032220 “Living in Fear”

One of our former vicars at Hope – I won’t tell you which one -- was on vacation with his wife. They interrupted their vacation to go to the dentist. "I want a tooth pulled, and I don't want you to do any numbing, because I'm in a big hurry," the vicar’s wife said. "Just extract the tooth as quickly as possible, and we'll be on our way." The dentist was quite impressed. "You're certainly a courageous woman," he said. "Which tooth is it?" The vicar’s wife turned to her husband and said, "Show him your tooth, sweetie."

Now, I’ll admit, that story is not true. I tell you that story, though, so we can talk about what is true these days. A lot of us are coming up short on courage. Many of us are struggling to be brave enough to face up to what’s going on in our world. Plenty of us would rather go to the dentist and skip the numbing than to have to deal with the harsh, constantly-changing realities we’re facing in this new coronavirus world.

The pandemic is stirring up a host of anxieties, uncertainties, apprehensions, panics. Many around the globe, throughout the nation, right here in our community, are living in fear. Our thoughts, decisions, and actions are more and more driven by fear. And a fear-driven life is a potentially-unhealthy life. Fear can frazzle our emotions, impede our relationships, paralyze our thoughts, impair our insights, and lead to poor decisions. And decisions made out of fear tend to lead to more and more fear, in a vicious cycle.

Well, I’m not a therapist, and this is not a counseling session. I can’t claim to address all of your fears, nor am I going to unload all of my fears on you. I want to acknowledge in this sermon, though, that, yes, these are fearful times. And I understand if fear is starting to get the better of you.

So let me talk about just one of the big spiritual fears that I think many people have. Because I think focusing on this particular fear might help us all realize that our God really is by our side, when we’re living in fear.

Through my years as a pastor, I’ve realized that one of the biggest fears many Christians have is the fear of not being forgiven. They’re afraid deep down that they’re not good enough, not faithful enough, to please God. Maybe some of you have felt that fear.

Through the years, I’ve also realized that many Christians should have the fear of not being forgiven, but they don’t. These believers are supremely over-confident, smug, convinced that it doesn’t really matter how they sin, or how often they sin. They think God has to forgive them, automatically.

Today’s message is for people on both sides of this particular fear. And our Bible verses, from Psalm 32, speak to this precise fear.

The psalm begins with the celebration of the person who experiences forgiveness. The psalm writer, King David, says, in verses 1-2, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, …”

David uses three different Hebrew words here, three picturesque words, to describe what forgiveness is like. Picture these in your mind, one by one. First, when a person is forgiven, it’s as if the person’s pile of sins is lifted up and taken away. Second, it’s like that person’s pile of sins are covered up, completely obscured, so that God can’t see them at all. And third, the psalm tells us, when God forgives a person’s sins, it’s as though that person’s pile of sins had actually never even been there at all.

Some of us have a hard time letting go of our sins, and forgiving ourselves. But these words from Scripture make it clear that forgiveness, from God, is an awesome, wondrous, extraordinary, miraculous thing! It’s really beyond my comprehension that my holy, perfect God could truly make my mountain of sin disappear. But he does. By sending his dear Son to the cross, by sacrificing his innocent, perfect Son in my place, God lifts up my sin and takes it away. My sin is covered up, by the blood of Christ. It’s as if, to God, my sins had never taken place.

Do you believe all that? Do you know Jesus as your Savior? Do you know in your heart that Jesus died for you, in your place, for your sins? Well, then, God’s beautiful words in Psalm 32, this celebration of forgiveness, apply to you, too! Not because you’re good enough, or faithful enough. But because God is loving enough and gracious enough, because God is so, so good to us! No matter happens to us in the world.

In these verses, God speaks directly to what is, for many Christians, one of our greatest fears. Am I really forgiven? Will God really accept me? Yes, he will. Not because of who we are. But because of who he is. Because of what God has done for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. Because of what God’s sweet forgiveness does to our nasty sins. God’s forgiveness is an unbelievably awesome thing!

And, I know, being forgiven by God doesn’t solve all our other worldly fears. But it helps us keep them in perspective. Because we can be confident, no matter what tomorrow’s news brings, that God loves us, stands by us, walks with us, and watches over us in all circumstances. God’s forgiveness is medicine for the soul, bringing peace of mind, confidence of heart, for the hard times in life.

But let me ask you this. Is God’s forgiveness an automatic thing? Notice the end of verse 2. “Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” God is all about forgiveness, and if you have faith in Jesus Christ but remain worried if you’re really forgiven, please stop worrying. But if you think your faith in Jesus is a guarantee of mechanical forgiveness on God’s part, please think twice.

The psalm writer celebrates the person who experiences forgiveness, but notes that that’s the person “in whose spirit there is no deceit.” The person who’s playing games with God isn’t automatically forgiven. The person whose spirit is deceitful – that is, a person who’s denying and hiding their sins – isn’t automatically forgiven. The person who’s claiming extenuating circumstances for their sin, or conjuring up excuses for their bad behavior, should be wary. Should be less confident, and less smug.

And right here, friends, is where our Lent sermon series theme comes into play. Confession. Honest, heartfelt confession is a crucial part of Christian living. Open up, be honest, be genuine and sincere. Don’t try to hide anything from God -- as if you could. Let go, right now, of any deceit that’s between you and God.

God’s forgiveness is a miraculously glorious treasure in our lives, thanks to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. And confession leads us directly to the cross. So let’s confess our sins together now. Read with me from the bulletin, or confess silently in your heart as you listen to these words.

**CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS**

**P:** Father of mercies and God of all consolation, come to the aid of your people, turning us from sin to live for you alone. Give us the power of your Holy Spirit that we may attend to your Word, confess our sins, receive your forgiveness, and grow into the fullness of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer.

**C: Amen.**

**P:** Let us make confession to God.

**C: Almighty God, merciful Father: I, a troubled and penitent sinner, confess to you all my sins and iniquities with which I have offended you and for which I justly deserve your punishment. But I am sorry for them, and repent of them, and pray for your boundless mercy. For the sake of the suffering and death of your Son, Jesus Christ, be gracious and merciful to me, a poor sinful being; forgive my sins, give me your Holy Spirit for the amendment of my sinful life, and bring me to life everlasting. Amen.**

**P:** Almighty God, in his mercy, has given his Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**C: Amen.**