

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

“God’s Womb Love”

Ash Wednesday
March 6, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Preaching text: Psalm 51, Evangelical Lutheran Worship translation

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness,
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my offenses, and my sin is ever before me.

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

Indeed, I was born steeped in wickedness, a sinner from my mother’s womb.

Indeed, you delight in truth deep within me, and would have me know wisdom deep within.

Remove my sins with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be purer than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; that the body you have broken may rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my wickedness.

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 sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

Let me teach your ways to offenders, and sinners shall be restored to you.

Rescue me from bloodshed, O God of my salvation, and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

For you take no delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. You are not pleased with burnt offering.

The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise.

Favor Zion with your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem.

Then you will delight in the appointed sacrifices, in burnt and whole offerings; then young bulls shall be offered upon your altar.

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

As we begin Lent, Psalm 51 invites us to reflect upon *our* own beginnings. How did your life begin? What is most true about you from the very foundation of your being?

The author of the Psalm does that reflection and he expresses a sense of his sinfulness from the very beginning, from his mother’s womb. He prays, “Indeed, I was born steeped in wickedness, a sinner from my mother’s womb.”

It’s important to note that the Psalmist isn’t making some abstract claim here about the doctrine of original sin. Rather, he’s coming to God in prayer confessing that sin and guilt have permeated his relationship with God, his whole body, his whole life, from the very beginning of his life. Sin and guilt feel to him like they are the truest, most foundational things about him.

Yet that sentiment, “I was a sinner from my mother’s womb,” is not how the Psalm begins. And, it turns out, it also isn’t the true beginning of the Psalmist’s life or ours. The Psalm begins with the words, “Have mercy on me, O God, **according to your steadfast love; in your great compassion**, blot out my offenses.” The Psalm begins with God’s steadfast love and compassion. And, in the original Hebrew, that word translated as “compassion” is rooted in the Hebrew word for womb. The Psalmist is calling on what Hebrew scholars refer to as God’s “womb love,” the love a mother feels for her yet-to-be-born child.

This is our true beginning. We begin in the womb of God’s compassion. Even if we do feel we have been sinful from our earthly mother’s womb, what is most true, most primal and primary for us is the “womb love” of God. God’s compassion is our beginning and our foundation. God’s deep compassion can permeate our bodies and our whole lives. The Psalmist prays that this would happen for him.

He feels his sin in a deeply physical, visceral way as a stained and broken body, a troubled and broken heart. He longs to experience joy and forgiveness in that same physical, visceral way. He prays to be *washed, purged, cleansed*; begs God to create a new and clean *heart* in him so that his *tongue* would sing of God’s righteousness. He pleads for God to open his *lips* so his *mouth* can declare God’s praise; longs to experience truth and wisdom *deep within*, joy and gladness in his *body*.

This is what our mothering God desires us all of us to experience, deep within.

On this Ash Wednesday we, too, experience our sinfulness, guilt and brokenness in a very physical, visceral way as we are marked with ashes and reminded that we are dust. The point of this is not to make us all feel terrible about ourselves or to indoctrinate us in the concept of original sin. All of this is intended to open up *our* bodies to God in repentance and prayer and help us to see how much we need God - God who is our beginning and foundation. It is intended to draw *us* into physical experiences of God’s mercy, steadfast love and compassion.

Ash Wednesday is to help us know, deep in our bones, that we begin in God and return to God. We are dependent upon God who breathes life into dust, who makes beautiful things out of dust, who gives us new life and new beginnings, creates new hearts in us and then receives us again when we return to dust.

The disciplines of Lent - fasting, prayer and giving - are all intended to help us know this in physical and visceral ways. They are intended to draw us into God’s “womb love” compassion and to shape us into people who bring that “womb love” compassion to bear in the world. Lent is an invitation to make each day a new beginning in which we are washed in God’s mercy and forgiveness.

This Lent, during midweek worship we will be reflecting on how we all thirst for physical, visceral experiences of God’s compassion in the form of water, wells, conversation, prayer, love, attention, and surrender.

On Sundays, we will drink deeply of the Psalms that draw our bodies into prayer.

This Lent, may you know, deep in your bones, that you are born of compassion, that God’s steadfast love for you is the most true thing about you. May you begin from that place each new day.

