

**4 Lent – Year C – March 17, 2010 - Homily**  
**Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**  
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One of the great gifts of our faith traditions is that we are part of an on-going conversation with Scripture, and with all who have written about them. It is said that tonight's psalm was one of St. Augustine's favorites, and that in Martin Luther's estimation it is among one of the best psalms. With those kinds of credentials, how could we resist taking a closer look?

Who doesn't want to be happy? One of the unalienable rights of our country's Declaration of Independence is the pursuit of happiness. Appropriately enough in the Declaration this right is stated as being endowed to us by our Creator. Our psalmist would agree that happiness comes from God, and especially in experiencing God's forgiveness. The psalm is the equivalent of a modern exposé on all the elements of forgiveness. That includes the sin that weighs so heavily on our consciences, to acknowledging our sinfulness, to confession, and acceptance of forgiveness. That is a great beginning and part of our Lenten journey, but there is more! The psalmist describes the ways in which the truly repentant move forward, actively engage in behavior that leads to spiritual growth, and pursue a different course of life, in accord with God's will.

On the other hand, the world will try to sell us all kinds of things that promise us happiness. Many of these things are possessions or worldly definitions of success. Many of us have probably tried a variety of things in our own pursuit of happiness. It turns out that the Book of Psalms is a veritable treatise on happiness. Of the multiple references to happiness, almost all are relational: being in right relationship with God, and others. Righteousness is just another way of describing this state of being. It is also one of the keys to unlocking happiness within us. As Pastor Lindsay Armstrong says, "According to Psalm 32, righteousness is not a matter of being sinless. It is about the ego-bruising work of Lent.... Undoubtedly this work is difficult."

After defining happiness as righteousness, and admitting that we will all sin, the first suggestion our psalmist offers is that hauling around a lot of baggage in the form of guilt and self-recrimination can have more than spiritual consequences. "While I held my tongue, my bones withered away," reads verse 3. We should not misunderstand the link between illness and sin here. It is not entirely linear. Obviously, there are many reasons for sickness, including those that are environmental, like no access to clean water. We also know that bacteria and viruses abound and spread easily; and that long-term stress in our lives is well known to compromise our immune systems, making us more vulnerable to physical illness. Smoking is also known to be a health risk, since tobacco contains all kinds of carcinogens. The list goes on. Having said that, from a purely holistic point of view, we are essentially spiritual beings with physical bodies. Our spiritual dis-ease may result in worry and feelings of guilt. Each of which can and does act like a toxin to our souls, and may well manifest itself in physical symptoms. Dwelling on our sins and failings is not healthy. It is like repeatedly asking for forgiveness without doing the work of sincere repentance. Repentance is a longing to accept forgiveness for our sins, and to turn our lives around by God's grace. Armstrong describes it as being "like rubberneckers staring at a car accident, unable to pull our gaze away from our sin towards God and the open road of sanctified possibilities lying ahead." As the old adage says, confession is good for the soul, and, we might add, the body as well.

What is great about this psalm is that it goes further than just confession and the experience of forgiveness. The psalmist describes what a new life of righteousness looks like. In verse 7, it says, “the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble.” Perhaps it is stating the obvious, but nonetheless there is good reason to say that a life grounded in prayer, helps us to cope *and* hope, in and through whatever circumstances we find ourselves. The psalmist has more than just intercessory prayers in mind. The psalm describes vividly what it feels like to take part in an intimate prayer life with God. In verse 8, he says to God, “You are my hiding-place”. In the word translated as hiding place, we get the sense not of avoiding suffering or sin, which we know experientially to be impossible. It is more a sense of knowing that God’s love, peace, and joy surrounds us, fills us, and protects us at the core of our being. When all the world is in turmoil without, our refuge in God is the divine gift of inner peace. Our hiding place is also the confidence that comes with the sure knowledge that God is always working to redeem all situations for our greatest good.

Realistically, one of the biggest temptations that we face is to find ways to try to hide from God or take refuge from life’s difficulties. Indeed, there are many forms of distraction available to us that appear to offer a solution to whatever is bothering us at the time. What the psalmist tells you and me, is that nothing outside of God will ever be able to fill our need for comfort in the way that God can in the inevitable challenges of life. No one knows us or loves us as completely and perfectly as God does. When we put our trust in God, God will never disappoint us in the way that people can and do. All the other things that we may choose from are just ephemeral distractions. Sadly, some of those distractions are terribly harmful to our health and well-being.

Our psalmist then goes on to describe another aspect of growth and formation in the path to new life. That is attending to God’s teachings. We have talked before about the habits of our hearts that draw us closer to God, and the sins that separate us. There is no question of denying our brokenness. The question is to Whom will we turn for healing, and perhaps whether we are willing to allow ourselves to be transformed by the One who has the power to heal. I hope I’m not alone in experiencing the kind of stubborn egotistical resolve that has compelled me to go my own way from time to time, rather than the way God would have me choose. There is a warning about such stubbornness. After all, God is ultimately in control, and it is God’s will that will be done, with or without our willing participation as co-creators of God’s kingdom. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, another theological great, says it this way, “Have your heart right with Christ, and He will visit you often, and so turn your weekdays into Sundays, meals into sacraments, homes into temples and earth into heaven.”

The last verse gives us the psalmist’s final piece of advice about finding true happiness in righteousness. Our response to God’s gift of forgiveness is just like the psalms themselves – hymns of praise, and worship to the Lord. For you and me, our forgiveness is freedom in Christ Jesus, and that is most definitely something to sing about. Praise God, from whom all blessings flow. May the conversation continue.

Amen.