

3-29-2009, 5 Lent B
Chapelwood UMC, Lake Jackson

Out of the Ashes
Comes the Truth
Psalm 51:1-12

I am continuing the Lenten sermon series entitled *Out of the Ashes*. We are looking at some of those times when our lives are reduced to ashes. And we are turning to the Psalms to see that the psalmist had similar experiences. After expressing the pain of those experiences, he often goes on to end the psalm in praise and rejoicing, because God used those ashes to re-create his life, giving him a better life than he had before.

This morning we will be looking at the painful experience of being humiliated and embarrassed, to see the good things God can bring out of this terrible experience.

I've gotten hooked on American Idol this season. I've managed to avoid it in previous years, but I watched it one night early in the season, and I got hooked. What fascinated me was the various ways people responded to the truth. All these thousands of people think they are great singers. At the audition, they are told the truth. The truth usually comes in the guise of Simon Cowell, who obviously cares nothing at all about preserving people's egos. He just says what he thinks, and he is usually right. He says things like, "That was just awful. It was dreadful. Please don't ever sing in public again." Then come the responses. Some of the singers will say, "Simon just doesn't know good singing when he hears it." Others will say, "Yeah, I wasn't at my best today. But any other day, I would have blown them away." Every now and then you can see that a contestant realizes that although he or she thought they were good singers, the truth is that they aren't, and the whole world knew it before they did. These people are humiliated, but wiser, people.

All of us have had similar experiences at some time. When I was in the ninth grade, I was coming to the end of my career as an athlete, but didn't realize it. One day in PE the coach selected another and me to captain pickup football teams for class that day. I picked my team and named myself as quarterback. After all, I was the best athlete on the team. On the first play a boy broke open and was standing there behind everyone, waiting for my pass, so he could run for a touchdown. I heaved it as hard as I could, and the ball fell several yards short of him. All of a sudden I and everyone else knew the dreadful truth. I was no longer a great athlete. I had a weak throwing arm. It was humiliating. Thankfully I recognized the truth and named another boy to be quarterback.

King David knew the pain of being humiliated as he discovered the truth about himself. He had a moment that was so embarrassing that he was mortified. The prophet Nathan came to see him one day. He asked David to grant justice to a man who had been terribly wronged. Now that was just the kind of thing David loved to do. He saw himself as a king of the people, a righteous man who used his power as king to protect the weak and the helpless against the rich and the powerful.

Nathan told him about a poor man who had been given a single lamb. This lamb was his pet. He would feed it with his own hands. At night he would go to sleep with the lamb in his arms. A wealthy man with a large flock of sheep had guests arrive.

Hospitality demanded that he feed them. But he didn't want to lose one of his own sheep. So, he sent his servants to take the lamb away from the poor man and fed it to his guests.

David was enraged at the cruelty of the rich man. He asked, "Who is this man?" Nathan said, "You are the man." And David suddenly realized that his secret was out. He had had an affair with the wife of one of his soldiers while the soldier was out fighting a battle for him. The woman became pregnant. He ordered the soldier to come home, thinking that he could fool the man into thinking the baby was his. But the soldier stayed in the barracks, saying it would be unfair to the other soldiers who were still in the field of battle for him to go home to his wife. David was so desperate to hide what he had done, that he arranged to have the man killed in battle. When he got word that the man was dead, he thought his secret was safe. He could continue pretending to his people and to himself that he was a champion of justice, punishing the wicked who abused their power with righteous indignation. Then Nathan showed up with his story about the wicked man who stole a poor man's lamb, telling David that David was the wicked man in this story.

In that awful, embarrassing moment two things happened. David knew that people knew what he had done. Somebody from the court had told Nathan what David had done. Now it would be known throughout the kingdom. It would be written in the royal Chronicles. Thousands of years from now, people all over the world would be reading in their Bibles what he had done. David knew his dirty secret was out. That was the first thing that happened.

The second thing that happened was that David was forced to admit to himself what he had done. He was forced to recognize that he was not who he thought he was. He was not the champion of justice that he thought he was. Few of the people he had judged and condemned had done anything nearly as heinous as what he had done. David took a long, hard look at himself and realized he had never been as good as he thought he was. He just had had a wonderful ability to ignore his own sins.

Now that sounds like a wonderful gift. We all want to feel good about ourselves. How do you do that? Well, just ignore the things you don't like about yourself. See yourself as the person you want to be, not the person you really are.

The problem with that is that reality can only be ignored so long. That's not who we really are, and it gets harder and harder to maintain the illusion. Our sin festers within us.

Once I visited a church member who prided herself on being a wonderful housekeeper. Her house was a showplace. She was very proud of her reputation, and she was critical of women who, as she would say, "just didn't seem to care" when it came to their homes. After we had visited and taken care of the business I had come to see her about, and, of course, after I had complimented her effusely on the beauty of her home, she was letting me out of the house, when her phone rang. I told her to get the phone and I would let myself out. I got lost. I had come in through her garage, and I opened the door I thought was to her garage and found myself in a room that was meant to be a maid's quarters. I stood there dumbfounded. The room stunk to high heaven. There were stacks and stacks of baskets of dirty clothes and shelves of dirty dishes. I realized I was seeing something I was not meant to see, and I was trying to close the door and get out when the woman came out and saw me. Before I could say anything, she broke down

crying. I went to her and apologized and was trying to explain. But she wasn't listening. She just kept saying, "I am so embarrassed. I am so embarrassed."

I found a place for her to sit down. She finally got enough control to start talking. She said, "People think I'm a good housekeeper. I'm a horrible housekeeper. I just make sure people see what I want them to see." She went on to talk about her lifelong fear that someday someone would discover her secret. She told me that she was so critical of other women's housekeeping to hide her failures as a housekeeper and also because she was so angry with herself.

I said to her, "Your problem is that you're trying to be something that you aren't. You aren't a good housekeeper. That's okay. You will probably never be a good housekeeper. You are a great decorator. You need to quit trying to be something you are not and be proud of what you are."

A few weeks later I went by to see her again. She was eager to show me the room. It was empty and clean. I said, "Oh, so you have become a good housekeeper. She said, "No. I hired a maid." (Before, she had been too embarrassed before to even let a maid see her house.) She said, "Do you know that I confessed to my best friend that I wasn't really a good housekeeper, and she said, 'I know that. We all know it. But it seemed so important to you to pretend that you were, so we played along?'"

The woman said, "It is such a relief not to be live in fear that my secret will be revealed." And she really was a happier and more pleasant person after that. Out of the ashes of her embarrassment came cleansing and healing.

We live in mortal fear that someday somebody will discover that we may look good on the outside, but inside, deep within our hearts, there is a room in which we keep all our dirty laundry and our unwashed dishes, and it stinks to high heaven. As embarrassing as it is, it almost comes as a relief when something happens that forces you to get real. That's what happened to David. He was forced to get real.

It was painfully embarrassing. But it was the best thing that could have happened to him. It was the beginning of his healing.

Three good things came out of that experience. David became a better judge. He no longer judged with anger and indignation. He judged as one who knew that he too was a sinner. He was a better king. He could say to his servants, "I've got a problem which threatens to undermine my rule and you knew it. Don't be silent when I am giving in to my weakness. Talk sense to me and help me be the king I should be."

And he had the joy of his salvation restored. Up to that time David thought God loved him because of who he was. He was the great military leader, the great singer and musician, the handsome, charismatic leader. That day he discovered he wasn't the wonderful person he thought he was, and God still loved him. It wasn't because of who he is, but because of who God is that God's love and grace was poured out on him.

When David's secrets finally come out in the open, finally he was free to open his heart to God. He put his dirty, messy heart in God's hands and said, "Lord, I'm tired of being dirty. I'm tired of being ashamed. I'm tired of being afraid of getting caught. Please, Lord, clean me up and restore to me the joy of my salvation."

A guilty conscience and an unclean heart steal our joy. Until we are at peace with ourselves, there is no joy. And we cannot be at peace with ourselves when we know that deep down inside we are frauds with dirty hearts.

If we want joy, we have to come clean. We have to be honest and reveal the secrets of our hearts. But we can't do it. It's too embarrassing. Until one day, somebody else opens the door for us. We are mortified. It is horrible.

And it is wonderful. That is the day we are finally freed from our burden, and God can start cleaning us up. That is the day that God can pull us out of the ditch and set us on the road that leads to joy.

We laugh at others' embarrassing moments. Months or years later, we often laugh about our own embarrassing moments. But not when it happens. It is painful. However, as painful as it is, embarrassment often leads to cleansing and healing.

When we are humiliated, we just to go away someplace and die from embarrassment. Don't. Recognize this experience for what it is—an opportunity to do some heart cleaning. This is the time of year when people do spring cleaning. They do housecleaning. We need to let God do some heart cleaning. Let God clean up your heart and restore the joy of your salvation. Out of the ashes of humiliation comes purity, truth and joy.

Dr. Wesley Welborn
Senior Pastor

1. Out of the ashes of embarrassment comes purity.
2. The relief of a secret revealed...
3. The revealing of King David's secret...
4. The recovery of the joy of our salvation...
5. Out of the ashes of an embarrassing moment can come the cleansing of our hearts.