

Hope for a New and Right Spirit

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Psalm 51:1-12 (NRSV)

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.

For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.

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.

Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my parents (mother) conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

This Psalm is one of my personal favorites. I am particularly drawn to the words,  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

When I gave my life to God as a teenager, this was the psalm that spoke to my heart. I am titling this message, Hope for a New and Right Spirit.

This psalm is generally classified as a prayer for help. But what makes this psalm different is that the petitioner needs help to get out of a mess he/she has created. This

psalm is frequently attributed to King David after he had an affair with the beautiful Bathsheba and she became pregnant. David tried to cover up the sin of his adultery, and the coverup was worse than the adultery. As one Hebrew bible scholar wrote, David broke at least half of the 10 commandments in this one shameful act and the ensuing coverup. This story of David, Uriah, and Bathsheba is found in 2 Samuel chapter 11.

Uriah, Bathsheba's husband was away at war when King David spotted Bathsheba from his palace balcony and summoned her to come to him. David had sex with her and she became pregnant. Then the messy coverup began. David had Uriah (the husband) come home from battle thinking he would sleep with his wife and then everyone would think the baby was his.

But Uriah being a good soldier would not allow himself the pleasure of going home and being with his wife while his fellow soldiers were on the battlefield. So since that strategy didn't work as David had hoped, David sent word to have Uriah placed at the front of the battlefield knowing he would most likely be killed. Then David would be free to take Bathsheba as his wife.

David knew he was wrong the whole time, while committing adultery, and while plotting and carrying out the cover up, including the murder of Uriah.

And let's be clear, the affair was not consensual. Bathsheba endured and survived her #metoo moment. She did not have the agency to refuse the king's sexual advances.

In other words, Bathsheba was raped and ended up pregnant from the rape. Now that

is a sermon I have never heard preached. Maybe someday I'll have the opportunity to flesh that out.

My point in sharing all of that story is to say, it is not always someone else who makes our lives miserable. If we are honest, we have made some poor choices along the way. We have not always been the saintly crowd we are today. Some of us are living clean lives today only because we can't do what we used to do. It is hard to get in much trouble when we are in bed by 9 pm each night. Amen! But there were times, when we got in our own way and we got in God's way. There have been times when God tried to direct us in our relationships, and with our children. But, we decided to ignore that still small voice and do it our way.

When we should have been silent and listened to another's point of view, we were way too busy pontificating because we felt entitled, or we had more experience, and more education. In times of uncertainty about a job or a career move, instead of facing our fears and naming our demons, we choose to medicate with alcohol, marijuana, sex, or by running up our credit cards.

But eventually, those poor decisions, those selfish decisions, those fearful decisions, will come back to haunt us. They will catch up with us. Today, on this fifth Sunday of Lent and in this season of reflection, we are encouraged to take inventory of where we are with our walk with God and with our neighbors near and far. In our quiet moments, we confess that there are some places in our lives that are a mess. We know they are a mess because we are not satisfied or happy with the way things are. Those

places of discontent may not be because of what someone else did to us, but because of our own poor judgement and thoughtlessness.

Some of our health challenges today are because we refused to stop eating greasy, fatty, sugary foods. We also found every excuse we could find not to exercise for the past 25 years. We indulged our addictions and now we wonder how are we going to get out of this health crisis.

Sometimes our messes are not about our individual transgressions. We can mess up as a community.

All over this country, churches are wondering how are they going to get out of the mess they are in. Churches are struggling to keep their doors open, because they have forgotten what mission means. They have lost their passion to share the gospel story. They have forgotten their first love of serving Jesus.

Today's gospel text from John 12 is where Jesus said, if I be lifted up I will draw all people to myself. Many congregations (Not SFBC) would rather die than reach out to their neighbors who look different, speak a different language, and have different tastes in music. I recently spoke with lay leaders who thought their pastors were hired hands and paying them more than \$25,000 was paying them too much! How are these churches going to get out of the mess they have created?

Young people are marching for their lives next Saturday, because generations before them, *our generation*, refused to stand up to the NRA and gun lobbyists and ban the sale of assault rifles and guns whose sole purpose is to murder multitudes of people in an instant. Our society is in free fall when we become callus to school shootings and when child murders become common place. Our hearts ache not only because of what someone else did, but because of *our* actions or in this instance *our* inaction.

The author of Psalm 51 knew he messed up, yet he also knew the first place to go in good times and in bad times is to God. Right up front, before he speaks about his indiscretions, he acknowledges the presence of God—even while feeling guilty and racked with sorrow. We serve a God of mercy who is only a prayer away. God's love is unconditional. And, God will forgive and give us a second, third, fourth, and fifth chance to get this love, justice, and mercy thing right.

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy;

Even on our worst days, God's mercy is available. Even when we make bad decisions, God's steadfast love remains. Yes, there will be consequences for our self indulgent, controlling behavior, but God's, grace is sufficient. God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Even when we act crazy and put ourselves at the center of the universe—thinking it is all about us, God will wait for us to get some sense and get out of God's way. Because, it is always *all* about God!

The psalmist realizes his situation is so bad, that he needs divine intervention. He can't fix this. So he prays,

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Hebrew Bible Scholar, J. Clinton McCann, Jr., wrote, *The human condition is bound to sin and go against God. The creation story gets at that point. While sin is inevitable and pervasive in the human situation, it is not ultimately the determining reality.* In other words, we may be a mess now, but we don't have to stay a mess. Amen In the gospel reading for today, Jesus said, life really begins after some things die. A plant comes to life and produces fruit once a seed dies and is placed in the ground. There may be some things and attitudes we need to let go of in order to experience life more abundantly.

The psalmist prayed, Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. The word used here for create is (bara). This Hebrew word is used when God is at the center of the creative activity. This word for create is not used when we are creating a mess, but is used when God is creating a new thing. Create in me a clean heart is our prayer. God I have made a mess out of this situation, and you and

you alone can create order, and life, and love, and direction in the midst of all of this chaos. God change us and turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh.

When God creates a new thing, a new understanding, new courage, new hope, and a new and right spirit we will experience the joy of God's salvation. There will be a praise on our lips that the angels cannot sing. Fear will give way to joy, sorrow will give way to joy, prejudice will give way to joy, stubbornness..., means..., doubt..., anxiety..., When God creates in us a clean heart, we will be transformed and know that the joy of the Lord is our strength. If we would open ourselves to God's creative power, we will be forgiven and restored to life, and sustained with God's holy spirit.

The hymn writer captured this joy by writing,

This is my story, this is my song praising my savior all the day long. This is my story, this is my song praising my Savior all the day long.

Please stand as you are able and sing our closing hymn, Blessed Assurance, #473