

Our Only Hope
Ash Wednesday Service
February 17, 2010
Elizabeth Communities of Faith
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Let me begin with another word of welcome to this service of the Elizabeth Communities of Faith. This partnership has quickly become an important part of life in our churches and hospitals, and it is not just the work of the clergy. It is the result of the energy and ideas of music ministers, church administrators and office managers and, of course, our lay leaders. With this series in particular, our work also includes the generous and nourishing contributions of a number of Elizabeth restaurants. For all of these things, thanks be to God.

The theme for our Lenten series this year is “In all things” We hope the “all” in that phrase invokes the inclusive and the ecumenical spirit of our efforts. You will hear the worship leaders finish that phrase in various ways, and we invite you to finish it yourself as you journey to the cross with us these 40 days.

We begin that journey today, Ash Wednesday ... a day when we reflect on our mortality and human frailty and the unavoidable truth that we fail to live as God desires. And so we start with a story from scripture of a man who lived large, sinned large ... and, as we will see, repented large ... a man who knew his only hope was the grace of God.

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David is – flat out - one of the greats of the Bible. Anointed for leadership as a boy, he was handsome and intelligent, athletic and musical. As a youth, he slayed the giant Philistine Goliath and was quickly elevated to military leadership, which he later parlayed into political power.

He became a threat to jealous kings and princes, spent years dodging their attempts to kill him until he finally became the prototypical, much-loved king of all the Hebrew people. Through it all, he held a special place in God’s eyes and he did his best to discern and do God’s will.

But David sinned just as large as he lived. As we heard in scripture, a beauty named Bathsheba caught his eye – and apparently he really got an eye-full! He stopped thinking, as men are prone to do ... and soon the sins started racking up. He lay with Bathsheba and conceived a child with her. Then he used his influence to put

Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, in harm's way until he was killed. Adultery, murder, a cover-up and a rejection of his first wife, all in short order.

Now, to be sure, King David would pay the price and Bathsheba suffered with him. The verses that follow today's reading report how the prophet Nathan made David confront his sins. Nathan also predicted the death of the child the two had conceived, which came to pass.

David's relationship with God was never quite the same after that. But we know from elsewhere in scripture that David repented as large as he lived and sinned. Psalm 51 is attributed to David at the time of his sinful deeds. It is a woeful, heart-rending plea for forgiveness, an unqualified acknowledgement that God's judgment is due in full for what he had done. David confesses:

“For I know my transgressions,
and 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.” (Psalm 51 vs. 3-5)

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We may hold David's sin in low regard, but it is impossible not to respect the depth and sincerity of his repentance. Think for a moment about what we are used to in our day from, for example, a recent President, a South Carolina governor and a former North Carolina senator, among others ... all men who played dodge-ball with the truth until it finally hit them squarely and in plain view.

And that, my friends, brings us back to our own human frailty. Our lives may not be like David's, our sins not as large. But it is dangerous business when we begin parsing sin, weighing our sins on a scale with others' to see whether and how deeply we should repent.

The truth of our humanity is as King David said: “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.”

We wear ashes on this day to proclaim that truth, that despite our best days we still fall short. These ashes come from the burning of last Easter’s palm fronds, a reminder that it is a brief journey from our exuberance over Christ’s victory to the frailty our human condition.

We wear these ashes to claim that frailty. But we do so in the context of an even larger promise, that the God who stood by King David in his sin stands by us in ours, a God whose grace became most clearly known on the cross. It is anything but cheap grace ... indeed, it is a grace that, in Christ, calls for our repentance, opens tombs, gives the great commission and guides our lives as individual believers and as the church.

This grace is our only hope ... and the only hope we need ... in all things.

So, let us turn now to repentance and confession. We will use portions of Psalm 51, King David’s own confession. After we confess, you are invited to come forward for the dispensation of ashes. Rev. Jeff Mitchiner, a member of the Caldwell community, will receive all who come forward on your right and I will be on your left.

Claim and live into the words you will hear: “Consider yourself dead in sin, but alive in Christ.”

Afterward, you are invited to proceed in silence through the doors at the front of the sanctuary for lunch or remain here in meditation.

Brothers and sisters, our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Let us confess our sins:

Confession of Sin

Leader: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

People: Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against 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.

(Silent Confession)

**All: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Amen.**