

SERMON TEXT FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

PREACHED MARCH 1, 2017 at ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: **Psalm 51.1-17**; Joel 2.1-12 12-17; Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21; 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10

With ash and soot we begin this Lenten season. We hear the words of God through the prophet Joel imploring us to *"Return to the Lord, your God, for [God] is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."*

Is **this** the way we view God: as **gracious, merciful, loving**, reticent to punishment? Or do we see God as a **vengeful, punishing god** for which nothing we do is ever good enough? If the latter is more the truth for you, then listen on.

I invite you to turn your attention to Psalm 51. It is a **penitential** psalm that the Hebrew Bible puts in the mouth of a **single voice** crying out to God for deliverance from a life-threatening situation. This magnificent prayer for forgiveness is most appropriate for a day in which ashes are placed on our foreheads.

In this psalm, the voice crying out comes from one of God's great **servants** (and author of many of the psalms): **King David**. The life-threatening **situation** he is in the midst of (or has endured) is his **guilt** over some pretty bad **behavior**.

The historical background for Psalm 51 comes from 2 Samuel 11-12, but here's a synopsis. David, in residence in **Jerusalem** while his armies are battling the Ammonites, observes **Bathsheba**, the wife of one of his military generals, bathing on her rooftop. He is in **lust**. He **sends** for her, "**knows**" her (in the biblical sense), and then conspires to have her husband, Uriah, **killed** in battle. When David's best friend **Nathan confronts** David with the implications of what he has done, David's only defense is, *"I have sinned against the Lord."*

And thus we read the text of tonight's psalm with this **context**: knowing David to be a sinner to the nth degree, but also recognizing that, in the God of the **Old** Testament as well as the **New**, there is **grace** and **forgiveness**.

The psalmist begins with four pleas to God: *"have mercy, blot out, wash me, cleanse me."* The psalmist seeks cleansing from *"my transgressions," "my iniquity,"* and *"my sin."* These three are the most

common words used in the Hebrew Bible to describe acts committed against God and humanity.

The pleas to God **continue**, verse after verse: *"Purge me ... and I will be clean ... wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."* The psalmist longs to *"hear joy and gladness"* and to be able to *"rejoice,"* yet imploring God to *"hide your face from my sins," "blot out all my iniquities," "create in me a clean heart,"* and *"put a right spirit within me."*

The speaker pleads with God not to be **cast away** from his presence. He fears that if God sees the depth of his sinfulness, that is **all** that God will see. It is as if the psalmist is saying, "Look at **me**, see **me**, your **beloved**, not the **treachery** that I have committed."

Psalm 51 is a **heartfelt cry** to God from one who has committed an **unspeakable sin** in the eyes of God. The **particulars** of the sin do not have to be spelled out - **God** knows the details. One of my colleagues once remarked that David **sinned big** and **repented big**, and the biblical text remembers him as *"a man after God's own heart."*

The words of Psalm 51, then, are fitting for the **great king** of ancient Israel. And, they are just as fitting for worshippers in the 21st century. **Our** sins may not be as **public** and **blatant** as David's, but we **all** fall short of living in the steadfast love and mercy of God.

In this season of Lent, then, our focus is on our **sinfulness** – the fact that we are, indeed, in **bondage** to sin. We **can't** escape it, no matter how hard we try. And God **knows** that. As **sinful** and **flawed** as we may be, we must not forget that **God is with us**. God loves us so much that he gave his only Son to die for **us**, for our **sins**. As Paul writes to the church at Corinth, *"be reconciled to God. For our sake God made Christ to **be sin** who **knew** no sin, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God."*

Lent is a season of calling us back to **right relationship** with God, a God who is eternally "for us" with the **endless love** of a mother for her child. The God who is **everlasting love** will never **abandon** us, no matter **what** our guilt says. Steadfast love and abundant mercy not only **heal** us of the stain of sin, but also of the lie of our worthlessness. Who among us doesn't need to hear **that** word?

The **ashen cross** we receive this night reminds us that while we **come** from dust, and will **return** to dust, we also are born of **grace**. We have come this far by **faith**. We are headed, with Jesus, for a **cross** and an **open tomb**. Let us journey together in faith. AMEN