

Ash Wednesday; February 22, 2023  
Psalm 130  
“Wait for the Lord”

**Out of the depths I have called to you, O LORD.  
Lord, hear my voice.  
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.  
If you, LORD, kept a record of guilt,  
O Lord, who could stand?  
But with you there is pardon,  
so you are feared.  
I wait for the LORD. My soul waits,  
and in his word I have put my hope.  
My soul waits for the LORD  
more than watchmen wait for the morning,  
more than watchmen wait for the morning.  
Israel, wait confidently for the LORD,  
because with the LORD there is mercy.  
With him there is abundant redemption.  
So he himself will redeem Israel from all its guilt.**

The night was long for watchmen. Not everyone in Israel’s army had to work as watchmen. Before binoculars and night vision technology, only those with the sharpest and most adaptive eyes were made watchmen. Their duty was usually mundane, but it was crucial: to stand on the walls of their city or the perimeter of their camp and scan the endless horizon endlessly, looking for any possible enemy movement. Sleep was punishable by death.

So the watchman stood and looked, and stood and looked. And he waited. He waited first for the darkest hour, then for the dawn and the relief of rest.

It would only be natural for a watchman to pass the long night not only looking out for the enemy, but also looking in at his own life. Plenty of time to look in and think. We don’t do that much anymore. We don’t have many jobs that require simply standing and watching and waiting, with plenty of time to think. We don’t have many jobs like that, and we don’t do it much at all. We are surrounded by constant stimuli and distractions. We rarely take the time to hold still and think and look inside.

But Ash Wednesday is an important time to do what the watchmen did. Hold still and look, to the outside and the inside.

Maybe the reason the human race has surrounded itself with endless stimuli is that we are afraid to hold still and take a deep look inside ourselves. But Christians must. We must look inside and see our own darkness, what the Psalmist calls “guilt.” Hold still and look inside to see if the Lord has sat unrivaled on the throne of your heart. I see darkness, the guilt of idolatry, when my other lords have bumped the Lord. Hold still and look inside, and see if your neighbor has come ahead of yourself, or if the people around you have been merely extras in the movie of your life, passing and unimportant.

Beneath this basic, dark guilt of idolatry and selfishness will lie endless more layers. Because when my God is not first, the dark guilt of neglecting his Word, and misusing his name will be there, too. When my neighbor is unimportant, the dark guilt of gossip and neglect and theft will be there too.

The darkness of our guilt is deep. It's no wonder we're afraid to be watchmen, to just stand still and look and think. To look inside ourselves slowly and carefully. It is because what we find is ugly, dark, guilt.

And like a watchman on the walls, it leaves us longing for the light of dawn to break the darkness, to give us peace and rest. The Psalmist cries: **Out of the depths I have called to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.** These are the words of a watchman who has looked inside, and plunged into the deep darkness of his sin. And the Psalmist did not accidentally lose track of his words when he said it twice: **My soul waits for the Lord, more than a watchman waits for the morning, more than a watchman waits for the morning.** He wants us to feel in our own souls what he feels in his: the desire for the light to scatter his dark guilt. Stop and look inside, and you will feel it, too. And wait for the Lord, like a watchman waiting for the morning.

As surely as the sun rises and crushes the deepest darkness, the Lord rises with his pardon and peace. The watchman knows for a fact that the sun will rise, because that's what the sun does. It can't do anything else. The sun is bound to rise at the set time every single day. And the Lord's pardon is always bound to rise.

We have all had to ask for forgiveness from other people. It is easier to ask some than others. When you know someone is a forgiving person, it makes it much easier to go them and say, "I'm sorry." When it's a spiteful person who prefers grudges to pardon, we may wonder, "Well...why bother?" No human forgives with perfect reliability. But the Lord does. **But with you there is pardon.** Not might be. Not may be. Not sometimes. Is.

The Lord's totally reliable promise to pardon sin inspires faith in him. The Psalmist calls it "fear," and states it plainly: **But with you there is pardon, so you are feared.** This is what fills our lungs to cry out to him from the darkness of guilt and sin: he will forgive us. This idea repeats a couple verses later: **Israel, wait confidently for the LORD, because with the LORD there is mercy. With him there is abundant redemption.** Again, no maybes, mights, or possibilities. There is mercy.

If there were any doubt that when we stop and look in to the dark guilt of our sin, and then look out for the light of God's mercy and pardon, we would not bother. Consider the Psalmist's rhetorical question: **If you, LORD, kept a record of guilt, O Lord, who could stand?** We know the answer to that question is, "Noone! Least of all me!" But it is the fact of God's pardon and mercy that invites us, inspires us, and even entices us to repent, to cry out from the depths of our guilt. We know what the answer will be.

And we know why. When someone asks you take them at their word, are you inclined to do it? The Psalmist says: **I wait for the LORD. My soul waits, and in his word I have put my hope.** Maybe we should rephrase our question: What kind of a person are you most likely to take at his word? Let's think about mechanics. A mechanic with a reputation for shoddy work and dishonest pricing tells you, "Your car will be done by Thursday at a cost of no more than \$700." Of course you will not take him at his word, because of his reputation. Another mechanic with a spotless reputation tells you the same thing. You may take him at his word, but until the repair is complete and the bill comes in, you will have some doubt. But how about a mechanic – and if you ever meet this mechanic please pass along his number! – who says, "Your

car is done and here's the bill for \$490." That's someone whose word you can really trust. Because the work is done.

You can trust someone to finish the job when they've already finished the job. When the Psalmist writes so confidently about those who cry out from the depths finding the light of mercy and pardon, there is good reason. The forgiving deed is already accomplished.

**With him there is abundant redemption. So he himself will redeem Israel from all its guilt.** The light of God's pardon and mercy is not free. God takes our sin much too seriously to simply wink at it and say, "Forget it." He despises it. So he could not just let it go. It had to be paid for. This is the picture of redemption. Redemption is making a payment to get something – in this case us – back.

The Psalmist looks ahead to the Lord himself redeeming his people from all their guilt. We look back and see his redeeming work. We see Jesus, God himself, laid in a manger. We see Jesus live his whole life in the light, free from the darkness of sin and guilt. And then we see him take all of ours on himself on the cross. He has paid for it all. That is how much God hates sin – only the holy blood of his Son was payment enough. And Jesus, the Son of God, made the payment to redeem. He bought us back from the guilt of our sin and made us the Lord's again.

This is the basis for the Psalmist's confidence, and our own. When he asks "**If you, LORD, kept a record of guilt, O Lord, who could stand?**" we know the answer, after we stop and look inside at our dark guilt. No one could. No one ever would. But there is a reason the Psalmist can turn on a dime and in perfect confidence say: "**But with you there is pardon, so you are feared...with the LORD there is mercy.**" The Lord has already done the work. He has bought us back: **With him there is abundant redemption. So he himself will redeem Israel from all its guilt.**

For most Christians, Ash Wednesday is a very useful day. Our world and our sinful nature tell us that if we are generally good people, then that is good enough. We hear stories on the news about the truly bad people, and by comparison we look quite lovely and kind. This is why we need reminders to look inside, compare our lives to God's holy law, and acknowledge the darkness of our guilt.

But there are other Christians who do not need to be driven or reminded to see their dark guilt. They live with it constantly. It drapes itself over their entire lives and makes them miserable. And even if that's not you, probably all of us have done at least a thing or two in our lives that could make us wonder if maybe our darkness isn't too dark, our guilt too strong to be paid for. We need to look closely at two splendid words: "abundant" and "all."

God's redeeming work in Christ is abundant. There is no limit to it. As strong as the dark guilt of our sin is, Jesus' sacrifice is stronger. The Holy Spirit shouts this truth at the top of his lungs in passages throughout Scripture, passages like this: **The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, purifies us from all sin.** And from this beautiful penitential Psalm: **With him there is abundant redemption. So he himself will redeem Israel from all its guilt.**

As a watchman waits for the morning, we look for the Lord to shatter the darkness of our guilt. And we cry out to him to do it. We cry out already knowing the answer he will give: pardon and mercy. And his word is good, because he himself has redeemed us abundantly from all our sin. Amen.