

Ash Wednesday 2018

Welcome to worship this evening.

Your heart. It's more than just a blood pump or physical organ. We describe it as the engine for your attitudes, the driver of your emotions and values. It motivates all you do. If your heart malfunctions physically, you suffer or die. But if it is damaged in other ways (spiritually/emotionally), you suffer and others around you suffer too. But there is healing, hope and life for our hearts.

Tonight...and over the course of this season of Lent we gather trusting in God's generous mercy. We admit our sin & the brokenness that results. We are marked with ashes, a sign of our human mortality that our sin brings upon us. We are marked by the sign of the cross, a reminder that Christ has carried our sin & death for us, & in Him there is love & life eternal.

But also...in that cross of Jesus Christ...our lives are re-formed & Christ-shaped. Our sinful world & our sin-broken hearts are reclaimed by the Father who created us for himself.

Tonight we hear David's plea: *"Create in me a clean heart O God...Restore to me the joy of your salvation."* And over the course of these 6 weeks...

We hear Isaiah's promise: *"He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed."*

Please stand as we sing...

To the service order...

Ash Wednesday – '18 B – Create in me a Clean Heart: Heartbroken by Sin

An interesting thing happened to me this week while I was reading the Bible. You know I read specific chapters every day according to the reading plan we make available in the back of our worship space at the Guide Hall. I've been using that plan for maybe a decade...read OT once a year & NT about twice. I find that discipline helpful. This week I was up to Mark 15...We'll get there in about 6 weeks...The passion narrative: the trial, crucifixion, death & burial of Jesus. Mark 15 ends with Jesus dead & buried & the last witnesses are the women who are standing outside the tomb dumbstruck by the horror, savagery & heartbreak they have just witnessed.

Acc to the plan, I was supposed to stop at the end of Mk 15...I didn't. I kept reading a few verses into Mk 16 which is the Resurrection account – Easter. About verse 3 (the women are asking who is going to roll the stone away from the tomb) a voice inside, which I count as the Holy Spirit, said, "Hey! You need to wait. You need to be here awhile."

It's funny, but I think I was subconsciously trying to hurry myself into the good news. I just didn't want the tomb & gloom to be the last thing I read that morning. I was racing ahead to get to the good stuff. But the Spirit halted my hurry with "Hey! You need to wait. You need to be here awhile."

I don't think I'm unusual in my desire to get past the bad stuff to get to the good. We tell the kids to just choke down broccoli/brussel sprouts 'cos dessert's coming. Given a choice of hearing good news or bad news we'd choose the good. And when there's a mix of both we want the bad first to get it out of the way. I know people who won't watch news in the evening because they don't want the troubles of the world crowding in the last thing before they go to bed at night...they prefer to end their day with good. "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Don't go to bed mad.

I think a lot of folks feel that way about Ash Wednesday...they'd rather not hear it. Rather not be reminded of the brokenness that is part & parcel of human life. Rather not own their part of that brokenness. It's more fun to get straight to Easter...skip the ashes & crucifixion & go straight for the chocolate & hot-cross buns. I have known folks over my 28 years of being pastor who simply don't do AW MT GF services. Palm Sunday! Yes. Easter! Without fail. Just don't like the more pointed "we are accountable" times. So they don't.

But the Holy Spirit says to each of us, "Hey...you need to be here awhile."

I'm sure David was hoping to just get on with the good stuff after he'd stolen Bathsheba from Uriah. I have to believe that somewhere inside David he heard that voice, "Just because you **can** doesn't mean you **should**" But he ran right through that "stop" sign & after surrendering to his lusts in adultery he had to go lower still to manipulation, conspiracy & state-sanctioned murder.

Listen how the book of Samuel finishes that part of the account when David hears his plan to have Uriah killed has succeeded: *"Well, tell Joab not to be discouraged," David said. "The sword devours this one today & that one tomorrow! Fight harder next time, & conquer the city!" When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. When the period of mourning was over, David sent for her & brought her to the palace, & she became one of his wives. Then she gave birth to a son.* Whew! Bad news over... Good news take the stage. Or so David thought...the account goes on...

"But the Lord was displeased with what David had done. So the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to tell David this story:" A story of someone who used his power & privilege to take advantage of someone lesser. A story of raw disregard for God & others. A story of "I me mine" above all else. David declares the just verdict... *"As surely as the Lord lives, any man who would do such a thing deserves to die!"* ...against himself. Nathan's reply is simple, *"You are that man."* "Hey...you need to be here awhile."

Confronted by Nathan God's prophet thank God David had the spiritual wisdom not to add denial to his crimes but to confess his own sin: *"I have sinned against the Lord."* Ps 51 is the director's cut version of that confession where we read brutal honesty where motives/motivations are exposed & David's sin-broken heart exposed. But it's in that vulnerability – in that openness to God's searching/searing gaze that we find freedom/forgiveness:

- vs 3-4 - I recognize my rebellion...Against you, & you alone, have I sinned; done evil
- vs 9 - remove the stain of my sin
- vs 10 – create in me a clean heart/new spirit
- vs 12 – restore to me the joy of your salvation
- vs 14 – forgive me then I can sing again

God does not whitewash the tears in our souls. God does not pretend the sickness in our hearts doesn't exist. God does not paper over the chasms in our character. God is clear – the fabric of the cosmos is torn by sin & I am ripped. I am a sinner. I sin *"from the moment my mother conceived me"* - you too...No denial. No excuses.

No hint of 21st century pop therapy: Poor child can't help himself: he has a condition. Poor darling can't help herself: she has low self-esteem. Poor me I can't help myself: I was raised in a bad environment ...it's mama's fault, daddy's fault, genetic.

David looks Nathan in the eye & says, *"I have sinned against the Lord."* Now Uriah Bathsheba, & the child born to die from their illicit union may all say "and us too!" But the point remains...Sin destroys. Sin rends what God created whole. Sin breaks what God made complete. Sin severs what God fashioned intact. Sin kills from the heart outward.

We so often think of sin as an offense against God's holiness (& it is) but it is also an offense against the joy of fellowship with God that we were designed to enjoy. We were built for God's pleasure & he delights in us. God delights in blessing & caring for his creation & us in particular. He built us for life in its fullness in companionship with Him & when we grasp for more – when we decide we know better - when we snatch at that which seems bigger & better than what God has already given we end up with less – we end up broken - we end up destroyed - we end up dead.

Rom 6:23a - For the wages of sin is death...

Every decision to act independently from God – every decision to act autonomously w/ no regard for God or neighbour - every self-centered/self-serving/self-focused act may not lead to adultery/murder but every turning to our own way putting our own above others is sin. Sin destroys & demands payment & there is no way around that.

So tonight we own up to - confess that self-inflicted rending of our hearts. Lent begins with each of us admitting to ourselves, to each other & to Jesus that we are broken & no amount of pretending/blaming will make those broken places whole. We acknowledge our desperate need of God to heal us, to make us whole, to drive out our in-born destructiveness & create in us clean, new & whole hearts that live for Christ alone. We admit our common destiny, "dust to dust." Nothing we were & to nothing we are going. "Hey...you need to be here awhile."

Because it is in our dustiness, that Jesus meets us. In our brokenness, Jesus comes to us. In our desperation, Jesus takes hold of us so that our dead end destination is transformed into a living hope-filled future in his presence. In our death Jesus gives us his life. In his dying & rising we are reborn children of God. We live forever marked by the sign of this cross so that those around us see the power of God at work in us – healing – restoring – bringing us to the abundant eternal fullness only Jesus can create.

Yes there is Good News: *"For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be sin for us so that we could become the righteousness of God."* On the cross, Jesus literally became sin & took my rebellion, my twisted torn self-interested heart, my misdirected trust & idolatry into himself so that he could remake me in his image, rebuild me in his righteousness, recreate in me his relationship with God the Father.

I am/you are a child of God only because God punishes sin by the life & death & rez of Jesus Christ – only because God destroys death & defeats evil by the life & death & rez of Jesus Christ. Here at the cross. Here at the table. Here in the community of the forgiven sinners. God rebuilds. God restores. God recreates. God re-establishes his covenant promise of love in you – in me – for the world for all eternity. **Amen.**