

Lent 5 March 21, 2021

Psalm 51

John 12:20-33

Pastor Ann Hultquist

What does it mean to you to be made new?

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Remove my sins with hyssop, and I shall be clean;

Wash me, and I will be purer than snow.

Psalm 51 makes a couple of appearances during the season of Lent--this morning and also back on Ash Wednesday. It's appropriate that we hear it and sing it again now because it asks for the very things we try to 'practice' during Lent--forgiveness, renewal of faith, and restoration of body, mind, and spirit. In this psalm we take all that has happened this week, this very long year, or in many years, and lay it before ourselves and before God: here, here--this is where I have fallen short; this is when I hurt someone I love; this is how I refused to trust you. Make me new, O God, make me new.

At our house, we watch an awful lot of HGTV, especially as we've been home more this past year. We comment on houses people are choosing to buy, telling one another confidently "Oh, that kitchen is a gut job," and "Ack! That wallpaper, what are they thinking?" Meanwhile the real estate agent is striding confidently through the rooms, saying "Easy fix, easy fix!"

It's true that if you have enough money and the right contractor, you can make any home beautiful after demolishing it down to the studs. But more interesting and challenging are those professionals who choose to work with what they've got, somehow seeing more possibility than anyone else would.

A woman named Nicole Curtis is one of these wonder workers on her own show. She buys houses that are over 100 years old or more and does astounding things to them--she somehow transforms terrifying hovels of lead paint, rusty sinks, and moldy bathrooms into beautiful homes. She saves original tiles on floors and walls;

she won't demolish when she can repair, and if original wood trim or doors are missing, she comes back with something old and beautiful to fill in the gaps. Interestingly enough, she's had some very messy difficulties in her personal life--but when she finally finishes a home, bringing it back from the brink, she often stands back and says "See? I always say: All these houses need is a little love!"

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Cast me not away from your presence.

How we hear those words or speak or sing those words depends a great deal on how we think about God. Is God angry and judgemental, a wrecking ball, we might say--so that these words sound to your ears like begging, as if God's face is always turned away from you? Or perhaps it seems as if God is equipped with a scorecard, keeping count of your failings and sin. Or is like a stern parent, whose expectations you can never quite meet, so some pleading is in order...Who are you seeing as you hear and sing those words today?

Some Greek people tell Philip today "We wish to see Jesus." We don't really know what they wanted, or who they expected to see. We don't hear any more from them, we only hear Jesus tell them about seeds going into the earth, and dying and losing and serving. Can you imagine them listening to that, one eyebrow raised and thinking "Huh?!"

Jesus knows what is coming--his arms stretched out, lifted up on the cross to draw the whole world to God's heart. It is as if he answers the question of these seekers by saying "Come see me Good Friday. I'll be on the hill outside the city. Then you will really *see* me." There Jesus will respond to hatred, violence, and the destruction of the human heart with extravagant love which refuses to give up on humanity, refuses to give us on you.

Create in me a clean heart, O God--but at the beginning of the psalm we say "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love."

If we hear and hold those words first, we can trust that God's response to us will always be grace. The Hebrew word for 'steadfast love' is *hesed--hesed* is the very character of who God is: searching for the lost one, welcoming the wanderer, raising the sinful from shame, forgiving those who turn away 100 or 1,000 times.

Sometimes in our lives, we need God to do a gut job, so to speak, on where and how we've been living. Ask someone who has struggled with addiction or other death-dealing living and they will tell you the truth of that. But more often, God goes in for restoration, seeing that the care and renewal we need doesn't involve a sledgehammer but maybe a paint scraper or a toothbrush--to gently clear out the crud we've hidden from the smallest crevices without damaging the one of a kind person Christ loves.

Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew my spirit

Today and every day is the right time to lay it all before God: here, here--this is where I have fallen short; this is when I hurt someone I love; when I could have helped and didn't; this is how I refused to trust you. Make me new, O God, make me new.

We are precious in God's sight, marked with the cross of Christ--our Creator and Redeemer knows we are worth restoring.