

Psalm 51:1-12
February 25, 2009, Ash Wednesday

Hampton Baptist
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“Sin Is Still Sin”

Few Baptist churches gather as we do tonight for an Ash Wednesday Service. Most Baptist churches do not follow the Christian calendar and while some Baptist congregations have waded into the liturgical waters of Advent and Lent, Ash Wednesday is still one of those dates that “only the Catholics observe.” This year, Baptists celebrate 400 years of existence, but before there were any Baptists, Christians were observing Ash Wednesday. The observance predates the Protestant Reformation and signals the beginning of Lent, the forty days, excluding Sundays, before Easter. We are entering a time of reflection, a season of prayer, and a period where we examine our lives beside the life of Jesus.

Tonight’s psalm provides us with a great example of beautiful, eloquent prose expressed contritely by the greatest king in all of Israel’s history. King David’s story is a powerful one for it is filled with seduction, lust, intrigue, murder and suspenseful drama; his biography, and certainly the episode which ultimately produced this penitential psalm, had all the makings of today’s Hollywood blockbuster movies.

King David had been a popular and mighty warrior, somewhat of a Robin Hood character, in that he was an underdog who sought to help the underdog. He had been vilified by King Saul prior to his own coronation; his stories of killing Goliath and protecting sheep from wild animals were legendary. His boundaries stretched for sixty-thousand square miles. Everyone loved him, but he eventually suffered from altitude sickness. He’d been too high too long.

In II Samuel, we read of the fall of King David, how that he saw a beautiful woman and allowed his lust to overtake him first with an inquiry through a servant girl. He learned that the woman was named Bathsheba and that she was married to Uriah, one of David’s military leaders, who by the way was off fighting for his country. David then allowed his lust to overtake him by sending for Bathsheba, and no one can refuse the king. Later, David learned that he has impregnated Bathsheba. He devised an elaborate plot to bring Uriah back from battle and gave him a pass to go home to be with his wife. The patriotic Uriah stayed outside the palace gate out of noble respect for his men who are fighting on behalf of their country. David then decided to get Uriah drunk in hopes that he would go home to his wife; Uriah still did not go home.

David sought to cover his tracks by allowing Uriah an opportunity to be with his wife, which could have resulted in people, including Uriah, believing that Bathsheba’s baby belonged to her husband. Yet this plan failed also. So David sent word to the military commander to place Uriah on the front line of the fiercest fighting and then for the remainder of the army to retreat, thus assuring Uriah’s death. The order succeeded; David then married Bathsheba, and their son was born.

The citizenry knew nothing of this horrible episode. David lusted, lied, committed adultery, murdered, deceived, and he was the most powerful, the most respected man in the world at that time. While the popular opinion polls continued to soar, David was still guilty.

After the son was born, God sent Nathan to David. Nathan was a prophet and advisor, somewhat like a White House Chaplain. He went to King David and told a story about a poor man with had one sheep whom he loved with all his heart; the poor man would hold the sheep in his lap and feed her from his own table. A rich man wanted to have a big feast and rather than slaughter one of his own animals for the main course, he sent his bodyguards to the poor man’s shack, and they stole the sheep and fired up the barbeque.

As King David heard this story, he was rightly incensed, and with reddened face and hair raised

on the back of his neck, he blurted, “The man who did this awful act has to die but before capital punishment can occur, he will give four lambs to the poor man.”

David had no idea what was happening; the prophet Nathan then said, “You are the man. God has given you *everything*, has taken care of you when you were at your lowest, has protected you and saved you. God has provided you with a family, and filled all your wants, and yet you still wanted more.” Numbers 32:23 reads, “Be sure, your sins will find you out.” David certainly was familiar with that idea.

As a result of Nathan’s “outing” David’s trail of sin, David penned Psalm 51. He pleads for forgiveness and cleansing. Sin has a staining, polluting, contaminating quality; sin can be seen as dirt that taints and discolors a person, therefore washing is appropriate. David confessed his guilt, because sin is a theological matter. Not only did David misuse the trust of his people, not only did he deceive his army commanders and messengers, not only did he violate an innocent woman, denigrate her as property, and deny her personhood, his sin profaned God. His iniquitous trail was an affront to the Deity.

What David did was wrong on so many levels and was hurtful to so many people, but first and foremost, he sinned against God. His sin pervaded the whole of his life.

David prayed for pardon and restoration; he wanted to be rid of the stains and pollution. He employed language which physically described what needed to happen to him spiritually; he needed bathing; purging; washing for he recognized how dirty he was.

He also recognized that his behavior must be changed and altered. To ask for forgiveness was a start, but repentance was a bigger step. He had to choose not to repeat his action; to learn from his wrong; to be reformed, reshaped, and even recreated from the inside-out. There had to be a change in motivation, in attitude, and in action.

Most of us have not committed David’s heinous acts. What he did was awful, and the consequences were damaging. Sin still leaves its mark, and David was marked forever by what he had done. God did forgive him, but the consequences lingered.

David sinned, and today, while we may mentally seek to elevate our spiritual conditions above David’s, we sin too. What he did then was sin; we also sin today, because sin is still sin. There are no big sins and little sins. While we may say that we’ve not committed adultery, the lust for revenge or sabotage, the ability to vilify another and to refuse to recognize them as a person is still sin. Sin is still sin. We may not send someone to the front lines of battle to be killed, but individuals still murder the spirits of others with their harsh and hurtful words. Sin is still sin. We may not deceive an entire country, but individuals still smile publicly while knifing people in the backs privately.

Albert Schweitzer said, “You can fill a bottle with dirt, take it into the shower and run water over it and, then, take it down to the lake, tie a string on it, and dip it up and down in the lake. But there’s still dirt in the bottle. Jesus said it’s what is inside us that defiles us.” No matter what you do with dirt, it is still dirt. Actions can be justified as reactions or responses to earlier stimuli or someone can say that their ends might justify their means, but again, sin is still sin.

And we are all guilty. While our actions, thoughts and maybe words may not be as public as a king’s, we are all guilty of committing wrongful acts, thinking bad thoughts, and making injurious statements. And if sin is still sin, then we are still sinning not only against those around us, but we are sinning against God, the one who has been so very good to us.

Tonight, be honest with your sin. Turn from evil. And confess to God.

IMPOSITION OF ASHES

The Imposition of Ashes encompasses Old Testament tradition as well as New Testament faith in an act of penance for sins committed and a prayer for God's forgiveness and grace. The ashes on the skin become a visible reminder of reconciliation.

Prayer:

Almighty God,

You have created us out of the dust of the earth. Grant that these ashes be to us a sign of our own mortality and penitence, so we may remember that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life. Thank you for offering us a way back, and that you still call us one of your own. We offer this prayer in the name of your Son, the One who gave his life for us, even Jesus the Christ. AMEN.