

Todd R. Allen
2017
Interim Pastor
Wednesday

March 1,
Ash

“Falling to Rise”

Scripture: Psalm 51

For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

- 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 right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
- ⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- ⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret 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.

- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
- 14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
- 15 Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
- 17 My sacrifice, O God, is^[b] a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.
- 18 May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
- 19 Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Opening Prayer: O Lord on this night—and at the start of this holy season—bless the words of my mouth—and the meditations our hearts. May both bring guidance and blessing to our lives—and to the lives of others. Through Christ, Our Lord, in whose name we pray.

Amen.

Let me begin tonight—with a nursery rhyme, and join in with me, if you would:

*“Ring around the rosie,
A pocket full of posies,
Ashes! Ashes!
We all fall down”*

This nursery rhyme goes back a few years—all the way back to the 15th century—did you know that? But there is more: It also speaks to a dark time in history—namely the Black Death.

The 15th century was a time when the Black Death—or what is now known as Bubonic Plague--ravaged Europe. Fully one third of the population died; the reference to “rosies”, some historians claim, points to the circular marks made by the plague on

the skin, while posies is a reminder of an attempt to ward off the plague through herbal remedies—namely, through the scent of flowers—posies.... Here, then is much more than a popular children’s song: We are brought face to face with the fact of death—a very adult topic....

My selection of this rhyme to begin my Ash Wednesday reflection, therefore, is quite deliberate: The period of Lent—down the years—had been a call to remember that we are mortal. The ashes to be placed on our foreheads, this evening, remind us that we are “children of dust.” That out of the earth we have been made, friends. And it will be to the earth—to dust—that we shall return.

We have no in-built immortality. This is surely one the great contributions made by our Jewish ancestors in faith, and it was an understanding that ran counter to the prevailing ideas of Greco-Roman society of the same time. The Greeks and Romans both believed in the immortality of the soul—that a part of who we are, friends, does not die, but instead floats free of the human body at the moment of death. The Jews had no such belief: To them, Adam—the first man—as well as Eve, his consort—were both formed out of the earth, and they did not come alive except for the breath of life that God gave to them. When they died—when they “breathed their last,” if you like—no part of them remained alive. To quote Dickens—they were as dead as a doornail....

“Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down...”

We do, all fall down, friends: One day, death will take us. We will fall, like a mighty tree to the ground—and the earth will take us back....

And so, our time, on earth is limited—here is one take away from all this. You and I have only so much time, more to the point, to plant goodness, and, hopefully, to see the harvest that comes from the same....

But there is also another side to Lent. This side speaks to how we may plant more goodness. How you and I may become more of the kind seed planters God has created us, to be....

Psalm 51—which we just recited together—is a central Scripture for this evening, and for this reason: The writer of the psalm—most likely King David himself—is well aware of his failings—of the times when his actions have produced a bitter harvest—but he is also aware—that a contrite heart is the avenue to new life. Listen to how he puts it:

“My sins are always before me,” he writes, “but you desire mercy, not sacrifice. A contrite heart, O Lord, you will not despise...

Create in me a clean, heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me...”

Lent is about new life—and the new life that God, alone, can give. As much as Lent is a time to remember that we have no built-in immortality, it is also the time to remember—with both humility and expectation!—that the One who breathes life into us, is the same One who also reaches out to us—in the midst of our neediness and brokenness—to touch our frail frames with healing and wholeness. God alone can give life, yes—and God also wants to give us, this new life, here and now!

I love the words to the hymn#317 in our hymnal—*“All People that on Earth do Dwell.”* It is a hymn typically sung to the tune of the Doxology, and I’d invite us to sing the second stanza together, this evening:

*“Know that the Lord is God indeed.
Without our aid He did us make.
We are his folk, he doth us feed,
and for his sheep he doth us take...”*

Are we children of dust? Yes, without our aid, God did make us—we bring nothing to the table in the matter of life—God is the One, alone, who give us the breath of life.

But the One who give us life, my friends, is the One who also claims us as His own—and the image of a shepherd caring for his flock is, of course, most apt for Jesus is spoken of in just these terms. The care of Jesus for us, friends, far exceeds that of any earthly—any human shepherd, however, for tonight—on this Ash Wednesday—we begin to turn our face towards Jerusalem, along with our Lord. With him, we begin a journey that will take us to a place where deathly shadows, will fall....

It is the place, let me suggest, where our failure should condemn us to remain—indeed, to receive the punishment we richly deserve. The Scriptures tell us of a trial that take place in Jerusalem—that Jesus will soon face a tribunal. Well, if you and I were to face a similar experience, our sins, quite simply, would place our lives in jeopardy; if our God—in short—was like an earthly judge, you and I would surely face eternal imprisonment given what we have done—and left undone—for we are surely guilty.

But our God—while a holy God—is also more than this:

*“O enter then his gates with praise;
approach with joy his courts unto;
praise, laud, and bless his name always,
for it is seemly so to do.*

*For why? The Lord our God is good;
his mercy is forever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.”*

Here—here!—friends, is the other side of Lent: Are we children of dust—and we do also fall down as we fail both God, our neighbor, and, yes, ourselves....

But then we rise, my friends. Not on our own power, though. We are restored, once more, to favor in the sight of God—but it is not based on any merit we have. No, when we fall down, a strong arm reaches out to us, and it is the same arm that will be stretched upon a cross in just 40 days. It is the arm of Christ, our Good Shepherd. *It is He who saves us—He who lays down his life, for our own—He who takes upon himself the punishment, we should bear.... And it His arm alone, which pulls us up, sets us back on our feet—an arm strong enough to even to raise us from the dead.*

“O enter then his gates with praise.”

“For why? Because our Lord, is good. His mercy is forever sure.”

Here is the mercy that comes to us when we come before God, friends, with a contrite heart. For a contrite heart, as King David knew, is most surely the avenue to new life....

*“Ring around the rosie,
A pocket full of posies,
Ashes! Ashes!
We all fall down...”*

Tonight, let us mourn how often we all fall down.
And let us remember—and rejoice—in the One who lifts us up when we fall...

May this Period of Lent, with God's help, be a time when we put to death what must die in our lives.

And may this period of Lent, with God's help, also be a time when we will lay hold of what gives life—even what gives rise to joy and celebration—yes, may the first stanza of this great hymn become our song—and may our lives show others that we know it by heart:

*“All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell.
Come ye before him and rejoice.”*

Amen—and Amen!