

Sermon for Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 2020

Psalm 102

1 O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry for help come to you. 2 Do not hide your face from me on the day when I am distressed. Turn your ear to me on the day I call. Hurry! Answer me! 3 For my days go up in smoke, and my bones are burned like hot coals. 4 My heart is cut down and withered like grass, so I forget to eat my food. 5 Because of the sound of my groaning, my bones stick out of my flesh. 6 I am like an owl in the wilderness, like a screech owl among the ruins. 7 I lie awake. I have become like a lonely bird on a roof. 8 All day long my enemies taunt me. Those who ridicule me use my name as a curse, 9 because I eat ashes like bread, and I mix tears with my drinks. 10 Because of your rage and your wrath, you have picked me up and thrown me away. 11 My days are being stretched out like a shadow, and I am dried up like grass. 12 But you, Lord, sit on your throne forever, and you will be remembered through all generations. 13 You will rise and have compassion on Zion. Yes, it is time to be gracious to her, because the appointed time has come. 14 Yes, your servants will show favor to her stones, and they will have compassion on her dust. 15 Then the nations will fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory. 16 For the Lord will rebuild Zion. He will appear in his glory. 17 He will respond to the prayer of the naked. He will not despise their prayer. 18 Let this be written till the last generation, so that a people not yet created may praise the Lord. 19 For the Lord looked down from his high, holy place. From heaven he viewed the earth 20 to hear the groans of the prisoner, to release those condemned to death. 21 So the name of the Lord will be recorded in Zion and his praise in Jerusalem, 22 when the peoples and the kingdoms are gathered together to serve the Lord. 23 He took away my strength during my lifetime. He cut short my days. 24 I said, "My God, do not take me away in the middle of my days." Your years go on through all generations. 25 Long ago you laid a foundation for the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. 26 They will perish, but you remain. All of them wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them, and they will be changed. 27 But you are the same, and your years will never end. 28 The children of your servants will dwell with you, and their descendants will be established before you.

Sermon for Lent 5, 03-29-20; St. Paul's, Green Garden, MI

Text: Psalm 102 Theme: **Our Comfort when the end is near**

The assassination of a president. The attacks on the world trade centers on 9-11. A loved one is killed in an untimely accident. You are diagnosed with a terminal illness or

have become part of the present pandemic. We all know what at least one of those moments feels like. We know what it feels like to hear one or more of those pieces of news. What have you felt like when you heard about those things or things like them? Doubt? Despair? Tears? Loss of appetite? When you hear news like that it reminds you that your life in this world, life as you know it will come to an end someday--be it sooner or later. Our new self knows that our eternal life with God will be far better, but our sinful nature cringes at the thought of enduring suffering or emotional pain in this life.

Could such thoughts be the reason we saw such an upsurge in church attendance after 9-11? But when the shock of such a terrible event fades, in so many cases so does the religious fervor. Yet believers in every period of history know that God could call us out of life in this world at any time; and scripture has always encourages us to be prepared for our Lord's summons to leave this life and enter eternal life with him in heaven. The trumpet could sound for any of us at any moment. And we know we will not be translated out of this life to heaven the way Enoch and Elijah were. So often the end of our days is accompanied by physical weakness or illness. Even Christians die in accidents of different kinds and it is always a shock to family and friends when it happens.

But when we embark on the season of Lent and journey with our Savior, often we think it is a journey that leads only to death. Yet by God's grace we see beyond our Savior's grave and we learn death is not the end. It is only the door through which we must walk to receive what Jesus died to freely give us.

The writer of Psalm 102 laments the sorrow of our human existence in a sinful world. He laments loneliness, loss of appetite, illness and death itself. In all of this he does not despair in God but pleads for his mercy. We too, plead for God's mercy because we know that there was a cross on Calvary—a cross our Savior died on, and a garden nearby with a grave that was left empty after three days. While we often lament with the psalm writer, we know we can look to the cross because it brings us comfort when the end is near.

This psalm really reminds us that we need to count on God's gracious mercy toward us at all times in life, but especially as we sense the end of life, or at least when events in life make the end painfully real. The end of life seems very real when we are in the middle of suffering because we know, our conscience tells us, the reason we suffer is because we sin. Suffering is a painful consequence of sin. When we suffer we are aware of God's wrath because of our sins. “ **because I eat ashes like bread, and I mix tears with my drinks. 10 Because of your rage and your wrath, you have picked me up and thrown me away. 11 My days are being stretched out like a shadow, and I am dried up like grass.**” And what if we suffer a crippling illness or deep financial loss or a dear family member dies? Do we ask why God is punishing us so severely? And sometimes when we think we are not going to get an answer to our question, the anxiety can be truly overwhelming?

In the OT the LORD told godly king Hezekiah he should prepare to die. Wow! Right from the mouth of God, "You are going to die." You can imagine his despair. His words sound very much like this Psalm. **A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah ...: I said, "In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?" I said, "I will not again see the LORD, the LORD, in the land of the living; no longer will I look on mankind, or be with those who now dwell in this world. Like a shepherd's tent my house has been pulled down and taken from me. Like a weaver I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom; day and night you made an end of me. I waited patiently till dawn, but like a lion he broke all my bones; day and night you made an end of me. I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid!"**

You can hear Hezekiah's anxiety. You can feel his sorrow because of impending death. And perhaps in our weakness, our sinful nature asks, is this all there is? Isn't there more to life? Can this be the end? But at those times when we feel despair, then our God comes to us with His gospel promises. For the psalmist says, "**My heart is cut down and withered like grass, so I forget to eat my food. 5 Because of the sound of my groaning, my bones stick out of my flesh. 6 I am like an owl in the wilderness, like a screech owl among the ruins. 7 I lie awake. I have become like a lonely bird on a roof. You will rise and have compassion on Zion. Yes, it is time to be gracious to her, because the appointed time has come.**" When we are suffering, when we are in despair, when we don't know anywhere else to turn because of our sins God comes to us with his compassion. Our suffering may feel unbearable but our God sent his son into this world. He too, was a man of suffering and acquainted with grief as Isaiah says. But he did not suffer for his own sins. He suffered for our sins. He suffered to bring an end to our suffering. And isn't that what Jesus does for us?

If sin becomes the tunnel we look into, there is no light there. You and I know that. If sin is all we want we will not find life there. Without God sin and its consequences is the end. And in the middle of sorrow, or loss or physical suffering, sometimes that is all we can see. Our sins seem to be a deep dark tunnel. But then think of Jesus on the cross. When his father abandoned him did it not seem as if there was only suffering and death for him? "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" he cried. Even his believers who witnessed his death, the women and the disciple John could only see the terrible horror of his death. But friends, he was abandoned by his Father, so his father would not abandon us. He suffered on the cross for our sins, to make payment for our sins so we will never have to suffer for them.

His suffering brings our suffering to an end, so that even when we die, even if it is painful, even if our emotions run wild with despair, we can still look at the cross, we can still be comforted that through Jesus our God has compassion on us. **The appointed time has come. Jesus suffering brings an end to our suffering.** For his suffering pays for our sins. That is important for our eternity. It is also important for the here and now. Since

He paid for our sins that is our comfort when the end is near. And when we cry out to him, we have the assurance he hears our cries.

When we suffer physical and emotional pain often we can feel very isolated; we feel as if no one, including God really cares about us or about our situation. The psalmist expresses it this way: “**My heart is cut down and withered like grass, so I forget to eat my food. Because of the sound of my groaning, my bones stick out of my flesh. I am like an owl in the wilderness, like a screech owl among the ruins. I lie awake. I have become like a lonely bird on a roof.**” If you have ever been in the desert southwest you notice that you don’t see many birds or animals and those you do see are not in groups. They are usually individual animals or birds trying to survive. The psalmist says, I feel as lonely and isolated as a bird in the desert.

When you feel that way, when you suffer remember that Jesus, too, knows what it is like to suffer alone. The entire Sanhedrin brought charges against him, accused him of lying and blaspheming because he called himself the Son of God. He knew what we sometimes feel. The psalmist cries out: “**All day long my enemies taunt me. Those who ridicule me use my name as a curse.**” He was willing to feel all that loneliness and the despair that goes along with it so what we will never be alone in eternity. What comfort that is for us now as we realize death could happen for us at any time. But even if we should still live for many years, whenever we are feeling alone, we can look to our God for his help and comfort. Our Lord Jesus knows what it is like to be alone and he will never leave us alone. He is always ready to listen to us and comfort us with his promises. **Because he suffered to pay for our sins he hears our cries for help.**

Remember Paul and Silas in prison and how they sang hymns at midnight in the jail at Philippi. They knew God would not abandon them. Think of how God rescued Peter from prison when Herod wanted to put him to death. He heard the prayers of Peter’s fellow believers who pleaded for him. In this psalm he promises he will hear us in our time of need. **For the Lord will rebuild Zion. He will appear in his glory. He will respond to the prayer of the naked. He will not despise their prayer. Let this be written till the last generation, so that a people not yet created may praise the Lord. For the Lord looked down from his high, holy place. From heaven he viewed the earth to hear the groans of the prisoner, to release those condemned to death.**” But God did not rescue his own son from death. He required his Son to carry out his mission to pay for our sins. Because Jesus made our payment, God calls us his children and listens to us. Even in our pain, suffering and isolation we have comfort that when the end is near, when sorrow seems to overwhelm us, our God still hears our pleas for his mercy and comfort.

We are like the kid who disobeys his parents and gets sent to his room. He may think his mom and dad don’t love him, that they don’t want to hear him talk. But he is their son. They still love him and want to know if he is really in pain or suffering or sad and they will do anything they can to help him. So we also, though we have sinned, we have a Savior who went to the cross for us, and because he did, he wants to hear our cry for help. He wants us to remember that truth about the cross at all times, but his open

ears bring us special comfort when our end is near. Because Jesus suffered he hears our cries. And friends our God is even greater than a loving parent. Our Lord Jesus rose from the grave to rule for eternity. In his mighty power he makes our eternal future secure.

In the middle of severe or even mild suffering it is often difficult for us to imagine the great love our God has for us. But he showed his love for us at creation. The Psalmist writes: **I said, “My God, do not take me away in the middle of my days.” Your years go on through all generations. 25 Long ago you laid a foundation for the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.**” You see, God uses his eternal nature for our advantage. While we may not understand WHY he chooses to call some of his children out of this life sooner and others later, his eternal nature is proof of his power. By his power he makes our future secure. And even though the human race sins terribly each day; even though we sin each day, he did everything so we can share his home in heaven. Grasp that truth and hold onto it NOW so that when the end is near for you, you can draw comfort from this truth: Your God has made your eternal future secure.

I knew a Christian man some years ago, who often used to say, “None of us are going to get out of this world alive.” He did not say it to make a joke, or to be flippant about death. He did not say it in fear. Even though he later out lived two wives he knew that when his God finally chose to call him out of the world, his Savior had made his future in heaven absolutely secure. Do you know what a blessing that is? Listen to the Psalmist: **“But you are the same, and your years will never end. The children of your servants will dwell with you, and their descendants will be established before you.”** There are so many people who need to be concerned about what will happen to them in eternity because they don’t know or don’t believe the comforting promises of God about our Savior. They don’t know they could have a secure eternal future with God through Jesus their Savior.

Most of us have never experienced the terror of not knowing where we will be when our last hour comes. And because Jesus went to the cross, because he suffered alone for our sins, because his father did not let the cup of suffering pass from him, you and I will never be alone, not even when our loving Lord finally calls us out of this life to the place he has made for us by his side.

The cross—the place of our Savior’s death—a place most people don’t want to talk about. But it is a place of comfort for you and me. It brings us comfort when we suffer, when we feel alone, when others have abandoned us; but the cross is where we especially find comfort when our end is near. Because Jesus suffered and died for our sins, for the sins of the world, we have no more sins to cause us anxiety—only the happy prospect of a joy- filled eternity. Amen.