



LENT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, February 21, 2010

Yolanda Pierce, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Elmer G. Homrighausen Associate Professor of African American Religion and Literature,
Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ

Lection – Psalm 32:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

(v. 2) Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (v. 3) While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

(v. 4) For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Selah

(v. 5) Then 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

(v. 6) Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you at a time of distress, the rush of
mighty waters shall not reach them.

(v. 7) You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad
cries of deliverance.
Selah

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Each Sunday of the Lenten season brings us closer to the celebration of Jesus' victory over the grave. Each Sunday of Lent should foreshadow Easter Sunday, the day we proclaim "Hosanna" in worship of our Risen Savior. As each Sunday leads us to the joys of the Easter worship experience that is to come, our lectionary passage from Psalm 32 foreshadows the coming of a Messiah, the One to whom the Lord "imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit" (v. 2). This day we rejoice that the words of the Psalms direct us to the words of the Gospel and the good news of Jesus Christ.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 32:1-7

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As Christians, we acknowledge the gospel message as the heart of our faith. The Lenten season, with its focus on the work of the Cross, acknowledges that the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the central tenets of the Christian faith. And yet, we cannot confine our Lenten readings solely to the books of the New Testament, because part of the beauty of the Old Testament is the way that it foreshadows the work of Christ and the Cross. Many Old Testament passages prophesy about the life and teachings of Jesus. This is especially the case in the poetic scripture of Psalms.

In Psalm 32, we have words attributed to King David. As a man "after God's own heart," we know that this passage reflects a believer who intimately knew God as Lord and friend. In this Psalm, David willingly acknowledges his sin, admits his helplessness, and petitions God's mercy on his behalf.

Sin is always the cause of our misery and it is always the cause of our separation from God. It is only through the sacrificial work of Christ that we are able to be in covenantal relationship with God and in right relationship with one another. Because Christ bore the sins of the world, those who believe in Christ will be graciously pardoned. There is only one in whom there is no guile and no iniquity: God's only begotten son, Jesus Christ.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven.” The reader is reminded that true happiness does not consist of gaining more and more material possessions. Nor is true happiness only the presence of pleasant feelings when things are going well. Those whose sins are forgiven by God are those who walk in the fullness of the joy of the Lord. True happiness is assurance that our sins are forgiven, washed clean by the blood of our Risen Savior.

“Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity.” If we were to be tried in a court of law, the certainty of our sin would force the judge to return a guilty verdict and impose a death sentence for our crimes. Instead, the Lamb who was slain cancels the punishment we rightly deserve. Indeed, even the very charges against us are dismissed. When our Savior pardons our sin, it is cast away and stricken from the record. Through this saving grace, we can enter into the presence of our Savior without a guilty stain.

“While I kept silence, my body wasted away.” When we keep silent, refusing to call on God in our distress, we suffer with our whole being. There is no peace for those who will not call on the name of the Lord in their distress, as it is the only name that can save us. Likewise, when we keep silent in the face of injustice and evil, we quench the Spirit of the one who dwells within us. As children of God, we are called to name oppression within our midst.

“For day and night your hand was heavy upon me.” As Jacob wrestled with the angel of God, refusing to let go until he was blessed, we must be active in seeking the face of God. Are we willing to tarry and pray? Are we willing to fast and meditate? The Lenten season requires a contrite heart, those who delight in the hand of God, heavy though it may be – because the only other option is the absence of God’s hand.

“I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.” How difficult is it for us to articulate our sins before God? We are ashamed of the ways that we have failed, in thought, word, and deed. And yet confession is necessary for pardon. With fear and trembling, may we acknowledge our wrongs, knowing that God is just and will forgive our sin.

“At a time of distress, the rush of mighty water shall not reach them.” This verse is a blessed assurance for the believer. As God protected Noah and his family from the flood, God promises to protect us from those mighty waters that threaten to overwhelm us. At all times, temptation, violence, and troubles seem to rush in like mighty floods bent on drowning us. And yet, the Christian believer has a hedge of protection around her life. Waters may seep in through the cracks, but your salvation is assured.

“You surround me with glad cries of deliverance.” We are all surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, all of whom can testify to God’s deliverance. When we feel discouraged or when we feel alone, may we remember that a camp of faithful believers encompass our lives. May we speak the names of those who surround us. And may we join them with triumphant shouts of deliverance.

While it has fallen out of fashion in our contemporary age, the “tarry service” is an ancient biblical tradition. It is a time set apart by a believing community to wait expectantly on the Lord. In the Psalms, David tarried, while hiding from his enemies and while petitioning God for safety

and deliverance. Are we willing to tarry during this Lenten season? Can we put aside our cell phones and laptops? Can we go a few hours without sending text messages or checking our voice mail? Can we tarry like our grandparents did: waiting, expecting, even demanding God's presence? Are we willing to cry out in gratitude for deliverance? Can we join in praise, with the host of witnesses that surround us? On this Lenten Sunday, and always, may we tarry in expectancy.

III. Celebration

David concludes this Psalm with a triumphant note about God's desire and ability to save us from ourselves. David reminds us that God always provides a hiding place for his people and that God always longs to deliver us from our mess. Thanks be to God that as we wait on the Lord, we know that he is not far away. We know that he is not unable or unwilling to hear our anguished cry and answer by and by. So, we live in expectancy. We live in hope. We live in joy because we have the victory through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

IV. Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage:

Psalm 32 is a "*maskil*" or "*maschil*." This word indicates that this is a musical Psalm, played by a musician of great skill. It is likely that a stringed instrument, such as a harp, would have accompanied the singer of this song. In your worship service, enjoy the skills of those accomplished men and women who glorify God with their instruments. In true biblical fashion, we may consider using a cantor to sing the words of the scripture, accompanied by a pianist or guitar player. May we always remember the African proverb that says: "the Spirit will not descend without a song."

Sights: A body wasting away; rushing mighty waters, hiding places; the scorching sun; and

Sounds: Groaning, water rushing; glad cries of deliverance.

V. Essential Quotation

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).