

Out of the Ashes Comes Wisdom
Psalm 25:1-10

Ashes are an important part of Lent. We began Lent with the imposing of the ashes last Wednesday evening. Ashes are the ancient symbols of repentance. They are symbols of great sorrow and distress. They are also symbols of death. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

But ashes are also the symbol of rebirth. When a forest is burned, the ashes provide an environment which is ideal for new growth. That can be true for us as well. In Coventry, England, there are the remains of a cathedral which burned to the ground in 1940 when it was bombed by the German Luftwaffe. While the ruins were still moldering, someone put a sign in front of the remains. The sign said, “To the glory of God, this cathedral burned.” We don’t know who this person was. But we can be sure it was someone with great faith. His or her faith was so great that this person could look into the future and see that another cathedral would rise up out of these ruins, like a phoenix reborn from its own ashes.

When we read the Psalms, we often find that the Psalmist has experienced great sorrow and distress. Often the Psalms are expressions of profound repentance. Often the Psalmist speaks of being on the verge of death. Over and over the Psalmist speaks of those times when something is so wrong, it is nearly unbearable. In other words, the Psalmist is in the ashes. Yet, each time, as the Psalmist speaks of his tribulation, he also speaks of God’s salvation. He tells us that God can bring something good out of the ashes.

That will be our theme during this Lenten season. We will look at some of the Psalms in which the Psalmist tells us of something good God has brought “Out of the Ashes.”

This morning we look at Psalm 51 in which the Psalmist tells us that wisdom and instruction can come out of the ashes our youthful sins and transgressions.

There is a story about a junior executive in a company who had a great admiration for his boss. This man never seemed to make a bad decision. His decisions were always so wise. One day the young man asked his boss where he gained such great wisdom. The older man said, “The only way to gain wisdom is from experience.” The young man said, “I’m sure that is true. How do you get that experience?” The older man said, “You gain experience is by making bad decisions.”

One of the goals of living has to be to grow in wisdom. By wisdom I mean growing in the ability to discern right from wrong and good from bad, being able to foresee the consequences of our actions and our decisions.

Making bad decisions is one of the ways to grow in wisdom. There are few things that teach us as completely and thoroughly as having to bear the consequences of a bad decision. We learn our lessons best when we learn them the hard way.

We don’t have to learn the hard way. We can learn from the mistakes of others.

I've told you before that my father used to have a saying he repeated a lot. He would say, "No man is a total failure. He can always be used as a bad example." Well, I learned a lot from my father's example. Some of the things I learned from him were things not to do. My father left my mother when I was about eighteen years old. When my father died, he was a sad, lonely old man. Now, anyone who has been married more than six months knows there are days when you wonder how in the world you can bear to spend the rest of your life with this person. I haven't had many days when I have felt like that, but there have been a few. However, I've never really been tempted to leave my wife. All I have to do is remember my father. You can learn from the mistakes of others.

We could avoid having to learn the hard way if we would listen to the warnings that others give us. The Bible is full of instructions as to how to avoid sin and act wisely. Our parents and mentors are always teaching us right ways to live. The problem is that most of us are not good at listening.

We could learn from listening to the wisdom of others, but often we don't. I was talking to my son the other day. My son heard my three-year-old grandson yell, and when he ran into the room to check on him, Michael was sitting on the floor rubbing his arm. He pointed at the outlet and said, "Poppa, it hit me." His parents have told him over and over again to stay away from electrical outlets. Michael is a tactile learner. He learns by touching, not by listening. He had to learn the hard way.

Most of us do have to learn the hard way. After all, we are descended from Adam. Adam didn't listen. Adam could have avoided all the misery of sins that has plagued the human race if he had just listened to God. But he had to find out for himself. He just had to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And I think God knew Adam would do it. If you put a beautiful tree in the middle of the garden where Adam has to pass by it every day, and you say, "Now, don't touch," what do you expect to happen? It is human nature to do what we are told not to do. I think Mark Twain was right when he said that if God had been serious about keeping Adam from eating that fruit, God would have said to Adam, "Whatever you do, don't eat the snake." Instead of inflicting original sin on his descendants, he would have opened up a chain of Kentucky Fried Serpent restaurants.

Adam didn't listen. Neither do his children. In spite of all the warnings, we have to try things. We have to find out for ourselves what happens when we do things we are warned not to do.

If we are lucky, the consequences of our mistakes aren't too bad. When I was young, I was a fast driver. I didn't slow down until the day that I missed a curve because I was speeding. I lost control of the car and went into a spin. Becky was with me. This was a few days before our wedding. While we were spinning, I was certain that both of us would die. Miraculously, we weren't even injured.

But there have been many other young people who did nothing worse than I did that day and the consequences were far worse. As my father-in-law said to me, when he drove out and picked us up, "You could have killed her." Would I have been more or less guilty of foolishness if the results had been different?

Yet there are people who are bearing terrible burdens of guilt for bad decisions they made before they were wise enough to know better.

Making mistakes is part of the process of growing up and becoming mature. Youthful indiscretions are the path to wisdom. Now when I say "youthful

indiscretions,” I’m using it in the sense that one of our congressmen used it when he talked about a youthful indiscretion that he committed a couple of years ago in his mid-50’s. In the light of eternity we are all young. Any time you face a situation for the first time and make a bad decision, that is a sin of your inexperience or youth. It is a youthful indiscretion, even if you are 80 years old.

If we learn from our mistakes, then something good has come out of the ashes.

Is there a memory of something you have done which haunts you? Do you find yourself remembering a mistake you made which causes you guilt or shame?

Here’s the more important question: Did you learn from that mistake? Did you repent? Have you said to yourself, “That was really dumb. I’ll never make that mistake again?” Then something good and very important has come out of the ashes. You gained wisdom.

The Psalmist prayed, “Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions.” As a father, I think God goes beyond our mistakes. I haven’t forgotten my children’s mistakes. I can remember them clearly. I can remember how they shaped my children into the people they are today, a mature young man and young woman of whom I am very proud.

They are wiser, better people than they would have been if they had been so afraid of making a mistake that they avoided life. I am told that there is a saying in the military that on the field of battle a good officer is one who can make decisions quickly and with confidence. If it happens to be the right decision, so much the better.

In battle of life, we have to make decisions. Some of them will be good ones. Some of them will be bad ones. But it is far better to make a bad decision than to refuse to make a decision at all. We can learn from our bad decisions. There is nothing to learn from avoiding decisions altogether.

If you’ve made some bad decisions and you have learned from them, you are a wiser, more mature persons than you would be if you were not willing to make a decision at all.

God remembers your bad decisions and rejoices in them, because they helped you become the person you are today. Out of the ashes of repentance for the sins of our youth comes wisdom and instruction in right living.

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