

Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. One of the traditional scripture readings for tonight is our Responsive Reading from Psalm 51 which King David wrote after the prophet Nathan confronted him with his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. Of all the writings in the Bible, this particular psalm best captures the outpouring of the human heart agonized by the consciousness of sin. It expresses the deep conviction of the sin of one who repents and seeks God's forgiveness. It is a confession of sin that explores the deepest reaches of human guilt. It tells of a person who like many of us has given in to temptation and now realizes the consequences of their mistake and feels the guilt.

But it is also a prayer of joy as the writer on the road to forgiveness walks on tiptoes to touch God's grace and mercy. These words are uttered in the assurance of God's steadfast love that cleanses us from any wrong. The psalmist proclaims a gracious God, who, like a master potter, remolds us, recreates us, and puts a right spirit within us. In essence, God wipes the slate clean for us.

Psalm 51 offers a model for our journey through Lent, a time of self-examination, repentance, and spiritual growth.

In this psalm, David asks for God's mercy. He does not ask for God's gentleness, tolerance, disregard of sin, or that God would look the other way and give him a break. Unlike many people today, David does not blame anyone or anything else for his sin. He does not make excuses, but takes full responsibility for his actions. Note that the word "me" or its equivalent is used thirty-four times. David asks that God make him pure. In a way, David realizes how dirty he is. David desires washing, cleansing, and purging; in other words, he needs a good scrubbing, not with some Dove soap, but Lye soap.

He knows that the process will not be easy, because he understands that what God really desires is "a broken and contrite heart." These words of verse 17 are essential to our understanding of Lent and forgiveness. Our most important act toward God is repentance from sin. No other act of obedience can be fully carried out when we attempt to hide unconfessed sin. The sacrifice that God really wants is a clean heart – one that is broken by sin, humbled by His presence, and willing to obey His will. God does not want a show of ceremony; what He really wants is an attitude of humility and trust. Anything less would reduce the covenant between God and us to mere bargaining. And God doesn't want to make a deal with us; He wants to have a personal relationship with each one of us. Whether or not we repent, we cannot hide sin from God or simply dismiss it in our lives; it will ultimately be revealed.

David approaches God fully aware of his sinfulness and his inability to rise above that sinfulness on his own. David recognizes the importance of honesty in his heart and seeks God's wisdom in

order to find the truth. David also recognizes that a dramatic change must occur deep within himself. He knows the extent of his own sinfulness since birth, and he acknowledges this sinful nature. Despite his lifelong relationship with God, David now desires a closer relationship and a more powerful transformation that only God can accomplish.

So, David offers God his greatest gift: his willingness to be transformed. He now seeks the joy of God's salvation. He will respond by sharing his experience of God's wonderful love and forgiveness with others; giving his personal testimony. With proper motivation, David will offer the right sacrifices: his heart and his obedience. Offering heart and soul to God can fill the empty places in our lives with new meaning.

It has been said that "short accounts make long friends." And that's what we need to do with God; keep short accounts. You should see the face of God every morning before you see the face of any other human being. If you come to the cross every morning, you are never more than one day's journey from the cross. Just keep close to the cross and close to Jesus, and if anything has gone wrong during the day or evening, do not sleep until that account has been settled. Take your troubles and sin to Christ, be honest with Him, tell Him you are sorry, and ask for His forgiveness. He delights to forgive. That is what is meant by keeping a short account with God.

Too often we think that we have to do something to merit God's mercy and forgiveness. We desperately try to make ourselves acceptable before we turn to God for reconciliation. But the good news of the gospel is that God takes the initiative to give mercy and restore us to His family. He did that when He sent His Son to die for our sins on an old rugged cross. All we have to do is seek Him and His forgiveness.

While sin is bad news in itself, the good news is that God's grace is greater than all our sins. David declares: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless in your judgment." The *Message* paraphrases it this way: "You're the One I've violated, and you've seen it all, seen the full extent of my evil. You have all the facts before you; whatever you decide about me is fair. I've been out of step with you for a long time." Genuine repentance comes when we see ourselves as God sees us. We cannot by our own power get the haunting and nagging feeling of sin out of our minds and lives without the grace of God.

The psalmist acknowledges that he has sinned against God and has done what is evil in the Lord's sight. During Lent we have the opportunity to reflect on our own lives, to seek out those things that have offended God, to repent of them, and to accept God's mercy. Someone once said that "man is born with his back to God, and that repentance is simply turning square

around.” A soldier has defined repentance in three commands: “Halt, About Face, and Forward March.” In other words, get in step with God.

Sometimes we don’t halt and turn about face to God because we think that God has forgotten about us or doesn’t care. Some of us may feel like the little boy whose last name was Cummings. He thought that the preacher didn’t like him anymore because during his sermon the preacher kept referring to how bad our shortcomings are. And since this boy was the shortest in his family, he took it personally. But the truth is that the preacher, like God, still loves the little boy no matter how short a Cummings he was.

The good news for all of us is that sin and the guilt that comes with it can be fixed. The psalmist prays: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a right spirit within me.” The Apostle Paul understood that the work of God in Jesus Christ is a creative act when he wrote in First Corinthians that “if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old is gone, the new one has come.” The word “create” means “to bring something out of nothing,” as something new, which cannot emerge from what now is, and which only God can fashion. This is what God can do for us; He gives us a fresh start.

But we must be willing to seek this new life and the Lord. The Hebrew for the word “heart” in verse 10 does not refer to the seat of emotions as in English. Rather “heart” here refers to the mind and will from which all actions and reason spring. We can’t cleanse ourselves, but we can make ourselves available to the cleansing powers of the Lord. David is asking for a clean mind and a new will. This is another critical point in this writing. By asking God to create a clean heart in him, David is interested in more than just forgiveness of his sins, he wants to turn his life around and become a better person. You know we can sin and ask God to forgive us and then go right back and do the same thing again. David does not want that; he wants to put his past sins behind him and try to live as God wanted him to do. To me there is a big difference between asking for forgiveness and seeking true repentance.

Visiting a mining town, a young minister was being escorted through one of the coal mines. In one of the dark, dirty passage ways, he noticed a beautiful white flower growing out of the black earth of the mine. “How can there be a flower of such purity and beauty in this dirty mine?” the minister asked. “Throw some of the coal dust on it and see,” was the reply. The minister did so and was surprised that as fast as the dirt touched those snowy petals, it slid right off to the ground, leaving the flower just as lovely as before. It was so smooth that no dirt could cling to the flower.

Our hearts can be the same way. We cannot help it that we live in a world filled with sin, any more than the flower could change the place where it was growing. But God can keep us so pure and clean that although we touch sin on every side, it will not cling to us.

So in closing, let's heed the commands of the soldier: let's halt what we are doing; do an about face and return to the Lord; and then march forward as a new person; one totally dedicated to the Lord; one in step with God. This year let's not waste the next forty days of Lent, but make a concerted effort to really strengthen our personal relationship with the Lord.

The writer of Hebrews says: "Let us throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." We are told to travel light! Do not carry the excess baggage of guilt, of regrets from the past, or of unforgiven sin. Tonight, as you come forward give God all that excess baggage that is holding you back from becoming the person that God wants you to be and the person that you want to be. Then run the race, the race to the cross where Your Lord and Savior is waiting to enrich your life with love beyond all expectations, with grace that covers all our shortcomings, and with forgiveness that washes away all our sins and guilt. Let's get in step with God during Lent. Amen