

Sermon for Sunday, March 22, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Have mercy on me, O God,
 according to your loving-kindness;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

Today's psalm
is one of the psalms of penitence,
the psalms that focus
on confession to God.
Most of us probably associate it
with Ash Wednesday,
when we read it together
after the imposition
of ashes.
But here it appears again,
later in Lent,
and it invites us to reflect
what we are doing
as we confess our sins.

Traditionally
it is ascribed to King David,
after he's had his affair with Bathsheba
and organized the murder
of her husband,
to cover up
his actions.
But whether it was written then,
or earlier or later,
the psalm
doesn't actually focus so much on that particular sin
as on the experience of having sinned
and desperately wanting God

to forgive.

Have mercy on me, O God,
 according to your loving-kindness;
 in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
 Wash me through and through from my wickedness
 and cleanse me from my sin.

Sin is one of those words
 that tends to make us uncomfortable
 even though - or perhaps because -
 it's something we have all experienced.
 And sermons on sin
 have a bad reputation.

But this week
 as I've thought about the psalm
 the idea of sin
 and of forgiveness
 has kept on coming up
 time and time again.

Yesterday, I think it was, or maybe Friday,
 I was listening to a radio program from the BBC called "A Good Read."
 In it, each of the three presenters has nominated one of their favorite books,
 and the others have to read it and comment on it.
 This time, one of the presenters nominated "Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde"
 by Robert Louis Stevenson.
 I have to admit,
 I've never read it,
 and nor had one of the presenters,
 and what was interesting
 was her comments about it.
 If you know anything about the story,
 you know it is about Dr Jekyll,
 who has spent a good part of his life
 trying to repress the evil urges within himself.
 Finally
 he develops a potion
 that, when he takes it, transforms him into Mr Hyde.

As Dr Jekyll
he is a friendly, pleasant person;
As Mr Hyde,
he is cruel, remorseless, and evil.
Today
we might call it a story of split personality;
but what the presenter pointed out,
is that his struggle is the same struggle that all of us have,
to control those parts of us
that we are ashamed of.
She said
that for her,
it was her anger;
the other presenters
were too embarrassed
to name theirs.

But what she pointed to
was something that I suspect we all experience.
There are parts of us,
patterns of behavior,
things we have done
that we are ashamed of,
and would rather were not part of us.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your loving-kindness;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.

Yesterday morning
at the Cathedral in Garden City,
we remembered the life and ministry
of our former bishop, Orris Walker.
As many of you know
his time here in the diocese
was complicated,
as he himself was.
When he first arrived,

people were so excited.
He promised change,
change in a diocese
which had many strengths
but also many weaknesses.
We had one of the largest endowments
of any diocese in the Episcopal Church,
and incredibly wealthy parishes
underwritten by a kind of Episcopal gentry,
and we had parishes of all sizes
with small budgets and deep faith.
There was, so I hear, a kind of ruling elite,
but so many others
felt marginalized and neglected.

In Bishop Walker's first years,
he was a whirlwind of energy.
Lay people were encouraged to take their rightful places in leadership and governance;
women were ordained;
the hungry were fed and the poor lifted up.
I myself remember being interviewed by Bishop Walker
when I came for my interview here in this parish.
He was gracious and gentle and encouraging.

But as we know, as Tony Lewis, former Dean of The Mercer School
and retired from being a professor of New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary,
has he said during the sermon yesterday,
Bishop Walker was a complicated person
and his time here in this diocese was equally complicated.
Complicated by power games
and racism
and by his own demons,
which included alcohol.

But as Tony also reminded us
we all have our demons.
Ordination
is not vaccination;
clergy just as much as the rest of the church
struggle.

Each and every one of us, I suspect,
you
and me,
each of us
has something we struggle with,
something
that we are ashamed of - or at least would be
if we were able to be honest with ourselves.

It might be something external,
like alcohol,
or drugs,
or nicotine.
But it might also be something internal.
We might struggle with anger,
or pride,
or greed,
or self-centeredness,
or insecurity,
or feeling unloved.

All of those things
and many more
are things that we struggle with,
that struggle with us.
Sometimes
it's even hard
to acknowledge them.
And we long for cleansing,
we long for healing.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your loving-kindness;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.

And I wonder if that's why many of us
find silence
so difficult.

On Tuesday night
we were privileged
to have four friends from the Conscience Bay Quaker Meeting
in Head of the Harbor
join us
for our Lenten program.

They introduced us to the Quaker tradition
and they led us
in their tradition
of quiet.

When they meet on a Sunday morning
they have no liturgy, no formal prayers, no hymns.

They sit
in silence
and wait
on God.

Sometimes
someone will, after great thought and prayer,
rise to speak,
to say something
that they believe the Spirit
is saying to their meeting.

But otherwise
there is silence.

And that's what we experienced,
although only for a few minutes, rather than their usual hour or so,
that's what we experienced
on Tuesday night.

And one of the things I've noticed about silence,
about that sort of waiting before God,
which we often talk about in terms of contemplative prayer,
what I've noticed
is that when you sit quietly before God
the first thing that happens
is that your mind fills with all sorts of stray thoughts.

What am I going to have for dinner?
What if I were to rearrange my living room?

I need a new pair of socks.
I should write a list, so I don't forget anything.
I need chocolate.

You can feel almost assaulted
by all the things running through your mind.
And so you push them back.

But then more things come into your mind.
And these ones
aren't so much from the outside
as from the inside.
Thoughts of things you have done
that perhaps
you wish you hadn't.
Regrets of things you didn't do
and now wish you had.
Memories of people who have hurt you.
Feelings of fear, and inadequacy, and aloneness.
And so much more.

And we long,
we long so much
to be cleansed
and healed
and made whole.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your loving-kindness;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

Our Psalm today is clear.
Yes,
we have all fallen short
of the glory of God.
But that is not

the end of the story.

Another thing that stuck with me
from yesterday's sermon
was the reminder that our sins, our demons, our struggles
are never something
we can deal with alone.
We might think we can keep them hidden. We might think we can keep them
under control.
But as those who work twelve step programs know,
we are powerless over them. We need a power
greater than ourselves
to restore us.
And as Christians
that power
is God.

God who in Christ
came to us
and lived among us
experiencing the very same struggles
that we all
experience,
and who died for us,
and offers us forgiveness,
and not only forgiveness
but the chance at new life.

And that's where our psalm takes us too.
It's not just about sin.
It's not even just about forgiveness.
It's about
new life.

We ask God to wash
us, to cleanse us,
to make us new.

And that's the promise.
That's the promise, isn't it,

that we've all been waiting for, yearning for?
Not just
to be forgiven,
not just to be cleansed,
but to be made new,
recreated.

That's what Paul reminds us
in the second letter to the Corinthians.
"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see,
everything has become new! "

We know our sins, our demons, our failures.
But we also know our savior,
Jesus Christ,
who invites us
to be recreated
in his very image,
made perfect, like him,
transformed
into the likeness
of of God.

And so I invite you now to sit in quiet for a few minutes, and then we will read Psalm 51
together.