

AGAINST YOU ONLY HAVE I SINNED

Psalm 51

Ash Wednesday

February 22, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon tonight is based on Psalm 51, which we already read together as our confession of sin. But since it is also the sermon text, and since it is such a significant passage, we will hear it again. This was King David's confession after he was confronted concerning his sins against Uriah and Bathsheba. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Psalm 51, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
- 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- 6 Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
- 11 Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
- 14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

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- 15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
- 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
- 18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;
- 19 then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

You are dying. I am dying. We are all dying. We talked about this a bit last week at Bible study, when we were talking about funerals. You will die, and everyone you love will die ... probably. As Christians, we're really the only ones who have enough hope to even add the word "probably" to that statement. We add that word, because Jesus will come again, and somebody will remain alive until that day. Those people will not taste the final moment of death. We might be among those people or we might not be. But for the purposes of tonight's sermon, let's assume we won't be. We will die. And everyone we love will die. Even if we end up being spared from death, we should be prepared for it. And we are wise to prepare for it, because, up until this point in history, with only one or two exceptions, everyone who came before us has died.

This is part of what we remember on Ash Wednesday. The symbolism of ashes reminds us that we are dying. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19).

But why is this? Why do we die? Perhaps we don't really question this, at least not the general question of death. In specific instances, when someone we know and love dies, we might question why that individual person died. But as a general fact of the universe, we know that's just the way it is. We might even say something like, "Death is just a part of life," which is a really ironic thing to say. So in that way we might think that death is just natural. But it's really not, and we know this too. "God has written eternity into the heart of man" (Eccl. 3:11). That's why we grieve over death. If death really was natural, if it really was the way the universe is supposed to be, there wouldn't be any grieving over it. But we grieve because, deep down, we really know that this is not the way the universe is supposed to be. Death is unnatural.

So why do we die? We die because of sin. We learn this in the third chapter of the Bible (Gen. 3). Adam and Eve rebelled against God. They craved his place. They ate from the forbidden tree. And death began. We die because of sin. As Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death." That is, death is the consequence or result of sin.

Now, when we hear that, it might sound as if God invented death as a punishment for us. But that's not really the way it is. God did not invent death, just as he did not invent sin. God invented life. Death is really just the deterioration or removal of that life. A better way to think of it is that death is the natural consequence of sin. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, they

broke the natural order of the universe. Everything God created was good. There was no sin. There was no death. The universe functioned exactly how it is supposed to. And this included mankind. Righteousness wasn't something Adam and Eve had to work for before the fall into sin. It's just the way they naturally were. God had created them good, so they naturally did what was good. The universe was a perfectly balanced system. But when Adam and Eve sinned, it threw off that system. It introduced brokenness, sin, and death into that system. And it affected everything.

It's kind of like the water pump on your car. The water pump circulates coolant through the engine, back to the radiator, and round and round. So if that pump stops working, it's not just the pump that's broken. But soon the engine starts to get hotter and hotter. Eventually it overheats. Things start to warp and crack, and if you keep driving, the whole engine will be ruined. We might say that the water pump sinned when it stopped pumping coolant. And then that original sin of the water pump spread to the entire engine, and it caused other parts of the engine to start sinning and dying. And pretty soon the entire engine is sinful in the sense that none of it does what it's supposed to do. The original sin of the water pump led to sin and death for the entire engine.

This is not a perfect analogy. But the general point is this: we should not think of death so much as a punishment, as if God is just so mad at us that he wants us all to die. That is actually contrary to God's will. Instead, we should think of it as the natural consequence of sin. When man, the pinnacle of God's creation, stopped functioning the way we were supposed to, it broke the system. It doesn't work right anymore. And we call that death.

This is the relationship between sin and death. So we should not think of sin merely as the bad things we do. If that's how you think about sin, you should broaden your definition. Before all of the bad things we do, sin is the condition we have of just not being right. So when we are tempted to sin, and we feel some inclination to follow that temptation. That is already sin. And I don't mean that in the simplistic definition of sin, as if we chose to have that temptation. But I mean that we are already broken. We are already sinful. That's why we feel the inclination to follow temptation. Sin is not just the bad stuff we do. Sin is the brokenness that already exists within us.

In this way, we can see sin as oppressive. Now, there's also a way in which we might oppress others by our sin. That is, we do bad things that harm them. But sin is also an oppressive force upon us. It's a brokenness that we did not choose. It overpowers us, and it leads us into further sin. Our hearts are already out of order with God's good and gracious will for us. So we sin because we are already sinful. David says in this confession, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity" (51:5). He was sinful even before he was born. We were too.

Now, in the midst of this sin, God invites us to come and confess it, all of it. And he promises to forgive, because he has already forgiven. God's response to sin is not to destroy us. God's response to sin was to take that consequence of death upon himself. And he did. In the flesh of Jesus Christ, God condemned all sin (Rom. 8:3).

In the epistle lesson, we read this great verse from 2 Corinthians 5: "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (v. 20). Jesus became sin. That's literally what it says. "[God] made [Jesus] to be sin." He took it all upon himself. He took it into his body. He actually became it. It's not just that he held it next to himself like luggage on the cross. But he took it into himself. He became sin. And so we know

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that all of it is paid for there. All of it is atoned for. And this gives us freedom now to come and confess.

And we have freedom to confess all of it. We have freedom to confess all of the bad things we have done. And we have freedom to confess that we are just not the way we are supposed to be.

And so, at church, as we come into the presence of the merciful God, we have freedom to not be okay. I want you to hear that. You have freedom here to not be okay.

I suppose it might seem like the opposite sometimes. It might seem like church is the place where people have it all together. If that's how it seems, it's just an illusion. Sometimes we act differently just because the presence of other people changes our disposition.

I might act differently at church than I do elsewhere, just because I see people who brighten my disposition. And it's not really that I try to act differently, but the setting changes my disposition. At the hardware store, I might sulk through the aisles, because something in my house is broken, and I can't figure out how to fix it, and for some reason, that reminds me of everything in the world that isn't right. And in those moments, I know that I'm not okay. But if I see a friendly face, my disposition changes. And that probably gives the impression that I'm better than I really am. And it might fool me too, because in that moment I feel more hopeful. But when that moment is over, I probably go back to not being okay, and it might be something bigger than just a leaky faucet.

This might happen to us at church too. We see a friendly face, and for a moment we forget that we're not okay. So if you look around, and you see people who seem to have it all together, or they seem to be doing well, know that it might just be an illusion. And it's not like they're trying to deceive you. It might just be one of the few moments when they actually feel like they're okay. And remember that you might be fooling yourself too. So remember why you're here. You're here because you're not okay. And this is the place where you have freedom to not be okay. This is where you have freedom to confess that you are broken and sinful. So when I say to you, "Hey, how are you doing?" you can tell me the truth. And you should be able to do the same thing with anyone else here. It might not work other places. Sometimes, people just don't want to hear it. But here, at church, we should have an open ear. This is where not being okay gets addressed. We should be ready to pray for one another and declare forgiveness to one another. To go to church and pretend like everything is fine is like going to the doctor, and when he asks you how you're doing, you say, "Pretty good," when you actually have a broken leg, a headache, blurry vision, and six other things. You have freedom to not be okay, and you even have freedom to admit that it might be your own fault.

In Psalm 51, we read King David's great confession of sin. To say that David was "not okay," would be an extreme understatement. He was a mess, and it was definitely his own fault.

This is David's confession after the prophet Nathan confronted him concerning his sins against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah, which you can read about in 2 Samuel 11.

In short, David saw a beautiful woman, and he wanted her. She was the wife of one of his soldiers, who was off fighting in battle at the time. So it was very dishonorable. Nevertheless, David sent for her and slept with her. She conceived a child. When David learned about it, he tried to cover it up by calling her husband back from battle. David hoped he would go home and sleep with his wife, think the child was his, and no one would be the wiser. It didn't happen, and David needed another plan. So he sent Uriah back to the battle with a letter ordering the commander to put Uriah on the front line, and then, when the fighting gets fierce, fall back so

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that Uriah would fall to the enemy. Then, with Uriah dead, David could take Bathsheba as his own wife. It amounted to murder, and not just the murder of Uriah, but also of the other soldiers who were on the front line with him.

Clearly, David sinned against both Uriah and Bathsheba. But in his confession he says to God, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (51:4). That seems strange.

But David’s right. What David recognizes here is that, first and foremost, he sinned against God. Uriah and Bathsheba were both created in the image of God. They belonged to God. They were his possession. By harming them, he was sinning against God. And God had joined Uriah and Bathsheba together as one flesh. By taking Bathsheba, he was sinning against the bond God created. God possessed Uriah and Bathsheba. He loved them. David stole from God. Every sin is, first and foremost, a sin against God.

We might think of our sin purely in terms of the harm caused to our neighbors. And so we might say, “As long as no one gets hurt, there’s no sin.” But that is never true. Sin always damages someone, often in ways we cannot see. A better way is to see every sin as a sin against God. This doesn’t take our neighbors out of the equation. It actually puts them in the proper place, because they belong to God, and he cares about their wellbeing more than anyone.

Furthermore, God sees everything. If we think only in terms of our neighbors, we might be tempted to cover up our sin. David was able to hide his sin from everyone’s sight, or so he thought. But he had “done what is evil in [God’s] sight” (51:4). There was no hiding it.

But when the prophet Nathan confronted David, David confessed, and God immediately forgave his sin. This is God’s desire. Every sin we commit is against God and is done in his sight. This is terrifying. But God has also promised to forgive. And that is his great desire. He does not wish that we would die. His will is to save us from the consequence of sin. He desires to forgive and heal. The payment has already been made by Jesus on the cross.

So God invites us to confess. He invites us to confess that we are not okay. He invites us to confess that we have hurt others by what we done and by what we have left undone. He invites us to confess that we have sinned against him in thought, word, and deed. He already knows all of it. But he invites us to confess, and he promises to forgive and heal.

When David finally confesses, he asks for mercy (51:1). He asks for forgiveness (51:1). He asks for cleansing (51:2, 7). And he asks for a new and clean heart (51:10).

This is revival. Revival doesn’t necessarily mean that you get excited or really fired up. It simply means that God cleanses you. He gives you a new heart. He brings life where once there was only sin and death. Wherever there is forgiveness of sins, there is revival.

So life and revival always follow confession. We never find revival by pretending we’re okay. We never have revival by hiding our sins against God. But revival comes when we confess that we are not right, that we have sinned against our neighbors, and we have sinned against God. Then, because of the innocent sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, God forgives and cleanses us. That’s when he revives us to new life. He is already merciful to you, so come, confess, and be healed. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.