HOW LONG?

Psalm 6

LENT 1

March 10, 2019 **Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards**

On the day that officially begins the 40-day penitential season of Lent, the somber words of Ash Wednesday announce to us what, deep down, we already know, but suppress to deny — ***"that we are dust and to dust we shall return."***

Maybe that's why fewer and fewer worshipers gather at this service to confess their sins to the 51st Psalm.

Or is it because people like ourselves do not want to wear on their foreheads an ash-swabbed cross, reminding us not only of our mortality, but also of our sinfulness under God's judgment?

This Lenten season, I have chosen to preach and teach six of the seven so-called penitential psalms.

The penitential psalms (numbers 6, 32, 38, 51,102, 130, and143) have long been associated with Lent.

In my research for this series, I learned that Pope Innocent II, around the year 1200, ordered that all seven of these psalms were to be prayed each day, while kneeling, during the Lenten Season.

If this proved unfeasible, it was to be done at least on Fridays.

Luther, himself, lectured on these psalms in the same year he posted his 95 Theses.

This morning, we turn to Psalm 6.

It has been described as a lament.

In his book, Healing in the Bible, Frederick Gaiser observes that **"Psalm 6 is a prayer of one 'shaking in terror,' a person in great distress who turns to God for healing."**

Luther sees lament as an element of repentance in this Psalm, as the psalmist discloses a desperate need for God's consolation and deliverance from turmoil, distress and affliction.

The psalmist turns to God to seek comfort and meaning in one's trials and afflictions.

All human beings are driven by an inner compulsion to understand the world and our lives in it as meaningful and purposeful.

And that goes for suffering, too.

Anthropologist, Richard Shweder, writes:

"Human beings apparently want to be edified by their miseries."

Sociologist, Peter Berger, writes: every culture has provided **"an explanation of human events that bestows meaning upon the experience of suffering and evil."**

It used to be the task of religion to provide some understanding of the causes of pain and suffering, as well as the proper responses to it.

In this way, a society equips its people for the battles of living in this world.

However, not every society does this well.

Our own contemporary Western society gives its members no explanation for suffering, and very little guidance as to how to deal with it.

Take this, for example.

Just days after the tragic Newtown school shootings in December, 2012, Maureen Dowd entitled her December 25th New York Times column, **"Why, God?"** and printed a Catholic priest's response to the massacre.

Almost immediately, there were hundreds of comments in response to the column's counsel.

Most disagreed with it but, tellingly, disagreed in wildly divergent ways.

Some held instead to the idea of *karma*, that suffering in the present pays for sins in past lives.

Others accepted the traditional Christian view that heaven is a place of reunion with loved ones, and will serve as consolation for suffering on earth.

Some alluded to how suffering makes you stronger.

Still others called for political action, in a sense saying that the only response to suffering was to make the world a better place.

The responses to the column were evidence that our own post-Christian culture gives people almost no tools for dealing with tragedy.

Commentators had to look to many other cultures and religions to address the darkness of the moment.

People were left to fend for themselves.

The end result is that today we are more shocked and undone by suffering than were our ancestors.

In Medieval Europe, approximately one of every five infants died before their first birthday, and only half of all children survived to the age of ten.

Life for our ancestors was filled with far more suffering than ours is.

One scholar of ancient Northern European history observed how unnerving it is for modern readers to see how much more unafraid people fifteen hundred years ago were in the face of loss, violence, suffering, and death.

Another historian said that, while we are taken aback by the cruelty we see in our ancestors, they would, if they could see us, be equally shocked by our **"softness, worldliness, and timidity."**

We are not only just worse than past generations in this regard, but we are also weaker than are many people in other parts of the world today.

Dr. Paul Brand, a pioneering orthopedic surgeon in the treatment of leprosy patients, spent the first part of his medical career in India, and the last part in the United States.

He wrote:

> **"In the United States . . . I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs.**
>
> **Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it."**

Why?

The short response is that other cultures have provided their members with various answers to the question, “What is the purpose of human life?”

When you survey world religions and philosophies, the crucial commonality is this: In every one of these world views, suffering can, despite its painfulness, be an important means of actually achieving your purpose in life.

One could say that in each of these other cultures’ grand narratives — what human life is about — suffering can be an important chapter in that story.

But modern Western culture is different.

In the secular view, this material world is all that there is.

And so, the meaning of life is to have the freedom to choose the life that makes you most happy.

In this view of life, suffering can have no meaningful part.

It is a complete interruption of your life story.

In this approach to life, suffering should be avoided at almost any cost, or minimized to the greatest degree possible.

When Luther lectured on Psalm 6, this is what he told his students:

“In all trials and afflictions one should first of all turn to God . . .

This is what the [psalmist] does here in this Psalm.

In this Psalm he mentions his trials, but first he hurries to God and accepts these trials from God, for this is the way to learn patience and fear of God.

But he who looks to man and does not accept these things becomes impatient and a despiser of God.”

To his theological students, Luther in commenting on this penitential Psalm, made a distinction between the God he termed in Latin, *deus absonditis*, or “the hidden God” and the *deus revelatus*, or “the revealed God” that is Christ.

Luther said to his preachers-in-training that when it comes to the “why” questions of suffering, pain, and death, we should not engage in speculation, but in the proclamation of repentance and faith.

For Luther, speculation is more comfortable than repentance.

He believes that speculation cannot penetrate God in His absolute hiddenness.
It will finally yield no answer.

Instead, Luther directs us away from God's hiddenness.
This is precisely where the "why" questions lead.
Luther then points to God's mercy revealed in the manger and the cross, coming at God from below.
God is truthful, and His truth gives us certainty.
A distinction must be made, Luther asserts, between the knowledge of God and the despair of God.
We know nothing of the unrevealed God — the hidden God.
God blocks the path here.
Luther says this:

"We must confess that what is beyond our comprehension is nothing for us to bother about."

We are to stick to the revealed God.
God give us His Son, so that we may know that we are saved.

Turning to his own experience, Luther recalls the consolation he received from his confessor, Johann Staupitz.
He directed Luther to the wounds of Christ, wherein we have the mercy of God revealed.
For God is surely there for us.
The example of Adam and Eve is a warning against every attempt to find God apart from the Word, for such an endeavor is more that spiritually frustrating.
It ends in unbelief.
In other words, God will not let sinners access to Himself in places other than His Gospel.

"Without the Word there is neither faith nor understanding."

This is the invisible God.
The path is blocked here.
Such was the answer which the disciples received when they asked Christ when

He would restore the Kingdom to Israel, for Christ said, ***"It is not for you to know."***

Here God desires to be inscrutable, and to remain incomprehensible.

No comfort is to be found in the "hidden God," but only in the revealed God.

Luther notes that **"when God seizes a person, that person is weak and disheartened, because that person does not know whether God is taking him in hand out of anger or in grace."**

Hence, Luther argues that we must distinguish between God's wrath revealed against sin, and the chastisements that He sends to His children as a kind Father Who disciplines those that He loves.

This is the tension Luther sees expressed in this Psalm.

Psalm 6 is a penitential psalm, which serves as an example of God's twofold work of condemning sin and forgiving sinners.

Beloved people of God,
Psalm 6 is a recognition of our need for God.

When we are under distress, pain, and suffering, we have no place to turn but to Christ alone.

We recognize our powerlessness over the enemies of sin, evil, and death, but such recognition does not end in despair, but in the Lord, whose promises are true.

Psalm 6 provides words for us sinners, who face the meaning of our own mortality when the ashes of death are marked with the cross of Christ, to place our lives in God's grace, and to take comfort that our prayers and cries for help do not go unheard.

AMEN