

Cleansing
Psalm 51:1-17
Matthew 6:1-6
3/6/2019
Ash Wednesday

Our society is enamored by the idea of cleansing. Consider the success of Marie Kondo. The last time I visited my daughter and son-in-law, okay more honestly, the last time I visited by grandson, I came home with some cleaning supplies, thanks to Marie Kondo. My daughter has been doing the “if it doesn’t bring you joy, get rid of it” thing, and not going be used items fell into that category. She was cleansing her house of all sorts of things.

It isn’t just the declutter movement fascinated with cleansing. A couple of years ago, Bonita and I reconnected on Facebook with a woman who was a youth leader at our church in Indiana. We hoped to see the occasional pics of family life and eventually

their children and we did. But no sooner had we friended her, we also began to see the posts about her nutrition products. And I don’t mean the occasional posts interspersed with the personal stuff. No, it seemed like there were several a day and many of them were about the cleansing power of these products and even the cleanses she was doing. To her credit, I think we caught her when she was beginning her business and she has settled down much on that front.

We want to cleanse our homes of excess. We want to cleanse our insides. There are lots of products to help us cleanse our skin and our hair. The point of many strategies to help people be productive or to find balance in life are based on a focus on the important and a jettisoning of all the other stuff, which turns out to be a cleansing of schedules.

Even if you aren't a Marie Kondo fan, even if nutrition or juice cleanses aren't your thing, and even if you aren't trying to cleanse your schedule, you understand the benefit of a cleanse. When you work hard doing a dirty job and then step into a shower, you experienced cleansing. It can make you feel like a new person.

And here we have a connection with our psalm. The point of almost all the cleansing we do outside and inside is an attempt to find a better and newer person – a healthier person, a person with more peaceful surroundings, a person with cleaner skin and hair. But the psalm sends us much deeper and to a much harder place. “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”

Many of the cases I mentioned to you of “cleansing” involve a significant amount of

marketing for the need to be cleansed. The church may need to do some convincing of members that we have sin that needs to be cleansed. We are willing to admit a few small sins – the unkind thought, the occasional lie, that moment of anger that arose during a family argument, but this psalm pushes us to consider that we all have deeply staining sinfulness.

It may be pride that refuses to admit our weaknesses. It may be jealousy for the success of a coworker who we don't think deserves that promotion. It may be greed, cleverly disguised as a constant concern for the checking account and IRA balances. It may be a covetous heart that admires the possessions or clothes or homes or cars of our neighbors.

There is great danger to ourselves and to others in this deep-set sinfulness. Psalm 51 is attributed to King David. He wrote it following the horrible incident where he committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, Uriah. David realized these horrendous acts revealed much deeper problems. While some may read the words, “I was born guilty” as support for the doctrine of original sin passed through heredity, I believe a better reading is to see this as the language of the poet who is saying, “The flaws of my character are so deep I feel like I am made like this.” For David these deep patterns of pride, of lust, of grasping power no matter what, wrought horrible problems for Bathsheba and for Uriah, for a child who died, for David and his whole household, and even for the entire nation of Israel.

We may think we are immune to the possibility of those kinds of bad choices, but that is the problem with those deep patterns of sin. They deceive us into thinking we are good people and then we find ourselves in the middle of the devastating family argument or the horrible life choice that hurts those we love the most. Those rob us of joy. The deep sins take away our peace, burn us up with guilt, and rob us of the ability to look in the mirrors and see someone that God loves deeply.

The psalm gives us the pattern for healing also. We begin with confession and then we plead with God for help doing the hard work of cleansing. The good news is the psalmist sees the work will have to be done by God. We can not fix our sin. God can fix us and is more than willing to answer our plea.

God is the one who teaches, who washes, who purges. God is the one who blots out our iniquities. The creator God continues that work by creating clean hearts within us. God puts the new spirit that we desperately need in us. God can even restore to us the joy that our sinfulness robs from us. And perhaps most amazing, God can put a new spirit within us that is willing, actually willing, to be obedient to the direction God gives us. That means we have hope from being freed from those deep patterns of sin so we don't keep repeating the catastrophic mistakes of the past.

The end result of our repentance is praise and joy. While repentance and the purging of our deep-set sins is a long process and can require difficult changes, the end result is filled with blessings – freedom from guilt, the chance to share with others the freedom we have gained, and a peace beyond

measure. And God can even bring healing for the brokenness in our lives and the lives of those around us.

God calls us to repentance, a repentance that not only addresses our small sins, but also those deep patterns of sin all of us hold onto. God can cleanse us, transform us, and change our hearts. Let us enter into this season ready to receive this blessing. Amen.