**New Hope Sermon: The Season of Lent**

**Introduction**

Last week’s Russian invasion of Ukraine is another stark example of the atrocities of slaughter, war, broken families, refugee migration, desperation, panic, fear, death, and the evils of power that crushes others. Wednesday March 2nd was also the beginning of the observance of Lent. It is an opportunity for Christians to revisit the depth of our sin that led Jesus Christ to come to earth as the Lamb of God who

“Was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering,. . . the One who took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows yet we esteemed him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all . . . By oppression and judgement he was taken away. . .” (Isa. 53:3-8 NIV)

Jesus Christ came to pay the price for the sins of the whole world – and none of us is without guilt in His death. Lent is a time to allow the starkness and horrific consequences of sin, including our own sin, to sear our souls.

At the Ash Wednesday service we attended on the 2nd, there was a Lenten unison prayer that I want to use to frame our meditation today:

Lord, Holy One, have mercy on us. We confess our sins to you. We have fallen short of your glory and without your mercy and grace, we would be dust. We repent now. Lord, as we enter into this Lenten season, be near to us. Help us, by your Holy Spirit, to feel right conviction and repentance for our sin. Help us, by your Spirit, to have the strength to overcome the enemy.

 (Christ Community Church – Family Prayer Service, March 2, 2022).

The opening line of a hymn also comes to mind: “Let your heart be broken for a world in need.”

As I’ve spoken to people who have ties to Ukraine, their hearts are broken by the war. But what about those who don’t know any Ukrainians and don’t feel the trauma of a people being destroyed? Or those who say in their oblivion “What war?” Are our hearts broken?

The call of Lent is to “feel right conviction and repentance from our sin”. It is “to have the strength to overcome the enemy.” But, who is that enemy? The Bible is clear, beloved, that the enemy is both inside us and outside of us. The power of Satan is always clear in the ravages of war. But do we see it as clearly in the deceit and selfish egotisms of our own hearts? Do we see it in the complacency that allows human greed, or power, or oppression to go unchecked? Are we as aware of the omissions in our own lives of the good God has called us to do as well as the commissions of others who do what is despicable to God?

This Lenten season I would call us all back to a deep understanding of the desperation of the human condition caused by sin. It is a time for God to recreate in us a clean heart. Only then can we be so compelled by Christ’s loving sacrifice that we become a people living by the Holy Spirit totally on the Lord’s agenda so others will come to Him as their Savior and Lord (2 Cor.5:14-21). But before we celebrate that victorious Easter message, we live through the Lenten season. The church leaders of the past were wise to set aside the 40 days of Lent for contrition and reflection. May these realities be anchored again deep in our consciousness.

**The anguish of sin**

Some of the most poignant psalms of lament come from a crushing sense of personal sin and the desperate need for God to cleanse and forgive those sins. A common theme is of bones wasting away, groaning all day long, wounds festering, feebleness and being crushed in spirit. Here are portions of two of these penitential psalms:

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 2Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

3When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+32&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14360b)] 5Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.” And you forgave the guilt of my sin. 6Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them. 7You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance (Ps. 32:1-7 NIV).

Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. 2Your arrows have pierced me,
and your hand has come down on me.3Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.4My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.. .  6I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. . .I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart. 9All my longings lie open before you, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you. . . 14I have become like one who does not hear, whose mouth can offer no reply. 15Lord, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God. . .18I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin. . .21Lord, do not forsake me; do not be far from me, my God. 22Come quickly to help me, my Lord and my Savior (Ps. 38 NIV ).

These descriptions of the anguish of sin are actually what our Lord Jesus experienced on the cross when he took on himself the sins of the whole world. He actually “became sin for us” (2 Cor.5:21). As he died, He quoted portions of Ps. 22 which describes the physical torment of crucifixion: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint, My heart has turned to wax, my strength is dried up like sun-baked clay” (Ps 22:14-15). Yet we see that his anguish of spirit as the sin separated Him from God the Father was far greater, as He cried out ‘My God, my God why have You forsaken me?’ (Ps. 22:1, Mt. 27:46). God had to turn his face away from his own Son when Jesus became the living sacrifice for our sins.

For us as humans the anguish of sin is what comes from the Holy Spirit’s conviction of sin. It is the precursor to our repentance. We acknowledge the presence of our sin; we cry out to God to cleanse and forgive that sin(s), and we determine not to repeat those sins – i.e., we repent. Repentance literally means to “feel so contrite over one’s sins as to change, or decide to change, one’s ways” (Websters New World College Dictionary).

My prayer is that this Lenten season the Spirit would bring us to that depth of awareness and remorse over our sin. I pray that for all of us because I wonder how often we have experienced this tormenting anguish over our sin? It seems to me there are two reasons why such contrition is not a regular part of our lives. First, we are not confessing our small sins of omission (what God has directed us to do) and commission (what we have actually done or thought that is directly opposed to God’s commands in the scripture). So, each day when we neglect to keep such short accounts with God, sin’s power over us increases and we begin down the slippery slope of justification, rationalization and denial of the sin itself. This creates a barrier in our relationship with God.

And secondly, we lack anguish over our sin when we lose our sensitivity to the still small voice of the Holy Spirit and thus miss altogether the conviction of sin the Spirit highlights. We became dull of hearing and slack in our obedience.

This is why we need to pray the prayer of Ash Wednesday every day and focus these 40 days on agreeing with the Spirit’s conviction of our sin. Then we need to choose to repent and receive God’s cleansing and forgiveness. The early church fathers and mothers who instituted Lent in the church calendar knew that only when God’s people understand the depth of their sin can they understand the cost of Christ’s crucifixion to pay the penalty for that sin and set us free. Good Friday’s agony paves the way for Easter’s victory.

And so, at the Ash Wednesday service, a thanksgiving for the coming Easter was also included. The penitential prayer was followed by:

Thank you, Lord, that Easter is coming! Death has no sting, no victory because of Jesus! Glory and honor and praise to His name! Thank you for rescuing us. Help us keep both the weight and the joy of this season in our hearts as we move through the next several weeks. Help us bear the good fruit of your Spirit. Let today be the day we give up who we’ve been for we can become. Amen.

We have begun the holy season of Lent and Easter. May the fruit God seeks in our lives be born in us this season.

I close with this Lenten song of confession: “Ah Holy Jesus”

 Ah holy Jesus, how have you offended that mortal judgment has on you descended? By foes derided, by your own rejected, O most afflicted!

 Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you? It is my treason, Lord, that has undone you. ‘Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied you; I crucified you.

For me, kind Jesus, was your incarnation, your mortal sorrow and your life’s oblation, your death of anguish and your bitter passion, for my salvation.

Therefore, dear Jesus, since I cannot pay you, I do adore you, and will ever pray you, think on your pity and your love unswerving, not my deserving. (Words: Johann Heermann, music: Johann Cruger – *Renew! Hymnal)*

Amen.

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March 8, 2022