



February 3, 2008

Preaching: Jim Best, Rev. Eunbae Doh

Psalm 51:1-17

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Ash Wednesday Reflections

“Finding a Sacrifice”

When we were planning youth led worship, we spent a week looking at all the different prayers in the worship service and why we had them. Several people said they didn't like having the prayer of confession each week because it was so depressing. My guess is that they wouldn't much like tonight's Psalm either.

Me, I'm a fan of the Psalms. For me they are the ultimate example of the relevance of the Bible. No matter what I am feeling, no matter what my day has been like, I know that I can turn to the book of Psalms and open to any page, and something there will speak to me. For this reason, I love to preach on the Psalms.

Some pastors have told me that they have a hard time with it; that the language of the Psalms often makes it difficult for them to write a sermon. The Psalms are filled with verses like the one tonight, and let's face it. Verses like “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit”, doesn't exactly lend itself to a happy sermon. At least not without a little work and a little thought.

Psalm 51 is historically thought to be written by King David, at a time in his life when things were not going well. David was soul sick. He knew that his sins were as bad as they could possibly be. He had slept with Bathsheba who was married to another man, and then he had ordered that man's death so that he could have the woman for himself. And then, just when he thought everything was going to work

out, the Lord sends the prophet Nathan to rebuke David; to show him the error of what he had done and the sins he had committed.

With the mirror that Nathan held to his face, David knew that he had committed the worst sorts of sins...and yet...and yet he knew that if he repented, if he turned from them and looked to God, then he would be forgiven. And it is in this mind set that he wrote this Psalm; A desire for repentance and renewal of a right relationship with God.

And that is what tonight is about, isn't it? A desire to seek repentance. A desire to find that Right relationship with the Lord. Today is the beginning of Lent; the beginning of the season of reflection and repentance within the church. Many people see Lent as a time for dieting. A time to give up chocolate or french fries or some other fattening thing in an effort to lose some weight during Lent. Many people know that they are supposed to give something up...but couldn't tell you the reason why.

During the early days of the Bible you often heard of people wearing Sackcloth and ashes. When someone had done wrong and were seeking repentance, they would wear clothing made out of sackcloth, which is exactly what it sounds like. Burlap; a scratchy irritating cloth that would not have been comfortable to wear. It was thought that by wearing that, the constant scratching, the constant irritation against your skin would be a continuous reminder of the wrong you had done; the sins you had committed. By wearing the sackcloth, every movement would remind you that you were sorry, and that your mind should be looking to God for forgiveness.

When we give something up for Lent, it should be for the same reason. It should not be because we want to lose weight. It should not be because we think God wants us to suffer, or that God wants us to avoid fatty foods. The reason we give up things for Lent is so that we can be reminded of our devotion to God. If you give up drinking soda, then anytime you think of grabbing a coke, or see someone drinking a Dr. Pepper, or see a Pepsi ad on TV, then you should be thinking about the reason why you are giving something up and turning your thoughts to God. For you see, when we Sacrifice something for Lent, it isn't the sacrifice itself that is important, but our thoughts. God isn't happy that we made it for forty days without ice cream, but rather, that by giving up the dessert, it turned our thoughts more to Him, and towards salvation. For that is what Lent is about, moving your thoughts for forty days towards the salvation that God offered to us all in the form of Jesus Christ.

David says "Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation." "O God of my salvation"! David knows where his salvation comes from and knows that

God is wanting him to think on his misdeeds. David knows that the laws of the time said he needed to ask for penance by offering up animals at the temple, but he also knows that that isn't what God really wants. David says, "if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased." David knows that God is looking for more than a simple, fast, act of contrition with no real thought behind it. Just like when we sacrifice something for Lent, it isn't the act alone that God desires. David goes on to say that "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." David is saying here that his spirit is indeed broken by the weight of his sins. David is saying that he has seen the enormity of what he has done, and no quick act, no unthinking rote prayers are going to be enough. No, he is saying that the only thing that God desires, is a truly repentant heart!

So here we are, having sacrificed our night and fought through the snow, on the cusp of the season of Lent. A time for devotion. A time for prayer and reflection. And a time to ask for forgiveness. Maybe we haven't been as bad as David, but we are all sinners. We have all done things in our lives, or by inaction allowed things to be done that we are not proud of. And yet...And yet, God is still the God of our salvation. Through the sacrifice of Christ, our sins and our failings have all been forgiven! And as we move into Lent, remember that what God really wants, is our desire to be closer to Him, and the sacrifice we should truly be offering, is our hearts.

Amen.

"Secretly or Publicly"

'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. 'So whenever you give alms, 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. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. '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. 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.

'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. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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.'

Wow, this is a very challenging message to me.

If that is true, as a pastor, there is no way I can avoid being the hypocrite. I may not be able to receive any reward from God. There are so many times I have to pray in public at committee meetings, worship, and so on.

And also, the message about fasting, it also makes me upset. I have a fasting figure, skinny body, gloomy face. People might think of me that I'm fasting, even though I'm not pretending to be fasting.

What should I do?

And also this message is challenging us. There is a contradiction in his teaching. Jesus says in Matthew 6:2-4 that when we give to the needy, we should not announce it, "but when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

But in Matthew 5:16 Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

So which is it? Should we do our good deeds in secret, or in public?

Do we have to pray always in a secret place? Do we have to do something good in secret, like Santa Clause? We can not say that praying and doing good in public is always wrong. There are many times we should pray in public. There are so many times we need to do good deeds in front of people, when we talk kindly to the clerk at the checkout line, when we love someone - your baby, husband, wife, even someone who we don't like, when we take a stand for what is right, when we make a voice for justice.

What should we do?

What was Jesus telling his people? What was the point?

Here is a clue helps us to understand his message.

In this verse, three times Jesus uses the phrase: “*And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*” (4,6,18) In other words God is secretly watching us and knows all of our secret behavior and all of the thoughts and intentions!

Let us look at some Scriptures about how God is observing our human lives:

Psalms 139:1-4

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.*

Jeremiah 23:24

Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD.

That’s right. God is watching us. God is watching us and cannot be fooled. God knows all your up and downs and knows your secret plans, your intentions, and real motivation in your heart. Therefore, we can reach a conclusion that practicing our piety, praying, fasting, helping other, these are not a matter of place (in public or in secret). This is a matter of our heart, because God is looking on our heart.

1 Samuel 16:7

But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.’

The religious hypocrite has perfected the outward appearance, the ingratiating smile, the holier than thou accent, the long robes and so forth, praying at the street, preaching on the TV show. But God is generally totally unimpressed. God does not look at the outward show but at the inward person, at their attitudes and intentions, and especially at their humility, love, faith and hope. When God finds someone with a good heart He blesses them mightily.

Brothers and sisters,
Keep your heart

Your heart is the place that all kind of evil comes out
Clean your heart
The things in your heart are what make people unclean