

“A Broken and Contrite Heart”

Ash Wednesday: 6 March 2019
Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571
Preaching Text: Psalm 51:1-17

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“I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight”

(Malcolm X, 1925 - 1965, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*).

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Let us pray:

**Most merciful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed.
We have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.**

**In your mercy forgive what we have been,
help us to amend what we are, and direct what we shall be;
that we may do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with you, our God. Amen.**

Hear the evening’s lesson:

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.**
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.**
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.**
- 4 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.**
- 5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.**
- 6 You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.**
- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.**
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;**

- let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.**
- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.**
- 11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.**
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.**
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.**
- 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.**
- 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.**
- 16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.**
- 17 The sacrifice acceptable to God[d] is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise** (Psalm 51:1-17).

A couple of decades ago a colleague wrote something still relevant. He wrote:

I went to see a lady in our church who was facing surgery. She had never been in a hospital before, and the surgery was major. I walked into her room. She was a nervous wreck. Then she started crying. She wanted me to pray with her, which I did. By her bed was a stack of books and magazines: *True Love*, *Mirror*, *Hollywood Today*, stuff about Elizabeth Taylor, Madonna, Britney Spears, folk like that. She had a stack of them there and she was a wreck. Which was then it occurred to me: "There is not a calorie in that whole stack to help her through her experience. She has no place to dip down into a reservoir and come up with something . . . a word, a phrase, a thought, an idea, a memory, a person. Just empty."

How marvelous is the life of a person who, like a wise homemaker, when the berries and fruits and vegetables are ripe, puts them away in jars and stores them in the cellar. Then when the ground is icy and barren and nothing seems alive, she goes down into the cellar and, in a matter of moments, it's July and August at her family's table. How blessed is that person.

I do not know what kind of reading material you would take to the hospital to see you through surgery and its aftermath. Nor will I make judgments from here on out. So, if you want to read salacious confessions, pulp fiction, or something even worse, I'll not comment. Nor will I expect to see bedside tables loaded with copies of *War and Peace*, *The Prayers of Peter Marshall*, or Jaroslav Pelikan's five-volume series on *The History of Christian Doctrine*. Read what you want to read. Just

don't expect nourishment from escapist fare, given that nobody ever equated fast food with soul food . . . eaten or read (William Ritter, unpublished sermon "On Storing Up Nuts for the Winter," 9/9/01, FUMC, Birmingham, MI).

If ever there was a scripture lesson which we would never confuse with fast food type of reading, then it is Psalm 51. This psalm is one of the seven Penitential Psalms of the Christian tradition (for others, see: Psalms. 6; 32; 38; 102; 130; 143). Theologically rich and poetically powerful, Psalm 51 is an earnest prayer of penitence or contrition in the form of an individual lament. Thus, it is most appropriate for Ash Wednesday.

Nathan brings David a parabolic story prompting David's guilt regarding Bathsheba. Psalm 51 underscores individual sin, and in turn, offers this prayer for personal pardon and restoration. This psalm seeks cleansing from "iniquity" and "sin." Restoration and a return to godliness, as well as a "clean heart," stand at the core of this stinging psalm. The pray-er knows that only God can purify. The pray-er asks God to grant the pray-er both bliss and nourishment via God's "holy spirit." Thus restored, this pray-er proclaims God's ways.

The lectionary assigns Psalm 51 for Ash Wednesday. This, of course, is the day that begins our Lenten worship season. This psalm's expresses the import of our forty days leading to Easter Sunday. We pledge ourselves during Lent to a time of self-deliberation and penitence. As such, Lent is a season to recognize our disobedience to our side of the covenant with God. It is in the season of Lent that the church sets aside a time for us to acknowledge that we need the mercy only God can give.

Psalm 51 offers us an aching awareness of trespasses: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." Not only is sin confessed; we, by means of this penitential psalm/prayer, also bemoan that we have sinned from birth.

There is a church skit that reflects our Christian reality. Peter is seated at the pearly gates, and a woman approaches. "Tell me why I should let you in," Peter says. "I have gone to church my whole life," the woman says. Then Peter reminds her that she had been unkind to some of the church members. "Well," she says warily, "I brought groceries every week to my elderly neighbor." Peter points out that she often used the neighbor's money to buy also a few things for herself.

The conversation continues like this, and the woman becomes more and more defensive and distraught, clearly beginning to panic at the thought that she might not be allowed in to heaven. Finally, she falls to her knees in tears and desperation and says, "Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned." Instantly, the pearly gates swing wide open and Peter says, "Welcome home, my child."

This skit illustrates that we are sinners and utterly dependent upon God for forgiveness and salvation. This is not the end of the story, however. There is a promise integral in the psalm, one of re-creation and redemption, recognizing that God not only saves us from our sins, but also gives us new life. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me," the psalmist prays. "Restore me to the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit" (Andrea Wigodsky, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*).

A moving part of Ash Wednesday worship is the imposition of ashes when the celebrant says: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The intention is not morbid. Rather, it is a visible sign of which the psalmist writes—we are wholly dependent on God.

The psalmist reminds us that God calls us to live. In addition, God knows that we are in need of the salvation and redemption that comes from God alone. As Frederick Buechner writes of our Lenten journey: “It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end” (Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark and later in Beyond Words*).

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