

***It Starts With the Heart***

Psalm 51:1-17

Ash Wednesday

February 25, 2009

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins

Tonight as we observe Ash Wednesday, we also observe the beginning of the season of Lent. Lent is a 40-day period leading up to the celebration of Easter, not counting Sundays. It is a season during which the Christian is called to reflect on the cross and the resurrection, and in that reflection to be a bit more intentional about turning our hearts toward God and God's grace and mercy. Historically, Lent has been used for the instruction of persons for baptism and profession of faith on Easter Sunday; for the calling back of those who have experienced estrangement from the Church; and for efforts by all Christians to deepen their piety, devotion, and readiness to mark the death and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

As a way of encouraging one another to deepen our piety and devotion, I have decided to use the Psalms as the focus of our Lenten journey. More than any other body of work in the Bible, the Psalms provide us with the language of faith. The Psalms witness to us the gamut of human experience--joy, despair, hope, trust, doubt, fear, praise, reverence, and much more. In addition, the Psalms model for us how we should approach God, as well as how God addresses us as his people. Walter Brueggemann writes,

“In season and out of season, generation after generation, faithful women and men turn to the Psalms as a most helpful resource for conversation with God about things that matter most... In [the Psalms] the community of faith has heard and continues to hear the sovereign speech of God, who meets the community in its depths of need and in its heights of celebration. The Psalms draw our entire life under the rule of God, where everything may be submitted to the God of the gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

During the Wednesdays of Lent, we will hold evening vesper services in the sanctuary, beginning at 6:00 p.m. The vesper services will use song, scripture and prayer to help us reflect about our faith and the God who is faithful to us. The central text for each Wednesday evening will be the Psalm that will be the sermon text for the following Sunday. I hope that you will use the Wednesday services as a way of attuning your heart to the language of faith we will explore during the season of Lent.

Among the efforts by Christians to deepen their piety and devotion is the practice of fasting, or giving up something for Lent. (A quick aside for those of you who are giving up something for Lent: to take the lead from our Catholic brothers and sisters in the faith, Sundays are never days of fasting--they are a celebration of the Resurrection, and the glorious Day of the Lord. Therefore, it is breaking neither the spirit nor the letter of the law if on Sundays you engage in whatever it is you are giving up for Lent.) Fasting is a spiritual discipline that is meant

to reinforce in each of us a greater reliance upon God in all things. It is a practice associated with penance, which is a recognition and a detesting of our own sins, and a resolve to turn away from our sinfulness and toward God.

In the Bible there were certain ritual characteristics of fasting, including the wearing of uncomfortable garments called sackcloth, the tearing (or rending) of garments as a sign of our sorrow, and the application of ashes upon the head. In our readings this evening, there are references to these practices.

But the act of fasting is more than just the abstinence from certain things or activities. Fasting is more than engaging in certain rituals. The fasting that God desires is not the rending of our garments, but the rending of our hearts. What God desires from you and me is not so much a going through the motions; rather, what God desires from you and me is an opening of our hearts to God's law and God's love. "God desires the people to rend [our] hearts, rather than [our] garments; to approach God in sincerity, rather than by ritual; to beseech God's mercy through genuine mourning for sin, rather than by ... rite... God wants the whole person, not some outward sign..."<sup>2</sup>

You see, it starts with the heart. What people see on the outside is nothing if it does not reflect what is in our hearts. Ashes on the forehead are worthless if they do not correspond to a sincere desire to turn away from sin and toward God. This evening during the imposition of ashes, let your coming forward be motivated by the yearning of your heart for a restored relationship with God.

Some people think that the Ash Wednesday focus on our sinfulness and our mortality is rather morbid. And if that were all there were to our observance tonight, then those people would have a good point. But the truth is we don't reflect on our sinfulness just to realize how bad we are; instead, our reflection on our sinfulness is meant to set us on the path of return. In her book, *Heart Whispers*, Elizabeth Canham has this to say about our Ash Wednesday focus:

---



---

We do not search out our sinfulness in order to indulge in feeling bad but to set ourselves on the path of return. Like the lovable character in the movie *E. T.*, who pointed a glowing finger toward his planet as he uttered his plaintive cry, "Home," we were created with a deep sense of where we belong. Often alienated, sometimes far away, we find the warmth of the God in whose image we have been made touches us; and our hearts respond with desire for homecoming. Always we find a place set for us at the welcoming banquet table.<sup>3</sup>

---



---

Our journey toward the glorious celebration of Easter begins in our heart. Our journey starts when in our heart we long for "home". Our journey starts when our hearts cry for the love and mercy and grace of God to restore us unto Him.

Rend your hearts, and not your garments, says the prophet Joel.

The sacrifice that God desires, says David, is a broken and contrite heart.

It starts with the heart. Which way is your heart turning tonight?

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1984), p. 15

<sup>2</sup> David J. Lose, in David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2: Lent Through Eastertide*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth J. Canham, *Heart Whispers*, Nashville: Upper Room Books, p. 130; this quote was the daily reflection for February 25, 2009, at [www.upperroom.org/daily](http://www.upperroom.org/daily)