

### **Psalm 51:1-4, 9-12, 15-17 (ICEL Translation)**

<sup>1</sup>Have mercy, tender God; forget that I defied you. <sup>2</sup>Wash away my sin, and cleanse me from my guilt. <sup>3</sup>I know my evil well. It stares me in the face. <sup>4</sup>Evil done to you alone before your very eyes... <sup>9</sup>Shut your eyes to my sin, make my guilt disappear.. <sup>10</sup>Creator, reshape my heart and steady my spirit. <sup>11</sup>Do not cast me aside, stripped of your Holy Spirit. <sup>12</sup>Save me! Restore my joy, support me, strengthen my will... <sup>15</sup>Lord, give me words and I will shout your praise. <sup>16</sup>For you have no delight in sacrifice; the gift doesn't please you. <sup>17</sup>So I offer my shattered spirit; a changed heart you welcome.

### **Scripture: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. <sup>2</sup>"So whenever you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your gift may be given in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>5</sup>"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you... <sup>16</sup>"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>19</sup>"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Psalm 51 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

03/02/2022 – Ash Wednesday

Saginaw First U.M.C.

Rev. Amy Terhune

Dr. Gregory Knox Jones tells a story about writer Frederick Buechner, who was riding a train into New York City one day many years ago. It was a grey, rainy fall day. The train windows were coated with dust, but there wasn't much to see anyway, except for the industrial wasteland that spreads out in all directions as you approach Newark, New Jersey.

After gazing out the dirty window at the ugly scenery, Buechner let his eyes come to rest on a large color photograph at the front of the coach in which he was riding. It was an advertisement for cigarettes. It showed a beautiful young woman and a handsome young man, both very chic-ly puffing sitting next to a crystal clear mountain stream with a gorgeous blue sky overhead and a backdrop of lush green trees. It was a scene full of beauty, youth and life. And then, down in the lower left hand corner were the words of the Surgeon General's warning: Cigarette smoking can be hazardous to your health. Buechner had seen such ads before, but for some reason, this time, it struck him. The ad seemed to scream at him: "Buy this, it will kill you."

And he realized that the ad wasn't just about smoking. It proclaimed something deadly about the human race—that sometimes we are our own worst enemies. We would buy a product that would destroy us. And it's not just cigarettes. There are all sorts of things out there to buy that aren't good for us. But that is just the beginning. As nations, we stockpile new weapons and old hostilities that may end up destroying the whole planet. As individuals, we stockpile anger, jealousy, resentment—unhealthy attitudes and behaviors that could undo us from the inside out. [3 ¶s from “The Darkness of the World” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] That part of our human nature that is our own worst enemy—that yearns for what hurts us—has a name. And you know what it is, of course. It's called sin. We don't like to talk about it very much. But there's no getting around it today.

46 days from now—that's 40 days of Lent and 6 Sundays—we will pause from our normal routine to experience and live through again the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many centuries ago now, our faith leaders decided that such a momentous time need spiritual preparation in order to truly appreciate it. Which is how Lent came to be. And they were right. We start with Ashes—a symbol of mortality and of sinfulness—to remind ourselves again that we're human, we're broken, we're entangled in sin, and we need this. But something happened along the way. During Lent as a whole, and on Ash Wednesday in particular, *some* folks began to confuse humility with humiliation. Humility is rooted in the term 'humble' and indicates a mindset—a proper and healthy understanding of our place in relationship to God, as in God is God and we are not. Humility is the opposite of arrogance. We need humility. But humiliation is a power ploy whereby one is made to feel shame, embarrassment, disgrace, worthlessness, or insignificance. The opposite of humiliation is dignity. And I assure you that while God desires our humility, God will never strip humankind of dignity. Quite contrary, Christ comes to earth to show us in his life and teaching how to bestow dignity on the marginalized, and his death and resurrection assures dignity to all humankind by reaffirming our sacred worth in God's eyes.

The word "Lent" comes from an Old English word meaning "a lengthening" as the days become longer and warmer with spring's approach. So Lent originally was based in the coming of spring and life. Because the church season always fell at this time of year, the name came to apply to the ecclesiastical observance as well. Lent is a season of reflection, but it is also a season of preparing for new life.

Christians have been observing Ash Wednesday for nearly a thousand years. I hate that expression, by the way. *Observing* Ash Wednesday. Christian faith is really not something we want to observe. It's something we want to experience. So let's say that Christians have been experiencing Ash Wednesday for nearly a thousand years. And now it's our turn—our turn to return our hearts to God's shaping and guidance.

The journey we begin today is one that we walk with Christ, not apart from him. In our gospel lesson tonight, Jesus begins with the word beware. It's from the Germanic root word *warez*, meaning perceive. Beware means be perceptive; be thoughtful; pay attention; think things through; have care. It's more than cautionary. It's about engaging spiritual practices intentionally. And then Jesus goes on to talk about three really good practices: giving to charity, prayer, and fasting. Why would he instruct us to be both cautious and intentional when we're setting out to do something good? Notice, he's not telling us not to do these things. Rather, Jesus is telling us not to do them reflexively and without thought. What he's asking us to do is examine our motives. Specifically, he's asking us to check ourselves for a desire to be recognized and applauded by others for the good we do. Because it is good for us to do things that bring no benefit, that challenge us, that stretch us. That's what goes in to preparing for new life.

Three Centuries ago, John Wesley took that to heart. He talked about what he called “Means of Grace”. These were tools at our disposal to help us know and experience God in our faith journey. They are intentional practices, and I’m going to put them up on the screen briefly. Wesley talked about those Means of Grace by drawing a cross with arrows pointing in each direction. The beam pointing up and down referred to works of piety (which nourish our inward spirit) and works of mercy (which nourish the world beyond ourselves). The crossbar pointing east and west referred to activities done alone and activities done together as the body of Christ. Within each of those quadrants are the tools for building the faith that drives our work, and the work that strengthens our faith. Prayer, fasting, journaling, worship, receiving the Sacraments, and Bible study are pietistic activities that nurture the inner self. Giving to charity, volunteering, fellowship, service projects, and collaborative efforts or Holy Conferencing are all ways we take our faith to the world. The means of grace are how disciples of Christ are made. But even more, the Means of Grace provide avenues by which we experience God’s presence and touch, transfiguring us to be more Christlike. At Lent, we look at this with a serious and devoted eye, and recommit ourselves to growth.

So this Lent, don’t just give up soda pop or potato chips. Let us give up our whole selves. Let us do more invite God into our hearts. Let invite God to refashion are hearts after God’s own. Let us do more than confess our sins. Let us open ourselves to God’s cleansing grace. Let us stop asking what’s in it for me, for us, and instead, look to the cross of Jesus Christ, remembering that he did not give himself because of what was in it for him, but because of what it would do for us. Let us take off the masks and the counterfeit facsimiles of ourselves, and be authentic children of God thus empowering others to do the same. This Lent, don’t give up. Don’t give out. Don’t give in. Instead, give yourself over to grace, over to God, that God may heal what’s hurt, purge what’s sinful, empower what is good, and so give us deep, full, abundant life in the shallowest, emptiest, meagerest of places. Amen.