

Ash Wednesday Sermon

Psalm 51:1-12

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Why do we come here to this bare sanctuary to gather around these ashes and listen to such solemn texts? Why do we sit in hard pews on a late winter day to receive, without protest, the psalmist's words, "O God, I know my transgressions; my sin is ever before me.... You are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment?" Why do we listen to such harsh truths about ourselves? I believe we do so because we are homesick. We are longing for home. The ache in our hearts brings us here.

You remember being homesick, don't you? The suffering in silence with tears falling on your pillow at night during sleep-away camp. The first winter in college, when you caught a cold because there was no one to nag you to wear your coat or get enough sleep. Adulthood does not bring immunity from such yearnings. Too many nights on the road and I am longing for my own bed, the familiar route to work, and the simple comfort of someone who knows how I like my eggs.

Lent is the time to admit our homesickness, to confess we have lost our protective coat of truthful living or found ourselves making camp in untamed compulsions, egos, and appetites. Ash Wednesday is the day we hear the psalmist's words, breathe them into our beings, look around, and then attempt to find the right path home. Many possible paths beckon, some more helpful than others. One tempting path emerges from the posture of humanity presented as the sanctuary colors change from green to purple. Advent speaks expectantly about God being so infused with love as to enter human flesh. Epiphany proclaims that the light of enfleshed love radiates its message to the world. Lent makes a U-turn, announcing the wretchedness of humankind. "My sin is ever before me," prays Psalm 51. "Indeed I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." The psalmist expresses something profound about human nature, something urgent around our capacity for wrong behavior. It is a truth that calls us home. Yet the confession, "I was born a sinner," unexamined, can slide dangerously into "I am nothing but sinful, good for nothing but harm." If we are only wretched, then we cannot reclaim our place in God's family. If there is no hope of being remade in God's love, then we bear no responsibility for walking a different way.

A second path tempts us with an inverse motif. This path says, "Do not be so hard on yourself. Of course you have made mistakes. Yes, you have sinned. But whatever your transgressions, they are not too serious a burden." This path is marked "A lighter side of sin." It suggests that our primary task during Lent is to select something to temporarily relinquish. Lent is the time to give up Twitter or Netflix or Diet Coke, something excessive or indulgent whose absence is a mere discomfort. The lighter side of sin pathway slyly suggests that abstaining from our daily fix of Facebook will fully contend with a prideful heart, a lifelong shame, or a festering wound we have inflicted upon another. If pounding away at the message sin, sin, sin leads us astray, then so does the perspective that simply tinkering with one particular habit will ad-

dress the pain of addressing the depth of our estrangement. Neither path will lead us home.

One afternoon I was at my computer, furiously finishing an article. The computer was old. The deadline was looming. The screen began freezing every few minutes. I would pound out the sentences and then look up to see nothing appearing on the monitor. I tried saving, closing, and re-opening the document. Still the screen froze. I rebooted the computer. Started again. Nothing improved. After multiple cycles of these remedies and several episodes of losing my newly written material, I, in a fit of anger, grabbed the keyboard and slammed it down upon the desk. As I did so, the space bar flew off of the keyboard, sailing across the room. I had to get on my knees to search through the carpet, eventually finding it behind a chair near the bookcase. Although it easily slid back into its place, the spacebar never worked properly again. It stuck—just a little—each time I hit it. It resisted my touch, forcing me to press down more firmly in order to register a space. Have you ever noticed how often you hit the space bar when you are typing? The stickiness of the bar became an enduring reminder of one angry outburst, one instantly regretted action. From that afternoon onward, whenever I sat down at my desk to work, I faced a stumbling block, a brokenness of my own creation.

The stickiness of the space bar communicates something about sin. Sin trips us up, slows us down, hangs a weight upon our souls, and stops us from finding our pathway home to God. We lie to ourselves when saying “my actions didn’t really hurt anyone,” or “it was a tiny mistake already forgotten.” Like an essential key on the keyboard of daily life, sin stays with us, changing the fabric of a day, the story of a life. Ask someone how it felt to have a loved one walk away and the messages they carry from the hole within their heart. Ask a child what it was like to come home each evening to an enraged parent. Talk to a person who has seen combat, inquiring if they would agree with Sherman’s words, “War is hell.” Examine your own battle scars, carved by living in a world that measures lives by the color of your skin, the swell of your bank account, or the awards lined on your mantle. Think about this world where so many homes are stuffed with trinkets in hopes of being insulated from pain and to many other homes with bare cupboards, beaten up furniture, and dreams dashed by the burden of eking out an existence. This is the web of sin into which we are born, with which we daily contend, and from which the psalmist seeks God’s transforming mercy.

Ash Wednesday is the day we choose to know this truth, for the sake of finding our way to the road paved by God’s grace. We confess all the ways we have been living apart from God’s generous, forgiving heart. We name the damage done to ourselves and to another. We pray, “O God, my sin feels so deep I cannot imagine what it would be like to be at your doorstep.” Or, “God, my sin weighs so heavy that even if I knew the road, I could not travel it alone. Please have mercy on me. Surround me with your steadfast love. Put a right spirit within me. And lead me back to you.”

Homesickness need not be a terminal condition. College preparatory manuals remind incoming students that everyone gets homesick at some point. These instructions include not getting too isolated. Do not lock away your life or your heart. They suggest finding ways to bring into the present some comforts of home. Jesus offered a homeward path based on the challenging comforts of God’s kingdom through his instructions to fast, give alms, and pray. These line the proper path of Lent.

To fast is not to relinquish a casual indulgence, but to abstain from a habit that typically hides your neediness. Fasting in a way that forces you to sit with your humanity—to feel your hunger, your loneliness, your boredom—and to allow that space to be altered by Christ’s presence. To give alms is to offer your resources to someone who is in desperate need. This practice forces us to confront our excessive living and to truly see another’s survival as urgent and equal to our own plans. To pray is to speak honestly to God. It is to offer your self before your Creator, not hoping someone else will see your faith, but trusting that God will meet you in your neediness, as a cherished child. Make a discipline of offering your time to God.

These are the three steps that line our path: fasting, alms giving, and prayer. Notice that they do not convey our unworthiness, but our beloved purposefulness as God’s children. Notice that they do not pretend we are without blemish. Instead they allow us to hear Love calling us from the doorstep of our true home and Christ offering us the strength to make it down the road to home again. May you walk a holy path. May you have a holy Lent.