

Presbyterians traditionally read Psalms responsively in worship
but we rarely take the time to slow down,
look at them carefully
and really understand what they are saying.

We are also seeking Christ in the Psalms.
I believe that Jesus is the point of all of the Scriptures -
Old Testament and New Testament.
That this library of books that we call the Bible,
has at its centre a focus on the plan of God
for the salvation of us all,
which is realized and takes shape in Jesus.

So we find foretelling hints and glimpses of Jesus in the Old Testament,
and we find him revealed and embodied in the New Testament.

We can't just understand our segment of this story.
Because, ultimately that is just a tiny part of this ongoing story.
Just as you can't understand a movie after watching a 10 second clip,
you can't understand the story of God's love for humanity
based on one life - even if that life is Christ's.
Even Jesus' time on earth is only part of the whole story.

It's not a bad place to start to understand God,
I just don't want us - you AND me -
to be focussed on a part and therefore lose sight of the whole.
And that's always a bit of a struggle.

Last week, we looked at one of the suffering servant psalms - Psalm 6 -
a psalm of penitence, in which we saw a glimpse of the suffering of Jesus,
and we learned a bit about the role that suffering plays in our own lives.

This week we turn to Psalm 51.
This is a Psalm of David,
one for which we do know the incident David is writing about.

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If you're not familiar with David's story,
let me give you a Cole's Notes version.
This is one of the moments in which we see David
as human and weak and fallible.

This story from David's life makes me think of a movie by Paul Haggis called Crash -
which came out back in 2004,
and won the Oscar for Best Picture in 2005.

I remember the first time I saw it, and I kind of hated it.
Because as well-acted as it was,
it was kind of ugly and raw in a way that broke my heart.

It took me a while before I figured out that the reason I kinda hated that movie
was that it showed people at their very best moments and their very worst moments.
Each character in the story has a moment when they are absolutely amazing,
and another moment when they are absolutely despicable.

For example - there's a character who is a police officer,
and early in the film you see him in a moment
in which he behaves with callous racism
and abuses his power as a law officer
to sexually molest a woman.

Then, later in the film, he saves that same woman from a burning car.
When she first realizes it's him, she actually shrinks back into the burning vehicle,
which has flipped over,
and he crawls in and manages to pull her to safety,
and you can see in her eyes
that she is grateful and horrified at the same time.

And that film got under my skin and bothered me,
because I think that's how most people actually are -
we are really complex and capable of being more than one thing at a time.

And sometimes those things are exact polar opposites.
David was human.
He was called a man after God's own heart -
he was capable of leading his people with integrity,
of worshipping God in word and in deed,
with a depth of heart that still amazes us today,
but also capable of doing things
that were just clearly and plainly wrong.

So the story is this - David saw Bathsheba.
And she was beautiful and he desired her,
and he was powerful - he was the King - so he sent for her
when she came to him, he slept with her.
She became pregnant,
but she was married to Urriah
who was a captain in the army,
which was off fighting
to expand David's Kingdom.

Instead of owning up to what he had done,
David sent for Urriah and gave him some leave from the battle,
so that hopefully he would come home and sleep with his wife
and just assume the child she bore was his.

Urriah, however, was a man of character
and would not go into his house while his men were still sleeping
in tents on the battlefield and fighting for their King.

So David sent him back to the front,
but first he met with the commander of his army
and told the Commander to make sure
that Urriah went where the fighting was the fiercest.
Once Urriah was there,
the Commander was to pull back the rest of the army
so that Urriah would be trapped and killed.

That went according to plan, and after Bathsheba had mourned her husband,
David sent for her and married her and she bore him a son.

This displeased God, and God sent the prophet Nathan to David,
and Nathan called David on what he had done.

Then David wrote this Psalm.
So, it is based on one of those worst-moment episodes from David's life.

David writes,
¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge.

Which sounds pretty great -

clearly David has seen the error of his ways, he's tortured by what he has done,
and he is contrite before God.

But I admit - I wonder what it would have been like
if God had not sent Nathan to David.

Would David have been tortured in his soul over what he had done?

Or would he have happily lived with Bathsheba, assuming he got away with it?

I think probably a bit of both.

But I think over time, his guilt would have gotten the better of him
and it would have driven a wedge between David and God,
or affected David's ability to lead,
or just generally have made it impossible
for him to have any peace.

David writes,

⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

⁶ Surely you desired truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

I have clergy friends that hate that line about being sinful from birth.

Because how can a tiny baby, taking its first breath in this world,
have done anything wrong?

And I understand that perspective.

But I see it differently -

I feel like David is saying that he knows that there is no excuse
for what he has done.

That he recognizes that there is something broken inside him,
that goes back to his very first moments in this world,
he cannot get back
to a time before his brokenness.

That simply being born human, means that there is a brokenness inside us,
that left to our own devices, leads us into our worst moments.

Whether those moments are on a scale with David's betrayal of Urriah,
or whether they are less dramatic moments
in which we are careless of another,
or seek to hurt another with our words or our deeds,
we all have those "worst moments."

We all have those times and incidents in our lives where we look back and are ashamed.

Maybe we didn't know better at the time,
but we do now and we are haunted by what we did.

That might sound like a horrible thing, a hopeless thing.

If we are that broken - from the very first breath we take in this world -
how can we hope to do anything but destroy each other?

And yet, it is at that moment - when David as no bravado left,

when he is humbled enough to acknowledge his sin,
to admit his brokenness -
that he is able to then turn and ask God for help.

"Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean."

"Create in me a clean heart"

"Renew a right spirit in me."

These are the cries of a person of faith who has realized their need for God.

Which is something that people often only come to
when they are at the end of their rope,
at the end of their own strength,
in a moment of deep suffering and anguish.

I wish I could tell you differently, but often we can only recognize how deeply we need God
when we've got nothing left.

The good news is that when we've got nothing left,
and we turn to God - it's the exact right place to go.
Because then God begins his work in us.

He begins to create in us a clean heart,
to renew a right spirit within us.
This is what the ongoing process of following Jesus looks like.

When people ask me how I know God is real,
I often say it's just a quiet, bright KNOWING that settles in my chest,
and says - yes, he's real, he's here,
and yes, the whole story of salvation is absolutely true.

But if you want evidence, I'd say to you
that God is making me kinder, more generous, more loving,
more willing to forgive, more interested in the good of others,
than I was last week, or last year, or 10 years ago or 20.

There is this slow process of becoming more like Jesus - sometimes it's very slow! - in my life.
And in the lives of the people of faith that I admire.
People who's preaching I listen to,
people who guide my faith,
people who are part of my family - and my church family.

Sometimes we think that the path is going to be direct.
Jesus comes in to our lives, we follow him, we become more like him.
Simple.

But I think nothing in life is simple.
Humans are complex, and therefore the paths we travel are complex.

Our path to becoming more like Jesus is a winding road,
one in which we sometimes lose our way,
one in which we have to ask for guidance and direction,
for a clean heart and a renewed spirit,
over and over and over again.

That's why it matters that we do this every week.
We need to hear these stories,
and sing these songs,
and pray these prayers,

because our pathway is winding
and it is so very easy for us to get lost.

Over and over again, we need cleansing and renewal -
that only the Father, Son and Holy Spirit can give us.

David writes,

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodguilt, O God,
The God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

¹⁵O Lord, Open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

¹⁷My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.

¹⁸In your good pleasure make Zion prosper,
build up the walls of Jerusalem.

¹⁹Then there will be righteous sacrifices,
Whole burnt offerings to delight you;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

You see, when we turn to God,
when we understand our brokenness and lay that at the foot of the cross,
God gives us purpose.

A thing to do in his name -
which may be as simple as being a good friend, or good parent,
or good employee or a good neighbour.

We know that David lived this out -
he continued throughout his life to write Psalms,
words that are teaching us, even today, God's ways.

Let us pray.