Sermon – March 30, 2022 - Lenten Midweek 5 Pastor Ventura

**Chased by a Dirty Conscience**

Genesis 42:6–24; Luke 23:1–25

Dreams really do come true—at least for Joseph. It had been a good twenty years since teenage Joseph dreamt of how his brothers would one day bow down before him. And tonight, we see ten of those brothers down on their knees before Joseph, with their faces to the ground. They were hungry, you see. The whole world was hungry. Pharaoh’s dreams about seven years of plenty had come to pass, and now seven years of famine were underway. It was all happening just as Joseph had dreamt and foreseen. Dreams really do come true.

1. **Clean or dirty, the conscience is a gift from God, a win­dow through which we view the world.**

But for Joseph’s brothers, a nightmare was about to begin. For two decades, they had been living a lie. For twenty years, they had been hiding a deep, dark secret. They had sold their own brother into a life of slavery and misery. They had lied to their father—had broken old Jacob’s heart by telling him that Joseph was dead. Their hatred had its way with Joseph, and they smugly concealed their sin. But now they were bowing down before Joseph, second-in-command of all Egypt, whom they did not recognize. And soon they would be chased, harassed, and tortured by their own guilty consciences.

I’m sure you know what a conscience is. Your conscience is not always perfectly reliable. It is not infallible; but it is a good gift from God. The Early Church was much better at helping Christians to cultivate a healthy conscience—to give attention to the condition of their conscience. They had this bit of wisdom that the conscience was like a window through which you view the world around you. Your conscience is your window on the world.

A bad, or guilty, conscience is much like a dirty window. The windows at our house right now are very dirty. They bear the grit and grime of a grueling winter. And spring cleaning has not yet begun. This means that when I look out my living room window, everything looks a little darker and dingier than it really is. Instead of a crisp, bright clarity, things are hazy and smudgy. And maybe you’ve noticed that the dirtier the window is, the more you see your own reflection in that window.

A bad, or guilty, conscience affects your view of the world in just the same way. When you are concealing some shameful conduct—when you’re being chased by a bad conscience—your whole world begins to look dirty and dark. In fact, it looks like everything is after you. You get a little paranoid, scared of your own shadow. And the harder you try to look off into the distance for an escape, the more you simply see yourself—and the reflection of your own sin and shame—as in a dirty window.

1. **But only repentance wrought by God can lead to a cleansed conscience.**

“If we say we have no sin,” if we conceal and cover up our sin, “we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:8–9). The key word there is cleanse. If a guilty conscience is like a dirty window, then repentance is when the Lord cleanses the window of the conscience so that we can see the world through crystal transparent windows, and we will see the clarity of our Lord’s light and life and love. Repentance restores reality to our worldview. Confession and Absolution is the only solution for a wounded, fearful conscience.

But the journey from a bad conscience to a clean conscience is not easy. In fact, it’s a journey we cannot make without the Lord’s help. And this “help” from the Lord is not always what you might imagine. A conscience that’s smug and comfortable cannot be cleansed. God’s Law must do its work. This is why Joseph initially acts so harshly with his brothers. This is why Joseph doesn’t reveal himself to his brothers right away. This is why he treats them like strangers and speaks roughly to them. This is why Joseph puts them through their paces and brings their sin to remembrance.

1. **The collective conscience of Joseph’s brothers was in critical condition, being led to repentance.**

These brothers have a classic case of a dirty conscience. Luther frames it like this: he writes, “Thus the sons of Jacob have an evil conscience. Therefore, they tremble horribly and fear God’s vengeance” (AE 7:271). But the situation of the brothers is even more dire. Their collective conscience is in critical condition, causing them to be anxious about what lies around every corner: “These brothers are not only troubled about the sin of which they were conscious—although they took pains to cover and conceal it—but they were also afraid of all their words and deeds, and they imagined that there was new guilt in every action or thought” (AE 7:277).

In fact, as soon as Joseph demanded that they go and fetch their youngest brother and bring him down to Egypt, they say to one another: “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.” To all this, Reuben replied, “Now there comes a reckoning for his blood” (vv 21, 22). The diagnosis could not be clearer. The symptoms are manifest. These brothers are being chased by a dirty conscience.

Now, to them it seems they are harvesting what they had sown—their sin is coming back to bite them, bad karma comes calling, justice is about to be served. Revenge and retribution are closing in quickly. But, what feels so painful to them is neither karma nor punishment. Joseph is not getting his revenge either. Joseph isn’t just toying with them. Although, it seems difficult to understand why not Joseph would just tell them once and for all, I’m Joseph, and you owe me. Or I’m Joseph and I forgive you! Or, something along those lines. But instead, Joseph choses to drag the case on a bit longer. A closer look will reveal what Joseph is doing is simply leading them down the road of repentance. To see the extent of their sin, so they truly repent. The pain they feel so sharply will lead to purity. Their conscience is being crushed—so that it might be cleansed of sin.

1. **Our sin and guilt have been reckoned for in the blood of Jesus shed on the cross.**

Like Joseph’s brothers, we, too, know what it feels like to be chased by a guilty conscience—to have our view of the world clouded and smudged by the stain of our own sin. Reuben was right. Reuben was right when he spoke about a “reckoning for [the] blood.” Reuben’s restless conscience sensed that a bloody reckoning was coming—that their sin would have to be answered for by the shedding of blood. Reuben didn’t know how right he was. It’s also true for us: our sin must be answered for. It can’t be covered up forever. Either you must answer for your sin and face the fallout, or your Savior must answer for it, and bear it all away.

What Reuben could only sense, we know for certain. We see it play out before our eyes in this holy season of Lent—as we look back on the bloody reckoning that Jesus endured in our stead. Although he was pure and sinless, his blood was shed to pay for our sin. He endured the pain of the cross so that you might know purity and peace. He was crushed so that you might be cleansed of every sin. And here too, God cold send Jesus in the form of a grown men, kill him on calvary in a very short time, and spare Jesus of almost a lifetime here on earth and then suffer the way he suffered. But did so we believe, did so, so that we too can have the chance to wrestle with our conscience, search our conscience and examine that smudged window, in fact truly pay attention to the smudged window, because as said earlier, that’s the reason we have difficulties trusting God in this world. But today let us remember that Jesus Christ has answered for all your sins, suffered for us, was killed for us. The only question is whether you have the faith to believe that, actually faith to receive what Jesus did for us.

In tonight’s reading from the Passion according to St. Luke, we hear about the scene involving Jesus and Barabbas. Barabbas was a rebel. He had been charged with the crime of treason against Rome—the same crime for which Jesus was going to be convicted. And Mark tells us that he was “prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising.” (Mark 15:7)

He was guilty of murder and was about to receive a reckoning for all his evil acts. But at the insistence of the crowd, guilty Barabbas goes free . . . and innocent Jesus is delivered over to death. The guilty man goes free, but the innocent man goes to the cross to shed his innocent blood so that you can be cleansed of all unrighteousness. This is God’s remedy for the tragedy of our sin. Indeed, the lord Jesus has a gift for you: the gift of a clean conscience.

“If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us”—“cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9). Those are really wonderful words! Today, you don’t have to be chased and hounded by a dirty conscience, but even if you do, because, let’s face it we always try to justify ourselves, trust in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, he is ready, he is expecting you to say, I confess, I confess my sins.

And when we do, we begin to live each day in the bright clarity of our Lord’s forgiveness and peace. You don’t have to be afraid of the truth anymore. For your sins, Jesus Christ has answered. Justice has been served on his cross, and your conscience has been cleansed by his holy, precious blood. Amen.