

THE STRUGGLE FOR CONSCIOUS CERTAINTY OF FORGIVENESS

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Our homily for this Ash Wednesday evening is taken from our Psalm, with our thoughts guided by the following translated verses:

*(A) clean heart create in me, O Elohim,
and (a) steadfast spirit renew within me.
Do not cause to cast me away from Your Face,
and Your Holy Spirit do not take from me.
Cause to restore to me (the) joy Your Salvation,
and (grant a) spirit of willingness (to) uphold me.¹*

Those words, with many of the other parts of today's Psalm, ring out through the public and private Services of God to His people in congregations like this one. The theme verses for this Ash Wednesday Psalm declare familiar words. They are sung and heard here about two Sundays each month. They are chanted in the Offertory which follows the Sermon in Divine Service III. That part of the 51st Psalm serves then to transition the hearers of the Word from the Service of the Word to the Service of the Sacrament. Hear that section of the Psalm again as we are accustomed to chanting it:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free spirit.²

Those are appropriate words to use to begin the Church's tradition of 40 days of fasting (not including Sundays). In them, we cry out to God, not on account of our giving up anything for Him, but, rather, for that which He has given up for us. Tonight, that remembrance is begun again among us through the almost 13-century old rites of Ash Wednesday. Here, marked with the ashes of mourning, we remember that the Second Person of the Godhead fasted from His full divine glory. This He did

¹ *Psalms* 55:12-14.

² *Lutheran Service Book*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007. pp. 192-193.

not simply during the 40 days in the wilderness following His baptism. He, Whom you know to be Jesus, fasted from His full glory into four decades of mortal life before manifesting His true glory on the Cross. That fasting Jesus did for you, as He bore your sins, in the work of repentance which you cannot perfectly do, into death and the grave. He did this that you need not die in your sins. It is those sins which you remember that move you to confess, as we did in the Psalm of this day:

*Mercy me, O Elohim, as (to) Your steadfast love,
according to (the) abundance (of) Your mercy blot out my transgressions;
cause to thoroughly wash me from my iniquity,
and from my sin cleanse me.³*

That means that your Lenten fast, as the days lengthen and Spring comes forth, is done as you recognize and give thanks for God's merciful love in sending His Son to set aside His glory, to die in your sins, and to rise on the third day to present you right with the heavenly Father. This recognition is given from the opening words of the Psalm. (That comes after a header which may show up in your Bibles which teaches that this may be a Psalm of David after he was called to repentance for adultery and murder by God through the prophet Nathan)⁴.

No matter what its original setting was, this day's Psalm is appropriate for all sinners. That makes it right for you to confess it, and pray it. It is proper for you to offer the Psalm back to God, giving Him His own Word as your sacrifice as a Kingdom Priest in the New Covenant time of Jesus the Christ. (That is why parts of Psalm 51 appear in the Order of Private Confession and Absolution offered at CLC). Tonight, following in the Absolution of our sins, we began proclaiming the Word of the Lord in the changeable readings of the day with these words:

³ *Psalm 51:3-4.*

⁴ *To (the) Choirmaster,*

(a) Psalm to David.

*In (the) coming to him (of) Nathan the prophet,
when he went (in) to Bathsheba.⁴*

*Mercy me, O Elohim, as (to) Your steadfast love,
according to (the) abundance (of) Your mercy blot out my transgressions;
cause to thoroughly wash me from my iniquity,
and from my sin cleanse me.⁵*

Our Lenten fast from singing, chanting and saying the Alleluias began in the Service of the Word, with our individual cries to God for His cleansing joined as one. That He has heard and we believe is on account of His mercy. Following the Antiphon (the verse, half verse, or statement before and after the reading of the Psalm) we each demanded mercy we do not deserve. We implored God for that mercy, not on account of anything we have done, or want to do or not do, think, or say, but we asked for mercy from God because we know and believe that He holds unconditional, enduring, love for those who are named with His Name. We did not point out to God our acts, words, or even silent imaginings of sorrow over or turning from sin. Rather, we asked Him to “blot out” our iniquities and sins, to no longer see them.

This we did through three words of confession of our state before God. The first word (פֶשַׁע) we translate, “transgression.” That describes any and all of our “breaking loose” or “tearing apart” from God and His holy Word. The second word (חַטָּאָה) we translate, “sin.” That defines any and all of our deviations from that which is well-pleasing to God. The third word (עוֹן) we translate, “iniquity.” That word may define any perversion, distortion or misdeed. All three words proclaimed together in this Psalm means that the one reading it in the Faith confesses his or state before God to have both inherited sin and actual sins. From that, we may say that today’s Psalm of Confession declares the human struggle for conscious certainty of forgiveness by anyone who knows his or her sinful state before God. As we have heard, that struggle is won only through the knowledge of and belief in God’s mercy and loving-kindness for sinners. Our Psalm continues, leading us deeper into confession:

⁵ Psalm 51:3-4.

*For my transgressions I know, and my sin (is) ever before me;
against You, You separately, have I sinned,
and the evil in Your sight I have done;
so that You are righteous in Your sentence,
blameless in Your judgment.⁶*

Those words contain a recognition that all sin is against God. That means that even the great and mortal sins – murder, adultery and the like – along with the minor and venial sins – small lies, cheating on your taxes and the like – are all sin. All sin, first or second table offenses, and even those tiny ones you may not think are listed in the meanings which lay behind those words engraved in stone, all sin makes us unholy. That is what you meant, whether you thought about it or not, when you confessed tonight that not only do you know your sins, but that they are against God, and that His judgment of you in your sins is just. Our Lenten confession, that which can be your daily confession, continues:

*Behold, in iniquity I was brought forth,
and in sin did me conceive, my mother.
Behold, truth You desire in (the) inward being,
and in (the) secret heart cause to teach me wisdom.⁷*

The beginning of that text declares that you, and I, and all humans sin because we are sinners. Sin can be called an “inborn, contagious disease.” Sin is what we receive from Adam’s fall. It is passed on, without interruption, as a genetic corruption of man’s original righteousness into all generations. Left unchecked, sin in us brings forth sin out of us.

God does not will us, or desire you, to sin, even though your sin shows His holiness. When God condemns any sinner, God is displayed as the just and holy God. When any human confesses sin, the human must only say, “Amen,” to God’s right condemnation of him or her in his sins. Without God taking action, we each and all

⁶ Psalm 51:5-6.

⁷ Psalm 51:7-8.

would remain under that God's just judgment forever.

Yet, because it is God's alien nature to punish sin, He has provided the antidote to sin. That was done when He made it a reality that sinners could have what our first parents had before Adam sinned – Truth in the inmost parts and Wisdom at the center of our beings. For us, in the text of the Psalm, is a glimpse of God's Truth and Wisdom in becoming one with us in our flesh. This is declared to be believed, proclaimed to be apprehended in the Faith:

*Purge me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Cause me to hear joy and gladness,
let (the) bones You have broken rejoice.
Cause to hide Your face from my sins,
and all my iniquities blot out.⁸*

That section begins with words that are freighted with biblical meaning. The hyssop stalk was used in rites to pronounce lepers truly cleansed from the effects of sin in their flesh, and thus able to rejoin the people of God in His Temple Presence. It was a hyssop stalk that was used to lift up the cheap wine of soldiers to Jesus' parched lips as He hung in the sins of the whole world, in your sins, on the cross.

In the Psalm we ask for God's washing. Here you have evidence of the cleansing He gave, gives and will give to you. With the baptismal waters connected to the Word of God, you were cleansed from sin and sins. In such a place, with the washing of regeneration and renewal, your Name was connected to God's Name. With the water and the Word, your sins were washed away. You were given (in God's sight if not as an earthly garment) the white robes of those whose sins are cleansed.

That is declared to bring you joy this Lenten tide. In hearing that God has taken all your sins upon Him, has died in them and freed you from eternal death and

⁸ *Psalm 51:9-11.*

separation from Him, you have been freed to sing that which God still does:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free spirit.⁹

God creates that clean center-of-person in you through His Word. With that Word comes the right spirit, the Holy Spirit. That Spirit, working through the Word, leads you to Christ-crucified to cover over your sins. He shed His blood to wash you whiter than snow. Jesus, your “Salvation,” presents you before the Presence of the Father, cleansed and regenerated. In Him, you are free in the joy of forgiveness. As you know that, believe that, and live in all that, you are freed to do that which the Psalmist describes of the one who is saved from sins, iniquities, and transgressions:

I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners to You will return.¹⁰

Through this season, God will surely give you opportunities to live out those words. Perhaps they will come as you deal with the infant and child sinners in your family. Maybe you will teach God’s ways to our new Catechism students (the right term for the group is, “catechumenate”). It may be that you, as part of us who are in this congregation, will be able to show sinners the Way, that is Jesus, when they come and hear the Word in this place. It could be that as you live a life of repentance these 40 days of Lent, perhaps fasting (to be known only to God and you) to remind yourself of God’s work for you and others, that God will let others witness the forgiveness you have and be led to turn to Him. It might be that you will never in this life know of the teaching God has led you to declare, and of those whom He has returned to Himself through you. In any event, because you have heard of and believed in the Way God had determined to grant His forgiveness you may rightly say that you are a sinner who has returned to the Lord your God.

⁹ *Lutheran Service Book*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007. pp. 192-193.

¹⁰ *Psalm 51:13*.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Ash Wednesday PM (LSB One-year series)

Psalm 51:1-13; Joel 2:12-19; II Peter 1:2-11; Matthew 6:16-21

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Soli Deo Gloria

Translation, second draft

To (the) Choirmaster,
 (a) Psalm to David.¹¹
 In (the) coming to him (of) Nathan the prophet,
 when he went to Bathsheba.¹²

Let it be, O Elohim, as to Your steadfast love, as to abundant, Your mercy blot out
 my transgressions;
 cause to thoroughly wash me from my iniquity, and from my sin cleanse
 me.¹³

For my transgressions I know, and my sin before me (is) ever;
 against You, You separately, have I sinned,
 and the evil in Your sight I have done;
 so that You are righteous in Your sentence,
 blameless in Your judgment.¹⁴

Behold, in iniquity I was brought forth,
 and in sin did me conceive, my mother.
 Behold, truth You desire in (the) inward being,
 and in secret heart wisdom cause to teach me.¹⁵

Purge me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
 wash me, and than snow I shall be whiter.
 Cause me to hear joy and gladness,
 let rejoice bones You have broken.
 Cause to hide Your face from my sins,
 and all my iniquities blot out.¹⁶

Heart clean create in me, O Elohim,
 and steadfast spirit renew within me.
 Do not cause to cast me away from Your Face,
 and Spirit Your Holy do not take from me.
 Cause to restore to me joy Your Salvation,

¹¹ Psalm 51:1.

¹² Psalm 51:2.

¹³ Psalm 51:3-4.

¹⁴ Psalm 51:5-6.

¹⁵ Psalm 51:7-8.

¹⁶ Psalm 51:9-11.

and spirit of willingness me uphold.¹⁷

Peter's Instructions for living out the Faith:

Καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο δὲ σπουδὴν πᾶσαν παρεισενέγκαντες ἐπιχορηγήσατε ἐν τῇ πίστει ὑμῶν τὴν ἀρετὴν, ἐν δὲ τῇ ἀρετῇ τὴν γνῶσιν, ἐν δὲ τῇ γνώσει τὴν ἐγκράτειαν, ἐν δὲ τῇ ἐγκρατεία τὴν ὑπομονήν, ἐν δὲ τῇ ὑπομονῇ τὴν εὐσέβειαν, ἐν δὲ τῇ εὐσεβείᾳ τὴν φιλαδελφίαν, ἐν δὲ τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ τὴν ἀγάπην.¹⁸

And beside this, giving all haste, having brought alongside the Faith of all of you, let it not be wanting in virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.¹⁹

Jesus' Instructions concerning fasting:

And when all of you may fast, do not continue to become as the hypocrites, gloomy men. For they render their faces unrecognizable wherein they appear to men to be fasting. Truly, truly, I say to all of you, they have received their reward.

(Shift to singular): But you, when you (are) fasting, wash your head and your face wash yourself, wherein not may appear to the men to be fasting...

The Sacrament of the Altar

Who receives this sacrament worthily?

Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words "for you" require all hearts to believe.²⁰

¹⁷ *Psalm 55:12-14.*

¹⁸ Nestle, E., Nestle, E., Aland, B., Aland, K., Karavidopoulos, J., Martini, C. M., & Metzger, B. M. (1993). *The Greek New Testament* (27th ed.) (609). Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

¹⁹ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.* 1995 (electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version.) (2 Pe 1:5-7). Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

²⁰ Luther, M. (1991). *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation.* Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.