

Ash Wednesday • March 1, 2017  
St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA  
Rev. Braun Campbell  
Psalm 51

“At the Crossroads: Confession”

King David didn't always get it right. He was only still a boy when he was anointed to be king by the prophet Samuel. David would go on to become the greatest of the kings of Israel, a leader God provided for His people to take the place of Saul. He was elevated to fame by defeating a giant Philistine with only a sling and a stone. He would go on to win many military victories; he was even crafty enough to feign madness when needing to escape from the king of Gath (1 Samuel 21). But David was also a musician and a poet, skilled with the lyre and the lyric. Many of the psalms we have in the Bible were written by David, including the one which we heard earlier in this service. Take a look at David's psalms, and you'll see a window into a man who knew struggles in his life. He struggled with his enemies, with his own weaknesses, even his own children. Like you and me, King David was a human being.

God blessed David with victory after victory, with wealth and power, with wife and family. But still, David did stray. He turned his own way. At one point, David even had a man murdered so that he could take his wife. He chose to follow after that which he thought would give him pleasure and happiness in life, even though he already had more than most men could dream.

God sent the prophet Nathan to David to confront him with his sin, to call him out for what he'd done. It crushed him when he realized the depth of his sin and willful blindness. David then had a choice: continue in the way he'd been going, or confess his sin before his God and repent of it. Looking to David's own words in Psalm 32(:3-5), you can get a sense of how he might have felt: *“For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away, through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. [Selah] I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”* David chose the path of confession.

Crossroads keep coming along as you journey through life. Each one marks an opportunity to make a choice in which path you'll follow – some of them seemingly more significant than others. At times, those crossroads come with tension as you're torn between the options ahead of you. Each one represents a different future. What does your head tell you, or your heart? Which is the right one? Which way would God have you go?

As we observe Ash Wednesday, we enter in to the time of Lent. We receive ashes on our foreheads as a reminder both of our mortality and of our sin. Lent is a penitential season, meaning that it's a time for confession and repentance, a time for seeking God's forgiveness for our sin. Sin is a problem for each of us, kings and beggars alike. There's a phrase, “garbage in, garbage out,” that applies to everything from computer science to nutrition and, really, life in general. It's a reminder that when you pour bad input into a system, you have no reason to expect good things are going to come out on the other end. Sin is the ultimate “bad input.” It pours in, all those times that we disregard God's guidance for life and choose to follow another path. **We sin. We need it gone.** We need to confess and repent, seeking God's forgiveness.

In the Smalcald Articles – a document that is often regarded as Martin Luther's “last will and testament” of faith – Luther wrote about confession and repentance:

This is what true repentance means. Here a person needs to hear something like this, “You are of no account, whether you are obvious sinners or saints <in your own opinions>. You have to become different from what you are now. You have to act differently than you are now acting, whether you are as great, wise, powerful, and holy as you can be. Here no one is godly.”

But to this office of the Law, the New Testament immediately adds the consoling promise of grace through the Gospel. This must be believed. As Christ declares, “Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). That is, become different, act differently, and believe My promise. John the Baptist (preceding Christ) is called a preacher of repentance, but this is for the forgiveness of sins. That is, John was to accuse all and convict them of being sinners. This is so that they can know what they are before God and acknowledge that they are lost. So they can be prepared for the Lord [Mark 1:3] to receive grace and to expect and accept from Him the forgiveness of sins.

This is what Christ Himself says, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [My] name to all nations” (Luke 24:47).<sup>1</sup>

King David wrote Psalm 51 in confession of his sin after Nathan confronted him, but it has become a cry of confession for the whole Church through the ages. As we join in praying this psalm, we, like David, come before God confessing our sin and seeking His mercy and forgiveness.

Look at the psalm’s pleas, and see what we’re asking God to do for us. Pay special attention to the verbs of those requests: **Have mercy. Blot out** my transgressions. **Wash** me thoroughly. **Cleanse** me. **Purge** me. **Wash** me. **Let me hear** joy and gladness, and rejoice. **Do not look** upon my sins; completely remove them from your records. **Create** a clean heart and **renew** a right spirit in me. **Cast me not** away. **Restore. Uphold. Deliver** me. **Open** my lips. From start to finish, Psalm 51 is a way of saying to God, “I have sinned. Be gracious to me, O God.”

We’re at the crossroads of Ash Wednesday. Going forward from this day, look ahead to the cross and empty tomb by which God answers our confession and our plea for forgiveness, even as He did for King David. As human beings who have sinned and who need that sin gone, join with me in praying Psalm 51(1-17):

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!  
For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.  
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.  
Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,  
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.  
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.  
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 from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.  
Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.  
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness,  
O God, O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.  
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.  
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

**Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Smalcald Articles III III 3-6