

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent and the beginning therefore of what's called a penitential season when we're called to deny ourselves and reflect upon our sins and failings. So that's why the church is decked out in purple today, a sort of somber, dark color. And our readings today are also equally somber. There are themes of disobedience, shame, guilt, brokenness, betrayal, temptation, denial and suffering. And there's a danger during Lent that all this talk of sin and denial can overtake us and we end up almost wallowing in sin and darkness. So, I want to say something on this first Sunday of Lent to set a tone for our markings of this season. And I'm going to talk about the wonder of God's forgiveness.

It reminds us as we begin this journey through the season of Lent, that the reason we can be honest with ourselves and acknowledge our failings, our weakness, and our sin, is that we have received God's loving forgiveness. Look at how the Psalm begins that we just read together. "Happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven and whose sin is put away." That's the context for our observance of Lent. We can be honest with ourselves about where we failed because God, our creator, has already accepted and forgiven us. And if God accepts us, we can learn to accept ourselves as we really are our real selves, not the selves that we put forward on Facebook or Instagram.

And it's important to note that the Psalm was written by King David, who's drawing here on his experience. It's because he knew so much about sin that he knew so much about divine forgiveness. And you may know that David's life unraveled after his affair with Bathsheba, which ended with him ordering the killing of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. And this perhaps not surprisingly led to David feeling great guilt and shame. He described it in the Psalm as, "My bones were withering away" and he felt God's hand heavy on him day and night. David, like many of us perhaps, carried around the burden of sin and guilt with him. As Tim McGraw sang, "It's hard when the devil won't get off your back. It's

like carrying around the past in a hundred-pound sack," which shows just how American I've become, actually, that I'm now quoting country and western singers in my sermons. King David knew the joy of God's forgiveness. He says in the Psalm, "I acknowledged my sin to you. I did not conceal my guilt. Then you forgave the guilt of my sin."

What burden do we carry around? As McGraw would say, what's our "hundred-pound sack" ? Is there something we've done which we think can never be forgiven or that could never be put right? Of course, there are some of us who find it difficult both to acknowledge our sin and to accept God's forgiveness. There was in the last century in Britain, a very famous preacher called Campbell Morgan, and he used to go around preaching and he was preaching in a mine one day, and a miner engaged him in conversation after his talk. And the miner said he was troubled by Campbell Morgan's message of grace and forgiveness. And the miner said, "It just seems too easy. Are you really saying that all I have to do is to turn to God and seek his forgiveness and I will be forgiven? That just seems too easy. Surely there's something that I have to do to earn that."

And Campbell Morgan looked at him and said, "Well, how did you get out the mine today?" And the miner said, "Well, came up through a lift shaft." And Campbell Morgan said, "Well, did you have to pay for that?" And the miner said, "Well, no, it was free." And Campbell Morgan pointed out that it wasn't really free, that the mining company had to put a lot of money into getting that mine, that shaft built. But it was free to the miner, and the miner got the point.

So, it is with forgiveness. It's a free gift to us, but there was a cost for God, the Forgiver. As it says in the book of Romans, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." That's how God forgives us by paying the price through Christ, which is good news for the likes of King David, who knew the gift of God's forgiveness. And St. Paul in the New Testament writes about that same gift too. You notice in the epistle that we heard read, he talks

about the free gift five times in one paragraph. "The free gift is not like the trespass," he says. "The free gift is not like the effect of one man's sin", he says. "The free gift brings justification," he says.

The experience of God's forgiveness brought great joy to King David, to St. Paul and an old lady in Scotland called Betty. This lady Betty had a habit of shouting out during sermons. If ever the preacher said something that was remotely encouraging or positive, she would invariably shout out, "Praise the Lord." But the trouble was the preacher didn't like it. He said, "Every time I build up some momentum in the sermon, you just interrupt me by shouting out." So, he did a deal with her. She was very poor. So, he knew that if he offered her two blankets at the end of the year for winter, that she'd do a deal. So, the deal was that he would give her two blankets at the end of the year if Betty didn't shout out, "Praise the Lord." So, she did well week after week, keeping her mouth shut. Then one day there was a visiting preacher, and the preacher was talking about forgiveness and the great gift of God's forgiveness. And as he spoke, the blankets started to lose their allure for Betty, and she got more excited about the promise of God's forgiveness. And at the end of the sermon, she couldn't help herself. She stood up and she said, "Blankets or no blankets, praise the Lord."

The wonderful truth known by King David, St. Paul and Betty, is that God's gift is still free and still available to all. And if we receive that gift, we're able to be completely honest with God and ourselves about the reality of our sins and failing. St. Augustine, another big sinner, he responded to this psalm. He had this Psalm number 32 inscribed on his wall because it reminded him that the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself as a sinner, a forgiven sinner. It says in 1 John, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. But if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We don't need to hold anything back from God. Our confession can be complete.

We don't need to be like the man who wrote to the IRS and said, "I'm having sleepless nights about the

burden of the past. Please find enclosed the check for \$250 for taxes which I forgot to declare. PS - If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

We all need and desire unconditional forgiveness. And that's what God offers. That's what King David is describing in Psalm 22. There's a story in Spain about a father of a teenage boy, and they were sort of estranged and for years, they didn't communicate, and it was a great burden and a sadness for the father. So, in desperation, as he got to the end of his life, he put an ad in the local paper that said, "Jose," which is the name of his son, "please, let's reconnect. Meet me in front of the newspaper office in Madrid. See you there tomorrow at noon." And the story goes that when he turned up the next day, there were 200 Joses waiting because there were so many young men of that name waiting for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Each week in our service, we always have a confession, always followed by an absolution, which could be paraphrased as the words that that father in Spain might have said to his son, "All is forgiven. I love you. Father." So in this Lent, as we dare to confront our failings, our regrets, our past, our shortcomings, our sins, we do that remembering that we are a forgiven people, that we have already received God's forgiveness in Christ, and we, who are forgiven by God, can forgive ourselves and also start to forgive others. Amen.