



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

ASH WEDNESDAY MESSAGE

PSALM 51

MARCH 2, 2022

"AGAINST YOU, YOU ALONE, HAVE I SINNED"

So here are again in Lent – this season of getting our acts together spiritually – and for some of us perhaps, even losing a few pounds from our fasting! Who says religion isn't good for a person! Let not a tear be shed for the Hershey or Cadbury Companies – even if their stock of chocolates might grow over the next 40 days, their stock values will survive – such is the economic reality of pent up demand, eh? Just last night at our annual "fat Tuesday" supper, I spoke with a young man who wanted to know why God put Lent in winter – for which the biblical answer is that's when Jesus was crucified – during the spring Jewish festival of Passover.

"Oh" he said...*"yeah I suppose that makes sense, you'd want to do it when it actually happened!"* Indeed... but with regard to the aforementioned discipline of Lenten fasting...if it includes a little renunciation of certain fatty foods we might also remind ourselves that Lent oh so conveniently falls between Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Eve, Super Bowl Sunday, Valentine's Day...and the trying on of new summer outfits!

But if Ash Wednesday is simply the start of our annual spring diet, we've missed it's meaning by miles. Martin Luther was not dismissive of spiritual disciplines. Regarding proper preparation for receiving the Lord's Supper, which we'll do a bit later, Luther said *"fasting and other outward preparation serves a useful purpose, but that person is well prepared and worthy who believes these words...given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."* In this, the mind of Luther is not far from the heart of David, the writer of Psalm 51 – one of Bible's greatest Psalms and perhaps it's chief "penitential Psalm.

David, referred to elsewhere in the Bible as *"a man after God's own heart"*, nonetheless had a very human heart – and it lusted after the things of this world no less than ours do. Pair it with an eye for beauty, which we also all have, and the result is that David's heart had some serious confessing to do. But note please that David entertained no notions that he could work his sin off. Later in Psalm 51 David dismisses as wholly inadequate sacrifices of just about any kind – including ones we might be planning to make in the coming 40 days as we spiritually clean house, refrain from eating or drinking, divert some funds from Starbucks to care of others, and neither send nor re-tweet a single discouraging word, but only cheerful ones.

The only "acceptable sacrifice" to God is a broken and contrite heart, David says. And on this one...David's head is in the right place. David is nothing but honest in this Psalm, and we do Ash Wednesday because faith is honest too ... Christianity calls 'em as it sees 'em ... the world and those in it *"are sinful from our mother's womb"* or as a professor of mine in seminary put it ... we can't not, not sin.

And while we've asked you to make a rather lengthy and thorough assessment of just how you and the Ten Commandments are or are not getting along these days, we in no wise did so to suggest that now's the time to correct those couple of places here and there where you need a little polishing of your spiritual manners. God could have written 100 commandments, and I imagine there are some folks who might like to be 'religious' that way, and would be only too happy, given their personal assessment of the world or a certain so and so in it they know, to suggest God write a couple more just for them.

But David knew, and we should too, that all sin is a breaking of the First Commandment. We need go no further. *"Against you and you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight"* he cried even though immediately prior to making this confession David had committed adultery, was an accessory to murder, coveted, and for good measure didn't do an especially good job of honoring his mother and father and the faith or good name they'd given him. This was a much-needed confession, and once again today, so our ours.

And thus, we come back to the reason why we do Lent and particularly this solemn, penitential day of Ash Wednesday. Yes, it's 46 days before the resurrection of our Lord. But when we come to celebrations, such as the Eucharist - the supper of the Lord, remember what Luther wrote- we ought to come *"well prepared and worthy."* When we celebrate Easter 46 days hence, we should come well prepared and worthy too... eager to say *"He is Risen"* mindful his rising is such good news precisely because his dying for our sins was such awful news. *Against you and you alone, dear Jesus have we sinned...indeed.*

So, how do we "prepare." Fasting and other preparations serve a useful purpose...so fast away dear people. Such can be good for the soul, the neighbor in need, not to mention the waistline. But that person is well prepared and worthy who believes these words...*"against you O Lord, and you alone do I sin...therefore you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge."* And who believe still more, with joy, that your judge bears such a striking resemblance to your Savior and forgiver Jesus. *Lord, on this day, restore to us the joy of your salvation, and grant us willing spirits to sustain us. AMEN*