

Sermon, February 18, 2024  
Isaiah 43:18-31

### “The Forgetfulness of God”

According to the liturgical calendar we are now in the season of Lent, which began on Ash-Wednesday and ends on Maundy Thursday. In Latin the term for Lent is Quadragesima, which means, ‘fortieth’. I’m not sure why the number forty is so prevalent in the Bible, but it arises on numerous occasions. For example, in the story of Noah and the flood they rode the waters forty days and forty nights, Moses fasted on Mt.Sinai for forty days and forty nights before receiving the Ten Commandments, Elijah fasted on Mt.Horeb for forty days and forty nights before he heard the “still, small voice” of God, and Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days and nights, being tempted by Satan. All of these fasts are, no doubt, the origin of the tradition that some Christians will refrain from partaking of something favored, as a way of identifying with these biblical sacrifices, particularly that of Jesus’ fasting in the wilderness.

But most importantly, it is recognized as a time of reflection upon our state of sin along with repentance, all in preparation for Easter. Of course, confession of sin is something that takes place throughout the year, but we are focused on it perhaps more fully during Lent.

But what exactly is sin? We tend to think of individual immoral or unethical behaviors as sin, but they are just the expression of a deeper existential state of Being, i.e., a state of estrangement from God as it is related in the story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, grounded in their willful and prideful disobedience to the will of God. In some traditions this is referred to as Original Sin, which is then passed on from generation to generation, which suggests that we are born sinful beings - others, including myself, reject that. It is not something we are born into - newborn infants can hardly be called sinful creatures. Rather, it is something we grow into when our own pride and willfulness places us at odds with our Creator. It can be seen as a state of separation from God which we have brought upon ourselves, not transmitted to us biologically from our ancestors. When we confess our sin we are taking responsibility for our own behaviors, and by repentance we seek the merciful grace of God, not to escape punishment, but to open ourselves to a deeper relationship with Him. Again, it is not God who creates the state of separation. That is not possible if we accept the fact that God’s love is unconditional. To confess and repent is to open our eyes to that fact. I believe that we can look upon confession and repentance as a form of spiritual healing as we relieve ourselves of the burden of guilt.

Feeling guilt over something we did in the past can hang like a spiritual albatross around our neck. It can lead to damage to our own wellbeing, emotionally, spiritually, and even physically,

and it can impede forward movement in our lives. We become a prisoner of our past. So, confessing our past wrongful behaviors isn't as much about appeasing God as it is about bringing God's healing to our broken selves.

If I may, I believe I have told you this story before, but it's worth repeating. Early on in my ministry I paid visits to an elderly gentleman named Roy. Having lived most of his life in Alaska he had great stories to tell. He was also a very religious man with a deep understanding of the Bible as well as devotion to Jesus Christ. He suffered from the effects of a stroke he had a few years back, and his overall health was failing. Late one night his son-in-law called me and said I should get up there right away. They lived on the side of a mountain in Vermont, and the roads were covered in snow, so they had to come and get me because I didn't have four-wheel drive. When I got there, I was very surprised by what I saw. Roy was in emotional agony and was shaking like a leaf. He knew he was dying and was terrified of what was on the other side. It perplexed me that this man who was so devoted to his Christian faith was so horrified by God's judgement. I tried to comfort him and convince him that had nothing to worry about. Then, suddenly, he looked at me and said, "We all fall short of the glory of God, don't we?" I replied that, yes, that was the truth. Then, just as suddenly, he became very calm, and an hour later he very peacefully passed away.

What I take away from that is that God is aware of our humanity, that we are far from being perfect people, that from time to time we mess up and do things that we really shouldn't do. And that is where the grace of God comes in, that out of divine love, His desire is not to punish, but to heal and set us on a better path. Through confession, freely given, along with the commitment to repent, we unburden ourselves from the mistakes of our past, bringing healing for our souls.

In our reading from Isaiah we hear the Lord saying, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more". Psalm 103 reads, in part, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, He will not always accuse, nor will He harbor His anger forever; He does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us".

Two things jump out at me in that reading. First, when it says, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve". It may be the case that some of our wrongful actions deserve divine punishment, but that is trumped by the depths of His loving grace. Secondly, the verse that says, "so great is his love for those who fear him". I've always been troubled by a religion which is based on fear.

You cannot attach conditions to an unconditional love! God's love extends to the whole of Creation, not just to those who tremble at the thought of Him. We should respond to His love with a love of our own, choosing to live a better life out of gratitude for the inner healing that comes through his mercy and forgetfulness.

Returning to Isaiah, we hear, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" Through the grace of God, we are empowered to let go of past mistakes, and, hopefully, to recognize that we have been healed in body, mind, and spirit, freed to lead a better and more fruitful life. Amen.

**Let us pray:** Faithful God, we praise you that you love us and that you have come to us in Jesus to reconcile the world to yourself. We thank you that Jesus walked the path of obedience all the way to the cross and that you raised Jesus up to draw us to yourself. Jesus handed himself over to death, knowing that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it will not bear fruit. Teach us, like Jesus, to hand ourselves over in love for you, for one another, and for all people. As we who have been baptized into Jesus Christ enter the life of the world, may we die with Christ, that we may also rise with Christ. May we take part in your work of suffering and redeeming love, lifting up the oppressed, binding the broken-hearted, challenging the powerful, drawing all into a community of love. We lift our prayers for the world still so full of suffering, still so shadowed by crosses, knowing that you have loved your creation from the beginning. We join our hearts with yours in love for the world, and we offer ourselves to you; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

**Benediction:** Seeing that we are surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses, the faithful of all times who have given themselves to God's loving will, let us run with patience the path God sets before us, encouraged by the love of God, renewed by the grace of Christ, and empowered by the presence of the Spirit, now and forever. Amen.