

We start a new short series entitled *Lent: Psalms in the Shadows*. We are again linking in with the rhythm of the Church calendar as we focus on Lent. We are in some ways focusing on both this season of the church calendar as well as Confession. Because if your experience has been anything like mine over the course of this year, as we have been wrestling with what it means to follow Jesus faithfully in our time, I've been convicted of the many ways I've fallen short. Either by way of giving my allegiance to lesser things than Christ or to simple ways I've accommodated or compromised to things lesser than the calling of Christ.

Lent is a season where we reflect on our identity as humans. A season where we recognize our failures and confess them before God. Lent helps us tune ourselves to the utter beauty of resurrection at Easter, but we only prepare by exploring the shadow side of life and the shadow side of our own life. Learning to confess the ways that we have compromised our allegiance to Christ and our calling as God's *Ekklesia*.

In our modern world, dating back to the industrial revolution and the rise of the technological age, there is hovering beneath the surface a belief in "the myth of limitlessness." This myth is built on the doctrine of progress that assumes that the world is a limitless place in which progress will solve all of our ills if only we can throw off every restraint or limitation that imposes itself on our personhood.

In this myth of progress/limitlessness, we define freedom as unlimited possibilities and options. However, this limitlessness is a truth claim about the nature of humanity—a claim not rooted in the biblical understanding of what it means to be human.

To assume a belief in our ability to be limitless is to seek to take on not a human quality but a godly one. One that we cannot assume because we are not God. Thus, God in Exodus defines and reveals himself to Moses as "I am that I am." A God of limitlessness and, therefore, a God beyond finite description. The pursuit of limitlessness manifests itself in many areas.

Time

When we refuse to build our lives on a habit of regular rest and work, we are seeking to transcend our limits. Whether it is our workaholic culture that refuses to rest and attempts to transcend our limitations by endless work hours or the 60-70-80 hour workweek. It can be with good or bad intentions, but nonetheless, it can be a damaging attempt to transcend our limitations.

Consumption, Work, and Economics

Ever since the industrial revolution, the goal of our economic structures has been built on the idea of infinite human desire and infinite material resources. In order for this system to operate, there had to be

consumers to partake in all that is made. This taps into (preys) on the endless well of human desires and distorts our desire for an infinite God toward a desire toward things.

Social Life

Lastly, even our social environments are built to transcend limitations. You can have thousands of friends, followers, and likes, all of it is built on the assumption that you can experience everything without missing out on anything. This is a myth that leads to exhaustion and a false understanding of self and others.

Jesus, when discussing the nature of what it means to follow Jesus and for his followers to take up their crosses, says, "*What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*" (Mark 8:36). To be human is to be finite, to live with limitation. To organize our life around transcending limitations is to distort the very idea of being human. Rather, it is in living within limitations that we find a flourishing life.

This struggle to understand our limitations, not as restraint but as what it means to be fully human, is as old as time. This was the very sin of Adam and Eve in the garden. It was a failure to live within limitations and, in turn, a failure to live as truly human. Rather, in their pursuit to transcend limitations, they sought god-like status that ultimately led to sin and death.

Learning to live with limitations is what the season of Lent reminds us of, that we are finite creations and the way to thrive is through understanding the God-given human limitations.

Genesis 3 - Living with Limitations

The scene we are stepping into is God having created the world in a flourishing manner. Everything is in its proper order, and everything is functioning in its proper way. God then places the humans, Adam and Eve, into the garden and gives them the command to bring it to greater flourishing, cultivating the creation into something more.

As God places them in the garden, God gives them one command,

You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die. Genesis 2:16-17

One limitation, that's it, among all of the flourishing of the created order, everything they could imagine. This was God's vision for his creation, to flourish within the limitations he imposed.

Skip over to chapter 3.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat

from any tree in the garden?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Genesis 3:1-5

Notice the temptation of the snake. It was to transcend the limitation imposed by God. But the allure of the snake was not just to transcend limitations, but that in transcending the limitations, humans will become like God. This was the sin, refusing to live within limitation and, in doing so, become god-like rather than more human. This is the story that repeats itself over and over again. It may not be fruit and trees, but history rhymes in a thousand ways. It is the desire to control our destiny, to become god-like, to transcend any limitation we have as humans: work longer hours, feel every sensation, acquire more stuff, more wealth, more, more, and more.

Later in chapter 3, we see God meting out justice for the sin, and the fallout is dramatic and painful. But the conversation ends with this statement by God. *"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you returned to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen. 3:19).*

This is the refrain and remembrance in the season of Lent. The season begins with Ash Wednesday, in which we are given ashes as a reminder that we are created from dust and will return to dust before the resurrection. It is a season where we turn from comfort and trivial engagement in the world to a time of repentance, self-denial, and limitation. It is a season that we remember our limitations and that we are finite. We remember that we are created, not the creator, and therefore, we are subjected to death. From dust, we came, and to dust, we will return.

Therefore, Lent is a season to confess. It is to confess that we are finite beings that are constantly stuck in cycles in which we try to transcend our limitations and try to be God. To confess is to admit our limitations. It is to recognize that we have sought to transcend our limitations and ultimately attempt to assume the position of god-like.

The rich tradition of the church of confession is, among many things, an exercise in understanding and reminding ourselves of our limitations and then confessing our failure to live within limitation to the one true limitless God.

So with this idea of Lent in our minds, that from dust we come and to dust we shall return, we are going to spend the remaining weeks leading up to Easter in Psalms of confession. Hence what we are calling this series *Lent: Psalms in the Shadows*. We are playing off of the idea that Lent is about the shadow side of our faith. It is about our need for confession and our failure. It is not about the upbeat of faith, but the downbeat. And as we walk through these Psalms, we will receive a vocabulary that will enable us to express ourselves in the fullness of the human/faith experience.

There is a set of Psalms that are traditionally called the "Penitential Psalms" or "Psalms of Confession." These Psalms are predominately written as expressions of sorrow for sin. They equally express repentance and desire for the removal of sin

Throughout this four-week series leading up to Easter, we will spend time in these Psalms. They will be our guide through this season as we reflect on our own frailty and sinfulness. This is in preparation to celebrate and enter into the Easter/Resurrection season

"Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit" (Psalm 32:1-2). The use of the word blessed in these verses is good but may miss the exuberance of the intent from the psalmist. The twofold repetition of blessed carries the meaning of the depth of forgiveness.

This is also highlighted by three different words used for sin here. In English, we generally only see two, transgressions and sins, but in Hebrew, three words are present, each with a subtle difference. A transgression is an act of rebellion and disloyalty. A sin is an act that misses, often intentionally; God's expressed and revealed will. Iniquity is a crooked or wrong act, often associated with a conscious and intentional intent to do wrong. These aren't necessarily three different kinds of sins but rather function as synonyms that communicate the wide-ranging effects of sin.

It is a beautiful opening that will frame the entire Psalm. It frames and sets the tone for all that follows. The psalmist declares with a joyful exuberance that the forgiveness of sins, no matter the kind of genre, be it against God or against others, big or small, conscious or unconscious, by either omission or commission, all the sins are forgiven and commuted by God alone.

The weight of the text is not in the kind of sin but in the magnitude of the forgiveness of sins. This takes place through three verbs in the text. The sins are forgiven, covered, and do not count. This is the deep expression of the work of God in David's life and in our life.

The forgiveness experienced is total. Forgiven is the removal of sin, guilt, and the remembrance of the sin. Covered is the gracious act of atonement through which we as sinners are reconciled, and the sin is considered a matter of our past. Do not count, expresses God's attitude toward those forgiven as justified. The overall tenor of these opening verses is joy, a filled-up joy.

"When 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" (Psalm 32:3-4). Having declared the blessing that comes from the forgiveness of sins, the psalmist now turns to detail this blessing by referencing their own experience.

For the psalmist, when he chose the route of silence, it did no good. He describes it as his bones wasting away. To ignore our sins and not be able to name and release them to God is akin to a sort of festering wound. It wastes away at our being. The double description of "wasting away" and of "sapping strength" is indicative of sin's effect. Sin has a way

of eroding our very selves. It chips away at who we are and slowly results in greater death. The wasting away effect of sin is a continuous state of being until the sin is recognized: groaning all day long, day and night, the hand was heavy on him.

Now we move to the pinnacle of the drama of the Psalm and the forgiveness event. *"Then 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" (Psalm 32:5).* The plot of forgiveness is narrated here, including verses 3 and 4. It is a simple narrative that moves from sin concealed to sin confessed and forgiven.

In a truly repentant spirit, the psalmist confesses his sin. And notice again that all three words that were used to describe sin in verses 1 and 2 are used again here, but in a different order: sin, iniquity, and transgression. But now they are coupled, not with three words of forgiveness, but three verbs that lead us into confession. Acknowledge is to make known. Did not cover-up is to bring to the light. Confess is to admit culpability.

The specifics of the psalmist's sin are unimportant at this point because the aim is to teach about the joy of Yahweh's forgiveness that comes as a result of confession. But the emphasis of all three synonyms for sin used here and the immediate discussion of the means of confession is indicative of the fact that there is nothing in the psalmist that he doesn't want to bring before God

The shift to the pronoun "you" at the end of the verse is a dramatic and important movement to the fact that the psalmist found immediate forgiveness. The immediacy is noteworthy; there is no rebuke, no discipline, nothing that interferes with the forgiveness. Instruction may come later, along with natural consequences of the fallout of our sin. But the forgiveness is immediate.

While this Psalm is not the Psalm written in response to David's sin with Bathsheba, the immediacy of the forgiveness is reminiscent of David's experience when he finally confessed and immediately received forgiveness.

Remember the scene in 2 Samuel 12:13. David had slept with another man's wife and eventually had him killed to cover up his sin. He is unrepentant for quite some time until he is confronted by the prophet Nathan where David finally admits and confesses his sin. We see this exchange, *"Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' Nathan replied, 'The Lord has taken away your sin.'" (2 Samuel 12:13).* The fallout of David's sin was still severe, the son that was born out of that adulterous relationship would go on to die, but the forgiveness is immediate.

So too, it is with us. When we get to the place of confession, we can be sure that forgiveness is immediate; even if the fallout and consequences of our sins continue, we are forgiven. This is the beautiful simplicity of confession. When we are contrite in confessing our sins, forgiveness is granted.

"Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them. You are my hiding place;

you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance" (Psalm 32:6-7). The instruction shifts to speak of God's protection and provision for "the faithful." The implication is that when we move from sin via confession, we turn to God, where we find protection.

The thought here is not insisting that suffering is always the result of sin, but rather that adversity is always the opportunity for a growing dependence on God. It is an opportunity to move toward the Lord and toward his protection. "Surely the rising mighty waters will not reach them" This is speaking of the adversity that the faithful will face, and the faithful ones are safe in the presence of God. For David, the hiding place is in God; it is in his presence where we find protection—not avoidance, but protection.

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Psalm 32:8-9

The pronoun "I" used here is not the psalmist but is a quote from Yahweh himself. Here we read God's reply to David, and through David, it is instructive to the rest of us. The hope is that we take on Yahweh as our teacher and then receive instruction on the "way you should go."

Of course, the implication is that there are particularities about the way of God that the faithful take up. This imagery is leaned in heavily by Jesus in the New Testament, so much so that the first Christians were actually known as followers of "The Way."

For the faithful, we trust that God will instruct us, that God will lead us, and that God will teach "his way" in the world. This way is a way that understands life and understands ourselves. It will teach us about ourselves and our own limitations, inviting us to live therein.

Verse 9 poses an interesting shift in the lesson God is using to teach. He moves to an example of nature. In order for animals, such as the horse or the mule, to be useful, they must have a force exerted upon them via a bit and bridle. However, God operates with humans differently. God provides autonomy and freedom on his way.

This is the importance of wisdom. Our task is to learn from those who have gone before us; there is wisdom to be inherited. If we avoid taking on this wisdom, we become like the mule and the horse. But it is through confession that we exercise our inability to do this way alone.

"Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!" (Psalm 32:10-11). This section ends with the very familiar contrast between the wicked and the righteous that is all throughout the Psalter. The wicked will be surrounded with woes, but by contrast, the righteous will be surrounded the love of Yahweh. Again, we can be certain of the love that awaits us when we bring our confession before God. His love will surround us. And as a result, it swells up within us joy and brings about rejoicing. The recognition of our sin that drives us to confession results in the joy of forgiveness.

Ultimately, this is a psalm of both confession and forgiveness. It is a psalm that reminds us of the way of God as a way of forgiveness. And it is in this forgiveness that we find new life. This psalm is actually quoted by Paul in Romans 4:7-8. In that passage, Paul is making the argument that forgiveness is the grounds for new life, and this new life is brought about solely by the forgiveness of God. No other qualification is able or necessary. Everything depends on the act of God's generosity and gracious forgiveness

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, writes this of this passage, "Divine forgiveness resembles a miracle; God re-creates life, just like the first autumnal rain that generally accompanies the New Year... When God forgives, he brings rebirth." It is the movement of God in forgiveness that is nothing short of a miracle. As the rain brings new life and washes away the old, so too does God's forgiveness bring about new life in our lives

Ultimately the conclusion the psalm is drawing is that confession leads to life. Whether it is the example of our bones wasting away while we remain silent or whether it is the example of the animals having to be restrained by force, confession leads us to life.

So how do we cultivate a life of confession and repentance when we transgress our limitations as finite humans? How do we allow ourselves to be open and honest about our own failures and cultivate rhythms of confession in order to not allow ourselves to "waste" away?

Learning to Confess

I want to close by addressing these very questions. At the center of the practice of confession is the work of God to bring about the healing and restoration of the cross. It was on the cross that Jesus absorbed the death and brokenness of the world and our own sinfulness. Without the cross and the work of Jesus, confession would merely be a therapeutic release. Which in and of itself is not a bad thing, but the Christian act of confession is far more! It involves an actual change in our relationship with God, and that change is in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.

Confession is so difficult for us because we often fall into the trap of viewing the church gathering as a fellowship of saints rather than a fellowship of sinners. But sin is unavoidable. We are all subject to failures and sins. We mistakenly believe that everyone has advanced so far in their holiness that we are isolated in our sins.

Confession is about bringing God into the fullness of who we are, of opening up that shadow sides of ourselves that we would rather avoid. It is about realizing and confessing that we have attempted to live without limits, and we must confess our failures in that way of living.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

To close, I'd like us to spend some time reflecting on our own limitations. Remembering that we are finite, limited beings, I want to lead us into a time of individual confession over the next few minutes. I'll guide us through a few questions to prompt your thinking and your prayer, and then I want us to say together a prayer of confession that is from the Book of Common Prayer. A simple way for us to recognize our own failures, and in the spirit of Lent, we come before God.

Where am I operating from a place of limitlessness? Where am I expecting myself or others in my life to be super-human, to not need rest, not set boundaries with time or commitments? When was the last time I confessed a sin to someone else? There is freedom in confessing to a brother or sister in Christ. Where might I need to realign my life with Jesus?

Prayer of confession

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace, there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. Amen.

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