

“Getting into the Heart of Repentance; a Meditation”

Joel 2:12-13; Psalm 51 selected verses; Psalm 32:5, 7

Sermon for Ash Wednesday 2022; March 2, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

Rev. Charles Westby, Pastor

+++++

The Season of Lent begins this evening. We call it a penitential season, which means that repentance is the dominant theme. This is in focus on Ash Wednesday, as Job 42:6 says, “[T]herefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” So let us look at the Scriptures to get into the heart of repentance, as the prophet Joel says, “Rend your hearts” (Joel 2:13).

One way to get into the heart of repentance is by looking at what happened with King David in relation to Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. David shows the heart of repentance in connection with this in some things he said in Psalm 51 and Psalm 32.

We first have to look at what King David did.

King David got himself into a heap of trouble. His army was battling the Ammonites. David remained at Jerusalem (2 Samuel 11:1). Then “it happened late one afternoon” (2 Samuel 11:2 ESV). David was walking on the roof of the palace. He was looking out over the city. He saw a woman bathing. She was beautiful (2 Samuel 11:2).

We could have hoped that King David had had control of his desires by faith according to the word of God, namely, “you shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14) Then, he would have turned his eyes away from her and walked to another part of the palace roof, to remove the temptation.

Here is a lesson to learn.

But, he didn’t. The desire excited in him by seeing her generated actions that would end in treachery and misery, his own treachery and misery he brought on himself and those around him.

So, he asked members of his staff about her. They told him her name, Bathsheba. They also told him that she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11:3). David knew that Bathsheba was another man’s wife.

What did David do? Did he leave it at that? No. He sent messengers to get her and bring her to him. She later returned to her house. She became pregnant (2 Samuel 11:4–5).

Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, was in David’s army. He was honorable and loyal to David and his fellow soldiers (2 Samuel 11:6–13). He was with the army battling the Ammonites when all of this took place. It was obvious, therefore, that Bathsheba was not pregnant by her husband. David’s staff knew what David had done. A pregnancy cannot be covered up for long.

What is David to do? He spirals downwardly into awfulness. This happens when a person allows unlawful desire to take control. David ended up conspiring to get Uriah killed in battle. David gave orders that Uriah should be put in the front line in the heat of the battle and then left alone at an opportune time so that he could be killed (2 Samuel 11:14–15). This was treachery of the worst kind, and abuse of power.

David thought that he had worked out the solution. Now he could take Bathsheba lawfully as his wife. The people would be none-the-wiser about his adultery with her and how he had treacherously gotten her husband killed.

But God sees, and God knows.

So, God confronted David, through the prophet Nathan.

Nathan told David a little story, like a parable. There was a rich man and a poor man. The poor man had one ewe lamb that was very dear to him. The rich man had a whole flock of sheep.

A guest came to visit the rich man. The rich man wanted to throw a feast for his guest. The rich man took the poor man's lamb for the feast, rather than one from his own flock (2 Samuel 12:1–4).

David was immediately furious at the injustice of this (2 Samuel 12:5–6). Nathan said, “You are the man.” You are like the rich man. Then he told King David plainly what he had done with Bathsheba and her husband contrary to God's law (2 Samuel 12:7–9).

Here we get to the heart of repentance. David did what he did. God saw. Then God spoke to David through His word to show David what he had done. Here is the crucial point; it is a point at which heaven holds its breath (Luke 15:7): What will David do with God's word that was pointing out to him that he was in the wrong? Will David hear and agree with God's judgment? Or, will David harden himself, defend himself, and reject God's word? Will he be like Job, “I despise myself,” or will he be defiant, “I have done nothing wrong,” and then attack Nathan for daring to accuse him?

David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:13 ESV). Heaven heaves a sigh of relief. David is in repentance. Nathan says to David, “The LORD . . . has put away your sin” (2 Samuel 12:13 ESV).

David spoke of it like this in Psalm 51: “I know my transgressions; my sin is ever before me” (Psalm 51:3 ESV). He speaks of the owning up to it, like this: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment” (Psalm 51:4 ESV).

Didn't David sin against Uriah and Bathsheba, and also others whom he got involved in his conspiracy? He sure did. But the root of his sin is that he did not fear, love, and trust in God as he ought. He had to admit that he had sinned against God when he had sinned against human beings; these two things go together (Matthew 22:34–40).

This led David to the deepest insight. It is the echo in different words of Job's heartfelt cry: “I despise myself” (Job 42:6). David realizes: “I was brought forth in iniquity; in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5 ESV). In other words, he realized that his corruption in sin went back to the very beginning of his life and corrupted his whole being. He was horrified at what he did and realized that this came out of a deep corruption of his being. He had to condemn himself for what he had done. This may be the most difficult part of repentance. He had to speak against himself and hold himself in contempt in light of God's word.

So, he acknowledged what God wants: “Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart” (Psalm 51:6 ESV). But because he was conceived in iniquity, he failed to have truth in the inward being. This was the root of the problem. His actions exposed a deeper problem of heart and mind that is corrupted in its will, desires, and thinking. This corruption led to the awful and wicked things he did. He sees this reality and is honest with it in a repentant or penitent heart. He realized these things as a believer.

But this is just one side of repentance, as worked by God through His word and Spirit. There is another side that is equally important, which is this: “Hide your face from my sins; blot out all my iniquities” (Psalm 51:9 ESV). Repentance worked by God's Spirit desires forgiveness and God's fellowship: “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:5 ESV). David also says it like this about God who convicted him of sin; yes, about God who convicted him: “You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance” (Psalm 32:7 ESV). So, the heart of repentance involves this godly desire and prays: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me; cast me

not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11 ESV).

Accordingly, David teaches us that godly repentance takes place within a promise: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit.” Here is the promise: “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17 ESV).

It is as the prophet Joel says: “Return to the LORD your God, *for* he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster” (Joel 2:13 ESV). Joel uses this little word “for.” Here it means “because.” Because the LORD is gracious and merciful, because the LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, then one can return to the LORD in genuine acknowledgment of one’s wrong. Then one’s heart is open to the LORD to be convicted and corrected where such are needed; but then restored by God: restored. When one is convicted by God in repentance, one is not destroyed but is brought closer to God and received by Him in His grace, as He forgives our sin on account of Christ.

We symbolize this tonight when the sign of the cross is made on our foreheads with ashes, pursuant to these words: “Receive the sign of the holy cross to mark you as one redeemed by Christ, the crucified.” Amen.