

## **“Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul”**

### **Psalm 32**

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**1st Sunday in Lent**

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Last week the defense team for former Mayor Catherine Pugh released a video apology by Ms. Pugh to the people of Baltimore for crimes she committed abusing her public office.<sup>1</sup> Some immediately questioned the sincerity of Ms. Pugh’s apology given that the video was released in what ended up being a successful effort to reduce her jail time to less than what was prescribed by federal guidelines. Others pointed out that moving from the Mayor’s seat to a federal prison is a long, long way to fall. But regardless of the public accountability that needed to take place, none of us really knows what’s in Cathy Pugh’s heart. As we enter Lent, we’re invited - alongside all of these important questions about public accountability - to focus more intently on our own relationship with God, the ways in which each of us has broken covenant with God, and the forgiveness that we all need to move forward.

Indeed Psalm 32 does not start with the question of whether or not a person is guilty. It assumes transgression. We’re all sinners, meaning we have done wrong. Now if you grew up in a stern, conservative tradition where you were beaten over the head with talk about your own badness, please do not get up and walk out.

The church fails us all miserably when we turn this psalm into a moralistic bludgeoning device for human beings, convicting them of sins they do not carry, convincing them they are more bad than good, defacing the image of God within each of us. I met one of those victims one time at a conference. He had been an associate pastor in an evangelical church where the head pastor regularly called in each member of the staff to confess their sins to him. When his sins weren’t wanton enough he had to make up stuff to match the imagination of the head pastor who delighted in holding this kind of abusive power over his staff.

This psalm assumes we have all done wrong not because it delights in convicting us, but because it has observed the terrible burden of sin that goes unforgiven. Some of you have known that burden. Any of us in the listening professions - pastors, therapists, bartenders, hairdressers, social workers - we have seen that burden of guilt that leads some people to arresting despair instead of action. Maybe this is why the psalm begins with the joy of forgiveness rather than the sting of sin. It begins with the

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<https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/crime/bs-md-ci-cr-pugh-video-sentencing-20200226-2ysbc5lf35ao5bchllbtepo64i-story.html>

outcome, the good news, the joy of the forgiven life. Life that is full not because it is blameless but because God is good.

“While I kept silent,” the Psalmist cries, “my body wasted away.” Long before Freud, the speaker knows, that “the body pays for covenantal disturbances” as Walter Brueggemann says. “There is weight loss and discomfort, restlessness and weakness.”

<sup>2</sup> The relief of forgiveness is directly tied to the confession of sin. The speaking of the thing that dares not be named. I once heard someone critique Brueggemann for his biblical exegesis being, in their words, “too rooted in therapeutic categories.” The Old Testament scholar replied, I don’t believe it was an accident that Freud was a Jew. The wisdom of healing that comes from speaking our sin aloud is very old wisdom, indeed.

The Psalm leaves out the specifics of the sin that has been committed. We have no idea what the speaker did. It’s not clear to me why the psalm leaves it out. I would want to know and I’m not the only one. Several times at Turnaround Tuesday - BUILD’s jobs movement that’s put over 800 Baltimore City residents back to work - I have heard testimony from people who have done time in prison. This is not surprising since more than 65% of these individuals with new work have a criminal record. One of the first questions that everyone seems to ask of returning citizens at Turnaround Tuesday is the obvious one - what did you do to land you in prison? What is the nature of your law breaking? According to this psalm, that’s not important. Focusing on the specifics of the sin keeps the focus on the punishment which invariably leads to judgment about what a person deserves.

But the psalmist is clear that deservedness is a dead end road. Our system of justice might be unduly focused on meting out fair punishment for wrongdoing, but God’s system of justice is designed for restoration of relationship. What has relevance is the joy that is available to people in the presence of a loving, forgiving God, not the content of the sin. Joy that is available for anyone who dares to speak aloud to God their shame and yield to God’s mercy. This does not mean that some sins do not require actions to make amends. It simply means that path to that kind of restoration is planted in the fertile soil of God’s grace.

Psalm 32 is one of seven of the so-called “penitential psalms” - so called because the church recognized their intimate quality.

John Calvin called the book of Psalms “An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul,” because he said, it reflects all of our emotions. “The Holy Spirit,” he wrote in his commentary on this book, “has here drawn to the life of all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short all the distracting emotions with which the minds of humans are wont to be agitated. . .” The writers who “lay[ing] open all their inmost thoughts and affections call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress), 1984, p. 96.

oneself in particular in order than none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed. It is certainly a rare and singular advantage, which all lurking places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light..."<sup>3</sup>

Many of us who have read John Calvin have tended to think about him as the rather severe leader of the rigid doctrines of the Swiss reformation, or at least as the precise theological ancestors of Presbyterians - a theologian first. But Serene Jones, in her book *Trauma and Grace* notes that Calvin came to Geneva as a survivor of violence, a refugee who fled Paris in the mid 1500s after finding himself on the wrong side of a civil war inside the royal family. Having fled to a German town, he was asked to minister to other refugees, people persecuted from their homeland. Thus Calvin's words about psalms are profoundly pastoral. His words about the psalm reflect the pain he shared with the people he served and the ways in which these words informed his understanding of that pain and the healing that the Word could manifest in the people he served and in himself.<sup>4</sup>

That door invites us not to "feel badly" or to confess a set of religious sins that we probably don't believe we have committed anyway, but, in the words of Brueggemann to "think through all the ways in which our culture denies and suppresses and covers up all in the name of competence, prosperity, and success."<sup>5</sup> This is the true guilt that needs to be confessed according to Brueggemann. The idol making ideologies of our day that are not good for any of us, that leave empty, drained, restless, anxious. The allegiance that we give so freely to the gods who rule our lives, our calendars, our checking accounts, our life.

This is why I think exploring the wilderness as our theme in Lent is such a rich opportunity. When Jesus entered the wilderness for 40 days, he relinquished control. He experienced hunger, scarcity, and loneliness. These are, I'd wager, some of the things we fear the most. They drive our life - our choices, our relationships, our weekly schedules more than anything else. When the truth of this fear remains unspoken, these realities hold a power over us that goes unacknowledged. The potential of our faith to liberate us from these false gods is reduced. Our lives become smaller than they need to be, smaller than God wants us to be.

Jesus is driven to the wilderness - he has to go there. There the usual supports that he was accustomed to disappear. He is left with little more than trust in God. In this time of personal adversity with reduced supports he found himself relying solely on the provisions of God. He was able to experience the reality that those external supports -

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin's commentary on the Psalms quoted in Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2009, 51.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 45-49.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 98.

that we all grow accustomed to - they are not reliable. Stock markets invariably hit the skids, our health is not a given, bad things do happen to good people. If there are reasons for that they are not known to any of us.

Only God's presence, God's Spirit, God's provision is reliable. In the wilderness we find this provision is enough. And that's why we go there. Not to feel badly about ourselves for 40 days. Not to beat up on ourselves for all the ways we break covenant. Just to see that so many of the things we chase after in our consumerist paradise actually don't bring us very much joy. Often they do the opposite. What brings us the deepest joy is the very thing we do not have to chase after. The thing that surrounds every child of God who trusts the LORD - the steadfast love of God.