

Listening for the Promise

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

February 17, 2021 — Ash Wednesday

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” – Psalm 51:1-2 –

Each year, the season of Lent poses the ultimate question, “How is it with your soul?” And we, who like to be in control, are given a smudge on our forehead to remind us that we are not. This smudge is a reminder that my bank account, my reputation, my skill, my good health, my acts of devotion – none of these can remove the specter of death from my life. See, you and I have this tendency, not only to deny death, but through our transgressions, we deny life with amazing regularity. This season of Lent calls us to examine our hearts, that we might compare ourselves, not to friends or neighbors or fellow disciples, but to Jesus Christ.

Psalm 51 is King David’s attempt to come to terms with his enemy – not some neighboring tribe or some invading nation, but himself. He is dealing with an inner battle of right and wrong, sin and guilt. Much like the battles you and I fight every day, and for David, it’s a losing battle.

David lost his battle with lust when he saw the beautiful Bathsheba bathing on the rooftop. He lost a second battle as lust gave way to adultery, and he lost again when adultery gave way to murder and the death of Bathsheba’s innocent husband. The prophet Nathan confronts David with his sin, and now David must ask, “How is it with your soul?”

The dust of guilt blows hard against him, stinging his conscience and making his life a gritty mess. In his selfish pursuit of pleasure, David has travelled far down a path which has taken him from God. He knows he cannot continue this painful road, so he turns around, turns back to God in an act of repentance. He pleads with God, “Blot out my transgressions. Wash away my iniquity.”

Ash Wednesday reminds us that we have a problem – we are sinners. But Ash Wednesday is also a promise, because that smudge of ash on our foreheads is in the sign of the cross, the sign of life and hope. We sing in worship, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right Spirit within me.” We do so because we know we cannot do better on our own stream. It’s why we need a Savior. It’s why Jesus died. For you. For me. The ability to receive this great love is a gift, that enables us to answer, “It is well.”

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