

Lenten Midweek 5

Chased by a Dirty Conscience

Text: Genesis 42:6–24; Luke 23:1–25

Dreams really do come true at least for Joseph. It had been a good twenty years since teenage Joseph dreamt of how his brothers would one day bow down before him. And tonight, we see ten of those brothers down on their knees before Joseph, with their faces to the ground. 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 a deep, dark secret. They had sold their own brother into a life of slavery and misery. They had lied to their father—had broken old Jacob's heart by telling him that Joseph was dead. Their hatred had its way with Joseph, and they smugly concealed their sin. But now they were bowing down before Joseph, second-in-command of all Egypt, whom they did not recognize.

And soon they would be chased, hounded, and tortured by their own guilty consciences.

I'm sure you know what a conscience is. Our 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 we view the world around us. Our conscience is our window on the world.

A bad, or guilty, conscience is much like a dirty window. They bear the grit and grime of winter. And spring cleaning has not yet begun. This means that when we look out our living room window, everything looks a little darker and dingier than it really is. Instead of a 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 our 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.

“If we say we have no sin,” if we conceal and cover up our sin, “we deceive 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 Jn 1:8–9). The key word 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 you might imagine. A conscience that's smug and comfortable cannot be cleansed. God's Law must do its work. This is why Joseph initially acts so harshly with his brothers. This is why Joseph doesn't reveal himself to his brothers right away. This is why he treats them like strangers and speaks roughly to them. This is why Joseph puts them through their paces and brings their sin to remembrance.

These brothers have a classic case of a dirty conscience. Luther frames it like this: he writes, ***"Thus the sons of Jacob have an evil conscience. Therefore they tremble horribly and fear God's vengeance"*** (AE 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"*** (AE 7:277).

In fact, as soon as Joseph demanded that they go and fetch their youngest brother and bring him down to Egypt, they say to one another: ***“In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.”*** To all this, Reuben replied, ***“Now there comes a reckoning for his blood”*** (vs 21, 22). The diagnosis could not be clearer. The symptoms are manifest. These brothers are being chased by a dirty conscience.

Now, it seems to them, 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 might 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 a “reckoning for [the] 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 you must answer for your sin and face the fallout, or your Savior 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 might know purity and peace. He was crushed so that we might 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 tonight’s reading from the Passion according to Luke, 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 . . . and innocent Jesus is delivered over to death. The man who shed innocent blood goes free, and the innocent man goes to the cross to shed his innocent blood so that you can be cleansed of all unrighteousness. This is God's remedy for the tragedy of our sin. The Lord Jesus has a gift for you and me: 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”—“cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). We don't have to be hounded by a dirty conscience. 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