note of petition. This penitential psalm has fulfilled its self-description – the speaker has held himself or herself accountable.

As we continue our exploration of the Psalms over the next few weeks, we’ll come upon what we expect to find – a response from heaven to petition. And that’s the ray of sunshine, the surprise in Lent, an otherwise gloomy season. For we will discover that heaven does answer sincere, even wrenching confessions of sin. It is there that Lent holds out hope, in a promise of reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing – for all that ails the sin-sick soul. Amen.

- 1 LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.
- 2 Your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down on me.
- 3 Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.
- 4 My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.
- 5 My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly.
- 6 I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning.
- 7 My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body.
- 8 I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart.
- 9 All my longings lie open before you, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you.
- 10 My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes.
- 11 My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away.
- 12 Those who want to kill me set their traps, those who would harm me talk of my ruin; all day long they scheme and lie.
- 13 I am like the deaf, who cannot hear, like the mute, who cannot speak;
- 14 I have become like one who does not hear, whose mouth can offer no reply.
- 15 LORD, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God.
- 16 For I said, "Do not let them gloat or exalt themselves over me when my feet slip."
- 17 For I am about to fall, and my pain is ever with me.
- 18 I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin.
- 19 Many have become my enemies without cause ; those who hate me without reason are numerous.
- 20 Those who repay my good with evil lodge accusations against me, though I seek only to do what is good.
- 21 LORD, do not forsake me; do not be far from me, my God.
- 22 Come quickly to help me, my Lord and my Savior.