

Beginning the Journey  
March 5, 2014  
Psalm 51: 1-17

This evening our Scripture passage is the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm. It is one of only seven Psalms typically classified as penitential, and it is certainly the best known of the group. Throughout the ages many have read and heard these Psalms as prayers during Lent. May that be true for us now.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Merciful God, help us to remember who we are and whose we are. Strengthen us for our Lenten journey. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

It doesn't come as a surprise to me that those gathered here this evening are far fewer in number than those who worshipped in this sacred space on Sunday morning. Ash Wednesday has a way of thinning the crowd – especially the Protestant crowd. It is a day some have called “the most uncomfortable day of the year.”

Ash Wednesday is an unusual sort of service for those of us who are not accustomed to the high church world of smells and bells. We expect what we know, and we know what we expect.

- We don't come forward to receive anything; whatever we need is brought to us.
- We don't make the sign of the cross nor do we receive it; the cross it is a symbol that stands tall before us as we worship.
- We don't confess our sins or receive absolution from a priest; the only time we find the word sin entering our vocabulary is in the Lord's Prayer.

But perhaps this is exactly why you are here tonight. You know to expect the unexpected. You know that Ash Wednesday signals a shift in the liturgical calendar; it marks the start of the Season of Lent.

Lent is a time of heightened spiritual awareness. It is during this period of 40 days that Christians have historically focused more on matters of faith than at any other time of year. It is a season that emphasizes penance, reflection, and even fasting.

Penance is a word I used to introduce tonight's reading. It may be unfamiliar to some. In trying to find a simple theological definition, I opened the smallest theological dictionary I own: *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* only to find it defines penance as something for Catholics.

More specifically:

In the Catholic tradition, the sacrament of reconciliation by which the penitent person is reconciled to God and the church through the forgiveness of sins. Often such reconciliation comes after the

penitent sinner performs some prescribed act as an indication of repentance.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, penance has a long history that predates Protestantism. It, however, isn't the exclusive domain of Catholicism. The early Protestant reformers rejected penance as a means of bargaining with God, but used these seven so-called penitential psalms to “redefine the nature of repentance, arguing that penitents were saved not by doing good works or participating in a sacrament, but rather by receiving God's grace.”<sup>2</sup>

What are these all about? Clearly there is wisdom in the seven for us as we begin our Lenten journey. While time won't allow me to offer insight into all seven, I do want to ensure you have the list so that you can read them on your own. The seven penitential psalms are numbers 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.<sup>3</sup>

For centuries these Psalms were normally attributed to King David. Our Psalm this evening, Psalm 51, is thought to be David's response to his affair with Bathsheba. You may recall that as King he thought he could and perhaps even should have whatever he wanted – even married women. His excessive appetite led him to have Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed. It led him to an unpleasant confrontation with Nathan that made his sin public, and caused him to finally admit the error of his ways.

This doesn't quite tie in to Ash Wednesday . . . or does it? Ash Wednesday itself has evolved over the centuries. One change, however, stands out among the rest. In an era when ashes were given to a select few – to designated sinners who were then ostracized, a priest decided to place the ashes on himself as a sign that he too was a sinner and that all stand in need of the grace of God.

Ash Wednesday is a reminder that we, like David, like that priest and like all who have gone before us, are sinners who need to be reconciled to our merciful God. Ash Wednesday is a call to repentance. It is why, just a few minutes ago, we prayed the first

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (InterVarsity Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Clare L. Costley King'oo. *David's fruitful sayings: The Penitential Psalms in late -medieval and early -modern England* (2005). Abstract available at <<http://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI3179719/>>

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 51. *The New Interpreters Bible, Volume 4* (Abingdon Press, 1996).

prayer of confession we have prayed together in worship since I began serving as your pastor.

As we start Lent, repentance is key. Repentance, however, is just part of the story. Ash Wednesday is always about both repentance and death.

When you come forward, I will invite you to receive ashes. If you are not comfortable doing so, simply cross your arms to receive a blessing. If, however, you receive ashes you will hear me say words that echo language from the funeral liturgy. Rather than “ashes to ashes and dust to dust” that mark the end of life, tonight you hear “from the dust you came and to it you shall return” suggesting a different kind of death.

A few days ago Marcus Borg explained it quite clearly:

Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week and Christianity itself are about following Jesus on the path that leads through death to resurrection. They are about dying and rising with Christ. We are to follow him to Jerusalem, the place of death and resurrection. That is what the journey of Lent is about.

That journey intrinsically involves repentance. But repentance is not primarily about feeling guilty about our sins, or about doing penance (think of the common practice of “giving up” something during Lent . . .). The biblical meanings of repenting are primarily twofold. On the one hand, it means to “return” to God, to “reconnect” with God. On the other hand, it means “to go beyond the mind that we have” – minds shaped by our socialization and enculturation.

The result: dying to an old way of seeing and being and living and identity, and being born, raised, into a new way of seeing and being and living and identity. Ash Wednesday, as we are marked for death, is the annual ritual enactment of the beginning of that journey.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of your age or the number of times you have taken this journey before, you are invited to begin the journey again this evening. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Marcus Borg. “Ash Wednesday: Death and Repentance.”  
<<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2014/03/ash-wednesday-death-and-repentance/>>