

March 30, 2018 – Leviticus 16:1-34 (Good Friday)

What about all the sins that I forget? What about all the sins that I didn't realize that I was committing? What about all the sins I never confessed?

Have you ever had that thought? Maybe it was during confession and absolution. Maybe it was as you prepared to go up to the Lord's Supper. Maybe some other time. Maybe you haven't ever thought about it at all. But I think a lot of us have. What about all the sins that I never confessed? Are they forgiven?

For Martin Luther, in his early days as an Augustinian monk, before the Reformation, this thought was absolutely terrifying. It weighed on him like a crushing load. I can confess the sins I know about. I can confess the sins I remember. I can go to the priest and receive absolution. Do penance. Make restitution.

But what about all the other sins? The thought nearly drove him mad. He would do all sorts of painful, humbling things to himself. Beat himself with whips. Crawl on his hands and knees. Not in penance for sins he knew he had committed. No, he did them in penance for sins he might have committed.

He would spend hours with his priest. Detailing every aspect of his day. Not because his day was so filled with sinful activity. But because if he confessed his entire life as a sin, he could receive absolution for everything he did that might have been sinful.

It got to the point that one priest threw him out of the confessional booth with the words, "Brother Martin, why don't you go out and commit some real sins, and come back when you have something to confess?" But still the uncertainty could be overwhelming. What if I've done something that God hasn't forgiven?

This isn't a new question in the history of God's people. Our Lenten series this year was titled, "Return from Exile: A Lenten Journey," because we went back into the Old Testament to show all the times that God's people were exiled for their sin. And the journey they took back to God's grace. And so, in this final Lenten service, we go back to the Old Testament once again.

We go to two men named Nadab and Abihu. You've heard of them before, right? They're household names! OK, maybe not. But they are actually pretty important.

You see Nadab and Abihu were sons of Aaron and among the first priests of Israel to work in the Tabernacle. But one day they went into the Most Holy Place to bring incense before the Lord. But instead of accepting their offering as good and pleasing, God sent fire to consume Nadab and Abihu. Struck them dead on the spot.

Because even as priests who had gone through all sorts of purification and offerings for their sin and obedience to the Lord, they were still sinners. They had been forgiven for the sins they knew. The sins they remembered. But there was still so much that they had done that hadn't been forgiven. They had walked into the Most Holy Place with unclean hearts and were punished for it.

And Aaron was terrified. Moses was terrified. The people were terrified. How could they possibly live and work and worship before the Lord if there was always the chance that they might have sinned. That they might be consumed by God's wrath. That they might not have God's forgiveness. Like Martin Luther, the thought nearly drove them insane.

And so God came to to Moses and established a new feast called The Day of Atonement. One day of the year, the high priest would go into the Most Holy Place. He would sacrifice a goat and take its blood behind the curtain. Sprinkle it on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant and atone for the sins of the people of God.

In this way, the people of God were cleansed of their sin. Not just the sins that they knew and remembered and brought sacrifices for regularly. All their sin. Even the sins they knew nothing about were cleansed. And they could dwell with God without fear.

But that wasn't all. Because on the Day of Atonement there were two goats. One goat was sacrificed, and the blood was poured out in the Most Holy Place. The other goat was the sin-bearer. God told Moses to have the high priest place his hands on the head of the second goat, the live goat, and transfer the sins of the people to it.

Then, the high priest would have the goat sent out of the camp. Led out into the wilderness. Back to Azazel... another name for Satan. They would send the sin back where it came from.

Like emptying a bathtub full of filthy water. The people were washed of their sins by one goat. And then that sin was carried away forever by another. And, in this way, they could stand before God without guilt and without fear.

At least, for that year. And then they had to do it again. And again. And again. Every year. Year after year. One goat to wash the sin. One goat to carry it away. It was such a blessing for God's people to know that they were forgiven.

But also such a burden. Because they knew the sin would come right back. They knew that the sinful nature inside of them would just keep dirtying the water. Polluting their souls. In just a year's time they would need to have it done all over again. In just a year's time they would be unworthy, unclean, unable to stand before the Lord once again.

It was an imperfect sacrifice. But it was never the final solution. It was only part of their journey. Part of God's perfect plan of salvation. Pointing to Jesus Christ.

Jesus, who is both the sacrifice and the sin-bearer. Isaiah describes it well in the verses we read last night to conclude our Maundy Thursday service. Stricken by God, smitten, and afflicted. Pierced for our transgressions. Crushed for our iniquities. By his wounds, we are healed.

His blood is the sacrifice sprinkled on the Mercy Seat of God that invites us to enter into the Most Holy Place without fear. Is it any wonder that the curtain of the temple tore in two at his death? What need is there for a divider between God and man when God has become man and atoned for the sins of the world.

But more than that, he doesn't just wash that sin away. He takes it upon his shoulders. He bears it upon his back, like the cross he carried up Calvary. Surely he has borne our sins and carried our sorrows, Isaiah says. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He takes our sin and, like that goat sent into the wilderness, he carries it back where it came from. Straight to the grave. Straight down to the gates of hell. He throws it in the devil's face and he says, "Satan, you can have their sins. But these people belong to me. I have taken away everything from them that you laid claim upon. I have bought them with my own blood. They are mine now. And you can't have them."

God's people traveled a journey for so many years. A journey of paradise and exile. Paradise and exile. Paradise and exile. Over and over again. All we like sheep have gone astray. All we like sheep have journeyed away from paradise through exile and wilderness and death. But that journey ends on the cross.

For when Jesus announces, "It is finished," he doesn't just mean his life is finished. He doesn't just mean his ministry is finished. He means God's plan to redeem the world is finished.

He means that all these things that God has used to point us to his love and forgiveness are finished in Christ's death. He is the perfection of God's grace. The final exclamation of God's mercy.

And because they are finished in Christ, there is no need for fear. Or doubt. Or uncertainty. What Martin Luther didn't understand during his days as a monk, we now know fully. That we don't make confession of our sins because otherwise Christ won't take them away.

No, we make confession of our sins so that we know exactly what Christ has already taken away. Every sin that you confess is a sin that Christ already washed clean on the cross. Every sin you confess is a sin he already carried with him to the grave. And every sin you forget to confess. Every sin you didn't realize you were doing. Those too are washed clean and carried away, just like the others.

So that now every day is a day that we stand in the presence of the almighty God. Every day is a day when we give thanks for the blood of Christ poured out onto the mercy seat of God. Every day is a day when we witness the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world. Not just for a year. But for all eternity. Amen.