

17 March 2021
Lent 4 Midweek

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Facets of Forgiveness: *Far*”

Text: Leviticus 16:5-10, 15, 20-22; Matthew 26:36-42; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57

Psalm 103:1-12

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Our sins are *cleansed*; we are washed clean by the blood of Jesus. Our sins are *covered*; our shame and unworthiness hidden in Christ. And our sins are *fixed*; they've all been put in one place and dealt with - on Jesus, on the cross. All good news. All wonderful facets of forgiveness we considered thus far.

And yet still our sins nag at us, gnaw away at us. They're like a dog with a bone. They just don't seem to want to let go. Wouldn't it be good if in addition to these facets, our sins would go someplace far, far away from us? If we could exile them, banish them, and know they were never coming back?

We sometimes try to do that with other parts of our lives. People move from the inner city to the suburbs to get away from the crime and struggles of city life. But then they find out the suburbs has its own set of problems. People sometimes switch jobs or companies to get away from a bad boss. But what if the new boss is the same - or worse! - than the old boss? People change churches to get away from people they don't like or problems they don't want to deal with, but there are such people and problems everywhere. Sometimes people even divorce and remarry, looking for that ideal marriage and ideal mate, only to find out that no marriage or mate is ideal.

You could say that none of these things work because no matter where I go, there is a sinner who follows me there. *It is me*. I bring my sin everywhere I go, into every relationship I am in. If only it could leave it somewhere. If only it would go far, far away
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Well that's the idea with the scapegoat we heard about tonight. God knows what we need, and He provides. And Old Testament Israel was just like us, and we are just like them, and so for them, too, there was this yearning to get their sins away from them. Far, far away. And so God gave them such a way. The scapegoat.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, in addition to other sacrifices and duties Aaron had, he was to do this, too: take two special goats - one, chosen by lot, would be used as a sin offering, and the other would be a sin-bearer, and be sent away into the wilderness. So

after the sacrifice of the first goat and its blood used for atonement as God prescribed, the second goat was brought forward. Aaron would lay his hands on the head of this goat, confess all the sins, iniquities, and transgressions of Israel *onto* this goat, and then this goat would be taken out into the wilderness, far, far away from the people. It was a picture to them of how God would deal with their sins. Cleansing? Yes. Covering? Yes. Fixing? Yes. But also this - sending their sins to *Azazel*. Or in other words, *sending their sins to hell*.

And on such a solemn day as the Day of Atonement, what a joyous part of the day that would be. There go your sins, far, far away. *Never to return*. For a goat wouldn't last long by itself out in the wilderness. The predators would quickly seize upon it for a tasty meal.

It is, of course, a picture of Jesus. As all the sacrifices of the Old Testament were. So Jesus, fresh from the Jordan and His Baptism there, where He took His place with us sinners - that is, not having any sins washed *off* of Him, but having our sins washed *onto* Him . . . as soon as that happens, what happens next? He is led out, or thrown out, into the wilderness. And there, the predator of our souls quickly seizes upon Him to destroy and devour Him. To send the Son of God to hell! That would be quite the *coup* for satan!

But He was not able. Because when the Son of God would go to hell, it would not be as a prisoner, but as a conquerer! So Jesus, who became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), takes our sins to the wilderness of the cross. Where He is left alone. Forsaken by His Father (Psalm 22:1). The predator stalking Him. His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane showing just how heavy the weight the sin of the world really is. Luke adding to Matthew's account that Jesus' agony was so intense that *his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground* (Luke 22:44). But Jesus bears it, alone, for us all. There was no other way. He would lay down His life for us (John 10:17-18). He would fulfill the reason for *both* goats - He would be both the scapegoat with our sins, and the bloody goat to atone for our sins. Whatever you need, all that you need, Jesus would provide.

So after His death and burial and His rest in the tomb on the Sabbath, Jesus descends into hell in victory, and then rises from the dead . . . and your sins are gone! They are on Him no longer. And as He is, so we will be in the resurrection: glorified and set free from the sin that has burdened and infected us since the moment of our conception. For joined to Jesus in His death and resurrection, our *perishable bodies become imperishable, and our mortal bodies become immortal, and death is swallowed up in victory*. And our sin-causing, problem-causing, death-dealing sins lay dead in the grave. Rest in peace. :-)

And because they do, so will we. Not the same way, though. We will rest in the peace of heaven, where there is nothing accursed (Revelation 22:3). We will rest in the peace of our Lord, in the unity and harmony of His love. And we'll never have to move or change, because our sin has been sent far, far away.

How far? We heard how far in the Psalm we sang tonight: as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

I like that picture, and as I often explain, it is because east and west are as far apart from each other as you can get. It is not so with north and south. North and south touch. If you're traveling around the earth, there is a point at which you stop going north and start going south, and vice versa. But east and west never touch. There is never a point at which you stop going east and start going west. East is forever and west is forever. And that's how far your sins have been removed from you! By the One who is your scapegoat, the One who is your sacrificial lamb, the One who is your Good Shepherd. Whose love for you is as great as ***how high the heavens are above the earth.***

So your sins? Yeah, they're not coming back. You might remember them, but God does not. They're dead to Him, and to you. But His Son is alive, and so are you. In Him. The prophet Isaiah says that God has *cast all your sins behind [His] back* (Isaiah 38:17), and that He *will not remember your sins* (43:25). In other words, God has moved on from your sin. He's dealt with it. He's done with it. *It is finished* (John 19:30). And if God has moved on from your sin, *so can you*. Not captive to sin anymore. Not bearing the weight of its guilt anymore. Not fearing its consequences anymore. He's set you free. And as Jesus said, *if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed* (John 8:36)! So you are free. Your sin is gone. You can live in confidence, not shame; in love, and not fear. Another facet of forgiveness from your Lord for you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.