

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
February 25, 2009 Ash Wednesday
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Pouring Out Our Hearts to God,
Psalm 51:1-17, Matthew 6: 1-21

Tonight, we begin the season of Lent. Actually, it is more than just a season. It is a journey of the heart, mind, and body. Usually, when we take a journey or a trip somewhere, we map it out to check distances and time of travel. We might buy a travel guide book that suggests what we can do and see during the time we spend at our destinations. We may also calculate the costs of gasoline or the air flight, motel stays, food and entertainment. We probably need to consider our own stamina or mental and physical ability to survive the journey. It might be wise to contact the people we want to visit in advance. Once we have all this planning done, we most likely will look into our hearts to see if this journey is something we really want to do. All of these considerations may also be true as we begin the season of Lent, a journey of the heart, mind and body.

This Ash Wednesday service is a good place to decide in your mind on whether or not your heart is into taking the Lenten journey in 2009. It is a journey that involves 40 days, not including Sundays, beginning with Ash Wednesday and ending the Saturday night just as Easter morning arrives.

Our Psalter Lesson from Psalm 51 is actually an excellent Lenten travel guide for the 40 day journey. We have heard this guide read, and we will sing it in our second hymn. It is vital, as we follow Psalm 51 as our guide that we do not skip over the first verse or the foreword to the book, so to speak. You see, it is in the first verse that we admit that we cannot afford to make this Lenten journey on our own. We need someone else to prepare the way, to provide the fuel, the food, the stamina and the places to stay along the road we travel. We really want to know that once we have arrived, we are welcome in our final destination. Are the doors open? Are loving arms extended to take us in? Will it do our hearts good to risk pouring them out to the one who is there to receive us? So, now, with all this in mind and with the psalmist as our guide, let us prepare to pour out our hearts to God who is there to receive us on this Lenten journey.

Let us also join the psalmist in taking the risk of faith, in approaching God who is there to receive us and emptying out our hearts to him in the certain hope he will supply our needs on the journey. With the psalmist, let us cry out to God, "Have mercy on me, O God,...according to your abundant mercy...." When we call upon God in this manner, we truly believe God is there ahead of us as we journey. We declare that God's mercy, God's grace is at each intersection, exit, airport terminal, motel, and rest stop to guide us because we would be lost, totally lost without him. This is our confession from the heart that we have lost our direction in life and need God's help. So we then cry to God, "blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." Yes, we must admit that we are lost in our sins, our angers, our resentments, our lusts and false gods. We are lost in a world that

constantly misdirects us; from God's ways to paths of evil; onto exit ramps leading to despicable places in life where we can be robbed of our faith and love of God, as well as our concern for each other. And so we cry out for God's mercy, God's grace to be there to save us from our lostness, from our sins that have taken us the opposite way we need to go on our life journey. "Have Mercy on me, O God.... according to your abundant mercy," we cry to the Lord who waits to receive us.

As we approach the Lord who waits to receive us, we still may have some fears. We are aware that when we have wandered so far from God and God's laws that God's justice may be what we receive once we arrive. God has every right to wipe us out for our sins. God could tell us, "Yes, you are lost, you got yourself lost. You have failed to follow my directions, now you must pay the price. You have chosen the road to hell, now go there." This is what we might tell others who have deliberately gotten this lost in life. But the character of God is different. Yes, God is a God of justice, but more than this, he is a God of mercy. If you have any doubt about this, consider the cross wherein God poured out his heart in his Son, Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. Consider the meaning of the communion meal and elements Jesus invites us to eat with him. Think of the words we so often pray in the simple prayer Jesus taught us to come before God to pray: "Give us this day, our daily bread.... forgive us our debts... lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil..." Jesus taught us that when you come before the Father in heaven, seek his mercy and grace. As we pray this prayer, we are indeed pouring out our hearts to the God of justice, who is even more in character and by his actions the God of mercy, the God of grace.

By the psalmist's words, this journey is also about the experiences of God's steadfast love. It is so easy to be distracted on a journey and miss the directional signs. So often as we travel through life we get on the wrong road and we think we are lost alone, even abandoned by God. But the truth the psalmist helps us to realize is that God's love is steadfast, it is always, always there. It never goes away and we will know this if we will but notice it and give our hearts to it. Each time we take communion we admit that God's love is steadfast for when we drink of the cup, we agree to be a part of the new covenant with God in Jesus Christ. The new covenant sealed by Christ's blood shed to wash away our sins. It is a covenant where he promises to always be with us, and to always forgive our sins. Yes, this journey is also about God's steadfast love. It is about God always being at the cross roads, exit ways, directional signs, and ahead of us at our destination to steadfastly love us back on to his roadway of life.

With such a God of mercy and steadfast love, waiting for us at the end of the Lenten journey, to receive our hearts with such a redeeming grace, it is wise for us to let go of our pride and admit we are broken spirits who need to be repaired by God's own hand. When we surrender to God, we find a safe place to pour out our confessions of sin, our stories of evil acts and depraved thoughts. God already knows all this of us and is waiting for us to admit our need of his restoration. The psalmist teaches how to open our hearts to admit such a great need. "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 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.” Or in terms of our modern Lenten journey, “Clean my windshield, oh God. Check my oil. Fill my tank. Set me on the right road and keep me there so that I may arrive safely into the presence of your ever loving arms.”

With such a redirecting and cleaning up of our lives by God, we can then join the psalmist in teaching fellow transgressors God’s ways, so that other sinners like us will know the way, the route, the direction to take to return to God, too.

Once we are right with God, what are the ways or directions of God that we are to teach to others on our Lenten Journey in order to keep them and us from getting lost in sin again? God’s ways we are to teach others are in the passage from Matthew. First of all, let us not become self-righteous show offs about this redemption God has given us, but let us be humble in word and deed as we worship the God of mercy and grace. Secondly, let us teach others how to pray to God as Jesus did, in fewer words that focus on glorifying God, not ourselves. It is also a reminder that we are to forgive others, be as merciful to others as God is to us. Thirdly, let us not fill our hearts again with the easily rusted material goods and corrupt powers of this world, but let the mercy, grace and steadfast love of God in Jesus Christ be that which we truly treasure, be that which saturates our hearts to overflowing. As we follow these ways or directions of God, when we pour out our hearts to God on the Lenten Journey we will not have to grovel in the shame of our sin, but we can join the forgiven and redeemed psalmist in declaring, “O God of my salvation, my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.” May the mercy, grace and steadfast love of God guide you as you plan your Lenten Journey of the heart, mind and body in 2009.