

Psalm 51  
Ash Wednesday  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
March 2, 2022

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Our English word “Lent” simply comes from an older English word meaning “spring.” Lent occurs during the spring season, so we call it Lent. In German, the season of Lent is called “Fastenzeit,” the time of fasting, which reflects the nature of this penitential season. The Gospel Lesson appointed for the beginning of Lent, the fasting season, assumes that fasting is part of the Christian life—not fasting as the latest weight loss program, but actually going hungry for a time to remind us of our frailty and weaknesses. Jesus says; “When you fast”—not “if you fast,” but “when you fast—do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.” Don’t fast to be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Fasting is an outward discipline, a good habit of Christians. But Jesus emphasizes that fasting is more a matter of the heart than anything. With Christianity, everything is a matter of the heart. God knows all things and nothing can be hidden from Him. You might fast outwardly, but if your heart is unrepentant, then it is all for nought. And so we enter this season of fasting by learning the language of repentance from the penitential psalms. We do so to prepare ourselves and our hearts for the season of feasting that will come at Easter.

This evening we begin our Lenten study of the penitential psalms, starting with Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is all about the true repentance of the heart, which is exactly what our Gospel text is getting at. True fasting is the same thing as contrition; it is a recognition that we have sinned against God and against those around us. Psalm 51 is David’s psalm of repentance after he stole

another man's wife and had that man put to death. David saw Bathsheba bathing on the rooftop. He desired her and used his position to get what he wanted. David then abused his power by having Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed in battle, to make it appear as though everything was left up to chance. David sinned, and then added sin upon sin as he tried to cover up his sin.

And then the LORD sent the prophet Nathan to King David to rebuke the king for his sin. The LORD said He would repay David for his sin. What David did was in secret, hidden before the eyes of all. He gave the appearance of doing what is right. But the LORD knows the true intentions of the heart. The LORD promises that David's secret sins would be punished publicly, before the entire world. David confesses before the prophet Nathan: "I have sinned against the LORD." The prophet Nathan absolves David: "The LORD also has put away your sin." In the example of David we have an example of confession and absolution, an example of repentance and faith.

In Psalm 51, David expounds on the confession of his sins and God's absolution. And through David, the Holy Spirit gives us the language to confess our sins as well, and to receive the forgiveness God grants us in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. First, David recognizes where sin comes from. "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." David, like every other person on earth except Jesus Christ, was born with original sin. Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden and the guilt of their sin is passed down from one generation to the next. You commit sins because you are a sinner. You were born corrupt and opposing God, and this inborn corruption leads you to sin everyday. Just like Adam and Eve, we sin and so we are condemned to death: "Remember, O Man, that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return." Adam was taken from the dust and in death he returns to the dust, and one day you will return to the dust as well. The wages of sin is

death. That's what the ashes on your head remind you of: you are a sinner and so you will return to the dust from which you came. You will die for your sins.

The original sin we inherited from Adam is so great a corruption of our human nature that our reason cannot fully understand it. So we ask God to open our eyes that we might recognize our sins. As David says, "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart" (51:6). And so we come to know our transgressions. Our sins are ever before us. In faith we recognize that we are not just hurting those around us. Every sin we commit is an act of rebellion against God, just like the first sin of Adam and Eve. With David we confess to the LORD: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."

Yet with David in Psalm 51, we cry out to God not for justice, but for mercy. We appeal to the loving-kindness of our heavenly Father: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy blot out all my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin!" And so the LORD purges us with hyssop. In the Old Testament the hyssop plant was dipped in the blood of the sacrifice so that the people might be sprinkled with blood to remind them of the price of atonement. In Baptism, we are sprinkled with the blood of our LORD Jesus Christ, the eternal sacrifice, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus shed His blood for us on Calvary to atone for our sins and for the sins of the whole world. That very blood covers us in Baptism, as the LORD cleanses us from our iniquity and washes us from our sins. He washes us clean of all our sins so that we appear before the LORD's throne in spotless garments, as white as snow.

Our sins are covered and God does not see them anymore. He only sees the blood of Christ. And yet we continue falling into sin. Our sins are forgiven and the guilt of all our sins is covered by the blood of Christ, yet we continue sinning. In this life, on this side of heaven, we

have not yet been made perfect. And so we continually return to the forgiveness of sin the LORD provides us in Baptism, where He applies the death and Resurrection of Christ to us. We daily come before our LORD and ask Him to forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us. We weekly return to the LORD's house, where we cry out to our God to remember our sins no more. We sing a portion of Psalm 51 in the Offertory before the Lord's Supper: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."

And then we come to the LORD's supper, where we eat Christ's body and drink His blood. We are covered with the blood of Christ in Baptism and we are filled with the blood of Christ in this meal. We receive from the LORD forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation because we have the lifeblood of Christ within us. The Holy Spirit renews our hearts and our minds, purifying us from the sins we constantly soil ourselves with. The LORD creates new hearts within us, hearts that recognize our sin and turn to the salvation won for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. The LORD opens our lips, that our mouths might declare His praise. We come before Him with the sacrifice of our broken and contrite hearts and He feeds us with the sacrifice of His dear Son. All of this is only out of the pure grace and mercy of our Heavenly Father, who blots out our transgressions according to his steadfast love. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.