

Getting Out From Under

Psalm 51

Feb. 1, 2004

9:30AM Psalm series

You may be surprised to learn that Groundhog's Day isn't a high point on the Presbyterian liturgical calendar. In fact, it's not on the liturgical calendar at all! But the film, "Groundhog's Day," provides an interesting introduction to Psalm 51, which is the Psalm we're looking at this morning. In the film, Phil Connors, an egotistical weatherman played by Bill Murray, finds himself stuck in a time loop on Feb. 2 in Punxsutawney, PA, where he is reporting on the festivities of the day. He hates being stuck there, but eventually, he finds an advantage to it. He can un-do mistakes and even sins he has committed, by avoiding them as he repeats the same day, again and again. In time, he is able to get out from under his own flaws and failures, and even becomes a better person!

Psalm 51 is about getting out from under the weight of sin, but without going into a time warp to do so! The Psalm is attributed to David, written after his horrific sin involving Bathsheba and her husband. You may recall the story. King David spies an attractive woman who is married to one of his soldier. He desires her. And as king he can have anything he desires. So he sends his people to bring Bathsheba back to his palace and has sexual relations with her. She becomes pregnant. David is unwilling for his sin to be found out. It would be devastating to his image and to the

morale of his troops. So he recalls her husband, Uriah, from the front, for some R&R. He encourages Uriah to spend some time with his wife, figuring that if they sleep together Uriah will assume the child is his. But noble Uriah refuses to sleep in a warm bed with his wife while his troops sleep in danger on the open battlefield.

So David sends him back to the front with a sealed note to his commander telling the commander to put Uriah at the point of the fiercest fighting and then pull back, leaving Uriah exposed. It is done and Uriah is killed. And David takes the now-widowed Bathsheba as his own wife. And it looks like he's gotten away with everything. But later, when the prophet Nathan courageously confronts David with what he has done, David is overcome with guilt and remorse, as is reflected in the Psalm.

Scattered throughout the Psalm are references to the effects that this sin had on David. See if you can spot them as we read it together. Let's read responsively.

¹*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*

²***Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.***

³*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*

⁴Against 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.

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶***For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.***

¹⁷*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

¹⁸***Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,***

¹⁹*then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

Did you notice the effects of sin on David? They are just like the effects that unconfessed sin has on us! Verse 3 speaks of the guilt which often follows sin, *“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”* Because guilt is such an uncomfortable feeling, we are tempted to push it down or rationalize what we have done so the feeling will go away. But we do so at the expense of our ability to ourselves as we really are to and feel the pain of others. It costs us part of our humanity.

Verse 11 reminds us that sin breaks our relationship with God. *“Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.”* I wonder if some people stay away from church and spiritual things because of unresolved guilt in their hearts. Verse 8 reminds us of the possibility of judgment, *“...let the bones you have crushed rejoice.”* And a

loss of joy is referred to in verse 12. “*Restore to me the joy of my salvation.*” David was robbed of the joy of living because he had not dealt with the sins he had committed.

Some of you have experienced exactly what David describes here. You have committed some sin- maybe recently, maybe years ago. Perhaps a betrayal of someone close to you. Maybe a divorce which caused tremendous pain to others. Or, some kind of theft or cheating. Maybe a sexual sin of some kind. Whatever it was, it is still having a powerful effect on you- a sense of guilt or shame, a sense of distance from God, fear of God’s judgment, or a lack of joy in your life. In addition, you might be living with the fear of discovery or the need to lie to cover up what you did or are doing. Sin promises us much- exhilaration, satisfaction, security, status. But what it delivers is often very different.

So what do we do about it? How can we be rid of it? How can we get out from under it? The Psalmist reminds us of three truths which help us. The first two truths are found in verses 3 & 4. *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.*”

The first step is admitting our sin. David says here that he knows his sin. He takes responsibility for it. This is where many of us get stuck. There is something in human nature that resists admitting our sin.

Consider the story of Dan White. In 1978, White, a former San Francisco councilman, entered the city office building through a basement window. He then found, shot, and killed Mayor George Moscone and council member Harvey Milk. His lawyers argued at trial that White was very depressed, had eaten lots of junk food (Twinkies and Oreos), which led to more depression. Because of this, they argued that he lacked the capacity to premeditate these murders. The court bought it! He was convicted of the lesser charge of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to only seven and a half years in prison.

As bizarre as this example is, all of us have our own “twinkie defenses” when we are confronted with our sin. We say, “That’s just the way I am.” “He or she made me do it.” “It wasn’t really as bad as all that- lots of people do it!” Or, we attack the one who points out our failure! I wonder if our propensity to rationalize our sin is part of the reason for the popularity of folks like Dr. Phil and Judge Judy. They usually insist that people take responsibility for their actions, and something about that just feels right to us.

In the Psalm, David gets this. He admits his sin without excuse. He takes responsibility for his actions. That’s what confession really is. Admitting to God what we have done. Confession is so important that we

have a special place for it in our worship services each week. It ought to be a daily discipline for us, as well.

Secondly, David recognizes that all sin is ultimately against God. *“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.”* (51:4) Clearly, David sinned horribly against Bathsheba and Uriah. But ultimately, sin is against God. Why? Because God created us and designed us to function in certain ways- to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we depart from God’s intention for us, we disrespect our Creator, living as though he doesn’t matter. In reality, it is God to whom we are ultimately answerable. And our relationship with God is always derailed by sin. When we carry around sin that hasn’t been dealt with we become uncomfortable being with God. We instinctively know that we are in an untenable position. All sin is sin against God.

And because sin is ultimately against God, only God can take it away! Frederick Buechner once said, “You can absolve yourself of sin about as easily as you can sit on your own lap!” David clearly understands this. He asks God for mercy. And in verses 7-12 he piles up request after request for God to forgive his sin. “Purge me. Wash me. Hide your face from my sins. Blot out my iniquities. Create a clean heart in me. Put a new spirit in me. Don’t cast me away or take your holy spirit from me.” Notice that it is

God taking all the action in these verses. David understands that there is nothing he can do to effect the forgiveness of his own sin; God must act.

Later he states specifically that even offering the required religious sacrifices to God is useless to achieve forgiveness. *“For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”* (Ps. 51:17) David reminds us that we can't earn God's forgiveness with a bunch of religious actions or good works. The sacrifice that God desires most is a broken spirit and a contrite heart.

Are you attempting to buy God off with your sacrifices and good deeds? It won't work. It's not what God really wants. God desires broken and contrite hearts. Only then will our sacrifices be given and received with joy.

In just a few minutes we will celebrate the Lord's Supper together. In that sacrament we remember that only God can forgive our sins and re-make our hearts. When we admit our sin and accept Jesus' death and resurrection as the payment for all our sins, we experience one of God's greatest blessings to us- forgiveness!

Then, we can experience the results of being forgiven. *“Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will*

teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.” (Ps. 51:12,13)

In other words, when the wall of sin is removed between God and us and we are able to be in close touch with the One who made us, joy is the natural result. So is a heart willing to do God's will. And then we want to tell others the Good News of God's forgiveness so they will also be drawn to God. That's the result of being forgiven.

In his novel, *The Testament*, author John Grisham introduces us to a man who experienced these truths. Nate O'Reilly is a disgraced corporate attorney plagued by alcoholism and drug abuse. After two marriages, four detox programs, and a serious bout with dengue fever, Nate acknowledges his need for God. Here is how Grisham describes it:

“With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list, mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgement of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished, Nate had tears in his eyes. “I'm sorry,” he whispered to God. “Please help me.”

As quickly as the (dengue) fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had

been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing.”

God is willing and able to wipe the slate clean if we will admit our need and ask him to. You can do so right now as you sit in your pew. Why wait to get from under your sin? Let us pray.