

Psalm 51:1-17

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009

Our New Lease on Life

How we long for renewal! Every area of our life is so easily corroded and stained. Some marriages need renewal. M. Scott Peck observes, we seem to need to fall in love again and again. Hollywood is a good example. Some families need renewal. It is heart-breaking that often it takes illness or death to reunite us. Some churches need renewal when liturgy becomes mechanical, the prayers seem automatic, and programs seem to fall short. But most of all, we need personal renewal – deep inner conviction of our own sin and poverty – followed by a fresh cleansing and filling in of God’s Holy Spirit.

Renewal often follows pain. Pain may come when the calm order of life is broken by illness, economic upheaval, or changes in relationships. It may come when we reflect upon the pace with which life passes and upon our haunting need for meaning or purpose in life.

The deepest renewal is spiritual, and it has a moral base. Since God is holy and gives us a conscience, we cannot be renewed until we deal with our failure before Him. We cannot remove sin by rationalization or denial. At some point, our intellectual and psychological defense mechanisms will be broken. In that moment of truth, when we face our own despair, God promises to come to us. Psalm 51 becomes a key to new life. This great

psalm opens the door to a radical change if we pray this psalm from our hearts.

Tradition indicates this psalm is written by David. David is guilty of a whole chain of sin, leading eventually to murder. In trying to cover his tracks, David only digs his hole deeper. David is no different from us. Finally, the Lord confronts David through Nathan the prophet. David receives mercy when he confesses to Nathan. Psalm 51 is David's deep, prayerful, agonizing response to his own catastrophe.

Psalm 51 is a prayer of lament. As we study this prayer, we are at one of the deepest points of Biblical revealing. We are to be prepared to change. David cries for mercy and for release from the presence and power of sin. His willingness to call on God in the depths of his despair is based on his love of God. God's steadfast love is a covenant love, and His abundant mercy indicates compassion. When we come to God for forgiveness, we call upon the fullness of God's grace. It is through Christ that we come to God the Father. We are bold to confess our sins because the blood of Christ establishes a new covenant which cleanses us from all sin.

Grace in action washes and cleanses us. When our sin is taken over by the love of God, we are renewed. Sin cannot exist before grace. To sin is to move away from God's law, to miss the mark, and ultimately to miss the perfection of God Himself.

There seems to be an odd dignity in taking responsibility for our own sin. We have a tendency to blame everyone and everything except ourselves. To

admit “I did it,” is the first step to healing and recovery. I remember a recurring Family Circus comic strip in which the theme of each child’s shadow said “Not me” when asked who is responsible for something happening. With God there is no fear of punishment or retaliation. When we take our sin to God, there is absolute justice and absolute mercy. God delights in forgiving repentant sinners.

We want to realize all sin is against God because it is God who is in charge of all life. To fall on our faces before the Lord is the start of our new beginning. We will then see our sins as extensions of our rebelling against the living and true God.

David admits his sin, acknowledges the One against whom he sins, and gets to the depths of his sin in utter helplessness. He realizes he must either despair or throw himself completely on God’s mercy. Knowing the love of God, David cries out for cleansing. As we pray for purification, our sin is removed.

This deep cleansing gives David boldness in praying for restoration. He not only wants cleansing; he wants communion with the Lord. David asks God to hide His face away from David’s sin. He is bold in prayer both because of his deep pain and because of his deeper love of God.

David prays to be created anew, a longing ultimately fulfilled in Christ. He wants total newness so he will not fall back into the cycle of sin. Such renewal of heart and spirit can only be done by God Himself.

David requests that God allow him to live in the presence of the Lord. While he does not want God to see his sin, he does want God to see him. To be cast away from God's presence would be to die. This is the ultimate loss. David asks for God's Spirit to not be taken from him since it is the Spirit who brings assurance and comfort.

Beyond a new heart is worship and witness. As David asks for joy, he connects it to salvation, which includes deliverance from the penalty and power of sin. This is God's gift; it is not our salvation but God's. As God brings this deliverance, joy will come. This is the joy of enemies defeated, of victory over death, and ultimately the joy of the Lord's presence. Before the Cross, Jesus promises His disciples that their sorrow at His death will be short-lived. Jesus is here; this is joy! This is true worship before Christ our Lord!

Out of the joy of worship and his resulting readiness, David promises to walk in God's ways and to teach others to follow God as well. Essentially, David becomes a wounded healer. We can each become wounded healers by following David's example.

David brings his prayer to its climax. If David is to worship rightly, God must work within him, by grace. Grace forgives us and brings about our response. Our praise not only reflects God's work; it is God's work. The offering God wants is David Himself. The offering God wants from us is ourselves.

All David can offer to the Lord in worship is his own shattered spirit, his broken and contrite heart. These are the very center of David's being. Sin and judgment have broken him. When we discover God's mercy in His incredible love for us in our sin, we find the final breaking for each of us. As our hearts sob, the Lord puts His arms around us. When we see Jesus expelling demons, forgiving sins, cleansing lepers, and hanging on the Cross, we are broken. We are among those who are forgiven much and who are loved much.

David's personal end in this psalm is he simply comes to God just as he is. After we have tried everything else, we are to try David's path. There are no alternatives.

Psalm 51 is a prayer for renewal. It brings forth streams of mercy to crushed spirits and broken hearts.

The psalm is insistent that to be forgiven is to be changed. It is to slough off the old and put on the new – to exchange the heart of despair for a heart of service to God.

Psalm 51 claims a home in so many hearts because it recognizes a crucial reality about the task of coming to terms with our sin. It is not until we recognize our own sinfulness and corruption before God that we are able to receive empowerment from the One who forgives and redeems. It is through this empowerment we receive our new lease on life. May we each open our hearts to be forgiven and renewed by our God who loves us unconditionally, always. Amen!