

Lenten Vesper Meditation
Psalm 130

Wednesday, March 18, 2009
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins

As a minister, a part of my call is to be a faithful member of the presbytery. Here in New Harmony Presbytery I serve on the Committee On Ministry. One of the tasks of the Committee On Ministry is to help churches resolve conflicts that at times arise between sessions, pastors, church members, and staff members. As members of the Committee On Ministry, our first job is to listen to the various sides of the conflicts, so that we can arrive at a better understanding of the dynamics that are at work in the conflict. In the past couple of years, I have attended listening sessions at three different churches in the presbytery that were experiencing some form of conflict or pastoral stress. Each situation was unique, but as I have sat for hours listening to various perspectives on the conflicts, I have noticed a similar dynamic taking place in all three situations: No matter what the issue, each side of the conflict was always more willing to point the finger of blame at the other party (or parties), reluctant to own up to their own responsibility in the conflict.

Finger pointing and the blame game are as old as Adam and Eve, who first blamed others for their own transgressions. And the denial of responsibility continues thousands of years later, doesn't it? No one seems to want to take responsibility for their own plight, or for the ills of the world.

The 130th Psalm begins with a cry of despair: Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord... It is the cry of someone who is tired of being miserable. It is the cry of someone who has found herself in a deep, dark hole, and she can't get out. It is the cry of someone who is at the end of his rope. Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord...

But notice this as well: the psalmist does not blame others for his plight. The psalmist knows good and well the source of his troubles: it is the accumulated burden of his sins.

Have you noticed that when people are suffering, when people are miserable, when people are at the end of the rope, they are reluctant to name their own sins as part of the problem? In a sense there is disconnect between this psalm and the contemporary world, because the psalmist is willing to admit that his own sins have put him where he is. Yet today you aren't likely to hear people attribute any of their troubles to sin. We don't even like to use the word, "sin". It's so negative.

There was in the 1970s a book written by renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger. The title of the book was "Whatever Became of Sin?" The premise of the question is that people do all sorts of things to explain away our own sinfulness. Sometimes we blame our environment, or the way we were brought up, or we find ways to define sin in such a way that some of our favorite things will fall outside that definition.

But notice in the 130th Psalm that the psalmist not only recognizes sinfulness as the source of his own broken and troubled life, but also the psalmist affirms that sin is universal and therefore in some way or another at the root of all our problems. "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" The psalmist uses an image that each of us can understand. It is the image of a ledger book. On one side you add up all the credits, and on the other side you add up the debits. If the credits exceed the debits, then your final number is in black ink. If your debits exceed your credits, then you have red ink. The psalmist declares that we all have ledgers that are full of red ink, that before God none of us has a positive balance.

Let me be clear about something. I am not suggesting that for every bad thing we experience, we can trace a specific sin as its cause. Nor am I saying that we deserve every misfortune that comes our way. But I am convinced that the world is sick and broken, and the root cause of the brokenness is human sinfulness. The Bible is pretty clear that paradise was lost because of the decision of our first mother and father to ignore God.

No one is righteous, not even one. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"

As far as my remarks are concerned, I am going to stop at this point in the psalm. I think it is important for us to pause and consider the gravity of our sinfulness before God. I'm not trying to be morbid or depressing; I simply want to make sure we affirm the reality of sin. For the remainder of the week, I would like you to consider a few things:

- First of all, notice that the psalm says in verse 3, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins..." Don't be so quick to pass by that very first word--If. Do you think the psalmist is assuming that the Lord doesn't keep a record of our sins? How does that influence the way you think of God? Does it make a difference in the way you relate to God?
- Next, I want you to think about two different kinds of waiting. There is a waiting for a specific moment or person or action to come to pass, as when a person waits for the arrival of a bus. Then there is a waiting that is more of a longing, a hope. What kind of waiting do you think the psalmist is describing in the 5th and 6th verses, when the psalmist speaks of "My soul waits for the Lord..."?
- The psalm calls out to Israel to put their hope in the Lord. For our purposes, where it says "Israel" in the psalm, we can substitute the term, "God's people." What is the basis upon which God's people can put their hope in God?
- Finally, the 130th psalm is a psalm of ascents. As such, it would have been sung and/or recited by Jewish pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for one of the three annual religious festivals held there. According to the theology of the Old Testament, Jerusalem is the place where God is present for his people. As people journey toward God to seek and celebrate God's presence, why do you think it would be important for God's people to confess their sinfulness, as is done in this psalm?

For the remainder of the week let the words of the 130th psalm soak into your very being, much as liquid flows into a dried up sponge. Consider the reality of human sinfulness. But consider also the mercy and steadfast love of God, and know that the redemption that God offers is worth waiting for--even more than the night watchman waits for the morning.

Amen.