

Ash Wednesday 2025

Homily – Saint Joseph Parish

Father Craig Looney

*Psalm 51 Joel 2.12-17 St. Matthew 6.16-21*



*“Let me hear gladness and joy; let the bones that you crushed exult; a pure heart create for me, O God, and a firm spirit renew within me. Give me back the gladness of your rescue and with a noble spirit sustain me.”*

In his book *“The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary”*, Robert Alter, Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley, describes Psalm 51 as David’s gut-wrenching confession after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for the murder of her husband. David, “broken” and filled with guilt and remorse, asks God in his kindness, to show him mercy and wipe away his crime.

We’re now in the Season of Lent. This is the time we ask God to reorient our hearts, minds and souls away from doing those things we should not be doing, and toward doing those things we should be doing. Lent is the time we get “broken down” by the crime of sin, and ask God to increase the power of his Holy Spirit within us to help us understand as David did, with repentance comes forgiveness, and with forgiveness joy and gladness return.

About four hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Prophet Joel was busy preaching in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. There was a terrible plague of locusts and things got so bad for the farmers they could no longer make a living and people were starving. They also could not supply the agricultural products needed for sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple.

Joel goes on to tell the people they must fast and pray and “break down” their hearts. Tearing their clothes off as a sign of repentance was not enough. God would not ignore them. He knew the disposition of their hearts just as he knows ours. He wants to forgive people who are truly repentant. God takes no pleasure in punishing the people he created. God promised to restore his people, and bless them and send his spirit to them.

The people of Judah would have understood what Joel meant by having their hearts “broken”. They would have remembered three hundred years earlier the prophet Jonah had visited Ninevah, the capital of ancient Assyria, now the modern-day City of Mosul in Iraq. The Ninevites were not Jewish and didn’t follow the Law. The City had a reputation for immorality and unscrupulous business practices. God saw their sinful and outrageous behavior and decided to take action.

God sent Jonah to tell the people of Ninevah to turn away from sinful and immoral behavior. God had seen them and was going to destroy the city. Jonah's message had a powerful impact on the people of Ninevah. The people turned away from sinful and evil behavior. They fasted and prayed, tore their clothes and covered themselves with ashes. Even the King of Ninevah couldn't hide his sorrow and repented along with his people. God had mercy on the people of Ninevah and the city was not destroyed.

Ash Wednesday commences our Lenten journey to the cross. We place ashes on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. The ashes remind us what we read in Genesis...we are made from dust and when we die we will return to dust. But that is not the end of the story. Death is not about extinction; forever wiped out of existence. The ashes remind us Jesus died on the cross to save us. The ashes are about the life he bought for us with his blood.

Jesus reminds us in the Gospel the point of fasting and prayer is to bring us closer to God, not to call attention to ourselves, or to try to impress other people with our Lenten disciplines. God sees what is in our hearts at all times. He sees us as we really are. We should approach Lent as a time of spiritual growth and maturing our faith. Like our friend, Saint Paul, told us in the Epistle for Quinquagesima, it's time to leave childhood behind and become grown up followers of Jesus.

Jesus reveals to us our Abba Father is a loving and caring God who doesn't hate the people he created. He forgives our sins...but we have to admit we need forgiveness. Psalm 51 is the quintessential Penitential Psalm and the inspiration for the Collect we said today, which we should say every day during Lent until Palm Sunday.

Lent "breaks us down", but we must realize we are not so broken God can't put us back together again. The Prodigal Son thought he had messed up his life so much even God couldn't reach him. His journey to redemption began when he started the long road home to his father, and discovered he never lost his love. Our journey to redemption begins now and will lead us to the cross, and Jesus' selfless sacrifice of love, for us.

We can learn from David and make Psalm 51 our Lenten Confession.

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