**SERMON Psalm 51:1-17**

INTRODUCTION

Folks, it’s a pleasure to be here with you marking the beginning of a new liturgical season. My name is Emma Loane, I’m an ordained UCC pastor serving St Andrew UCC as their Associate Pastor and you, here at St John’s as your Transitional Pastor, guiding you and your Bridge Team over the next year to discern your next steps in your search for a new settled pastor. We are at the very beginning of our relationship together, and I thought what better place to start on this journey than by opening up a liturgically appropriate space for lament and confession? *Right?*

I’m not 100% at ease with opening all my relationships with vulnerable self-disclosures, but here we are, participants in a faith tradition that has set aside a significant portion of the year for such a practice in the season of Lent. *Now, the Lenten journey can be a paradoxical experience. Lent reminds us that our liberation, our salvation, our transformation, will come through painful self-realizations, through suffering and discomfort, rather than in spite of it.* And Psalm 51 has a permanent spot on this day in our lectionary, meaning every year we come back to this very flawed figure of David.

*Friends, I firmly believe David is proof that we, flawed as we are, are not alone in this journey.*

*Let’s pray:*

CONTEXT

Psalm 51 is a poignant psalm of repentance, intimately tied to a particularly shameful event in the life of David. This event, documented in the second book of Samuel in the Bible, involved David's affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband Uriah. Despite knowing that Bathsheba was Uriah's loyal wife, David was overcome by her beauty and gave in to his desires. After all, he lives in a society and in a system where the King gets what he wants. But as so often happens, one shameful act, one shameful decision –even if the system and the culture normalize it– begets another. And it’s not long before David orchestrates Uriah’s death in battle and is confronted by the prophet Nathan. It was only then that he began to understand the gravity of his actions, and we get Psalm 51, attributed to David, as a heartfelt plea for forgiveness, acknowledging his wrongdoing and failures, and imploring God’s compassion and mercy.

UNDERSTANDING OF SIN

**INDIVIDUAL**

One understanding of sin is as individual actions, or as the actions of individuals. David’s poor choices and actions towards Bathsheba set off a chain of events that quickly spiraled out of control, trapping him in a web of his own making. This serves as an important reminder that every individual holds the power to make choices that can lead to complex and difficult situations. But sin is much more than that action of an individual. For while this Psalm begins rooted in a particular sin, the Psalm sees David’s act of violence against Uriah as the tip of the iceberg.

**COLLECTIVE**

Because David’s sin wasn’t just his individual sins of lust and murder. He exploited his position of power in Israelite-Judean society. He exploited the position of power and authority given to him by God and by God’s people for his own selfish ends. In doing so, he doesn’t just manipulate himself, but his own military leadership, and the trust of all of his people, in his plot to commit murder.

So this flawed figure of David reminds us year after year that sin is an inherent and inescapable aspect of the human condition that cannot be viewed in isolation. Rather, sin interwoven into the very fabric of our lives and culture, affecting us in profound and complex ways that can hinder our ability to live in alignment with our values and aspirations, leaving us feeling powerless and defeated. When we say sin, we not only mean the individual acts of wrongdoing but also the larger societal and structural forces at play that create an intricate web of sin. It seems inevitable, and perhaps futile to fight against it.

However, the psalmist’s desperation is not without a glimmer of hope.

MAIN POINT

In the center of our text, we find one of the most poignant sections of this Psalm, beginning in verse 10: *“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”*

You see, it is at this point in the prayer that the Psalmist’s frustration over sinfulness and his inability to rise above it gives way to confidence in God. **As well it should! Because let’s be honest, on his own merit, David doesn’t really have a lot going on for him right now.**

David goes from a man so self-assured in the righteousness of his own lust, so confident using military power and chain of command to his own ends, that he ordered his nation’s military to orchestrate the murder of Uriah so that David could have Bathsheba. Left to his own devices, David is skilled at little but sowing self-justified chaos.

David, overwhelmed with his own flaws and inability to overcome them, realizes he must reach beyond himself and his own power. And so, David asks his Creator for two things: to have his sins forgiven and to be made a new person. It is always fascinating to me that David here does not promise to do better but asks God to create the inner conditions that will enable him to live a more selfless life. David knows that this outward transformation cannot come without an inward realignment, and he knows that this inward realignment cannot happen without the help of God. All David had to do was be willing.

God’s mercy is both creative and regenerative. God is capable of taking the dust off our broken hearts and generating a transformed life, marked by liberation from the shackles of sin. All we need to access this transformative power is to be willing – to be willing to admit our shortcomings, to be willing to ask, like David, for God’s help, and to be willing to, minute by minute, day by day, year by year, Lenten season by Lenten season, continually seek to align our inward lives with God so that our outward actions may bring about the kingdom we so desperately need.

CONCLUSION

For when we gather each year to have ashes rubbed on our foreheads, we are not just reminding ourselves of our sinfulness and our mortality, we are also participating in an act of re-creation. God is not impaired in the least by our screw-ups and failures to live up to our own expectations, let alone God’s. Like the dust that God first breathed life into, the ashes smeared across our foreheads are a visible reminder that we are created from nothing and if God can create us from nothing then God does not need much to work with when it comes to the task of re-creation. For the God who leaves a fingerprint on our foreheads, the God who breathes life into our dust, is the God who will not rest until we are transformed.