**Psalms 51:1-19**

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. **2**  Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! **3**  For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. **4**  Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. **5** Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. **6** Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. **7** Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. **8** Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. **9**  Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. **10**  Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. **11**  Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. **12** Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. **13** Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. **14** Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. **15** O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. **16**  For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. **17** The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. **18**  Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; **19** then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

**“When Mercy Is All We Can Ask”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Ash Wednesday is hard to miss unlike the other Wednesdays that follow. The season of Lent begins tonight with the custom where all the baptized receive the sign of the cross marked with ashes. Unlike gently pulling off a Band-Aid, those words tonight tear off any deception, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.” Knowledge of God without knowledge of sin is pure pride. It will not stand before the judgment seat of God. Likewise, knowledge of sin without the knowledge of God only ends in despair. The reconciling work of Christ is what we need for God, “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

In order to help our Lenten meditation, we will consider this year what are called, “The Penitential Psalms.” How the saints of old handled repentance to God helps us today. Even in the 21st century, we are no less sinners which means God’s saving work is to be upon our lives. Tonight, Psalm 51 should not only sound familiar, but is also chief among the psalms for Lent. This psalm addresses the personal remorse of David over his sin with Bathsheba. Luther tells us, “In it David, or rather the Holy Spirit in David, instructs us in the knowledge of God and of ourselves. He does both of these gloriously. First he clearly shows sin, then the knowledge of God, without which there is despair.” All we can ask for is mercy and only God’s forgiveness renews us rightly to praise Him.

1. **To ask for mercy means to know deep down there already is a problem; it is me.**
2. “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”

* David tried to build up barriers to his adultery and murder, but Nathan brought the proclamation of Law that finally said, “You are the man!”
* Self-examination is not a closed off system to our standards for we recall the words exhorting us tonight, “But when we examine our hearts and consciences, we find nothing in us but sin and death, from which we are incapable of delivering ourselves.”

1. “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”

* The problem was for David bigger than just his big sin that was the “elephant in the room” kind of thing.
* What he did against his neighbor was a greater offense before God.
* Even if his neighbor excused it away, it did not change God’s word of judgment.
* Our problem is more than returning to dust. It is that death is the result of a more painful verdict by God.
* The Laws judgment falls not merely on a single act, but upon me a sinner.
* Like David, it is not about the bad fruit, but to acknowledge a far harder fact that only Scripture at last reveals.

1. “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

* What David had justified to himself and even others was not going to stand before God. The Law showed his guilt and bondage to sin that carried a death-sentence.
* God’s verdict of guilty is what stands against our life and not how we feel or reason it out. The Law of God is to “teach me wisdom in the secret heart.”

1. **Yet, admitting defeat by confession opens us up to depend on God’s answer.**
2. “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”

* The removal sin was not going to come by David that depended upon a far greater work that God alone had to give.
* Repentance leaves a gaping hole that we dare not fill-in, but allow God to bring His absolving work upon us.

1. “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.”

* Only God’s righteousness, His Word of forgiveness by the prophet Nathan removed the judgment against David.
* The Gospel is righteousness not our own, but what God gives as rightness for us in Jesus Christ. This is joy sinners hear when God settles the charge against us by words of forgiveness.

1. “Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.”

* What turned God’s face away from David’s sin is the same grace of God that turns to look upon all judgment falling upon Jesus as the sacrifice.
* Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and God has blotted out our guilt by the gift of His Son.

1. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

* Since God does the creating, the work is one-dimensional where God is doing what we cannot purely as the promise He makes good on for His baptized.
* A right spirit is a right reception of forgiveness for that alone is grace shining against all guilt and shame so new kinds of fruit may flourish.

1. **Where God works forgiveness there is rightly praise of** Him.
2. “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.”

* To give praise to God is to honor His Name and Word that gave us His Name.
* It is to pray, praise, and give thanks rather than consider our works, glory, and selfishness.

1. “Then will you delight in right sacrifices…”

* David knew sacrifices in the Old Testament were not going to appease God that was a broken spirit.
* Since Christ is the final sacrifice, no sacrifice of man justifies, but it does help serve our neighbor.

Ash Wednesday would be hypocritical, if it were just about repenting just once a year. Instead, repentance is a way of life for the baptized to, “rend your hearts and not your garments.” Since Christ alone freed us from bondage to sin and guilt by His innocent suffering and death. We can lay down our burdens of regret, put away the ailments that alarm, and set aside the aching heart. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law by the cross. You are clean, holy, and safe in Him. His kingdom lets you serve with hope, glory, and peace that are not your own making. All we can ask for is mercy and only God’s forgiveness renews us rightly to praise Him. Amen. In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.