

Psalm 51 (The Message)

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 21, 2021

Nine years ago, in early June 2012, BC Conference held its General Meeting at UBC. The theme speaker was Alanna Mitchell, the author of *Sea Sick: The Global Ocean in Crisis*. Although she promised to share some good news later on, she started with the bad news: carbon overload, warming trends and acidification were killing our oceans. The oceans are vital to our health and that of the whole planetary ecosystem, and are valuable in themselves. And we are killing them. The result is comparable to an extinction event 250 million years ago when a huge percentage of the earth's species died off.

I remember that meeting. I remember leaving UBC's War Memorial gym, going to my car, and just sitting there, too devastated to move, too depressed to drive home. The planet was a mess, humans were to blame, we were doomed. I felt overwhelmed, hopeless, and guilty.

I remembered that feeling when I read Psalm 51 this week. Whether you hear Eugene Peterson's everyday translation in *The Message*, as we did today, or the more formal and familiar language of the New Revised Standard version, the writer's words

resonate with anyone who has ever felt disgust at their own actions and despair at their situation:

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

Lent is a penitential season - that is to say, it is a time to examine ourselves: our personal lives, our society, our worship. It is a time to identify the ways in which we have turned away from God. It is a time to turn around, to reorient ourselves toward God. This Psalm is one of the traditional Lenten Psalms because it has a lot to say about this process. It has a lot to say about sin.

One of the ways we think about sin is in terms of rules or debts. It is a bad record in a ledger, it is a conviction in a court proceeding, it is a stain on our souls. We are guilty in a legal sense. We know how bad we've been, as The Message says, and so does God.

This Psalm also talks about sin in terms of relationships. Regardless of how we have gone wrong, whether we have stolen money or abused our partners or even just spoken harshly to our children, we have not simply transgressed against an impersonal set of heavenly rules, but we have wounded our parent, our creator, our lover, our friend - our God. We feel like we deserve to be tossed out with the trash, kicked to the curb. We feel far away from the family of God. We do not feel God's breath in our lungs, God's wind in our sails.

Sin is also denial of the truth. It is denial of our relationships, denial of our responsibilities to God and the world. It is refusing to live the Gospel, it is lying about the loving and God-filled nature of life. We are commissioned as witnesses of God's truth, but we instead spread self-serving lies.

The Psalmist speaks of sin as an almost physical experience. Sitting in my car after that meeting, I felt an oppressive weight on my body. We know in our bones that something is wrong, and certainly when we participate in systems of oppression, the consequences are literally hunger, disease and death for plants, for animals, and for human beings.

The season of Lent is a preparation for Easter: we set our feet on Jesus' Way, and his Way is the Way of the Cross. We proclaim that something happened or was revealed

there. Somehow the crucifixion was central to our salvation from the oppressive weight of our sin. The details depend on how we conceive of sin.

If sin is primarily against God's rules, if we have offended against the rules of Heaven or its king and judge, then Jesus' death is a sacrifice to erase our guilt and payment to erase our debt. We are restored to a state of innocence and free to begin again as God hopes and intends.

If sin is a violation of our relationship with God in whom we live and move and have our being, Jesus' death is solidarity in our despair and the entrance and reassurance of God's love through the barriers we erect in our guilt and light in our darkness.

If our sin looks like our alienation from the truth of our dependence on God and our relationship to all Creation, Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the revelation of the truth of our interdependence and a restoration to unity.

And finally, if sin is physical suffering, or a distress so profound that it feels physical, then in Jesus God accomplishes healing and restores justice.

When sin shatters us, once God comes to us, our shattered hearts are ready to be rebuilt in God's image. When that happens our worship will again spark true joy in our hearts, our societies will live out justice, and our churches will lift up and energize our souls.

Notice the one common denominator: it is God who takes the initiative. Usually when we look for problems, it is with an eye to fixing them. We take stock of our bodies to determine whether we need medicine, or rest, or food, or exercise. As spring arrives, we examine our homes with a critical eye to determine what needs cleaning. In Lent, we examine our hearts...and give something up.

Maybe we need to pause from our attempts to save ourselves and others, and let ourselves be saved. Lent is, after all, about less, not more. Perhaps then it should be about *doing* less, not more. Perhaps we should take seriously the idea that salvation is *God's* initiative.

If we want to save the planet, I don't think we can do so from a place of despair, or from desperate, frantic action. Perhaps we need to accept the Lenten invitation to pause. If we want to save Creation, perhaps we first need to let Creation save us.

Listen to this poem from Mary Oliver.

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.

I would almost say they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,

in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."

The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come

into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

Before Jesus began his ministry, he fasted for forty days in the desert. Before a crowd of slaves became God's people, they were shaped for forty years in the wilderness. To reset the relationship between God and humanity, God let things rest for forty days in the flood.

In these days of environmental distress, our sin is ever before us. But we do not save ourselves. Let yourself be forgiven, let yourself be healed, by the love of God and the voice of Creation. See and feel the deep well of life and beauty that even now resides in God's world.

And then take up your task of worship and restoration, with glad and joyful and, above all, hope-filled hearts.

Amen.

Source:

Webb, Elizabeth. "Commentary on Psalm 51:1-12." *Working Preacher, March 18, 2018.*

Luther Seminary. Accessed March 18, 2021 from

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-psalm-511-12-4>.

Oliver, Mary. "When I am Among the Trees." In *Devotions: the Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*. Quoted in "Poetry." Madison Public Library. Web. Accessed March 20, 2021 from <https://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/poetry/when-i-am-among-trees>.