

Ash Wednesday  
22 February, Anno Domini 2023  
Psalm 51

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

O Penitent Sinner,

You have been marked for death. The ashes that have been smeared on your forehead are a visible mark of an invisible reality. You are of death. This was true from the moment your earthly mother first conceived you in her womb. You had no choice in the matter. You did not get to decide whether or not you will be a sinner. You are one. You are born into this slavery to death. And that means that your whole mind, body, and flesh are set against God. Every fiber of your being rages against what God has spoken, wishing that He had spoken something else or even nothing at all. If only there weren't commandments which kept me from doing the evil that I wanted to do. If only there was no Bible and we could believe whatever we wanted to believe.

Every sin that you commit is proof of this reality. Every unkind word. Every desire to have what hasn't been given to you. Every choice to skip church so that you can enjoy the things of the world. Every failure to confess the truth of God's Word in the face of lies just to keep the peace. Every grudge. Every lustful glance. Every failure to pray or to study God's Word. Every failure and refusal to confess. Every choice to do what is easy rather than what is right. Every worry about daily bread. All of it reveals the truth that your heart is turned against God and would love to live without His commandments.

But the law that is written on your heart and that is proclaimed to you by God leaves no escape. You have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed. You have done what is evil in His sight, regardless of how wonderful the world may think you are. David had convinced the whole kingdom of Israel that he was simply a generous king who was trying to help the sad pregnant widow of a fallen war hero tragically lost in battle (never mind that it was David's child that had been conceived in adultery and that Uriah was only dead because David commanded that he be abandoned at the front lines, which begs the question - who else did David murder as collateral damage to his treachery?). David couldn't afford the bad press. What would people think of him? Better to tell a few lies and let it all just become water under the bridge.

“But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.” (2 Samuel 11:27b) The Lord had seen David’s lust burn in his heart and lead him to commit adultery and murder. The idolatry of David’s heart, the very same man described as a man after the Lord’s own heart, had cut him off from the God who called him out of the fields and raised him to be king over God’s people. David had cast himself into death and had he died in his unrepentance, David would have spent eternity in hell suffering the just judgment of his sin - his idolatry, his adultery, his murder, his lying, and his unrepentance. David had certainly sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah and all of Israel. But every one of those sins was a ultimately a sin against the Lord God. David knew the commandments. As he did it, he knew that the whole sordid affair was sinful from start to finish. He sinned against his conscience, knowingly doing that which was wrong. That is why he was willing to murder an innocent man - to try to cover up his sin. His reputation among men was more important than the eternal salvation of his soul.

But throughout the nine months of Bathsheba’s pregnancy the condemnation of the Law burned hot against David’s conscience as he seems to confess in Psalm 32 when he prays “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.” (Pslm 32:3-4) The hot iron of God’s wrath rests on the conscience of those who know His Law and have sinned against it. It hurts down deep into the soul causing the very terrors of hell to consume it. It afflicts every hour of every day. It infects every thought and every conversation. You can’t drown it in money or alcohol or drugs or pornography though the devil would love nothing more than for you to try so that he can use those to drive you even deeper into despair. You can’t make up for it by helping other people. No sacrifice you make, no amount of fasting will be able to make atonement. You can try to ignore it. But if you do that long enough, be warned, you will have hardened your heart against God and you will have traded salvation for eternal death. “For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore to them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.” (Hebrews 6:4-6) There is nothing you can say or do that brings relief to the Law’s judgment. Nothing. Absolutely nothing you can do will bring peace to you as you resist the working of the Holy Spirit by remaining unrepentantly in your sin.

It was only when the Lord in His steadfast love for David sent the prophet Nathan to draw out the poison of David's sin, bring David to repent, and proclaim the forgiveness of his sin that David was set free from death. Neither act was flashy. In fact, the simplicity of David's restoration is quite shocking. David, before Nathan, did not make some lengthy tearful confession and promise to make things better. That's not what God is interested in. He doesn't delight in sacrifices and He is not pleased with a burnt offering, not when they are offered to conceal an unrepentant heart or as a substitute for His forgiveness. David simply confessed "I have sinned against the Lord." (2 Samuel 12:13) God delights in truth in the inward being, specifically the truth that there is nothing good in you, that is in your flesh; that you are a sinner through and through who has offended God on every level and deserve nothing but His burning hot anger and temporal and eternal punishment. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." And that confession comes only when God has done His work to reveal your sin and remove every last vestige of self-righteousness.

Then it is the great joy and desire of God to bestow upon you the gift which He acquired for you at the cost of the precious Blood of His own Son, Jesus Christ. From Nathan's mouth, David heard words that drew him immediately out of the darkest pits of hell and caused his heart to soar to the highest realms of heaven "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." (2 Samuel 12:13) No restitution. No works of satisfaction. Just forgiveness. This is what pleases God - not your damnation but your salvation! "This is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes!" (Psalm 118:23) Beloved of God, we don't have penitential seasons in Christ's Church so that we can walk around morose and feeling sorry for ourselves. Shame on us if that is how we spend the next forty days. Lent is not an end in itself. Fasting and bodily preparation can be good outward training to discipline the flesh but we have nothing if we have nothing more than fasting and prayer and alms giving. Sorrow over sin is good but only when it is followed by the joy of redemption. In the midst of Lent itself, though the Alleluias and Gloria Patris and Gloria in Excelsis are silenced, there is a word that remains, the only word that matters - the word of promise from God "I have put your sin away from you; you shall not die."

Those are the words that we live by, the words of eternal life, the words that take away sin. These words cleanse the soul of the filth of all its iniquity. These words, which remove from us the guilt of all that we have done against the Word of God, and cover us in the Blood of Jesus Christ, make us pleasing in His sight, beloved children born not of the flesh nor of the will of man but of the will of God. This is the escape that God has provided for you. This is not of yourself. You have neither

the power nor the authority to forgive your sins. It is God who has been sinned against and therefore He alone has the authority to remit sin. And that is precisely what He has done for you.

Every deed and every word of Jesus are proof of that reality. Every miracle. Every sermon. Every exorcism. Every prayer. Every drop of His divine Blood that poured out from His sacred veins which now fill Baptism and Holy Communion with forgiveness, life, and salvation. These words are what raise the crushed conscience from the ashes. These words bring eternal rejoicing and sunshine to the downcast and hopeless. It is because of these words that we confess our sins - because of God's gift of forgiveness. When we confess we acknowledging that God is justified in His condemnation, that we have done all those things of which His holy Law accuses us and that He would be right to condemn us and cast us into eternal punishment. We cut down the pride of our Old Adam who would silence our confession, who would have us believe that we are more righteous than God has shown us to be. We don't confess to tell God something He doesn't already know. We confess that God might be declared right, justified in His Words and blameless in His judgments.

But even more than that, we confess that God is faithful to His Word and that He will never snuff out the smoldering wick or break the bruised reed. Instead, He will give life, He will strengthen, He will bind up, He will fill with the Holy Spirit that our spirit may be cleansed and restored. He will fill us with the everlasting joy of the forgiveness of all our sins. And in His mercy God has given you pastors to preach that word of forgiveness into your own ears that you might not doubt but firmly believe that YOUR sins are forgiven before God in heaven. That is how Christ our dear Lord would deal with you. He doesn't leave you to forgive yourself (I'm sure David tried that nonsense too) or to wander around aimlessly in the thoughts of your own heart. He speaks through His called and ordained servant who has been commanded to forgive the sins of those who repent of their sins and want to do better. He pours water over your head and promises that in that baptismal flood all sin that you have inherited from Adam and have committed yourself since have been drowned and died like hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea. He takes the atoning sacrifice of Golgotha from this altar and places it on your sinful lips and says "This has touched your lips. Your sin is forgiven. Depart in peace." God richly and lavishly provides His forgiveness to you in more than one way so that the loud shouts of the Law's accusations might be overwhelmed with your heavenly Father's forgiveness and lovingkindness.

Redeemed sinner, though you have been marked for death with the ashes you are also marked with the cross by which your death has been died and forever overcome. You have been marked with the sign of Jesus by which you are sealed for salvation and are kept in safety for the great day of His return. The greater reality is not your sin but the salvation which Christ has accomplished on your behalf and given to you as a free gift. You have been delivered from blood guiltiness. Let your ears and hearts be filled with His forgiveness and your mouth be continually filled with His praise.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.