

Psalm 51 Steps

February 17, 2010

(Ash Wednesday – Year C)

Psalm 51

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

My wife Susan's cousin, Brian, is a family practice doctor in Kentucky. Last week, Brian went down to Haiti to help in the relief effort there and to work in a clinic in Port-au-Prince.

Ever since Brian arrived in Haiti, he has been sending daily email updates to family and friends.

On the first day that Brian was at the clinic in Haiti, he sent out this email:

“We learned today that because of the one month marking of the earthquake, the Haitian President has declared the next three days as national days of prayer and fasting for healing in the land.

This left the streets much quieter and the ride to the clinic was much less chaotic.

We passed several places (some churches and some street corners) where there were worship services taking place.

When we got to the clinic, we found about 50 patients already lined up and waiting for us.

We had a brief worship service before we got started seeing patients.

Our pastor led us in reading the 51st Psalm.

The Haitian patients sang some praise songs (in Creole, of course).

[It was] very moving.”

The first thing that I noticed about Brian's email was the worship by the Haitian people, in both churches and on the street corners.

And the second thing I noticed was how they read the 51st Psalm during the opening worship at the health clinic.

To me, the 51st Psalm is the essence of Ash Wednesday.

Each Ash Wednesday, after we have received ashes on our forehead,

After we have heard the words, over and over again:

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,”

After we return to our seats for quiet prayer and meditation,
Each Ash Wednesday, we read together the 51st Psalm.

The 51st Psalm begins –

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness;
In your great compassion, blot out all my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness
And cleanse me from my sin.”

When I read Brian’s email from the clinic in Haiti and found out that
they began their worship with the 51st Psalm, my first thought was
this:

“Why are the Haitian people reading Psalm 51?
They haven’t sinned or done anything wrong.”

I could not fathom that a people who are been crushed under falling
buildings and who have suffered for days without adequate
medical care and who have lost parents and children and spouses
and friends in that earthquake,
I could not fathom that these people would have any need for confessing
their sins or for being sorry for any wrong doings.

Yet sometimes I believe that we do not think correctly about this
concept of sin.

Sin is not only about bad behavior.

Sin is a condition that results in bad behavior.

Sin is being separated from God and being separated from each other.

A sinner is not someone who behaves badly.

A sinner is someone who needs God’s mercy and loving-kindness.

A sinner is someone who desires compassion and the blotting out of all
their offenses.

A sinner is someone who wants to be cleansed and washed through and
through.

For I am a sinner.

You are a sinner.

All of us are sinners because we have been separated from God and from each other.

At St. Alban's during this Lent, we are going to be digging into the 12 steps that are used by recovery groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. Twelve Step groups acknowledge, quite plainly, that all of us are sinners, sinners who have been separated from God and from each other.

Some of these 12 steps seem to be lifted directly from the 51st Psalm. Step 5 is that we have admitted to God, to ourselves and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step 7 is that we humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings.

Step 11 includes that we have sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God.

The 12 Steps acknowledge that all of us have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.

The 12 Steps acknowledge that all of us have been separated from God and from each other.

And the 12 Steps also acknowledge the joy of forgiveness when we are reconciled to God and to each other.

For the 51st Psalm continues by praying:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a right spirit within me.
Give me the joy of your saving help again
And sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.”

You see, even the poor and innocent victims in Haiti continue to pray the 51st Psalm.

For we all know that sin is not just about bad behavior.

Sin is a condition, the condition of being separated.

And Jesus bridges our separation.

Jesus creates a clean heart within us.

Jesus gives us the joy of his saving help again and sustains us with his bountiful Spirit.

Jesus reconciles us to God and to each other - and we are forgiven.

Therefore, please join me this Lent in working through the steps of
acknowledging our sin and separation.

Please join me this Lent in working through the steps of forgiveness and
reconciliation.

Please join me this Lent in working through the steps of the 51st Psalm.

AMEN.

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