

**Ash Wednesday Has Us Counting Our Blessings**  
**Sermon on Psalm 32: 1-5, 10-11**  
**Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI**  
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**February 6, 2008**

**Introduction: Ash Wednesday Is Very Contrary to Our Culture**

Prompted by the Spirit, David once wrote: *Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* You and I face the same predicament. Amen.

Dear fellow Christians—sorrowing together over our sinfulness:

What a strange situation we find ourselves in! I mean: how countercultural is this?—almost un-American! You and I are gathered for worship: on a Wednesday, no less. And we have come together, a lot, to get sad. You and I have united to admit how worthless we are, how evil!—and to throw ourselves on the mercy of the Almighty.

Today there is a man who speaks to us from his grave. He was a bad sinner, rotten to the core—just like we are. And he learned the hard way what it was genuinely to sorrow over sin. Let's take his words – God's Word! – to heart. And maybe in the long run, we can save ourselves a lot of pain.

**Part One: On Ash Wednesday, Our Sins Crush Us**

God's Word to us today is the majority of Psalm thirty-two, including its first and last parts. It is written in the service folder.

Hymn number thirty-two, in the inspired hymnal of the Old Testament, is a psalm *of David*. That is: David wrote it—under the circumstances narrated in our first reading today, his adultery and murder and cover-up. It is *a maskil*. That seems to mean that this is a poem meant for contemplation.

And David writes: ***Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.*** Maybe a little more accurately translated: *Oh the happinesses of the individual whose rebellion has been lifted off him, whose sinful shortfall has been covered. Oh the happinesses of the individual to whom the LORD does not reckon his crookedness (even perversion) and in whose spirit is not deception.*

Did you hear all the words for sin there? Aren't they great?! *Rebellion...*, *shortfall...*, *crookedness* or *perversion...*, and *deception...* David committed every one of those against the Almighty. And so have we.

- *Crookedness* or *perversion* pictures a person taking God's good will for his life and twisting it, bending it out of shape. David did that—maybe especially with Bathsheba. Bad enough David already had plenty of wives. Now he craves a woman who does not belong to him, who belongs to another man, and does with her what he could well enough have done with his wife. It made David a crooked pervert.

We are crooked perverts. We do the same thing David did, at least in our heart. For example, God gives us this perfectly good institution called marriage, and we bend it all out of shape. We either ought to have eyes only for our spouse, or be perfectly content without a spouse, or to wait patiently for the dear Lord to obtain us a spouse. Instead, we crave intimacy outside of marriage. Too many actually pursue that. And it makes us crooked perverts.

- David was also guilty of *sinful shortfall*—maybe especially with Uriah, whom he murdered. Actually, at first, that might sound a little gentle for what David did to Uriah—but I think we'll find it a useful concept. Uriah, you'll recall, was one of David's soldiers. David

should have risen to the heights of praying for Uriah's safety. David should have done all he could to protect Uriah's life, and to protect Uriah's interests, while he was on the battlefield for David. Instead, David fell to the depths of murdering the man in cold blood. What a terribly sinful shortfall!

And that's just the way we live our lives. We have a classmate; we have a coworker. What should we do for that classmate or coworker? We should be praying for her; we should be appreciating him; we should build them up and look out for their interests. Now, what do we do for that classmate or coworker? We tear them down. We murder them in our hearts. What a terribly sinful shortfall!

- And then David was guilty of *deception*. His was the perfect crime. Hardly anybody figured it out. A guy gets killed in battle. It happens every day. After the month of mourning, the king marries the widow. How kind! Now she'll be taken care of. They're expecting a baby? How nice! And so David, the leader of a whole nation – God's nation! – was deceiving God's people. And David was probably hoping he was even sort of hiding things from God.

And that's just like us. We sin. And immediately we scramble to cover it and to look good. We hide the sin from others. To ourselves, we minimize the sin. If someone catches on, we blame somebody else for the sin. We deceive ourselves into thinking it's not that bad. Maybe we even think we're even kind of hiding things from God.

- And finally, David was guilty of *rebellion*. He shook his fist at God—God, who had given David riches and wives and children and the kingdom and blessings from the Spirit that other men did not have. That God?—David broke his sixth commandment, and his fifth commandment, and his eighth commandment, and his first commandment. It was complete rebellion against God.

As was our sin. I mean name a commandment of God you haven't broken?— ...at least in your desires, ...at least in your thoughts, ...really: even in your words, ...really: even in your deeds. I mean: Have you never “hurt or harmed your neighbor in his body”?—the fifth commandment. Have you always led a “pure and decent life in words and actions”?—the sixth commandment. You see, we are completely in rebellion against God!

## Part Two: On Ash Wednesday, Christ Relieves Us of Our Sins

Now, there are two ways to deal with all this perverted crookedness, all this sinful shortfall, all this deception and rebellion of ours. And David tried them both....

He says: **When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.** And actually the picture there, in the original language, is that David was like a little piece of fruit: withering in the summer heat, and then crushed to squeeze out the very last drops of juice.

So, that's one way to deal with sin: to keep silent about it, to pretend it's not there, and to hope it goes away. It didn't seem to work for David. In fact, it looks like holding in all that guilt made him physically sick.

And then there's the other way to deal with sin. David writes: **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.**

That's the other way to deal with sin: acknowledge it, admit it, confess it. There's no other way, is there?—because otherwise our sin will just kill us! So, acknowledge it, confess it; we ought even to hate our sin—and then, hope it disappears.

Is there hope that our sin will disappear? Yes! *Oh the happinesses of the individual whose rebellion has been lifted off him, whose sinful shortfall has been covered. Oh the happinesses of the individual to whom the LORD does not reckon his crookedness and in whose spirit is not deception.*

- God's own Word – right here! – declares that your rebellion *has been lifted off you*. All that guilt you've been trying to carry around – like three hundred fifty pounds on this shoulder, and another three hundred fifty pounds on that one – God has lifted that off. Yeah, he's strong enough to do it!

- God's own Word declares – right here! – that your sinful shortfall *has been covered*. It's like this (sorry to be so graphic): we have vomited out of us the infection of our transgression, and God buries it in the snow; God buries it far underground, and it can't hurt us any longer.

- Furthermore, God's own Word declares – right here! – that God *does not reckon to you* your crookedness, your perversion. So, it's like you're racking up an enormous amount of debt on one column of a ledger book, but someone keeps canceling out that debt of yours: by writing an equal amount of credit in the other column.

- And finally, God's own Word declares – right here! – that God *sees no deception* in your spirit. It's like he's checking out your soul from every angle, near and far, searching for a flaw, searching for a gray spot, and God can't find any at all.

Isn't that amazing?! How can that be?! How can God look at you and me and see no crooked perversion, no sinful shortfall, no deception, and no rebellion? How can he simply overlook all of that? Well, of course, he didn't overlook it. He sent a Savior to handle it for us.

God loaded on Jesus my three hundred fifty pound loads of sin, and your three hundred fifty pound loads of sin, and all the weight of all the sins of all the world—and Jesus was crushed to death by them. It was Jesus' snow-white purity that covered the infection of our sin, and in his tomb it is buried. It was Jesus who, every time we incurred a sinful debt to God, paid it off, and credited to us his every righteous act. Jesus purified your spirit and mine.

### **Part Three: On Ash Wednesday, We Sing for Joy in Our Relief**

No wonder, once David found that out, he wrote: *Many are the woes of the wicked* – who would want to live any longer with the sickness of sin?! – *but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him* – God's mercy to us through Jesus Christ is now our eternal protection and peace.

So: *Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!* No, don't rejoice any longer in your perversion, your shortfall, your rebellion, your deception. Remember: Jesus got rid of those! Instead, sing for joy that he has lifted off, covered, canceled, and purified you from your sin. And live in that joy. And share that joy with others.

### **Conclusion: Ash Wednesday Has Us Counting Our Blessings**

So, Ash Wednesday is not much like any other festival or holiday. But I guess we could consider this Ash Wednesday to be like a day of thanksgiving for us. This psalm, at least, had us counting our blessings on Ash Wednesday. Although our sins crush us, Christ Jesus relieves us, and it makes us sing for joy.

God grant that we never forget how crushing was our crookedness, so that we never forget how magnificent is our Savior: Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prompted by the Spirit, David once wrote: *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free Spirit.* That's every Christian's Ash Wednesday Prayer—and God answers it: through Jesus Christ! Amen.