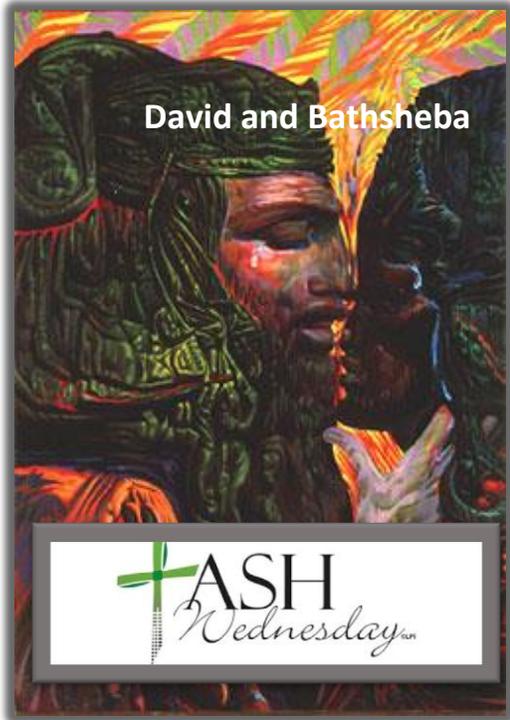


Psalm 51: Be Merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned



David and Bathsheba

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is before me always:

"Against you only have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight."

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.

Cast me not out from your presence,
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me. O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Psalm 51 is an extended confession of sin and an anticipation of new life grounded in the divine forgiveness of our faithful covenant-keeping God.

God is assigned three terms that characterize His deep commitment as a faithful, covenant – keeping God: mercy, steadfast love (hesed), and compassion. (V. 1)

- **Be Merciful** are the first words of this psalm. Mercy is the grace to forgive someone even when they do not deserve to be forgiven. It is gift. Confession of sin is always based on the grace (gift) of God.
- This psalm appeals to God's **steadfast love (hesed)**. Steadfast love (hesed) is a covenant word. This is a God who is in deep relationship with us and keeps his promises. For all his unworthiness, David knows that he still belongs.
- **Compassion** consists of doing something loving for someone you would not ordinarily love. Like God with the Israelites, God's compassion is for those in special need.

The psalmist asks God to **"wipe out my offense, "cleanse me from my sin, and "wash me from my guilt". (V.2)** The prayer is not merely an expression of human remorse or preoccupations with failure and guilt; it looks beyond self to God and depends on the marvelous possibilities of God's grace. Confessing sin is the act in which we humans acknowledge what we are before God and what God is for us.

Psalm 51 is a song written by King David when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. David also sent Bathsheba's husband Uriah to the front lines of battle to ensure that he would be slaughtered and that Bathsheba would become his wife. (See 2 Samuel 11-12).

Against you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. (V. 4) Those who confess their sin know that their life is judged by God. It is God and God alone whose way and will are criteria for human acts. The prayer confesses **sinfulness**, not just one or several sins. It concerns the condition of the self. My need is not just pardon for a wrong, but deliverance from the predicament of myself. **Repentance concerns who I am**, not just something I have done.

The notion that a person could sin without injuring others is inconceivable in the Old Testament. Sin does not only damage one's relationship to the Lord, but was understood to damage one's community severely. The confession of sin is first the act of the people of God, and its doctrine of the human condition is a reflection on all humanity from that perspective. (Brueggemann, 2014)

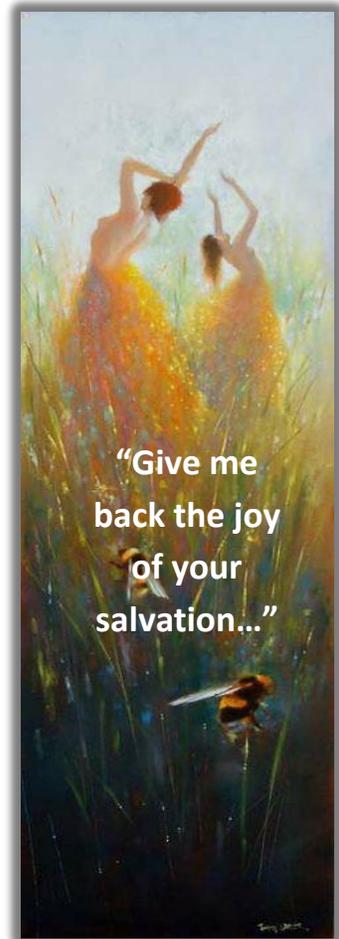
It is so easy to refuse to take personal responsibility for the good order of the world around us. But if we do that we cease to be blessing and begin to be a burden on the universe. The confession of sin always has a corporate dimension. The sins of all concern me because they are the manifestation of the sinfulness that conditions me. The assembly's confession of sin needs to be based in its character as a unity and in its connectedness with all humanity. *To say that public hate-mongering in the name of talk shows doesn't create the climate for racism, sexism, violence and other political manipulation, is to deny the fact that behavior has consequences. Self-reflection demands that we ask ourselves what we ourselves are contributing to the social environment: human hatreds or human community. Think of your last three conversations with neighbors, friends, family. What did you talk about? What did you yourself add to the conversation?*

"Create a new heart for me, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." (V.10) In biblical vocabulary, what is said of heart and spirit characterizes the condition and direction of a person's life. By using the term create, the psalmist expresses his belief that nothing less than a miracle could affect his reformation, and declares that repentance is the gift of God. A clean heart would be a mind and will open to God, oriented to God. A steadfast spirit would be a mind and will fixed and steady toward God – ready to praise, true to God's covenant and trusting during evil times. *Do you think that we are living in evil times?*

"Give me back the joy of your salvation." (V. 12) Sin suppressed is delight destroyed. David was saved, but his soul had soured. He longs once again for the enjoyment of God that comes with intimacy and right relationship.

"O Lord open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise." (V 15)

Note the close connection between a joyous faith and an infectious one and between experiencing restoration and leading others to that knowledge. Our God is compassionate, full of abundant mercy and loves with a steadfast, covenant love. **Psalm 51, one of the seven penitent psalms, is a song of hope for God's people. Truly we experience delight in restoring the joy of our salvation!**



Bibliography

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