

Devotion for Week of August 7, 2022

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

As I was writing the liturgy for this coming Sunday, I thought a lot about the Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon. We are called to corporate confession of sin in the Presbyterian order of worship, followed by an assurance of pardon. We're not just asking God to forgive our individual sins, but to forgive our collective sin as a community – the sin we commit if we fail to take care of our neighbors, or the sin we commit if we don't practice justice as a church or society.

The Hebrew word associated with forgiveness for sin is interesting – it is *nasa*, and it literally means to lift or carry. It appears over 600 times in the Old Testament. Sometimes it really means carrying something, like in 1 Samuel when David talks about a lion or bear “carrying off” a sheep so David has to go rescue it. Or in Exodus when God says that He “carried” the Israelites out of Egypt. But other times it means bearing the weight of sin. Cain cries to God, “my iniquity is too heavy to bear (*nasa*).” Ezekiel announces to the people that “you will be held accountable for your betrayals, and you will bear (*nasa*) the sins of your idols.”

In the Old Testament, sin is not an abstract concept. It is visualized as a weight bearing down on a person – burdens that sinners carry. In this context, forgiveness means that someone lifts the burden off of the sinner. And usually, that is God who does the lifting. When God carries away the sin, we no longer need to carry it. The remarkable thing is that God does that for us. And if we think of sin as a burden that is weighing us down, the Prayer of Confession makes a lot of sense. We're literally saying, “Here God, we confess our sin. Please take it off of us so that we are not burdened with the weight of it anymore.” Being forgiven lifts that millstone around our necks so that we can stand up straight and live a life that is free of that heavy weight.

In the New Testament, we have been taught that Jesus died and took the burden of our sin upon himself, as the Son of God. We no longer have to be bent over from carrying our sin. We can pray in Jesus' name for God to forgive us and know that God will take that burden from us and lighten our load. We can breathe a little easier, get the kinks out of our bent over backs, and walk with purpose. What a remarkable gift we have been given as children of God and recipients of Jesus' grace and mercy.

Jeanne