

Psalm 32 & Luke 18:9-14 – March 6, 2024

Two days ago, I turned 42 years old. I don't really feel 42 years old though. I feel about 62 years old. Or sometimes 82 years old. But, no, I'm only 42. Despite all of the aches and pains. All the blood pressure medication. All the yearly medical tests. I'm (only) 42 years old.

And I've found that as I get older, there is one activity I have begun to despise: going to the doctor. Rationally, going to a doctor should be something we want to do. They want to help after all. And they can do so much good. They want to take away the aches and pains, if they can. They want to keep us healthy. They want to make sure more serious diseases are caught early.

But something about a doctor's office just makes me uneasy. And I know I'm not alone in my anxiety around medical professionals. Whether its our general practitioner, or our dentist, or a specialist, or just being around hospitals in general, people tend to avoid doctors. And so, I stay home. Wallowing in my misery and self-pity. Hiding from the one person who could make me feel better.

And I wonder sometimes whether we hide from doctors for the same reason that people will hide from God. Because people do hide from God. David himself hid from God. He says that in the Psalm that we read earlier.

And he says that when he hid from God, when he kept silent and refused to turn to God in prayer, it felt as if his bones were wasting away. As if his strength was sapped away by heat stroke. As if he had grown so weak, he felt crushed.

David had a disease many of us are familiar with. It's a disease called "sin." And it infects us from the time we are conceived. And there are a couple ways we can deal with it. Our basic, sinful, human inclination is to do what David did initially. To hide from God. To shut the door to God and cut Him out of our lives.

It's exactly what Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. They sinned. They realized they had sinned. And they hid. And I honestly don't believe it's because they thought they could hide from God. They weren't stupid, after all. It's just what their new, sinful instinct told them to do.

Why? Well, because sin always seems like a good idea. It always looks appealing to the eye and good for food and desirable for wisdom, just like the fruit that they ate. It always seems like a better idea than the Law that God gave to us. And so, like Eve, we take it and we eat it and we share it with others. You don't sin because you expect it to hurt you. You sin because you expect it to help you.

And when you're confronted by God, you have to admit the sin was actually a bad idea. That you aren't as smart as you think you are. That God is actually as smart as he claims to be. That in sinning you thought you were helping yourself, but in fact, you did something really foolish. It's like going to the Emergency Room because you shot yourself in the foot. Sometimes, you'd just prefer to bleed to death rather than face the humiliation of admitting what you did.

David felt it too. You notice, when he says he felt crushed when he hid from God, it wasn't the sin that was crushing him. It was the hand of God that crushed him. The sin he could deal with. He could wither away in agony under the disease of sin for a very long time if he wanted. But what made it unbearable was the fact that like Adam and Even he couldn't actually hide from God. And every time God showed up, it crushed him a little more.

Which leaves him – and us – with another option. If we can't hide from God out of sight, then we'll hide from Him in plain sight. We'll disguise ourselves as something different or better. As David suggests, we refuse to acknowledge our sin and we cover up our iniquity. We pretend to be something we're not.

That's what the Pharisee in our Gospel Lesson does. This Pharisee knows God's Law. The Pharisees knew scripture better than just about any person in all of Judea. They had studied the Torah backwards and forwards. Inside and out. They had written volume after volume of commentary on the Law – called the Talmud – and studied that too.

Every word of that Law was written for him. To convict him of his sin. To tell him to repent. To make him feel the weight of God's hand upon him, just as David did.

But it doesn't repent. Because he is hiding from the Law. Hiding from it under his own self-righteousness. He has convinced himself that he has kept the Law. That he is better than other men. That he has earned God's gifts. As St John puts it in the Epistle, he has deceived himself and the truth is not in him.

And so he is terrified of seeing the doctor. Of admitting in humility that he is a sick man. Sick with sin. He spends his entire life hiding from the doctor of his soul by simply refusing to admit how ill he really is. He convinces himself that he is strong and healthy even as his soul wastes away. He thought he could hide from God. But he can't.

Because you can't hide from God. You can't escape into the bushes when God shows up. You can't disguise yourself as something you're not. But what's most ridiculous is that you don't have to do either one.

Our sinful nature tells us we do. Our Old Adam is constantly telling us to run from God, to do whatever it takes to keep our pride and sinfulness and never give it up. Even if it makes our bones waste away. Even if it saps all our strength. Even if it crushes us. But what David tells us is that while the condemnation of God's hand upon him has the power to destroy him and suck all the strength out of him, it also has the power to heal him and forgive his sins.

For we are sick people. Who fear the healer of our souls. And we hide from him. For thousands of years, humanity hid from God. Until God finally showed up among us. And said, "You don't have to hide from me. I'm not going to crush you. I'm not going to ridicule you. I'm not going to hurt you. In fact, I'm going to let you crush me. I'm going to let you ridicule me. I'm going to let you kill me. If that's what it takes to convince you. If that's what you need to show me yourself and show me your sin. Then I'll do it. For you."

Hiding from God will destroy us. But turning to him in repentance will heal us. When we are silent about our sin before God, we waste away under the disease of sin. But when we acknowledge our sin to him, when we do not cover up our iniquity, when we say, "I will confess my transgression to the Lord," we find forgiveness for the iniquity of our sin.

That is what the tax collector in our Gospel parable knew. The Pharisee went before God seeking to hide his sin under the veneer of self-righteousness. And in the end, he was humbled, for you cannot hide from God.

But the tax-collector went before God seeking to acknowledge his sin. To expose his iniquity. To confess his transgressions to the Lord. He cried out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" And the Lord forgave him. The Lord justified him. In fact, even in his humility, the Lord exalted him.

That is the crazy reversal of God's grace. We hold back our sin, seeking to indulge our pride and self-righteousness, and we end up humbled. But when we expose our sin, when we confess it to the Lord and risk humiliating ourselves in the process, we find ourselves exalted. We find that there is no humiliation in God's eyes.

For Christ has already endured more humiliation than we will ever know. There is nothing we could confess that would be more humbling than what Christ has already gone through. He has been slandered, tortured, spit upon, mocked, insulted, and nailed to a cross. He has been branded a criminal in the eyes of the world. He has had his own Father forsake him as a sinner, though he did no wrong. Christ has been brought as low as human being can be brought so that we might be lifted up.

For he is a doctor. A doctor to our souls. And as a doctor, he wants only one thing: to see us healed. To see us come to him and confess our sins. For he is faithful and just and he will forgive our sins. He will cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We are all sick with sin. Everyone of us. The only difference between us is how honest we are about that disease. We cannot have peace with God or our neighbor if we lie to ourselves about our sinfulness. We cannot find healing for our relationship with God or our neighbor we don't first admit that we are sick.

But if we just humble ourselves and go to the doctor, to the Great Physician, he will give us medicine that cures the soul. Medicine that gives us everlasting life. Medicine found in his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. Amen.