

## ***Our Deepest Longing***

Psalm 51:1-17

March 1, 2009

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins

Today is the first Sunday in 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 says that "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>

Today we turn our focus onto psalm 51. The 51<sup>st</sup> psalm is one of the seven psalms traditionally classified as "penitential" psalms. And of the seven penitential psalms, perhaps none other does a better job of capturing the essence of the human experience of alienation from God and longing for a restored relationship with God than does the 51<sup>st</sup> psalm. There is great familiarity to the words of the 51<sup>st</sup> psalm. The words have been put to music countless times, especially the refrain, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me..." It finds itself in our Ash Wednesday liturgy every year. The psalm itself has been used in the context of corporate worship, namely, as a prayer of confession. Some have suggested that the 51<sup>st</sup> psalm has been used more in worship than any other scripture text, but I would maintain that the Lord's Prayer has it beat in that category.

It is always a challenge to preach from a text that is so familiar. Sometimes people will tell me that it must be easy to preach from John 3:16, or from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, or other familiar texts. But the truth is, the more dear a text is, the more it is a source of devotion and meditation, the greater is the challenge for the preacher, for it is nearly impossible to preach as a lesson or in some expository way. And so I come to this text this morning in awe at its language, moved by the faith it demonstrates for us, and at the same time fearful that my own words will be inadequate to the task.

There is a beauty to the words of the 51<sup>st</sup> psalm. The language of the psalm is that of a person who recognizes there is a chasm between the psalmist and God, and there is a deep longing for restoring the relationship that has been broken. There is something in the words of the psalmist that reflect the inner feelings of virtually every human being, a longing for God that is universal in the human experience. The psalmist recognizes that he is not where he needs to be, and he cries out to God for help.

The other day at the Men's Breakfast, John Buddin shared a devotion that spoke to this recognition that we aren't where we need to be. It came from the Upper Room devotional guide for last Wednesday. It started with this question about our own experience: Have you ever been driving down the road automatically--listening to the radio or letting your mind wander--only to discover as you reached a corner, "Oh, no! I'm not supposed to go to work. I'm supposed to be going to the store" (or some other place). Most of us have had that kind of experience. We get used to getting in the car and heading toward our usual destination. At some point, we realize we're not heading where we want to go. We're going in the wrong direction.<sup>2</sup> It is that kind of realization that the psalm identifies--the realization that our lives are going in the wrong direction.

"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your steadfast love and your great compassion."<sup>3</sup> The cry to God arises out of a recognition of our brokenness and a desire to be forgiven by, and restored unto, God. In the first two verses we find the entire Old Testament vocabulary for sin: There is the word "transgression," which describes a breaking of a law, a rebellion, a crossing of a forbidden boundary; there is the word "sin" which speaks of our falling short of the standard of righteousness that God holds out for us, a failure to be the kind of people we are called to be; and there is the word "iniquity", which describes the corruption of our very being, a characterization of our nature as sinners. The heart that cries out to God first of all must recognize that our brokenness and our sinfulness has violated our relationship with God.

But it is more than confession of sin that emanates from the heart of the psalmist. It is also a great longing for forgiveness. If it is true that our hearts despair at the loss of our relationship with God because of our sinfulness, it is also true that the solution to our sinfulness lies beyond our own abilities. The solution to our sin must come from God. Take a look at the petitions of the psalm--every one of them seeks help from God, every one of them beseeches God to take what is wrong in our lives and make it right: Cleanse me, wash me, blot out, have mercy→ these are words of desperation to be made whole, to be forgiven, to have what is wrong made right.

The words of cleansing and washing and blotting out have their roots in the ways by which scribes would re-use papyrus for writing. In ancient times papyrus was a rare commodity not to be wasted. And so when a writing was to be discarded, the scribe would take a wet cloth and wipe all the ink off of the papyrus, and then turn the papyrus 90 degrees and re-use it for writing. In the same way the heart seeks forgiveness--that our sins would be erased, wiped away, that we may begin again with a clean slate.

Cleanse me, O God. Forgive me.

The heart cries out from a position of brokenness, and we seek forgiveness. But that is not all. For after forgiveness, the psalmist cries out to be made new: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.<sup>4</sup> The word that is translated as "Create" is *bara'*, and in the Bible God is the only subject for that verb; no one else can create in the sense of the word, *bara'*. What the psalmist is asking for is something that only God can do. Only God can create something new. Only God can take our old, sinful selves, and make us into a new creation. You and I don't have the ability to become a new creation--that is something that God must do for us. You see, our hope does not lie in our own ability, but in the belief that God can change us, that God can create us anew.

James Mays, a former professor at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, has called the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm "The Liturgy of the Broken Heart."<sup>5</sup> Liturgy is the way we piece together our worship to depict various spiritual movements that are taking place. The Liturgy of the Broken Heart is an appropriate name for the 51<sup>st</sup> psalm, because it begins with our confession of brokenness, then proceeds with our cry for help, and then seeks

something new from God. There is a movement of our heart toward God and the healing and hope that God can grant unto us.

The Liturgy of the Broken Heart is also an appropriate naming of the spirit with which we ought to approach the season of Lent, for it is with broken hearts and empty hands that we look to our Lord for redemption and salvation. To pick up once again the metaphor of suddenly finding ourselves going where we weren't intending to go, Lent is a time for us to put on the brakes and consider where it is our hearts need to point. It's time for us to take stock of where we're heading, and to discern whether or not that's where we really want to go.

St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in thee, O Lord." I think the essence of the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm is a restlessness of the soul that arises out of the recognition that we are not resting in God, that we are separated from God, and we desperately need God to make things right. It is our hearts' deepest longing to be in communion with the living God, who is gracious and compassionate, abounding in steadfast love.

This Lent, I challenge you to take time to consider your own spiritual brokenness, your sinfulness. Don't do it just to indulge in feeling bad about yourselves, but to anticipate the grace and mercy and compassion by which God will meet the penitent heart. Just like that loveable character in the movie "E.T.", who pointed a glowing finger to the heavens while uttering his plaintive cry, "Home..." so were we created with a deep sense for where we belong. We belong with God. There is no greater yearning in our hearts, than to come home to the presence of God.

Let us pray.

The very thought of you, O God, stirs deeply in us, and we cannot be content until we find our peace with you and in you. "Lord, restore to us the joy of your salvation."<sup>6</sup> Amen.

---

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

<sup>2</sup> Beverly Kinego, [www.upperroom.org/devotional](http://www.upperroom.org/devotional), February 25, 2009

<sup>3</sup> cf Psalm 51:1

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 51:10

<sup>5</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 203.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 51:12