

# “Create in Me a Clean Heart”

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – February 22, 2023 – Ash Wednesday*

*Psalm 51*

Tonight, we gather as Christians in Willoughby, Ohio. We come as a unique body of Christ. We come as a small example of the church universal to a time when the church reviews itself and its actions. As individuals in Christ church, we are called to a deeper level of self-examination. We are called to an extended time of prayer and preparation. And part of that preparation is to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us to an open acknowledgement of sin in our lives.

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

Does anyone know how Lent got started? It's not in the Bible. There is no verse that says "Thou shalt celebrate Lent."

Around 230 AD, a group of Christians started fasting for the 40 hours leading up to Easter. To prepare their hearts for Easter. Pretty soon, the idea caught on. Years later, they bumped it up to 7 days of fasting. And they called it Holy Week. And by 325 AD, the church officially made it 40 days. Representing Jesus' 40 days of testing in the wilderness.

That is the Reader's Digest version of the tradition of Lent. But the point of Lent is to remember our relationship with God and others. How our sin destroys that relationship.

Psalm 51 is a psalm that is about when the prophet Nathan came to David after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. Now it is important for us to remember that this Psalm is a song that is used in the temple for worship. As we read this Psalm, we are to remember repeatedly the sin of God's favorite.

The Bible calls King David A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART. Yet we know he committed not just little sins, He broke commandments. He coveted, had an affair and then tried to cover it up and when that went wrong - he murdered.

All of this took a little time. But he thought he had gotten away with it. A man after God's own heart ... I Don't Think So!

He planned his sins. He acted on his plans, and he was comfortable with what he had done.

It would not surprise me if he was going to temple on the Sabbath with his new wife on his arm, smiling and shaking hands with all the folks. It had been months, and no one said anything. No one condemned.

Aren't we glad that we can say, "Oh, God, I thank you that I am not in any way like David. I have never done anything like that. I have never planned and executed a sin. I have always admitted when I did sin and made everything right."

We live in a culture, a nation, a community and even a church environment that will let our sin slide. But no one challenges us to dig deeper, no one will confront us or even mention that they see sin in our lives.

That would be judging. That would make us sinners and a meddler. If I did that, they might say something about me. They might challenge the sin in my life.

Psalms 51 contains a public exposure of a great man's sins, and it is a documentation of that man's feelings and prayer about that situation.

David poured out his heart to God in this prayer. He knows that he was caught in his sins. Not by Nathan but the moment he allowed the human desires to take hold and plan his sins. In this prayer he admits that his sins are always there and that he cannot fix them. He can't hide them.

It took an external source to make him reflect on the fact that just because no one around noticed or said anything about his sin, that you are not OK.

He understood that throwing a bull or a hundred bulls on the alter as a sacrifice has no value to God because there was no sign of repentance.

His prayer is his plea to God that he wants to be made right. He knows that the only way it can happen is for God to wipe the slate clean.

Tonight, we are beginning a process where we take 40 days, for self-reflection. We commit ourselves to the process of allowing the Holy Spirit to convict us that we are more like David than our pride and arrogance would allow us to admit.

Lent is a period when we reflect on how we really act and the little sins that we have made no big deal in our lives.

I read a story about how birds around Niagara falls fly up to the falling water to get a drink. In the winter, each time they go in for a sip, a little ice buildup on their feathers. People have watched as some of these birds go in for dip after sip and suddenly disappear into the falling water when the ice on their bodies becomes too heavy.

The sins in our lives weigh us down, Lent is a time when we allow our focus to see the little stuff that is weighing us down.

Lent is not a time to be depressed and wallow in our failures, it is the time to free our soul from the burdens. By admitting that we are sinners, and we want to change, really change! we become free.

Who do you think wrote Psalm 51? It is a confession, a public confession that was a reminder of what he had done. It was a reminder not to take that side path again.

Tonight, we are not asking you to declare your deepest darkest secrets to anyone except God. We are suggesting that by receiving the sign of ashes on your forehead or hand that you are praying like king David. "CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, OH GOD, AND RENEW A RIGHT SPIRIT WITHIN ME."

For us tonight, the sign of the ashes is our admission that we are not perfect. But we really want to try to change our ways and actions. This is the first step. Each week we attend worship and focus on how we can be closer to the people God created us to be, helps us to move past our sins and live in the glory of God making each of us holy.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.