

CHASED BY A DIRTY CONSCIENCE
Sermon for the 5th mid-week Lenten Service 2022
Genesis 42:6-24

Grace and peace to you all from our risen Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The text for our sermon tonight is Genesis 42:6-24: **Joseph, as the ruler of the country, was selling grain to all the people of the country. So, when Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces on the ground. ⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognised them. However, he kept his identity from them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "From where have you come?"**

They answered, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food."

⁸ Although Joseph recognised his brothers, they did not recognise him. ⁹ Joseph remembered the dreams that he had had about them. He told them: "You are spies. You have come to find out where the country is undefended."

¹⁰ They answered him: "No, my master! Your servants have come to buy grain for food. ¹¹ We are all the sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies."

¹² However, he told them, "No! You have come to find out where the country is undefended."

¹³ They answered him: "Your servants are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan. In fact, the youngest is now with our father and one is no more."

¹⁴ However, Joseph told them: "It is just as I have told you. You are spies. ¹⁵ This is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶ Send one of you to fetch your brother. The rest of you shall be kept in prison, that what you are saying may be tested, to see whether you are telling the truth! If not, as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies."

¹⁷ So, he put them in prison for three days. ¹⁸ On the third day Joseph told them: "Do this and live! I too fear God. ¹⁹ If you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody! The rest of you, go and take grain for your hungry families! ²⁰ You shall also fetch me your youngest brother, that what you are saying may be confirmed! Then you will not die."

So, that is what they did. ²¹ Then they told one another: "Surely we are bearing the consequences of our guilt concerning our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he was pleading with us for pity, and we would not listen. This is why this distress has come on us."

²² Reuben answered them: "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy!?'? However, you would not listen. Yes, you see, we are being called to account for his blood."

²³ However, they were not aware that Joseph understood them. For he had been speaking to them through an interpreter. ²⁴ Joseph turned away from them and wept. When he came back, he spoke to them. Then he took Simeon from them and had him arrested while they were watching.

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Dreams really do come true - at least for Joseph. It had been a good twenty years since teenage Joseph had dreamt of how his brothers would one day bow down before him. Now tonight, we see ten of those brothers down on their knees before Joseph, **"with their faces on the ground."** Why? Because they were hungry. 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.

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 that deep, dark secret of selling their own brother into a life of slavery and misery. They had lied to their father - breaking old Jacob's heart by telling him that Joseph was dead. Their hatred had its way with Joseph, and they smugly concealed their sin. However, now they were bowing down before Joseph, second-in-command of all Egypt, whom they did not recognise. And soon, they would be chased, hounded, 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. Perhaps the windows at your own home right now are very dirty. When you look out through dirty windows, everything looks a little darker and dingier than it really is. Instead of 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.

In his First Letter, John writes, "*If we say that we have no sin,*" if we conceal and cover up our sin, "*we are deceiving 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 John 1:8-9). The keyword 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 bathed in the crystal 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 we may imagine. A conscience that's smug and comfortable cannot be cleansed. God's Law must do its work. This is why Joseph initially "**spoke harshly to**" his brothers. This is why Joseph "**kept his identity from them.**" This is why he treated them like strangers. This is why Joseph put them through their paces and brought their sin to remembrance.

These brothers have a classic case of a dirty conscience. Luther frames it like this when he writes, "*Thus the sons of Jacob have an evil conscience. Therefore they tremble horribly and fear God's vengeance*" (Luther's Works 7:271). But the situation of the brothers is even more dire. Their collective conscience is in critical condition, causing them to dread 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*" (Luther's Works 7:277).

In fact, as soon as Joseph demands that they go and fetch their youngest brother and bring him down to Egypt, they say to one another: "**Surely we are bearing the consequences of our guilt concerning our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he was pleading with us for pity, and we would not listen. This is why this distress has come on us.**" To all this, Reuben replied, "**Yes, you see, we are being called to account for his blood.**" The diagnosis could not be clearer. The symptoms are manifest. *These brothers are being chased by a dirty conscience*.

Now, it seems to them that they are getting their just deserts - 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 in reality, what feels so painful to them is neither karma nor punishment. Joseph isn't just toying with them. They are simply being led down the road of repentance. The pain they feel so sharply will lead to purity. Their conscience is being crushed - so that it may be cleansed of sin.

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 "**being called to account for his 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 we must answer for our sin and face the fallout, *or* our Saviour 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 we know purity and peace. He was crushed so that we would be cleansed of every sin. Jesus Christ has answered for all our sins. The only question is whether we have the faith to believe that.

In Luke's account of the Passion of Jesus, we hear about the scene involving Jesus and Barabbas. Barabbas was a rebel. Today we'd call him a terrorist. He was a murderer who had shed the blood of innocent people. He was guilty on all counts and was about to receive a reckoning for all his evil acts. But at the insistence of the crowd, guilty Barabbas

goes free, while innocent Jesus is delivered over to death.¹ The man who shed innocent blood goes free, and the innocent man goes to the cross to shed His innocent blood so that we are cleansed of all unrighteousness. This is God's remedy for the tragedy of our sin. The Lord Jesus has a gift for all of us: 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 from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). We do not have to be chased and hounded by a dirty conscience. Instead, we can live each day in the bright clarity of our Lord's forgiveness and peace. We don't have to be afraid of the truth. For our sins, Jesus Christ has answered. Justice has been served on His cross, and our conscience has been cleansed by His holy, precious blood. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Luke 23:18-25