

Our scripture today is Psalm 32.

The Joy and Happiness of Forgiveness.

Psalm 32 is a psalm of extremes. It starts and ends with a focus on happiness and joy, but the middle is about sin and forgiveness. We see the mess and struggles our life of sin, yet we are also shown that the love of God surrounds us and makes a guilt-free, joy-filled life possible.

This complex chapter reflects the roller coaster ride of life in many ways. We experience the highs and lows of our human experience. So strap yourself in and hang on for a ride!

Let's listen to the Word of God.

1Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven; whose sin is covered. 2Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

3While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

5Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD', and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

6Therefore, let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. 7You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. *Selah*

8I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. 9Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

10Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. 11Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. Thanks be to God.

I usually preach from the Book of Psalms. It's the laments of the people and is just as applicable today as it was when it was written. As long as we have humanity, we will have those who lament. But Psalms 32 isn't a lament. It's about penitence—and we are in the season of Lent. I even like that fact that the Psalmist connects happiness and joy with forgiveness. That's not the normal thought process that we use in connection with sin and forgiveness. Happiness and joy are really opposites of the normal suffering and struggle we associate with being in a sinful condition.

As I was preparing for today's sermon, I was sitting in a special place that had recently been violated by a neighbor—yes you heard that correctly, one of our new neighbors. Our mountain home had been broken into and we had been robbed. My initial thought was “are you kidding me? What in the world God?” What did we do to deserve this? We discovered this quite by accident when we traveled there so I could use my library to prepare for this sermon. There were some items taken from the house. The thief had spent time eating John's pistachios, drinking some specialty sparkling water we had in the refrigerator, and enjoyed ice cream from the freezer. Some of the odder things he took were our dogs treats and let's not forget he even took John's \$4 plastic bucket from Lowe's. I'm reminded of the Grinch ransacking the houses in Whoville! You're a mean one unknown thief!

In this scenario alone, I experienced three of the sins the Psalmist listed in today's first two verses. Rebellion—I was angry that my space was invaded--my unmentionables were all over the floor! Guilt—why did this happen to us? What did I do wrong to warrant this awful invasion of my space? I wanted to know who did this—I wanted to know why God? Why? And the third—treachery—my mind

was racing to think of ways to get justice--could I put a curse on this person? How can I make them pay? Wait a minute, that's not very Christ-like. I shouldn't be thinking in this way. And I most certainly shouldn't be thinking of ways to extract justice with mean behaviors.

Our family is teaching our grandchildren that those types of responses are not appropriate behavior. We live in a society that bullies, shames, and makes others feel less than. Am I guilty of do as I say, not as I do? Should I be asking the why now God question? Why now God? Or better yet, Why ever? How is this fair? I know, life is not fair!

I'm forgetting parts of the verses where it says "Happy are those...". It's not part of our human experience to think of sin as bringing us closer to God. We traditionally talk about sin being a divider/separating us from God. Paul Tillich in his book *"Shaking the Foundations"*¹ writes that "Sin is separation. To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation." We know these feelings of separation from God. Sin brings on feelings of guilt and shame. We do things we know are wrong while at the same time knowing they are the wrong things to do! Yet, we do them anyway! Sin robs us of those feelings of comfort, closeness, peace, love that are part of a personal relationship with God. So in a sense, sin is a thief! It robs us of the true relationship we are to supposed have with God. Yet it is in these moments of being wrong which opens the door to allow God's mercy into our lives guiding us to a closer relationship with God.

The next part of our journey takes us to verses three and four. We are shown how our reactions to being sinful affect our every day lives. I was living into what the Psalm was saying. ³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my

strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. My emotions were all over the place. I called 911 for the Sheriff's office, I couldn't touch anything until the house was investigated. My stomach became upset, I was cold because the doors were opened, the extra stress was giving me a headache, and I didn't sleep well that night as many thoughts kept flying in and out of my mind.

God, this is not what I planned! Don't you just hate that! This weekend was supposed to be relaxing. I was going to finish up today's sermon and enjoy the peace and quiet of our mountain home. But God had other plans. And while things were not going as I had planned, they were going as God planned. I didn't see that while in the middle of life's living. It was seen in the rearview mirror, looking back at the weekend's events. Needless to say, no sermon work this weekend, not what I planned.

It took a couple of hours for me to journey to verses five through seven of the Psalm. 5Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD', and you forgave the guilt of my sin. 6Therefore, let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. 7You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

For some, it may take days, weeks, or even years, to reach the part of the journey we experience in verses five through seven. Some may try to cover over their sin, hide it, not acknowledge it in any form. Some may feel such guilt and shame for their sin that they do not feel worthy of a relationship with God. Some may understand that they have done something wrong but are not sure exactly

what it is that was wrong and struggle to find the words to ask forgiveness. All of which have left us in that unworthy place, not sure of our relationship with God.

Whatever the case may be, we learn from the Psalmist that when we confess our sin to God all is forgiven. We learn that all it takes is a prayer. What is prayer? Our conversation with God on a personal level is all it takes. We may not remember how to pray, especially in times of distress, but we do remember how we talk to our family and friends. And God is ready to listen to us when we come asking for forgiveness. We are reminded that God is our refuge, our strength, and our salvation. Even when we feel unworthy of a closer relationship with God, all we have to do is ask, nothing is too great for God to forgive, and once we ask...we shall receive. God's mercy turns our unworthiness in to worthiness allowing that close deep personal relationship with God.

Verses eight and nine—8 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. 9Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

God is reminding us that we are always under God's care. We will be guided on the path we should travel. God watches over us continuously. We are also reminded to not let our own stubbornness get in the way of our travels. I know I can be very hardheaded and stubborn and I for sure don't like people telling me what to do. But I'm also openhearted enough to know that if I take a moment and listen to God speaking to me, that my journey can be God's journey if I allow the Holy Spirit to do God's work in me. Maybe not what I planned, but a great plan indeed.

In verses 10 and 11, we finally get to the joy and happiness that the Psalmist says we will receive. 10Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. 11Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Isn't it just like God to take our brokenness and turn it into wholeness? God takes our broken tendencies and uses them to show us love and mercy. Julian of Norwich writes in the *"Revelations of Divine Love"*² that "our wounds are our glory". Our wounds allow God reframe our brokenness. Another way of seeing this also comes from Julian of Norwich when she writes "First the fall, and then the recovery of the fall, and both are the mercy of God." God's mercy, freely given, brings us back into a personal relationship with God.

I am the Peacemaker, a nine on the Enneagram, so as one who avoids conflict, it doesn't take long for me to start looking for the good in a situation or the good in a person. John and I gained so many blessings from this experience. The why now God question is answered for us here. God showed us support as we met our new neighbors. We found mercy that the damage and loss was minimal when you consider all the other things that could have happened. We are learning grace as we learn more about this person who inadvertently entered our lives. We seek God's comfort when our humanity takes us towards bitterness, anger, and frustration. That first night, I prayed for this person. And I continue to pray for not only this person, but those others whose lives are touched by this situation. We were not the only victims and the community as a whole has suffered. Matthew 7:12 says 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. It's not what I planned, but it's what I need to do. It's what God asks me to do.

I'd like to close with a paraphrase version of Psalm 32 from the book by Leslie F. Brandt called *Psalms/Now*.

The person who knows the meaning of forgiveness, who is no longer plagued by past failures, who stands blameless and guilt-free before God, that person is rich indeed.

Every time I attempt to handle my own guilt—by ignoring it, rationalizing it, or just running away from it—some unseen power or pressure from the depths of my being squeezes my life dry, leaving me empty.

But when I face up to my failures and confess them, when I open my guilt-ridden heart to You, O God, then I realize the blessed meaning of forgiveness.

Thus everyone who claims faith in the living God needs to cling to His acceptance and concern. Times of darkness will come. Life's storms and tempests will continue to rage, but the faithful shall not be destroyed.

You are, O God, a place of refuge. You enable us to face our problems, You keep us from being destroyed by them. Even within the darkness surrounding me, in the midst of life's turmoil, I can hear the voice of God: "Even these things serve a purpose in your life. Don't sell them short for they are steps along My path for you. Stop being stubborn and stupid like some undiscerning jackass that has to be driven with sticks or whips."

The faithful and the faithless both suffer the uncertainties and insecurities of this life, but the children of God can depend always on the love of their Father. It is for this reason that there is light even in the midst of darkness, incomprehensible joy in the midst of sorrow, and we can find a measure of happiness and well-being regardless of the circumstances that surround us. (end)

Today's scripture speaks to the joy and happiness of forgiveness. We don't often think of joy and happiness as part of our Lenten journey to the cross. Today we took a journey with the Psalmist who showed us our sinfulness, God's mercy, the way to turning our brokenness into wholeness and a life full of joy and happiness. It's our for the taking, it's ours for the asking. Maybe it's not what you planned, it wasn't what I planned, but it is God's plan. Sometimes God's straight lines are crooked, and when we meet that path, it's time to change our plans!

Let us pray. God of creation we come together today to celebrate this season of Lent and our journey to the Cross. This is a time of personal reflection, meditation, of cleaning our internal house. We ask that you guide us on our journey this Lenten season as we do our own work as children of God. We can't take care of others if we aren't taking care of ourselves. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1: Tillich, Paul, *Shaking the Foundations*, Scribner Book Company, January 1, 1940.

2: Norwich, Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Penguin Classics, August 27, 1998, first published in 1393.