

For Lent we are beginning a new series – practicing the disciplines of grace – and we’re letting the invitation at the beginning of the service guide us through the series - an invitation to observe a holy Lent – with penitence – prayer – fasting – almsgiving – and reading and meditating on God’s word.

These are practices that deepen us in the joy of knowing God – catch us up in his work of grace in and through us – shape us to live into an entirely new humanity.

Today, that first reading, Psalm 32, one of 7 penitential psalms invites us into our first discipline of grace – repentance.

The psalm opens with shouts of joyful exuberance – Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven – Blessed is the one whose sin is covered – Blessed is the one against whom the Lord counts no iniquity.

Blessedness is more than contentment – it is more than joy – it is the state of

complete wellness of being – David – the Psalmist – says through this psalm the thing that unlocks full life – the thing that leads me to joyful exuberance – the thing that sets me on the path to wisely navigating the complexities of life is found through repentance.

Now to the modern listener such an affirmation seems utterly ridiculous right?

Culturally we have done away with the categories of sin, iniquity, transgression,

guilt – they don't lead to life – we say – but away from life – they don't lead to complete wellness but to psychological deterioration – the champions of modernity thankfully rid us of such thinking – Nietzsche said it made us weak – Freud said it made us neurotic – Sartre said it made us inauthentic – guilt isn't the problem it once was – we say - guilt exists in those cultures where morality is imposed - where religion – society – family – define right and wrong for you – defined who you should be – but we have done

away with all that – we can choose how to live – we define for ourselves what is right and wrong – we fashion our own identity – and that is full life – we have thankfully done away with sin and guilt – but have we?

This week I read an article written by author and lecturer Devorah Baum – and article entitled why do we feel so guilty all the time – guilt that we don't live up to our own standards – guilt that we said or did something we shouldn't have – guilt that

we are failing as parents – as friends – guilty about food – about money – about our political convictions - white guilt – middle-class guilt – liberal guilt – survivor guilt - we have no common cultural agreement on right and wrong and yet – we all still feel guilty – we all still feel condemned – we all have a sense that we are not as we should be – we all have that inner voice of self-condemnation.

It's a voice we externalize - just scroll through the comments on a news article –

read a twitter thread - as we hold up our standards of right and wrong – laying them down in judgement – weaponizing shame to dismiss the convictions of others.

Devorah says our relativistic culture may have been able to do away with objective guilt – but it has done nothing but exacerbate subjective guilt – and she concludes the article by saying we often blame our guilt on religion for assigning the label to humanity as sinner – fallen – endlessly compromised – but religion also

tells us there is hope – there is change - which suddenly looks much more comforting by comparison to a life consumed with subjective guilt.

Repentance is about that change – repentance leads to our only lasting balm for guilt - God’s lavish forgiveness.

Now we have to understand that the psalm is written in the genre of wisdom literature – and wisdom literature arises from this conviction – in creation we see that God

brings order from chaos – forms what is formless – patterns what is patternless

We all know there is a pattern – a fabric - an order to physical reality – we can study it - quantify it – and we ignore it to our peril – if an engineer designs a bridge out of step with the physical fabric of our world – that bridge will fail.

Wisdom literature says that just as God has knit a fabric – an order – a pattern into the physical world –there is a fabric –

an order – a pattern to every other aspect of life.

There is a fabric to relationships – a fabric to raising children – to handling money – to satisfying work – to a just and equal society – God has knit a pattern into every aspect of life – and if we live in step with that pattern there will be flourishing – if we don't live in step with that pattern there will be disintegration – unravelling – transgression – sin.

The psalm as wisdom literature is saying – there is also a pattern to how we approach our sin - we can work with that pattern or against it – we can try and cover over our sin – or in repentance invite God’s forgiveness to cover it – one will lead to disintegration – the other to flourishing.

So how do we try and cover up our sin?

Well many of us turn to blame shifting – I only did that because of my Dad – you would do the same things if you had my

dad - I wouldn’t have reacted that way if you hadn’t done that to me first.

Or we’ll assign cause to the circumstances of our lives – I’m not responsible for my actions – this is how the hurts of my past have shaped me – I’m the victim here.

In *Silence of the Lambs* – the book – not the film - the monstrous killer Hanibal Lector is talking to Officer Starling. He is describing the horrible things he has done, and she looks at him and says, “What

happened to you that you could do this?
Who did something to you that you could
be so bad?" And he looks at her and says:

Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling.

*I happened. You can't reduce me to a set
of influences. You've given up good and
evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling.*

*You've got everybody in moral dignity
pants – nothing is ever anybody's fault.*

We cover our sin through blame shifting –
behaviorism - or maybe our covering of

choice is denial - medicating – shop
therapy – have another drink – distract
yourself with binge entertainment.

Or maybe our covering is exposing the
wrongs of others – criticize – gossip – run
down – if we can expose them – it'll cover
me.

Or maybe our covering is overwork –
seeking by our accomplishments to
balance the scales – to silence the inner
voice of self-condemnation.

Or maybe our cover is justifying –
defending – mastering the spin – never
able to admit we're wrong.

Whatever your covering of choice - such a
covering needs constant attention – new
covering for new transgressions – another
layer where we feel exposed – it's a
wearisome exercise - vs. 3 - when I
covered it over when I kept silent – my
bones wasted away – my strength was
dried up as by the heat of summer.

The cover – whatever it might be - festers
and poisons the whole system – we can't
admit our wrong so we undermine
relationships – we uncover the wrongs of
others so we break relationships – we
medicate – blame – overwork – justify –
defend – spin – sleepless nights - tortured
thoughts – strained relationships –
constant inner murmuring – disintegration
– unravelling...

The result of this pattern? Vs. 9 - we go through life like a horse or a mule – guided by nothing more than bit and bridle.

What does David mean? Well picture a horse - a rider - the horse sees a beautiful patch of grass off to the side of the road – it's hungry and so longs to feed – the rider has places to go – people to see - so pulls at the reins – the bit digs in – the horse tries again – the rider pulls the reins – the bit digs in – the horse still wants the grass – but the pain of the bit makes it

less appealing – has the horse changed its desires – of course not – it's just acting out of self-interest.

David is saying - if you are out of step with the fabric of how to face your sin – if you seek to cover it over – and not face it – the primary thing that will guide you in life will be self-interest – you'll only change where there are consequences – once the consequences are removed you'll go right back to the way you were – disintegration – unravelling...

So if covering over our sin is out of step with the pattern God has knit into our humanity – what behavior is in step with that pattern - leading to our flourishing?

Vs. 5 – I acknowledged my sin to you – I did not cover my iniquity – I said I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.

David uses no less than 3 words to describe his state before a holy and living God – transgression – sin – iniquity – he is

inviting full – uninhibited – unexcused specific uncovering of our true state.

I confess my transgressions to you – meaning I confess my rebellious self-assertion.

In his book confessions Augustine tells a story from his teenage years - he and some of his friends had broken into a pear orchard to steal pears – we might think – ah just some adolescent fun – but in the book he pays particular attention to it – it

stood out to him – it made him aware of the state of his heart – because he asked – why did I do it? - I wasn't hungry – I don't even like pears – I didn't sell them – I threw them away - the only reason I did it is because I was told I shouldn't do it – I stole simply to steal - you see the incident made him aware of something that sits at the center of every human heart – the resistance of any outside claims on our autonomy – no one tells me what to do and not do – even God – I confess my

transgression – I confess my rebellious self-assertion..

The uncovering continues - I acknowledge my sin – there is a way I should go – there is a fabric – a pattern – an order that God has knit into this area of life – and I have consciously and unconsciously not lived in step with that pattern

I do not cover my iniquity – an action with an intent to do wrong – I acknowledge

that even my intentions – even my motivations are warped.

David is inviting us to repentance - to a full – uninhibited – unexcused - specific uncovering of our true state before God.

Now if that is repentance – than we would have to acknowledge that what most of us do when we think we are repenting isn't repenting – you see most of us when confronted with our sin respond with remorse and resolution.

We do this in relationships all the time – I do this with Laurie - there are times I do things in our relationship of selfish jerkiness – and I feel remorse for that - and I move to apologize so that her forgiveness will rid me of my bad feelings - and then I move to resolution – Laurie - I won't do that again - I promise to do better next time.

And we do that same thing with God – remorse and resolution – and think that what we are doing is repentance – its not -

Because behind that are two grave misconceptions about ourselves – we don't see ourselves honestly enough – we don't give a full accounting - and so we are constantly surprised by how angry – selfish – lustful – hateful we can quickly become – the bottom line is that we don't believe what God says about our true condition.

The other grave misconception is that we think we have the power to change ourselves – so we make resolutions – since

we have a light view of sin – we believe we have a minor problem – so it's nothing that a few resolutions can't fix.

Repentance is a true accounting – a complete and utter uncovering – I did do that – I am like that – I can believe I could do that – I have no excuse – I have no covering - Lord forgive me - you are my only hope.

And how can this be our response to our sin? What could possibly lead us to lay aside every covering to utter exposure - well some say this shouldn't be a penitential psalm - because there isn't much about repentance - it is more a psalm of praise and thanksgiving for the forgiveness of God.

The psalmist David has tasted this - he wants us to taste it as well - he had sinned grievously - abuse of power - murder - adultery - he covered over his sin - but

Nathan the prophet brought him to an awareness of it - and David responded - I have sinned against the Lord - and Nathan immediately answered - Now the Lord has put away your sins - Augustine reflects - the word is scarcely in his mouth - before the wound is healed.

Repentance will be immediately met with his covering - his forgiveness - vs. 2 - he will not count our sin against us.

Imagine it this way – let's say you are driving your car – after a long winter – a beautiful spring day has finally arrived – the DVP isn't a parking lot – wide open road – you have the window down – tunes blaring – and you get a little heavy on the gas – lights and siren – you're pulled over – speeding ticket – and you know what this means right – your insurance will be notified – it's going to take a hit – a few weeks later a letter arrives from your insurance company – the opening line – in light of your recent moving infraction –

your heart drops – but as you read further – it says – but we are not going to count this against you – it won't impact your standing with the insurance company – it won't increase your premiums – how do you feel – you do you respond.

How much more so when in repentance he won't count your sin against you – he'll cover it – he'll forgive it - How could God do that? – He does that ultimately in Jesus – he does that ultimately at the cross - for at the cross our sins were counted against

him that we would be counted as righteous
– at the cross Jesus was exposed that we
would be covered – at the cross Jesus was
condemned that we might be forgiven –
the cross – as Richard Foster puts it –
means confession isn't just psychologically
therapeutic – it brings about an objective
change in our relationship with God and a
subjective change in us – it both heals and
transforms.

How will we face our sin? – will we respond
out of step with the fabric and seek to

cover it over – disintegration unravelling -
or will we repent to be met with the
covering of lavish forgiveness –
blessedness – wholistic flourishing.

For when we repent – when we fall on
Jesus as our only hope – vs. 8 – we
become teachable – we enter into a place
to be instructed – humbly able to respond
in obedience to God's revealed pattern in
every aspect of life.

When we repent – we can bring restoration to our relationships – for we can quickly admit our wrong with no excuse.

When we repent – we become safe people – others aren't worried we'll be harsh or judgmental – for we know we are no different from anyone else.

When we repent – and are met with the lavish forgiveness of God – we find deep resources to forgive others.

In 2006 in Lancaster PA – a gunman forced his way into an Amish one-room school house and opened fire – he shot 10 girls – wounding 5 and killing 5 before he turned the gun on himself.

That same day members of the Amish community went to the shooter's parent's home - we forgive your son – they said - and we grieve your loss – we want to do everything we can to support you in the days ahead – at the shooter's funeral there were more Amish than anyone else – the

community later took up a collection to support the shooter's widow and three children.

How could they have forgiven like that?

How? And so quickly?

Years later four secular sociologists sought to answer that lingering question – and they wrote their findings in a book called *Amish Grace* – and here was their analysis – The Amish believe Jesus Christ died on

the cross forgiving his murderers, and as a result, to be a Christian is to have that at the very center of your life – because of that – they said – the Amish were able to forgive.

Let us respond to our sin in accordance with the fabric – the pattern – the order that God has knit into our humanity – in the face of our sin let us repent – make a full and utter accounting of who we are and fall on his grace alone – that he may shape us – and make us new.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father may we know with David
the joyful exuberance - the blessedness of
knowing we need to be forgiven and
tasting that forgiveness - we give you
praise and thanks for your work of
forgiveness in Jesus - lead us into the
disciplines of grace - the practice of
repentance that we may be formed and
shaped to love as you have loved us - to
forgive as you have forgiven - to be

merciful as you have been merciful - for
we ask this in Jesus name.

Amen.