

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Lent seems to have crept up on us quickly this year, especially if you've been distracted by other things, as I have. It is early this year, but not the earliest it can be. But early or not, we knew it was coming and now here we are. I wonder if you tend to think about Lent the way I have tended to think about it for a good chunk of my life, as something of an imposition from without, not something I would necessarily choose to observe if it weren't part of the whole package of the liturgical calendar. Lent has often felt to me like something I have to endure, something to get through rather than a way of life that I'm invited into to inhabit whole-heartedly, if only temporarily. Only recently has the latter possibility even occurred to me. So I want to throw out the possibility that not only can Lent be good for you, it can also be a joyful, life-giving space to inhabit in the midst of everything else in life that might be troubling or burdensome.

More about what that might look like later. Before we get there, there are some important themes in today's text that I want to explore with you in order to help them be resources and not obstacles to your Lenten observation. The first is in that opening psalm, Psalm 51, which we get every year on Ash Wednesday. I wonder how that psalm strikes you. Maybe you are used to it and don't notice how radical it is, I mean in the sense of getting to the root of our human condition. Or maybe you *have* noticed how radical it is and that has never sat very well with you. A lot will depend, I expect, on your life circumstances and how you have been taught to think about the whole concept of sin that is such a crucial component of the Christian faith. I'd be particularly interested in how you react to verse two, there, "wash me through and through from my wickedness..." And then in verse five, "Indeed, I was born steeped in wickedness." What are the things you think about when you hear that? Does it resonate? Does it repel? These are deeply personal questions, I realize, and maybe not anything you'd ever actually want to discuss. But I want to name that, to acknowledge the impact a word like wickedness can have, because I think is one of those words that brings up how sin has been misused in the history of the church and of the cultures we have inherited. To me, wickedness feels like a defining label that has been used as a weapon to dismiss and "other" people. If you are labeled wicked, it's not really done to help you. Because it doesn't seem redeemable. Think the wicked witch in the Wizard of Oz. She was bad through and through. Only good for melting. If you're wicked, you're just plain bad, end of the story. So I'm not sure that this is the best choice of words to translate the Hebrew here. Other translations use the old-fashioned "iniquity" for "wickedness" in verse two, and "guilt" for "wicked" in verse five. And that's backed up by the dictionaries I consulted.

What I want us to see in this whole discussion, though, is that sin as it is being spoken of here in Psalm 51 is not a defining characteristic of human beings. We are sinful, to be sure. All of us. Right from our mother's womb, as the psalmist puts it. But this is not what humans are in our essence. It is definitive only of the condition we find ourselves in, not of who we are or who we are meant to be. The early church was clear about this from very early on, drawing on the first chapter of Genesis, the whole point of which is to remind us that God created us to be good. Very good, even. And that is why the psalmist can pray to be cleansed of sin, to have sin removed. If sin were an essential human characteristic, that would be a prayer for destruction, and that is clearly not what is going on here.

So sin is not who we are, but it is the condition that we are in. It is something that we are in captivity to, as our confession puts it, and from which we cannot free ourselves. And part of

our collective sinfulness is not recognizing this essential distinction. So, we divide the world into good and bad people, into us and them. *Those* people are irredeemable. *Our* people might not be perfect, but they're not *those* people, and we give them a pass. You know the dynamic. It's all over our politics at the moment.

In our sinful condition we use sin as a weapon. We impose it as identity upon others. And then, because we come to believe our own propaganda, when it is used against us we start to believe it also about ourselves. We accept wickedness as our identity. We become ashamed not only of what we have done and left undone, as our confession puts it, as surely we ought to be. We take the shame to where it does not belong, deep into the core of our being, and we believe the lie that wickedness is who we are in our very essence.

So if that is your story, I understand why Psalm 51 might be difficult for you to hear, and painful for you to speak. You're not ready for it just yet. It is a remarkable psalm and a treasure of the church, but it is only usable if you are able to separate your sin and your wickedness from your essential, core identity. The psalmist is clearly able to do this, and so is able to turn to God in hope, confident in God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love going all the way back to the good beginning that God made at the dawn of creation.

If you're not there yet, let me turn your attention to our second reading from 2 Corinthians. And specifically to verse 21. "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so in him we might become the righteousness of God." This is what Martin Luther calls the "happy exchange." God in Christ takes on that identity that we are so happy to cast onto others, and that also comes back to bite us. Christ takes on our sinful condition and that false identity and does what we cannot do: he puts it to death on the cross and then leaves it buried in the garden tomb. In return he gives to us his uncorrupted goodness and righteousness. This is the promise we receive when we are buried into Christ's death in Holy Baptism. *This* is God's word about who you are now, your new identity. You are reconciled with God and declared a new, good creation. And because it is God speaking, you know it will happen.

But just like the first creation, this new creation does not happen all at once. It is a process that involves an ongoing battle with sin, which is still our condition, but no longer our identity or our destiny. Lent becomes a time for remembering this lifelong battle with sin and its consequences. But it is not a dreary slog, but a struggle we gladly and joyfully take on because we are confident that sin and death are already defeated, and we are now in the mopping up stages.

In a few moments you will be marked with the sign of the cross on your forehead and will hear that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. That is a quote from God, spoken to the first humans after their fall into sin. You should know that that also is not your identity, not your full identity anyway, not the essence of who you are. You are dust. It's what you were created out of. And you will return to dust in death. But that is not all there is to you. Out of dust God created you in God's own image, and out of the dust you return to in death God will raise and refashion you for the life that God has intended for you all along, a resurrection and recreation that has already begun in you through baptism.

It is not sin and death that is your identity or your destiny. It is the goodness and life of the one in whose cross you are marked that is you really are. So take heart in that promise. Rejoice and be glad in who you really are for Jesus' sake. Be encouraged for the joyful battle with sin that is already won. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.