

Fifth Sunday of Lent
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, CT

Psalm 51 - Miserere mei, Deus

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; * in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

2 Wash me through and through from my wickedness *and cleanse me from my sin.

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

4 Against you only have I sinned * and done what is evil in your sight.

5 And so you are justified when you speak * and upright in your judgment.

6 Indeed, I have been wicked from my birth, * a sinner from my mother's womb.

7 For behold, you look for truth deep within me,* and will make me understand wisdom secretly.

8 Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; * wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.

9 Make me hear of joy and gladness, * that the body you have broken may rejoice.

10 Hide your face from my sins * and blot out all my iniquities.

[11 Create in me a clean heart, O God, * and renew a right spirit within me.

12 Cast me not away from your presence * and take not your holy Spirit from me.

13 Give me the joy of your saving help again * and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

14 I shall teach your ways to the wicked, * and sinners shall return to you.

15 Deliver me from death, O God, * and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness, O God of my salvation.

16 Open my lips, O Lord, * and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.]

17 Had you desired it, I would have offered sacrifice, *

but you take no delight in burnt-offerings.

18 The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; * a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

19 Be favorable and gracious to Zion, * and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

20 Then you will be pleased with the appointed sacrifices, with burnt-offerings and oblations; * then shall they offer young bullocks upon your altar.

Sermon

Open our lips, O Lord, so our mouths can proclaim your praise. In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

I'm going to be preaching about Psalm 51 so you might want to have your bulletin handy. When I prepare to preach I start by reading over the assigned scripture passages and I hope that something will jump out at me. Psalm 51 jumped out at me.

Psalm 51 is a beautiful penitential psalm. It is a psalm that typically comes up in Lent. Some verses of this psalm are prominently used in our prayer book especially at the beginning of Morning Prayer, which begins "Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise."

You probably know that the psalms were written to be sung. In fact the 150 psalms which make up the Book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible are, in a way our first hymnal. The psalms are very important to our worship life and the more familiar we become with the psalms the more prayerful they may become for us.

Rob Boulter
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But... if you're at all like me, the words sometimes fly by when I read the psalm and I don't always get to focus on words very well. And... I find it's even harder for me to concentrate on the words when we sing the psalm because, even though I can read music, it's hard for me to get the notes right and get into the words of the psalm. With that in mind we decided to read the psalm today so we could experience together these words spoken from our own lips. It is good to explore different ways of praying the psalms so we might better hear what the psalm is saying about God and about our relationship with God.

I really didn't appreciate the psalms until I got more familiar with them, and started to see them as a way to talk to God - as a way of praying. The psalms give us a rich vocabulary to use when we want to talk to God but just can't find the words.

There are different kinds of psalms. Psalms of praise like psalm 18:1-2 "I love you, O Lord my strength, O lord my stronghold, my crag, and my haven. My God, my rock in whom I put my trust, my shield, the horn of my salvation, and my refuge; you are worthy of praise."

There are psalms that express anger and frustration like Psalm 13:1 "How long, O lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I have perplexity in my mind, and grief in my heart, day after day? How long shall my enemy triumph over me?"

Did you know that Jesus last words on the cross are the first verse of Psalm 22? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And that psalm ends (22:29-31) "To him alone all who sleep in the earth bow down in worship; all who go down to the dust fall before him. My soul shall live for him; my descendants shall serve him; they shall be known as the Lord's for ever. They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn the saving deeds that he has done."

And there are also psalms of lament. Like Psalm 51 which is very appropriate for the season of Lent. Some of the old manuscripts of the psalms include titles and notes to the singer written at the top of them. Most scholars believe that these notes were added later but I still find them interesting. Psalm 51 is entitled 'A Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon' and the notes say it is attributed to King David and linked to the story of David and Bathsheba which is in the 2nd Book of Samuel.

King David becomes enamored with Bathsheba, but she is married to Uriah. So... King David plots to have Uriah killed in battle so he can take Bathsheba as his wife and that is what he does. Sounds a little like a 'Law and Order' episode I've seen. But the story doesn't end there. After David takes Bathsheba as his wife, the Prophet Nathan comes and expresses God's displeasure.

Nathan tells David a parable about a rich man who has many flocks of sheep and a poor man who has only one lamb. The poor man cared greatly for the lamb and brought it up treating it like one of his family. One day a traveler comes to visit the rich man but the

rich man didn't want to waste one of his animals on a meal for this traveler, so he took the poor man's lamb. King David becomes furious at the injustice of this story and declares that this man should be punished and forced to repay the poor man. Nathan says to King David – you are the man.

It is at this moment that David realizes his great sin and repents. Psalm 51 “¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offenses. ² Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”

One focus of this psalm is the asking of forgiveness, but also it affirms the character of God. God is merciful, God is loving, God is compassionate. No matter what we've done, even if we break half of the Ten Commandments like King David did. If we are truly repentant God will forgive us. Not because we deserve it, but because God is merciful and loving and compassionate.

In King David's story redemption comes with a price. He is spared from death, but he loses a child, and he watches his country fall into chaos, and he never gets to see the Temple of God built in Jerusalem.

This is how we understand justice isn't it? We understand that if we commit an offence we will need to pay a penalty in order to be redeemed. This is fair and just. But God works in a different way, when we sin against God and our neighbor, there is a price to be paid, but Jesus has already paid it on our behalf. God gave Jesus for us. Jesus was offered, once for all, to bring us back into proper relationship with God.

Psalm 51:17-18: “Had you desired it, I would have offered sacrifice, but you take no delight in burnt-offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

We know that we cannot hide from God, and that our repentance comes at God's invitation. Our true self, the self that we rarely show in public is already known by God, and God loves us anyway. God doesn't need to hear our prayers, God knows our heart. But we need to admit our failings and put a voice to our lament. This is where the psalms can be so helpful to us. This is how we find a voice to express our inmost concerns and admit our most secret mistakes.

We can 'try on' the words of the psalms and see if they help us to be more aware of God's desire for us, and more aware of our shortcomings and mistakes. In conclusion let's pray together Psalm 51, verses 7, 8 and 9. “For behold, you look for truth deep within me, and will make me understand wisdom secretly. Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; wash me, and I shall be clean indeed. Make me hear of joy and gladness, that the body you have broken may rejoice.” Amen.