

# Moment of Truth

## Psalm 51:1-17

### Ash Wednesday 2016

Some of the psalms come with headings. These headings might contain ancient musical instructions. They might identify the psalm writer or source or recipient. Some headings describe the subject or occasion for the psalm.

Psalm fifty-one has a heart-stopping heading: “*A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*” Behind this psalm lies a tale of lust and lying, of arrogance and adultery, of malice and murder. It is little wonder the poem begins, “*Have mercy on me, O God...*”

David was king of all Israel. He conquered enemies, built a palace, and brought prosperity to the land. David was known as “*a man after God’s own heart.*” David was incredibly gifted—and fatally flawed

At the height of his powers, David sent off younger men to play at mayhem and war. In his royal leisure, David spied out Bathsheba, the wife of another man. David took her for his own and ordered the death in battle of her hapless husband.

Confident, comfortable, and complacent—David took what he wanted. No one dared confront the king with his crimes—no one except for the prophet, Nathan. Nathan told David a story about a poor man. The man had a little lamb that he raised with tender devotion. The poor man treasured the lamb as he did his own daughters.

A rich neighbor entertained a guest. He spied the poor man’s treasured property. The rich man stole and slaughtered the poor family’s pet and served it to his guest.

Nathan paused and waited the king’s response.

“*As the Lord lives,*” David exclaimed, “*the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity.*”

Nathan laid his trap with care and caught himself a king. “*You are the man!*” he declared to David.

David is exposed in the full glare of his failure. He is hung on his own hypocrisy. The man after God’s own heart is, after all, merely a man. In the desperate helplessness of a sinner revealed, the man who had no mercy can only whisper, “*Have mercy...*”

You and I are not David. Our triumphs are not so high, nor our fall so low. Our failings may be less spectacular, but they are no less destructive. Our self-deception may be less complicated, but it is no less complete.

We also build our sanctuaries of self-serving security. We fool no one but ourselves, but that is usually enough. Humility is for suckers. Confession is for losers. Forgiveness is unnecessary. Failure is not an option.

David has his moment of searing honesty. I have had such moments. But we humans can stand such nakedness for only seconds at a time. We get through our days with a mixture of mild regret, rueful rationalization, and selective amnesia. Without such defenses, I would curl up in a whimpering ball of shame. In the desperate helplessness of a sinner revealed, all we can whisper is, *“Have mercy...”*

Is despair the only option? That is not the message of this psalm or this day. Why ask for mercy if mercy is impossible? Why plead for the grace of God if God is not gracious?

We read the psalms through the lens of Jesus, the Messiah. *“For our sake,”* Paul writes to the Corinthians, *“he made him to be sin who knew no sin...”* Jesus leads the struggle against sin, death and evil. During Lent, we cling to his presence and power as we continue the struggle.

We can ask for God’s mercy, because we have seen Mercy’s face. His name is Jesus. Not even death can limit on that mercy. We remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We confess that dust will not be our destiny. Nor will dust determine our daily direction.

David hit bottom in his high dive from the throne. Only now is he willing to be changed. *“Teach me, purge, me, wash me!”* he pleads. *“Create in me a clean heart, O God,”* we pray, *“and put a new and right spirit within me.”* If David can be changed, there is hope for you and me.

Lent begins with a solemn call to fasting and repentance. But as we hear in today’s readings, now is the acceptable time to return to the Lord. The sign of ashes points to our human mortality. What seems like an ending, however, is an invitation to make each day a new beginning. What seems like a dead end is the road to new life. *“Teach me, purge, me, wash me!”* We hear God’s word. We confess our sins. We remember our baptism. With the cross on our brow, we long for the spiritual renewal that flows from the Easter feast to come.

Hear this invitation to your own moment of truth. Hear the promise of mercy God makes in Jesus. And hear the call to pray each day to accept that life-giving grace of God.

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