

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “Have Mercy on Me, O God” (Psalm 51:1-2)**

**Ash Wednesday: February 17, 2010**

Each year during the Ash Wednesday service we kneel and recite Psalm 51, one of the seven penitential Psalms (the others are 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143). Psalm 51 articulates a cry for God’s mercy for those desperately in need of God’s grace.

Often during the season of Lent people make a concerted effort to do things they do not normally do—like praying, reading the Bible, doing charity work, attending church services, or being less grumpy. Others may make a concerted effort to abstain from things they enjoy—like dessert, television, *Facebook*, or alcoholic beverages.

While these things are fine, they often turn our focus to ourselves instead of God. Lent is not about what we do or don’t do for God. Lent is about remembering what God has already done for us. Psalm 51 immediately points us to what we need more than anything else in the world, the mercy of God.

Today I’m preaching on Psalm 51:1-2—“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offenses. Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.”

Psalm 51 was written by King David. David is the greatest king in the history of Israel. David was the youngest son of his father, Jesse. He was rejected by his father and rejected by his brothers, but chosen by God. When the prophet Samuel was led by the Lord to visit Jesse and anoint one of his sons as the next king of Israel, Jesse invited all his sons except David. David was like the one kid in the neighborhood who was not invited to a birthday party, except it was not his neighbors who rejected him, it was his family.

But the Lord passed on all David’s older brothers, and so Samuel asked Jesse if he had any more sons, and Jesse replied, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” Samuel responded, “Send and bring him.” David arrived and the Lord told Samuel, “Rise and anoint him for this is the one” and Scripture tells that “the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David” (I Samuel 16:1-13).

David went on to defeat Goliath and lead Israel to victory over their oppressors, the Philistines. He later defeated the Philistines again and brought the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. He wrote many psalms that have been used in worship for many hundreds of years. David won many battles over the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Amalekites, and Philistines. David was the consummate warrior-poet.

He was eventually crowned king of Judah, and seven years later he was crowned king of all Israel—and he reigned for a total of forty years. Moreover, God made a covenant with David and promised that someday a descendant of his would establish a kingdom that would last forever. Listen to what God spoke to David through the prophet, Nathan:

“I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me... your throne will be established forever” (II Samuel 7:12-16).

David had everything you could ask for: power, wealth, prestige, fame, honor, a huge family, and beyond all that David was anointed with the spirit of God. In short, David was *the* man. But David was also *a* man, and in II Samuel 11 we see that during the season when kings usually went to war, David stayed home. He had an affair with a married woman named Bathsheba, and when she conceived, David made arrangements for her husband, Uriah the Hittite, who was out fighting battles against the Ammonites on David’s behalf, to be abandoned in the heat of battle so that he would be killed. King David, the man after God’s own heart, the one anointed with the spirit of God, committed adultery and murder.

David tried to do what many of us do when we sin, he tried to cover it up, but it didn’t work—it never does. For the same prophet, Nathan, through whom God had earlier spoken his promise of establishing an everlasting kingdom through his descendants, once again came to David, this time to confront him with his sin. At this point, however, David stopped trying to cover up his sin, and he responded to Nathan with one simple sentence: “I have sinned against the Lord.”

David no longer tried to cover up his sin. He made no excuses. He did not say, “Oh well, boys will be boys.” He did not say, “I did not have sex with that woman.” He did not tell Nathan that his childhood experiences of rejection made him especially vulnerable to temptation. He did not ask to appear on Dr. Phil. Instead, David owned up to the reality of his sin. David in this case would have agreed with the classic song written by blues legend Blind Willie Johnson (and later covered by Led Zeppelin), *Nobody’s Fault but Mine*. David’s response to Nathan was right on and right to the point: “I have sinned against the Lord.”

This was the darkest and most stressful season in David’s life. He had not been this stressed when walking across the field to face Goliath. He had not been this stressed when fleeing for his life from King Saul. He had not been this stressed in the many times he had been in battle. But I imagine that the realization that he—a man after God’s own heart, the anointed king of Israel—had committed adultery and murder, stressed him out more than we could imagine. David experienced what we state about our sins in the confession each week: “the remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable” (BCP 331).

And yet, David turned to God, the same God who had chosen him, delivered him time and time again, and anointed him with the Spirit. David turned to God and prayed what became known as Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, O God.”

When David was confronted with the reality and the gravity of his sin he did not appeal to his Lenten disciplines, he appealed to the grace of God: “Have mercy on me, O God, *according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion blot out my transgressions.*” David surely remembered that when God revealed himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai He proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). David appealed to the grace of God.

And David continued, “Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.” David experienced the truth of what the prophet Jeremiah was to preach years later: “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). David experienced the truth of what Jesus preached many years after that: “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person” (Matthew 15:19-20a). David knew that only God could wash him “through and through” and cleanse him from his sin. David, the man after God’s own heart, knew that God looks at the heart (I Samuel 16:7) and he knew that what was in his heart could only be cleansed by God. And so David appealed to the grace of God.

And God had mercy on David and forgave him. And although David had to deal with the fallout of his sin in the life of his family, *God* forgave him, and *God* kept his promise: for many years later a descendant of David was indeed born, rejected by men but chosen by God (I Peter 2:4), Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, God kept his promise made to David. God always keeps his promises.

Through his death on the cross Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of everyone in the world, including David, and including you and me. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of what is referred to in Psalm 51 as the “loving-kindness” and “great compassion” of God.

Through faith in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven, our offenses are blotted out. It’s as if God opened a document on his computer that listed every single sin in our lives, and then typed “Ctrl/A” to shade them all, “Delete” to delete them all, and “Ctrl/S” to save the change—so when God opens the document that used to list all our sins he sees a blank document. Through faith in Jesus Christ we are justified, our sins are blotted out by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

And not only does the blood of Jesus Christ blot out our sins, it also cleanses us “through and through.” That happens when we confess our sins to God, as John wrote in his first letter: “If we

confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9).

When David, the man after God’s own heart, the greatest king in Israel’s history, found himself at the end of his rope because of his sin, he turned to the only One to whom he could turn, God, and asked for the only thing that could save him, mercy. David expressed that in Psalm 51, and we too, when we find ourselves at the end of our rope because of sin, can pray Psalm 51 and ask God for mercy. When it is all said and done, we need God’s mercy more than anything else, and God gives us that mercy in Jesus Christ. That is the good news of the gospel.

A couple weeks ago I read *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, written by John Foxe and originally published in 1563. It is a classic and moving account of the heroic suffering and death of many Christian martyrs, with particular emphasis on those burned at the stake during the English Reformation, and as such is a stirring reminder of our heritage as Christians in the Anglican tradition.

On February 9, 1555 an Anglican priest named Rowland Taylor, who served as Rector of Hadleigh in Suffolk, was burned at the stake for his Protestant convictions. In addition to being respected by his parish, Taylor was loved by his wife, Mary, and their nine children. Five days before his death he wrote the following to his wife and children:

“I believe that they are blessed which die in the Lord. God careth for sparrows and for the hairs of our heads. I have ever found him more faithful and favorable, than is any father or husband. Trust ye therefore in Him by the means of our dear Savior Christ’s merits: believe, love, fear, and obey Him: pray to Him, for He hath promised to help. Count me not dead, for I shall certainly live, and never die. I go before, and you shall follow after, to our long home.”

At about 2:00AM on the day of his death Taylor was taken from his cell and his wife, Mary, and two of his daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, who had suspected this might happen and had waited outside, ran up to him. The sheriff granted Taylor a few moments with his family. The four of them held one another, knelt and prayed the Lord’s Prayer, while the sheriff wept. John Foxe continues:

“After they had prayed, (Taylor) rose up and kissed his wife... and said, ‘Farewell my dear wife, and be of good comfort, for I am quiet in my conscience. God shall stir up a father for our children.’ And then he kissed his daughter, Mary, and said, ‘God bless thee and make thee His servant:’ and kissing Elizabeth, he said, ‘God bless thee; I pray you all stand strong and steadfast unto Christ and His Word.’”

As Taylor was tied to the stake later that day, awaiting his painful death, guess what he was reciting. Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your

great compassion blot out my offenses. Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.” Rowland Taylor, at death’s doorstep, asked God for mercy. When it is all said and done, it is only the mercy of God, the grace of God in Jesus Christ that can save us. Taylor knew that it is the merits of Jesus Christ that saves us, not our own efforts.

As we begin the season of Lent today if you are in a place in your life in which you realize you need the mercy of God, if you are in a *Nobody’s Fault but Mine* place, you do not have to wait until you at the end of your rope like David or at death’s doorstep like Rowland Taylor to ask God for mercy. You don’t even have to wait until Easter morning. You can ask God for mercy in just a few moments as we pray Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offenses. Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.”

Lent is not about what we do or don’t do for God. It is about what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ and his atoning death on the cross God has given us what we need more than anything else, his mercy. And his mercy is more than enough.

Amen.