



ASH WEDNESDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Wednesday, February 6, 2008

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Lection - Psalm 51 and Romans 7:14-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

Psalm 51

- (v. 1) Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.
- (v. 2) Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
- (v. 3) For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
- (v. 4) Against you, you alone, have I sinned, And done what is evil in your sight, So that you are justified in your sentence and blameless in your judgment.
- (v. 5) Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- (v. 6) You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- (v. 7) Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- (v. 8) Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- (v. 9) Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
- (v. 10) Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
- (v. 11) Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- (v. 12) Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.
- (v. 13) Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.
- (v. 14) Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, And my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- (v. 15) O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
- (v. 16) For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.
- (v. 17) The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

(v. 18) Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
(v. 19) then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings; Then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Romans 7:14-25

(v. 14) For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.
(v. 15) I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.
(v. 16) Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.
(v. 17) But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.
(v. 18) For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.
(v. 19) For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.
(v. 20) Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.
(v. 21) So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.
(v. 22) For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,
(v. 23) but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.
(v. 24) Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?
(v. 25) Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent: a period of forty days before Easter (not including Sundays) when Christians practice self-denial and self-examination. The date changes every year, determined by a lunar calendar that allows Passover and Easter to be observed as closely together as possible in keeping with the biblical stories surrounding the Passion of Jesus Christ. Ash Wednesday recalls Jesus' conquering of temptation in the wilderness. On this day, some Christian denominations place ashes in the shape of a cross on the forehead of believers, as a sign that they are about to enter a period when they, too, will seek to overcome temptation in their lives.

Aristotle once observed, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Ash Wednesday begins a time of self-examination by all believers. It begins a time for purging from their lives any practices, beliefs, attitudes, or habits that are inconsistent with godly living. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Christians should focus on discovering the self-indulgent practices in their lives that prevent them from living the life taught and exemplified by Jesus.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 51 and Romans 7:14-25

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

This commentary is being written at a time when being searched and examined, internally and externally, has become a standard part of life. In airport security, our checked and carry-on bags are searched, along with the contents of our pockets. Modern medical care includes such things as mammography, blood tests, X-Rays, CAT scans, MRIs, EKGs and EEGs, biopsies, and colonoscopies. Sadly, the recurring problem of drunk drivers has made us familiar with the breathalyzer, which measures the amount of alcohol in the blood system. All of these are methods by which our bodies are searched for anything not readily apparent to the eye that may prove to be hazardous to our health. Ash Wednesday allows us to be examined at the level of our souls. It invites us to slow down and examine the values, the vocabulary, the vision of the future, and the vices that define our lives. Ash Wednesday is our response to Aristotle's reminder that "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Psalm 51 is David's plea for mercy following his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and his attempted cover up that resulted in the death of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite. David did not arrive at this moment of repentance by his own volition. In II Samuel 12:1-14, the prophet Nathan confronted David about his sins. Psalm 51 is David's acknowledgement of his sins, and more importantly, it is his request that God create within him a "clean heart" and "a new and right spirit."

Psalm 51:4 reminds us that sin is not simply against the person we have hurt or wronged (Bathsheba and Uriah). Sin is always against God since it is God who has established the laws and standards that we have violated (Against you, you alone have I sinned). Verse 5 points to David's belief in the Doctrine of Original Sin as he declares, "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." Verses 16-17 echo many of the biblical prophets who said that God is not pleased with animal sacrifices and other religious rituals. What God really desires is a contrite heart.

Verse 1 reminds us of Zedekah's (pronounced Zeh-dah-kah) or God's "steadfast love." It is steadfast love that allows God to "Look beyond our faults and see our needs."¹ Nowhere is this attribute of God's character more poignantly or beautifully expressed than in Lamentations 3:22-23 that says:

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
For his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness.

David desires that steadfast love of God so that his sins can be forgiven and his life can be spared from a harsh sentence that David knows God could impose. Structurally, it must be observed that David could not seek God's forgiveness until he first acknowledged and repented of his sins.

Psalm 51 employs a series of increasingly aggressive measures meant to remove sin from our lives. It begins with **blotting** (a light dabbing on the outside – verse 1), then **washing** (still addressing the outside – verse 2), followed finally by **purging with hyssop** (a cleansing measure that impacts inside – verse 7). Purging with hyssop suggests that David needed to vomit out of his body whatever sin was dwelling within him that was displeasing to God. The outcome of these various levels of cleansing is that David’s life will be transformed, and instead of breaking God’s laws, verse 13 says that David will now teach transgressors the ways of God.

It is useful to link the study of Psalm 51 with a study of Romans 7:14-25 since both passages deal with the issue of human sinfulness and the need for divine intervention to allow us to break the cycle of sin that seems to be our nature. Paul gives a personal admission of being a sinner and acknowledges in verse 18 that “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” In this aspect of life Paul, David, and each of us stand together; we know what is good, but keep doing what is wrong.

There is an internal struggle within everyone who wants to serve God: the upward pull of the teachings of scripture and the downward pull of our human nature that seeks to satisfy our most sinful impulses and desires. Most of the behaviors we detest in ourselves and in others can be traced to this spiritual warfare that Paul saw raging within his life and that we feel raging within our lives: greed, jealousy, racism, sexism, violence, sexual exploitation, and warmongering. We can will what is right, but we cannot do it. Peter Gomes updates the language used to describe this struggle when he speaks of “human beings for whom the easy wrong is preferable to the difficult right.”²

Roman 7:24 raises a critical question for Christians: “Who will rescue me from this body of sin?” The answer is nobody but Jesus can save us from the problems and perils of sin. This confirms the insight of James A. Sanders concerning biblical characters serving as mirrors but not as models of human behavior.³ Biblical characters like David and Paul, no matter how they appear on their best days, will have a day when their behavior takes a sudden turn away from godliness. One need only consider David and Bathsheba and Uriah or Saul and his persecution of the early Christian church and his standing idly by as a Christian was murdered (Stephen). If we sought to model our behavior after any biblical character or earthly figure, they would eventually lead us astray. Thus, rather than being models of how we should live, biblical characters are actually mirrors of how we do live our lives. We are like them and they are like us. The only person mentioned in scripture deserving of being the model for human conduct is Christ. Only Christ sets a constantly perfect example. Only Christ is the “way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Only Christ can save us from ourselves.

Challenge

Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent challenge us to acknowledge the ways we have contributed to our present predicament and not seek always to blame others when trying to account for what is going wrong in our lives and in our communities. When Paul says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), he meant us as well. We

will never overcome the challenges that can cripple us and kill us unless we are willing to examine ourselves. “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The rebuilt walls of Zion; the bones that God has crushed; burnt offerings; the battle of good and evil at work in the mind; and

Sounds: David pleading before God; God blotting out transgressions; David being washed thoroughly; David being purged from sin by hyssop; the sound of joy and gladness.

III. Other Sermonic Suggestions

Many hymnals used in churches include litanies and responsive readings that add depth and clarity to the observance of Ash Wednesday. One good example would be: A Call to Fast. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #63

Notes

1. “He Looked Beyond My Faults.” African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. # 249
2. Gomes, Peter. The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus. New York, NY: Harper One, 2007. pp. 124, 134.
3. Sanders, James A. “Hermeneutics.” The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, supplemental vol. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976. p. 406.