

It is only Wednesday and already it has been an exceptionally exciting week. I don't know how many of you watched the Superbowl -- I confess I didn't -- but I understand it was one of the most exciting ever. It went down to the last few minutes of the fourth quarter. It doesn't get much closer than that. Millions of eyes were watching, I heard it was the most-watched Superbowl in history. It is kind of a national, secular sports festival. People gather with friends for food and laughter, the best teams do their best, the companies air their most polished and funny advertisements, it is one of the greatest shows of the year.

As if that weren't enough, there was of course another super event this week, Super Tuesday. This was sort of a national, secular, political festival. It is one of the closest races in years, and the participation levels at many of the primaries were the highest ever seen. The politicians polish their speeches, the media whips itself up into a frenzy, all eyes, or at least most eyes, are on the candidates and the results. Lights, camera, action -- the spotlight is on them.

Given all this activity and excitement, Ash Wednesday comes almost as a shock, a splash of cold water in the face. It is such a sudden change, it almost grinds the gears or gives us whiplash. As a society, I think we do the super stuff rather well, it is easy to get caught up in it, to focus our attention elsewhere. And don't get me wrong, I am not saying that these are bad things, I just can't help but notice the radical counter-

cultural change of tone that is represented by our service together tonight. The tone could hardly be more different. Don't you feel it? We move from the public to the intimate, from the spotlight to the shadows, from the polished to the raw, from feast to fasting, from victory speeches to silence, from laughter to tears. We move from having our attention comfortably directed elsewhere, to this season of Lent in which we are invited to look at ourselves in the mirror, to see ourselves as God sees us. It makes us uncomfortable -- we will not like everything we see.

Ash Wednesday is celebrated in most churches as the first day in the season of Lent. Lent is the forty-day season that precedes Easter, not counting Sundays. During Lent we are called to penitence and reflection. The tradition associated with Ash Wednesday of marking our heads with ashes has roots in the Bible. Job, for example, speaks of repenting in dust and ashes. The ash is a reminder of who we are, a reminder of our sin, and a call to turn to God. The ashes recall God's words to Adam and Eve following their sin in the garden of Eden -- you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

If Advent was a season of waiting and preparation, Lent marks our journey to Jerusalem, following Jesus, and Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of that journey. It is a long and difficult journey. It isn't accomplished in a single day. It isn't a matter of just changing one's frame of mind, rather it is a sacramental journey, it has to be embodied

and acted out. That is why there is often so much talk about spiritual disciplines during Lent. Some things can't be taught, they have to be experienced. If you fast forward to Holy Week and Easter, you will miss out, the journey itself gives meaning to the destination.

In thinking about Ash Wednesday and Lent, I have the image of a small group of people getting ready for a hike through a deep and dangerous valley. We lay out our things in front of us. Take only what you need. We sift, we let go of some things, we re-examine what is really important for the journey ahead. Jesus, our guide, reminds us to keep our eyes on him, and if we encounter any problems, to cry out for help. The tone is somber. Perhaps there is even a whiff of fear in the air. This is not a hike for the fun of it. No, there is the sense that our lives are somehow at stake. That knowledge weighs upon us.

There is perhaps no Biblical text that better sets the tone of Lent and Ash Wednesday than the 51st psalm that we just heard. This psalm is traditionally used on Ash Wednesday. The Israelites remembered this as a psalm of David. It gives us a different glimpse into the life of this king, into his heart. The tone is intimate, the language is raw. Its poetry is magnetic, and in reading this psalm, I cannot help but be moved. It is as though this psalm invites us onto holy ground, and I feel the urge to take off my shoes as I walk upon it. One commentator I read suggested that if you do nothing else during Lent, you should read this psalm and meditate

upon it. I echo that sentiment, so I will assign this psalm as homework. Read this psalm again. Better yet, read it at least once each week for the rest of Lent. Spend some time with it. Listen again,

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my
sin.

For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in
your sight,

so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you
pass judgment

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

This is a man with a profound understanding of sin. It weighs upon him. His sin is ever before him. It is not just that he sees the result of his sin, no, it is deeper than that, it isn't just a matter of his vision, it is a presence. I imagine he gets up in the morning, and as he shaves he feels the weight of a void in his soul. Funny how voids can be so heavy. He goes to work and talks with the other guys, laughs with them even, but the laughter doesn't reach all the way down, the laughter is like a river that evaporates in the barren waste of his guilt. He goes about his

routines, he eats and pays his taxes and watches tv, but the hollowness remains. The hollowness remains, it is there, a stain that cannot be erased, a sadness that cannot be overcome. It isn't merely as if he has something on his mind, something on his soul, it is as if something has his soul. I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me, the sense of shame and brokenness permeates everything. We aren't just talking about sin as an act, no, it is worse than that, we are talking about sin as a state of being, an awareness that the world isn't right, he isn't right.

What a contrast this picture makes with what I often hear in our society. I hear people talk about living without regrets, living up to one's potential, trying to seize the day and get the most out of life. Obstacles that are encountered along the way are just that -- obstacles, we go over them or around them, but they don't really change us. You've met people like this, haven't you? Shoot, for that matter, most of us are probably like that ourselves more often than not. And what's wrong with living without regrets or seizing the day, anyway?

It is not so much that there is anything wrong with that, but in light of passages such as this one, in light of the deep weight of sin portrayed in this psalm, I can't help but think that the 'live without regrets' mentality trivializes sin. It makes it seem as if sin is just a flesh wound, a minor problem, something to be avoided or worked through. It isn't really

serious, it's only a matter of perspective. Always look on the bright side of life, and all that. But try telling that to someone like David, who has blood on his hands, who cannot sleep at night. He cannot take it back, he cannot change the past. Try telling that to people who lose loved ones to sickness and death. Try telling that to refugees from Darfur and Palestine and Iraq. You see, to live without regrets is not to have ever really entered into the suffering of another and known the deep desire to make the suffering go away, to live without regrets is not to know the brokenness of our world and of our human condition, to live without regrets is never to have really loved, never to have really escaped one's self-centeredness, never to have known the pains of spiritual growth. Living without regret, in other words, is a form of hell.

Although the text doesn't mention it, I imagine that, for a while at least, David did with his sense of sin what most of us do. He minimized it, he denied it, he rationalized it. He medicated the void, he ignored it, he repressed, he projected. He kicked the dog, he sank into a depression, he yelled at his wife, he led a nation to war. But try as he might, he couldn't fix it, he couldn't fill the void, he couldn't get rid of the stain and his own sense of guilt.

In reading this psalm, I was struck by how often he talks about washing and cleansing. Blot out my transgressions . . . wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin . . . purge me

with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow . . . blot out my iniquities. Create in my a clean heart, O God.

Dirty. This is a man who feels dirty, he feels it in his bones.

This deep sense of sin, this deep sense of being stained, reminds me of a famous scene in literature. Shakespeare's play Macbeth. Lady Macbeth has connived with her husband Macbeth to kill King Duncan, Malcolm, and others. But the murder weighs more and more on her conscience, and in act five we are treated to a glimpse of her wandering around, half mad, rubbing her hands as she continues to imagine blood on them. In one of the most famous lines in all of literature, she exclaims, "Out, damned spot! Out, I say." She continues, "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him . . . What, will these hands never be clean? . . . Here's the smell of the blood still." And as the doctor who overhears these ramblings rightly observes, "More needs she the divine than the physician."

More needs she the divine than the physician. Lent is a reminder that that is true for us as well. Lent reminds us that the church is a place for people with blood on their hands, blood on their souls, the church is a place us who have the blood of Christ on our hands, the church is the place for people who have been touched deeply by sin, who are aware of their inability to fix themselves, their relationships, and the world. The church is a place for outcasts and sinners, for people at the end of their

rope crying out for help. If you are such a person, if you are such a sinner, and you are whether you know it or not, the church is for you.

But unlike Lady Macbeth, David does something different, something more. He dares, he dares to go to God, he dares to offer his broken spirit to God, hoping and trusting that when he cannot fix himself or heal himself or forgive himself, there is still a power who can. He dares to believe that God can overcome the weight of his past by the promise of a new future. The cost is high -- it isn't only a matter of offering a sacrifice or giving up something for Lent. Rather, as David says, "the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." But if the cost is high, the promise is greater, it is the promise that God will resurrect his dead and broken spirit.

Like David, we too are called to be people that dare. If the church is a place for the broken, it is even more than that a place for people who dare to believe that there is a cure, who dare to trust and follow the one who can provide it. For the good news to us today is that this same God is still at work in the world, still making all things new, still offering us the promise of new life. So as we prepare this day for the journey ahead, as we remember who and whose we are, I invite you. I invite you in the name of Christ to dare, to come to this table and taste and see that the Lord is good. Come, if you are in need of healing, come if you need

strength for the journey, come if you dare to believe that there is a balm
in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.