

Lectionary (Lent through Eastertide)

David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. Lectionary: *Feasting on the Word*, Year A. Volume 2 (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008).

Scripture texts: Is. 58: 1-9

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice; to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, the Lord will answer: You shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

On Ash Wednesday, Christians read Is. 58 passages for their repentance.

And it is customary to impose ashes on the forehead with the words, saying "Turn away from your sin and be faithful to the gospel (Mark 1:15). This observance signals the beginning of Lent, when many Christians fast or abstain from certain foods to focus on the things that need to be set aside in the course of Lent - things that stand in the way of living wholehearted relationship with God. We can say, it is time to get back with God. Is. 58 passage is challenging those who have to share with those who have not. Isaiah urges the haves to get back on track, to rejoin God's path. Those who have wealth and power must break the yoke of the suffering. The yoke is bonds of oppression of all forms in the world.¹

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- Isaiah urges the haves to get back on track, to rejoin God's path.
- Those who have wealth and power must break the yoke of the suffering.
- The yoke is bonds of oppression of all forms in the world.
- We talked about our captivity in poverty, hunger, illness, habits, substances, anger, hatred- all forms of material and emotional and spiritual poverty and captivity.

¹ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. Lectionary: *Feasting on the Word*, Year A. Volume 2 (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 4-5

PS. 51: 1-17

(Sermon on Ash Wednesday)

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

David, not immediately after his adultery with Bathsheba nor even his arranged murder of Uriah her husband, but only after the prophet forces the king to acknowledge his transgressions. David cries out to God from a heart shredded by the guilt of having been found out, wallowing in the depth of a shame that most of us have never plumbed.²

It is more than solely David's anguished prayer, more than hyperbole born of shame-drenched desperation. It is the prayer of us all as we kneel in the name of Jesus Christ, marked by ash, in the presence of the One "before whom no creature is hidden," before whose eyes "all are naked and laid bare" and "to whom we must render an account" (Heb. 4:13). Our sin is ever before us. Augustine confessed, ... "*But if I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me, where, I ask you, Lord, where or when was I, your servant, ever innocent?*" We are never innocent because the reality and power of sin - alienation from God, from one another, and from the more-than-human world - is pervasively present throughout all the web of our interconnected lives... None of us is a stranger to abuse, shame, fear, suspicion, and pain. This is our world. This psalm helps us to name it rightly.³

Psalm 51 also leads us to hope in the God of Israel, who acts toward us "according to steadfast love" and "abundant mercy" (v. 1). We can hope because we confess and believe that this God of Israel is indeed the Creator of all things.⁴ (Michael Lodahl)

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

It is no coincident that Psalm 51 is appointed for Ash Wednesday, the day that marks the beginning of the liturgical season of Lent. The Psalmist's words encapsulate the depth of the meaning of forty days leading up to Easter. Lent is a time of self-reflection and penitence, a time to acknowledge our sinfulness and need for God's mercy. Psalm 51 is a plea to God, a prayer for forgiveness. The Psalmist displays a painful awareness of his sins: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (v.3). Not only he committed evil; he also laments that he has been a sinner since he was born (vv. 4-5).⁵

The season of Lent is a more deliberate time of reflection and penitence. We are called to confess the ways that "we have not loved God with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as

² David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 9.

³ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 10.

⁴ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 10.

David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 8.

ourselves." Part of the process of repentance is recognizing our utter dependence on God. Just as the psalmist pleads to God for deliverance (v. 14), we must realize our own need for God's mercy. We are utterly dependent upon God for forgiveness and salvation. God not only saves us from our sins, but also gives us new life. The intentionality of focus on our sins and our dependence on God during Lent allows us to recommit ourselves to living as the people we were created to be. The Christian writer Frederick Buechner writes: "After being baptized by John in the river of Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it means to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask what it means to be themselves." ⁶ (Andrea Wigodsky)

EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE

As one of the seven Penitential Psalms of the Christian tradition (Pss.6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), it is most appropriate for Ash Wednesday. This elegant poem utilizes expressive imagery and vocabulary for both human sinfulness and divine grace. ⁷

This confessional psalm applies traditional terms for "transgression" (*pasa*), "iniquity" (*awon*), and "evil" (*ra*). The appeal for divine forgiveness is contingent upon God's gracious nature, and the psalmist begs God to "have mercy" or "be gracious" (*hnn*, v1). The penitent invokes God's "steadfast love" (*hesed*), using an important relational or covenant term, and "abundant mercy" or compassion" (*rhmyk*) (v. 1). ⁸

Psalm 51 shares much of its vocabulary with God's self-revelation in Exodus 34:6-7, which describes the Lord as "merciful and gracious" (*raham wehannun*), "abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*emet*)," and "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." ⁹

Psalm 51 employs five images for the remission of sin while avoiding the common verb "to forgive" (*ns*). The penitent urges God to "blot out (*mhh*) my transgressions" (v. 1, 9). The verb *kb* in "wash me" (vv. 2, 7) means "to wash by treading," usually applied to stained clothing (Ex.19:10, 14; 2 Sam. 19:24). The third verb, "cleans" (*thr*. vv.2,7,10) is a priestly term used in ritual purification of uncleanness (e.g., Lev. 13:13-17; 16:30). .. Purge me with hyssop, Adn I shall be clean; wash (*kbs*) me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (cf. Is. 1:18). Finally verse 9 turns the negative image of God's hidden face into a positive metaphor: "Hide(*hstr*) your face from my sins." ¹⁰ (Neal H. Walls)

⁶ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 10.

⁷ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 9.

⁸ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 9. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 11.

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HOMILETICAL PERSPECTIVE

In many Catholic and Protestant Churches, an Ash Wednesday worship service marks the beginning of the Lenten season. Most visible and widespread ritual is the marking of the forehead with ash, in the sign of cross saying "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," the ashes suggest a posture of penitence, and they remind us of our mortality and our humble place before God. The second most familiar practice of a typical Ash Wednesday service is the communal recitation of Psalm 51. Expressing clear humility and contrition, the psalmist acknowledges his transgression and pleads for God's mercy (vv. 1-3). His urgent prayer is for God's forgiveness and salvation, that God might withhold punishment and instead wash him clean and purify his soul (v. 2 and vv. 7-12).¹¹

The Psalmist begs for a new start, a second chance, and he knows that he cannot begin again without God's mercy and grace. In the climactic verse 10, the writer prays: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." Sin is not a surface wound; rather, it is a penetrating sickness that like a cancer eats away at the core of our being. Overcoming such an invasive disease requires a dramatic divine intervention - a heart transplant, nothing less. This is the path of healing and wholeness, the psalmist concludes. It is the only way for him to achieve a restored relationship; with God, to share again and always in the life of the Holy Spirit and in the joy of God's salvation (vv. 10-12). Psalm 51 includes the nature of sin, the practice of confession and repentance, and assurance of God's forgiveness and mercy.¹²

David's sin surely harmed Bathsheba and Uriah as much as or more than it harmed God. Our sins bear real consequences for our relationships with others. Praying for God's mercy is a good starting point, but it is not enough. Our goal should not be simple repentance, but reconciliation - a restored relationship with God and with our neighbors. Confessing our sins to God is often the easiest part, because we can count on God's promise of unconditional love and mercy. The more difficult step is seeking forgiveness from the people we hurt, and committing ourselves to the hard, often painful work of reconciliation. True reconciliation requires not only repentance, but also truth and justice and a commitment to changed behavior.¹³(John D. Rohrs)

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¹² David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 11.

¹³ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. *Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 13.

SUMMARY OF ABOVE SOURCE

LENT:

The season of Lent is a more deliberate time of reflection and penitence. We are called to confess the ways that "we have not loved God with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves."

In many Catholic and Protestant Churches, an Ash Wednesday worship service marks the beginning of the Lenten season. Most visible and widespread ritual is the marking of the forehead with ash, in the sign of cross saying "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," the ashes suggest a posture of penitence, and they remind us of our mortality and our humble place before God. The second most familiar practice of a typical Ash Wednesday service is the communal recitation of Psalm 51. Expressing clear humility and contrition, the psalmist acknowledges his transgression and pleads for God's mercy (vv. 1-3). His urgent prayer is for God's forgiveness and salvation, that God might withhold punishment and instead wash him clean and purify his soul (v. 2 and vv. 7-12).¹⁴

BACKGROUND OUR TEXT

I need to tell you briefly about the back ground of Ps. 51.

The popular authorship of Ps. 51 is King David. In the Bible he was known to be a very generous, faithful, compassionate and courageous person beginning his boyhood. After he became a king, he committed unforgivable crime. He took Uriah's wife. Uriah was one of 30 chosen men who commanded David's army. While Uriah was in war, David took advantage of his wife, Bathsheba and got her pregnant. In order to cover up his crime, David made Uriah to go to front line in the war and be killed. Prophet Nathan confronted David on his crime. Psalm 51 is confession of his sin.

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to acknowledge our sinfulness and need for God's mercy. Psalm 51 is a plea to God, a prayer for forgiveness. The Psalmist displays a painful awareness of his sins: " For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (v.3). Not only he committed evil; he also laments that he has been a sinner since he was born

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HOW DO WE RELATE TO DAVID'S CONFESSION OF SINS?

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