

Psalm 51- Preached on Ash Wednesday, 2008

¹*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³For 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. ⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. ⁶You 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. ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide 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. ¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹²Restore 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. ¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. ¹⁵O 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. ¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

There is a lot of irony in our national calendar this week. Yesterday was a day of extravagance for a number of reasons. It was Fat Tuesday, or Mardi Gras, where our nation feasted on fatty foods and had parties galore before Lent began. I'm sure there was lots of drinking and partying and eating happening in many college towns.

And yesterday was also an extravagance of politics. It was Super Tuesday, where many states held elections to decide on political candidates for the upcoming presidential elections. CNN and papers are full of political opinions and news about the candidates.

There seems to be a whirlwind of political busyness and extravagance – the candidates spend millions of dollars on campaigning...they travel through towns and states...sometimes 10 or 15 states in a week and it's difficult to follow where they have been.

And now the irony happens because we woke up this morning, on Ash Wednesday, following a day of overindulgence and extravagance, to a day where we simplify things and get back to the basics of our faith. It is a day where we acknowledge that we are human...that we have failings and sins and temptations and we confess that we are not perfect.

In the beginning of the service, we had a time of confession that was different than usual. We confessed to many different things. I, for one, would like to be able to say that some of those confessions don't apply to me...but they do.

I would like to be able to say that some of those confessions don't apply to any one of us...but they do.

And that is one of the reasons why we come forward to receive the ashes right after the confession. Because we need to know that we are human. We need to know that we sin. We need to know that we do things that hurt other people. We need to hear the words, "To dust you are, and to dust you shall return." We need to hear that because then we will not always live in what yesterday was – a day of extravagance and overindulgence.

We need Ash Wednesdays in our lives. We need to examine ourselves and ask, "what am I doing?" And "How am I living as a follower of Jesus?" And sometimes these are uncomfortable questions for us to ask ourselves. We may not like the answer we give. We may not want to change what we're doing.

But that's why those ashes on our foreheads are there. To remind us to look past ourselves and to instead look to the cross of Christ for our guidance.

Is there something in your life that you need to confess? Is there something that you would like to change about yourself? How have you been living your life? There is no better time than now to ask God for help with your life.

We come, like the Psalmist wrote, to pour our sin before God and to pray, "Have mercy on me O God. Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin."

The Psalmist knows, like we all do, that things are not right within us. He cries out to mark himself with the same sign of sin and death that we do.

He doesn't cry out so that he can beat himself up though- he doesn't cry out so that he can wallow in his own shame. The Psalmist cries out to God so that he can turn his back on his sin and turn to face God's new future for him.

He prays to God, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." He cries out to be changed, to be turned back to God. He prays that God will guide him in the ways that will lead him to life.

This is what we pray for tonight.

Lent is a time for reflection and change, and God will walk with you and help you! Don't be afraid to ask God for guidance and direction. And remember that when we confess, there is always the part following the confession that I most look forward to – the forgiveness. Tonight I read the words, “God does not desire the death of sinners, but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live.”

These aren't condemning words! These are words of forgiveness that promise new life! That's why tonight is so important in our walk of faith. We have the opportunity for new life...and Christ will walk with us.

And we are reminded in our Gospel reading that it is not always about the words that you use or what you have to show for yourself – we do not confess or pray to make ourselves look good.

We confess and pray so that God can better walk with us on our journeys. We confess and pray so that we continue looking outward and towards Christ, rather than constantly looking inward and not seeing the needs around us.

Yes, you have ashes on your forehead. But you have ashes in the shape of a cross. The same shape that was put on your forehead when you were baptized. This is a promise and not a condemnation. IN CHRIST, you confess. IN CHRIST, you pray. IN CHRIST, you are forgiven. IN CHRIST you are loved.

May we begin this journey of Lent with ashes on our foreheads, knowing that we are sinners, yet trusting the promise that resurrection will come. Amen.