

**ASH WEDNESDAY**  
**February 14, 2024**

Psalm 51:1-17

Create in Us a Clean Heart

Grace and peace to you from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

We held a spiritual retreat a couple of weekends ago and introduced our theme for this Lenten season. We spent our time looking at some of the psalms and we will continue to do so for the next five Wednesday evenings. Each week one of our members will reflect on their favorite psalm.

So to start us off I decided to share with you my reflections on Psalm 51 (the psalm we read every year on Ash Wednesday). I am drawn to the psalm because its words describe the kind of deep and honest relationship I seek with God. It opens up for me the opportunity to search my soul in a safe space. It moves me away from the abstract and allows me to be my true self.

The psalm starts with an acknowledgment that we all have times in our lives when we feel distant from God. During those times we cry out to God for mercy. Somehow we know we have wronged God either knowingly or unknowingly as we say in our confession. We know we have crossed the line or rebelled against God and neighbor or completely missed the mark.

Oh, we know where we have strayed. Our sins are ever before us.

But we also know the nature of God. We want the abundance of his mercy to shower upon us. We want his steadfast love. In Hebrew, the word used for God's steadfast love (*hesed*) taps into the limitless and unconditional love God has for us. His abundant mercy (*rakham*) is like that of a mother who has a deep and abiding love for her children. In the Hebrew, the word is translated as *womb compassion*.

We lay bare today our human condition and all the different ways we have sinned against God. We are guilty as charged.

Yet we have the courage to stand naked and vulnerable before God whose *hesed and rakham* outweigh our sins. God is justified to rain down his wrath upon us but in all of Scripture God offers a different path (a different way). Thanks be to God!

And maybe this is what I most appreciate about Psalm 51. I find the psalmist to be frank about his sins in a good and healthy way. He acknowledges his shortcomings, his weaknesses, and his willful disobedience. He is the first to say that it is in our nature to gravitate toward sin and it will be with us forever. He is not trying to escape responsibility but he accepts full blame and makes no attempt to find excuses. But at the same time he does not wallow in his despair.

Frustration over his sinfulness and his inability to rise above it gives way to confidence in God. His vocabulary for the nature of God is even richer than how he describes his sins. Given the inescapable quality of his condition, just listen to the list of things he wants God to do for him. It is a beautiful litany and not necessarily self-serving:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin and teach me wisdom. Purge me with hyssop and I will be made clean. Wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

God alone will wash us and cleanse us and teach us his wisdom. God alone has the power to create within us a clean heart and a right spirit. Verse 10 leaves no doubt that God alone is able to accomplish these things. In the Hebrew, the word for *create* is the same word that is used in Genesis 1:1 when in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Even more significant, God is the only one in the Old Testament who creates. Along with the psalmist our hope is in the unique creative ability that only the God of Israel possesses.

No angry and vengeful God is portrayed here. According to the psalmist, the most devastating thing God can do is cut us off from his divine presence. But God assured us that would not happen when God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. We are blessed to be in a relationship with God who can both forgive our sins and create us into a new person. Both are acts of God's grace.

In order for this washing and cleansing and purging to take place we have to declare our total dependency on God. We need to believe with our whole heart and soul and mind that it is God alone who has the power and ability to change our sinful ways.

We should not be foolish enough to think that we can do better (and be better) apart from God. We are asking God to do the work that is necessary to enable better behaviors and a deeper relationship with God. It leads us once more to another place in Scripture that we go to often (Hebrews 4): *Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

When we read this text from the perspective of Psalm 51, we can approach God with confidence. God will love us unconditionally and God will shower us with abundant mercy in spite of our sins. God will be present and with his Holy Spirit, God will sustain us. We can ask to be split open from the inside out and have a thorough make-over. Get inside of us, God, heal our broken spirits, forgive our contrite hearts. Invade us deeply so that your touch changes us from deep within.

As the psalm draws to an end, the new life brought about by God's creative and redeeming work quickly becomes visible. The one who cried out for mercy anticipates being set free to teach others the ways of God. The one forgiven and redeemed will be able to speak from personal experience of the triumph of God's *hesed* and *rakham* (his steadfast love and abundant mercy) that overcomes our sinful nature. The psalmist is now free to sing aloud and declare God's praise so that others (like him) will return to God.

In the midst of our songs, we come to the startling realization that God has no delight in sacrifice. A burnt offering does nothing to please God. The only sacrifice we are truly able to offer God is our broken and contrite hearts. Hearts that seek renewal by our creator God is more than enough.

Listen once more to a reworked version of Psalm 51:

Be kind to us, O God. Be gentle with us. Sin has dried up our hearts. We have hurt people and we have hurt you and let you down.

Be kind to us, O God. Be gentle with us. Reach into your deep and endless store of love. Scrub hard and wash us clean. Scrape away our guilt and make sure to find all of those places that are hard to reach.

Be kind to us, O God. Be gentle with us. You delight in truth so teach us your wisdom. Clear out our lies and soak us in your truth. Create in us a clean heart, O God, and renew your Spirit within us. We will sing of our new freedom. We will praise your kindness with a loud voice and a much lighter heart.

Be kind to us, O God. Be gentle with us. Amen