

Why We Need Easter on Psalm 51

By Rev. Russell B. Smith

Covenant-First Presbyterian Church
717 Elm Street, Cincinnati, OH 45202

“There is a way to be good again.” Those are the cryptic words that set into motion the plot of *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini’s bestselling book that is this year’s selection for Cincinnati On the Same Page. For the next month, people all across Cincinnati will be discussing this book and its story of a young boy who commits a despicable betrayal of his best friend and his father, and of the steps he takes to attain redemption. If you haven’t read it, I won’t blow the story because it’s a really, really good book. But I will tell you this: the boy finds redemption through his own personal suffering.

The book stirs deep within for many people precisely because of that opening line: “There is a way to be good again.” That is the longing of David in the early lines of this psalm we read today. David too has committed a great betrayal: he has slept with the wife of one of his mightiest warriors, and then plotted to have that man killed. But after being confronted, David pours forth his shame in this psalm. See the desire for cleansing in verses 2, 7 and 10. It is the aching personal cry for cleanliness.

David recognizes his own darkness, but he also recognizes that his darkness comes from more than the actions that led up to this psalm: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5). And here, David hits on the universal struggle, for we all stand guilty.

You say, “Pastor, that’s pessimistic about human nature, but I’m an optimist. I believe that people are basically good.” I believe that people are basically good too – insofar as each person is a bearer of the image of God and carries the unique dignity of that image. Scripture teaches this. Scripture also teaches that each person is broken – “depravity” is the term we Presbyterians like to use. There is a darkness within that we cannot escape.

In 1971, Dr. Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University initiated his famous Prison Experiment. In it, he interviewed and selected 24 college students who would be paid \$15 per day to participate. Zimbardo randomly assigned some to be guards and some to be prisoners. Those who were prisoners were arrested by the police, booked in a real jail, and then transferred to the basement of a Stanford building. Those who were jailers were given uniforms and instructed not

to use violence but that their job was to maintain control of the prison. To tell the story, I'll quote from Stanford's own web page on the experiment:

From the perspective of the researchers, the experiment became exciting on day two when the prisoners staged a revolt. Once the guards had crushed the rebellion, "They steadily increased their coercive aggression tactics, humiliation and dehumanization of the prisoners," Zimbardo recalls. "The staff had to frequently remind the guards to refrain from such tactics," he said, and the worst instances of abuse occurred in the middle of the night when the guards thought the staff was not watching. The guards' treatment of the prisoners — such things as forcing them to clean out toilet bowls with their bare hands and act out degrading scenarios, or urging them to become snitches — "resulted in extreme stress reactions that forced us to release five prisoners, one a day, prematurely."¹

Or perhaps for more verification you could go back to Stanley Milgram's 1965 experiments, described here from the University of Rhode Island's website:

In the experiment, so-called "teachers" (who were actually the unknowing subjects of the experiment) were recruited by Milgram. They were asked to administer an electric shock of increasing intensity to a "learner" for each mistake he made during the experiment. The fictitious story given to these "teachers" was that the experiment was exploring effects of punishment (for incorrect responses) on learning behavior. The "teacher" was not aware that the "learner" in the study was actually an actor — merely indicating discomfort as the "teacher" increased the electric shocks.

When the "teacher" asked whether increased shocks should be given he/she was verbally encouraged to continue. Sixty percent of the "teachers" obeyed orders to punish the learner to the very end of the 450-volt scale! No subject stopped before reaching 300 volts!

At times, the worried "teachers" questioned the experimenter, asking who was responsible for any harmful effects resulting from shocking the learner at such a high level. Upon receiving the answer that the experimenter assumed full responsibility, teachers seemed to accept the response and continue shocking, even though some were obviously extremely uncomfortable in doing so."²

¹ From www.stanford.edu/dept/news/pr/97/970108prisonexp.html.

² From www.cba.uri.edu/Faculty/dellabitta/mr415s98/EthicEtcLinks/Milgram.htm.

There is darkness within each one of us. For some of us, it's what haunts us at night and gnaws at the edge of our conscience. For others, we go along blissfully unaware until we are confronted with studies like Milgram's and Zimbardo's. "Surely I was sinful at birth."

Deep within, we long for cleanliness and purity. Deep within, we long for that darkness to be blotted away. That deep drive is what compels us toward the myriad addictions and distractions. Have you ever wondered why someone would become addicted to crack? Why would someone allow themselves to be used again and again as a sexual object? Why do some become obsessive compulsive about work or an avocation? It's all the frenetic desire to medicate the pain that comes from that hole deep within.

Thoreau rightly diagnosed it in *Walden* when he said that

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation... A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no joy in them.³

He's got us nailed, doesn't he? Do we begin to understand David's desperation in this psalm?

David longs for cleanliness – this is what Easter is all about. The ancient Israelites had an extensive sacrificial system: you committed sin, you made a sacrifice. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would offer elaborate sacrifices on behalf of whole people of God. (You can read about it in Leviticus chapter 16.) And this was supposed to make the people clean.

When Jesus Christ came, John the Baptist identified him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. His dying on the cross was the fulfillment of all those Old Testament sacrifices. Cleanliness comes through Christ alone. It's not accomplished through medicating yourself with endless distraction. It's not accomplished by punishing yourself or by trying harder. It only comes from Christ.

So what are we to make of Psalm 51:16-17? Simply this: an intellectual understanding that your cleanliness comes from Christ is not the same as casting yourself upon Christ as your hope. Knowing about Christ is not the same as knowing Christ. One is an idea, the other is a relationship. One is a concept, the other is a commitment. The broken spirit comes from confronting your inner darkness and its many manifestations, and crying out, "Jesus, I can't handle this any longer – I surrender to your will!" That's the cry of faith we make.

³ Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*, New Signet American Library, 1980 ed., p 10.

But here's the kicker – and this is what I want you to leave with — when you cry out to him in faith, he gets inside of you. Philippians 2:12-13 show us this: “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” God gets inside of you and he starts to change you.

When you cry out to him in faith and desperation – he starts to fill you with this sense of joy. You begin to look around the world and see his hand everywhere. You marvel at the handiwork of the trees, the birds. You find yourself just standing in the mall, people watching, amazed at how God's glory shines just a little bit on the face of each person who walks by. You watch an NCAA basketball game and you begin to see how God shaped each one of those athletes. And as they immerse themselves in the game, they reflect just a bit of God's glory – and you say, “Thank you, God.”

You understand the line from *Chariots of Fire* – the great story of the early modern Olympic Games. Runner Eric Little, who was going to be a missionary in China, was asked why he was going to run in the Olympics rather than leave sooner for his mission field. Little replied, “God made me for China, but God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.”

You begin to understand that sentiment when you get lost in what you're doing. You say, “This is for you, God.” You find yourself pausing and thanking God in the middle of the day. You find that those old temptations don't have the luster they once did, and one by one they begin to slough off like dead skin. You find that God makes you interested in hanging around his people, and you begin to fellowship with other Christians. You find that the Bible becomes much more interesting to you, and you begin to see it as a love letter rather than a legal ledger. You begin to delight in just being good.

All the joys and pains will feel sharper to you. At times you'll feel like you're a bathtub of joy just overflowing onto the floor. And when, for a season, God hides his face, you'll ache like a part of you is gone. If you haven't tasted that joy, then it'll seem like this will really mess up your life, but you won't have any other recourse.

This weekend, Tammy and I watched *Luther*, the really terrific film biography of Martin Luther. Joseph Feinnes puts in the performance of his career as Martin Luther, and what he captures so well is how Luther is at first consumed with fear and anger with God, and then he begins to understand that joy that comes from freedom in relationship with Christ. It's a joy that comes out in his sermons, in his playfulness with his students, and eventually in his relationship with his wife. It doesn't prevent him from suffering or feeling abandonment as his ideas take on a life of their own, but it sustains him. The joy of knowing Christ overflows with richness in the good times, and it gives him steel in the hard times. The joy of knowing Christ is what gave Luther the tenacity to answer when

being questioned by the Archbishop's flunky before the emperor. There he was, surrounded by hostility, likely facing death at the stake if he didn't turn his back on the teachings of the reformation, and Luther says simply, "Here I stand, I can do nothing else."

Do you want to live with that kind of strength? Do you want to overflow with joy? Do you want to be clean? That's why we need Easter. Do you know him as risen Lord? Have you committed to him? If not, will you do it today? It'll change your life and your eternal destiny will be secure.