

Whatever Happened to Sin?
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About 40 years ago, the psychologist Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled *Whatever Happened to Sin?* He argued that whereas an earlier generation had a clear understanding of sin, the present generation was in danger of losing all sense of sin. Although published more than a generation ago, the thesis of this book remains in tack: Many people, Catholics included, have lost a sense of sin.

Some people think this is a step forward. In their view, sin and guilt are unhealthy, something that belongs to a bygone era. After all, are we not an enlightened society that has moved beyond sin and guilt? Perhaps we are, but are we better for it? Before answering this question, consider today's readings.

In the first, the prophet Isaiah describes the profound experience of God's holiness that he had when God called him to be a prophet. The temple was filled with God's glory, and Isaiah knew that he was standing in the presence of God. At that moment Isaiah realized—perhaps for the first time—his profound sinfulness and he cried out, "I am doomed, for I am a man of unclean lips ... yet my eyes have seen the Lord of Hosts." In the presence of the all-holy God, Isaiah experienced his sinfulness in a powerfully new way.

Something similar happens in today's gospel. Peter had been fishing all night but caught nothing. Then Jesus appeared, telling him to cast his nets once more. Although skeptical, Peter obeys Jesus' word. When he catches a miraculous number of fish, Peter falls at Jesus' feet and exclaims, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Like Isaiah, Peter understood his sinfulness—perhaps for the first time—because he was standing in the presence of God's holiness. Fully aware of his sinfulness, Peter knew his profound need for God's grace.

Whatever happened to sin? Why have so many people lost a sense of sin? The answer can be stated in this way: Many people no longer experience the holiness of God; they have lost all sense of the sacred. Living in a purely profane world, they have lost their sense of sin because they have lost their sense of God. They no longer understand their profound need for God's grace because they have lost all sense of sin.

Suppose every day were cloudy. Suppose we never saw the sun. Suppose the sun never appeared. If that is all we knew, we would think that we were living in the light. But then suppose that the sun broke through the clouds one day. Suppose that the sun shone brightly one day. On that day, we would realize—for the very first time—that we had been living in darkness and did not know it. WE would realize that what you were calling light was really darkness.

This is the situation of those who have lost their sense the sacred. Living in a purely profane world without God, people think they are living in the light, but they are living in the darkness. People think they are enlightened, but they do not see clearly. People think that there is no need for change in their lives because they have no experience of God's holiness. This is why it is so important to come into the light of God's presence. For, only when we stand in the light

of God do we comprehend our real situation. Only when we experience God's grace do we understand the power of evil.

Whatever happened to sin? It never went away! It's still here as powerful as ever. Sin occurs every time we worship the creature rather than the Creator. It occurs every time we selfishly make ourselves the center of the universe. It occurs every time we live as if we had no need for God. Sin exchanges the glory of God for our own glory.

On Wednesday, we begin the discipline of Lent, a period of 40 days during which we enter into a profound combat with the powers of sin and darkness that would possess our lives. The purpose of this Lenten discipline is to purify and make us ready for the Paschal Feast of the Lord's resurrection. The purpose of this discipline is to make us aware of God's grace so that we will know our sinfulness and repent. For it is only when we stand in the light of God that we know our need for God's grace. It is only when we stand in the light of God that we say with Peter and Isaiah, "I am a sinful creature in need of God's grace."