

Beginning our Lenten Journey

Psalm 51 (below)

King David is arguably the greatest Old Testament figure.

Rising from a lowly shepherd to court musician, from rebel to king,

David is touted in the New Testament as a symbol of faith.

Yet, David was also guilty of one of the great sins of the Bible

Lusting for the beautiful Bathsheba, he finds that she is pregnant with his child.

David then conspires to set up her husband Uriah,

in order to convince all that the child is Uriah's

Failing to accomplish this deceit, David intentionally gets Uriah killed in battle.

The prophet Nathan then leads David into confessing his own sin, and pronouncing the deserved punishment – death.

David receives a punishment worse than his own death – the death of his child

But it is in confessing his sin that David learns of God's grace and forgiveness.

To him is attributed Psalm 51.

Psalm 51 is the most often used Psalm for confession. It is the cry of all who come to understand the depth of their own sin and guilt; and the power of God's forgiveness.

It is the voice of one who realizes how low he has sunk and desires to be restored to wholeness. "Purge me with hyssop", the sinner cries.

While the lofty cedar tree represents the pride of the hills of Lebanon.

The lowly hyssop represents modesty and humility.

The hyssop is a grayish shrub with thin woody branches; neither its leaves nor its flowers are outstanding in any way. It makes do with very little, sometimes even growing out of the smallest cracks in stone, yet it is highly valued for its fragrance and flavor. The hyssop is an important spice and medicinal plant, but in appearance, it is only a small plant that gets crushed underfoot.

David's prayer for forgiveness can be understood like the plea of the leper: "I was proud and haughty like the cedar, and now I beseech you to make me humble like this hyssop with which I ask to be cleansed." It is the prayer with which we begin Lent.

Perhaps more than at any other time in the Christian year, Ash Wednesday is a call to look inward. This day calls us to a journey inward where we encounter and confront all that which causes separation between ourselves and God.

It will usually take some kind of outer voice or event to turn us to the inward journey. It can be the words of a parent who cares, or a friend who dares tell us to take a look at ourselves. Hopefully, for many of us it can be the gentle nudge of the Lenten season.

For King David of Israel, the voice behind Psalm 51, it was Nathan the prophet. Like many of us, David was living in denial of his grievous sin against his top general Uriah. In his greed and lust, David had broken every major commandment with lying, murderous conspiracy, adultery and theft! Yet, when he realizes the depth of what he has done, and how it separates him from God; David confesses his sin and comes back into God's presence

Ash Wednesday is our call to a personal and private journey in the sense that we look deep within at ourselves and not at others. We compare ourselves to Jesus Christ, not to our friends, or neighbors or the thieves and scoundrels who are the *real* bad guys.

This day and this season of Lent is about a singular, focused question:

"How is it with you and the Lord?"

Rather than the traditional "give something up for Lent" practice, make this season a time to "take something on" for Lent. During the days that lie ahead, take a few moments each day to consciously set aside all the outward noise and demands and quiet the inner chattering of your mind. Then look yourself squarely in the soul and take on the question...

"How is it between you and me Lord?"

This is not an easy thing to do or a light commitment to make. Taking a serious, personal, inventory of our souls is something most of us would rather not do. Indeed there are significant barriers to the process.

- We are too busy for our inner lives.

- We are usually *easy* graders when it comes to our own lives and *hard* graders when it comes to the lives of others.
- We are quick to justify ourselves and slow to excuse others.
- We compare ourselves to those we consider beneath us instead of comparing ourselves to Jesus Christ and the glory of God.
- And... we are sometimes fearful of what we will see.

Yet, when we like David, recognize our sin and desire to be cleansed

We are humbled and healed – like lowly hyssop.

This Lenten season,

Draw near to God that he may make you whole.

Amen.

Psalm 51

¹Have 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.

⁴Against 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.

⁷Purge 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.

¹⁰Create 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.

¹³Then 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.

¹⁶For 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.

¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,

¹⁹then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.