

**PSALM 38**  
**Lent Mid-Week Message**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**March 23, 2022**

Pastor Patti and I are preaching on the Penitential Psalms this Lent. This one—Psalm 38—is a doosie. These words bring us right into the middle of David's pain, guilt and misery. It's a beautiful psalm because it's a cry to God, but it's not pretty.

The first thing that strikes me is how David makes virtually no distinction between physical suffering and spiritual suffering. And that to me is totally true to life. When my back aches, my spirit aches. When I'm being driven into a corner by pain, my relationship with God is affected. How could it not be?

God created us to be these biological creatures. I know who God is because my eyes see figures on a page they send signals to the cauliflower up here. Or I hear the word of God, and these little bones in my skull rattle and send vibrations to my brain which converts those vibrations into thoughts and images and concepts. That's how I've come to know God in Jesus Christ. Through my body. And these bodies—even though they stop behaving for all of us at some point—these bodies are what we are meant to be. They are what connects us to each other, and yes, God. He communicates himself through the stuff of the world and our bodies. These are the wonderful temples of the Holy Spirit. Jesus affirms the holiness of the body when that night he held up the bread and wine and said "this is my body. This is my blood." In other words, it's not just some spiritual part of you that Jesus came to redeem—it's the whole package. And he's claiming us as his own—body and soul. There's nothing about our biological, economic, or social reality that Jesus is going to leave behind. He's claiming Lordship over all of it.

All that being said, we come to Psalm 38 and we realize just how messed up everything is because of sin. God created us to be temples of the Holy Spirit. But personally I can feel that the left knee on my temple doesn't have too much cartilage left, and I go through periods when I can't seem to sleep very well. My body isn't what it used to be. And yes, that's also part of that broken relationship with God and the people around us. As David says, "Because of your wrath there is no health in my body, my bones have no soundness because of my sin. My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear." The spiritual death he's experiencing is also an experience of physical death, and vice-versa. The situation is total. Guilt, sin and biological death all go together.

Of course, we cannot make a simple direct connection between our moral choices and our physical condition. Remember when Jesus' disciples asked him about the man born blind: "who sinned, that man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus said very strongly, that's not the result of bad choices anyone made. That poor man was born blind so that God could be glorified through him. So we know we need to be careful making direct connections between our physical maladies and our choices. But even there, remember—that blind man did eventually die as we all do, and that's what we're getting at here. We all wear down. Some of it's because of choices we make. I won't be surprised if some of my habits are going to come back and bite me. Those thousands of donuts I've inhaled. The fact that what personality I have left is built on caffeine.

But regardless of those choices we make, we all run out of time. The light goes out of our eyes. And as believers, we know that death—the degeneration and loss of life in this world that every creature experiences—came into the world because of that break with God.

I know that my own experience with suffering is a walk in the park compared to what some of us here have been through or are going through. But when I read this psalm, I can't help but think of last summer when I spent three nights in the hospital. First of all, an illness is going to drive you into a sense of isolation, of being alone, cut off. When you're in pain, you can have people right there who adore you (and whom you adore), but the pain separates you from them. It's hard to even hear what others are saying. And that's spiritual isolation. David expresses something that in the psalm: "my friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds, my neighbors stay far away." It's not that your friends and companions and family don't adore you...they might wish with every bone in their body they could trade places with you—but the fact is, they simply cannot be totally where you are when you're going through that, no matter how much they want to be. And that hurts them, too. Pain can certainly make you question God. You can wonder if he's your enemy. That's in the psalm too: "Your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon me. Because of your wrath there is no health in my body."

But I can also say, that as a believer, laying there in the hospital, I'm know I was processing things differently than a non-believer would have in that situation. For one thing, even in the misery I was thankful. Really. I was grateful for the alone time I was being forced to have with God. It was like he was telling me, "don't you see how ridiculous all that stuff was that you were worried about two days ago? All those little things that were making you anxious, that you were so invested in with all your heart, soul and mind? And now that all those things have been stripped forcibly out of your hands, do you see how the world keeps turning without you?" I could almost hear God's voice: "Were you really trusting me?" And my answer was "no, I guess not, really." But now that there was just one thing to think about—my existence and God's living presence—I was reminded of what I've been taught my whole life but have so much trouble with as a sinner—that in the end there's nothing but faith. And no matter how much I hurt right now, I know who I can trust completely. I know that the one who holds my existence in his hands is also the one who will breathe his life into me when I'm dust. Whether I live or die, he's my savior.

And that's also the most beautiful things about today's psalm. David is miserable—and he has also made some very bad choices. He's looking straight into this painful darkness of guilt and physical pain. But he's going straight to God; willingly throwing himself into God's arms. "O Lord, do not forsake me, be not far from me, O my God. Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Savior." When you believe in the God of Israel, you don't just say God is good and then hope that's accurate. No, you expect him to act, you know that he will deliver you, even when you are dust and ashes, he will act to create life.

I've always found analogy from C.S. Lewis very helpful when it comes to suffering, waiting on God. That's what we're doing when we're suffering, isn't it—it feels like we're stuck there waiting for life to come. That's where David is, in this Psalm. But Lewis understood it like this: Even in heaven, even in perfection, life will come to us in waves. It's because God likes to give to us one gift, one surprise after the next. Those popular pictures of heaven, where everyone's

hanging around on clouds and nothing ever changes...they're really horrible. No—heaven will be an everlasting procession of newness, one wave of fulness after the next. And of course, along with those waves, there will be *troughs* in between the waves where we will just be enjoying what we've been shown and given, and also, better yet, in the troughs we'll be waiting with this joyful anticipation to see the next thing God has up his sleeve. Anticipation is a huge part of joy and love, isn't it? I think of my love for Karen—a lot of the joy of my relationship with her is wondering what's going to happen next. It's anticipation.

God sends us those waves and troughs in this broken world, too. But the problem for us here, where we're born into this darkness, not knowing where we came from or where we're going, or why we're even here, is that those troughs are really, really rough for us. It's hard enough for us, as believers, to trust that the next wave of life is coming from God when all we see is death and darkness around us. But just think how hard it is if we don't know God. As a non-believer, I can't be sure another wave is coming at all, much less trust where it's going to come from. In fact, in sin we can't even distinguish between God's grace and a death threat. Look at how people saw Jesus. He came to bring nothing but grace, but people saw him as threat to everything held dear. But as a believer, I can know with full confidence that the next wave is coming from my loving Father in heaven. Even if the next wave is going to wash us away from this life, even if it was going to take us away completely—we know know it will end in life, healing, and joy. Even in the deepest trough, we can trust in the next wave and even look forward to it, because we know who's there with us in the trough. Our Savior. The God of Israel. The Lord Jesus Christ who went to the cross for us. The one who went into the deepest trough for us, to unleash a whole new ocean of life into this world.