

For the Healing of the World

Ash Wednesday 2008 | Psalm 51

Our Lenten theme this year: "For the healing/salvation of the world." Points to Jesus' purpose according to Matthew (1.18); word from the angel to Joseph about Jesus and his purpose:

*She will bear a son, and you are name him Jesus,
for he will save his people from their sins.*

1.21

Word 'save' here is the same as the word for 'heal' and it reminds us that Jesus offers us both healing and salvation through his life, death and resurrection. It doesn't mean that Jesus will automatically cure whatever physical ailments we may have. But it does mean that Jesus brings healing and restoration to our relationships with each other, and most of all, healing and restoration in our relationship with God.

And just how does God do this in our lives? Through the Word of God. The problem is that we think of the word of God as a bit of sacred literature, a collection of spiritual truths to live by, the guidebook to a happy life, a treasury of illustrations of God's love and faithfulness, while the Bible portrays the word of God as something else entirely. The word of God is, the book of Hebrews says, "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit." This is an image, not of passively receiving a message, but of action, movement, judgment, struggle.

It is that sense of the Word that Luther means. He likes to talk about God's Word as "a word that kills and makes alive." As theologian Gerhard Forde has put it, for Christians the point is not what the word *means*, but what the word *does*. It kills and makes alive. It isn't just something on which to ponder and meditate, but it is power, danger, even threat - and also hope and promise and gift.

Scripture itself gives no better evidence of this than Psalm 51, with which we began our worship this evening. Let me remind you of the setting. King David, in his lust for Bathsheba, has committed a string of sins. He has arranged for Bathsheba's husband to be killed. He has taken Bathsheba as his own wife. The prophet Nathan confronts David by telling him a parable about a rich man who steals a lamb from a poor man. David, thinking the parable is a real event, is furious, and demands to know who the man is who has done this. "Thou art the man," Nathan replies. And in that moment, the Word of God, spoken through Nathan, the Word of God kills David. It reveals to him his sin. It does not offer him platitudes or admonitions, but it works exactly like a two-edged sword and it kills him, convicts him of his sin, pierces his heart. It kills him.

David's psalm does not suggest a man who is thinking abstractly and soberly about right and wrong, but a man who is utterly broken. "Have mercy on me, O God . . . I have done what is evil . . . You are justified in your sentenced, and blameless when you pass judgment." David has been killed by the Word.

And then in the next moment, it makes him alive. "Make me hear of joy and gladness," David writes, "that the body you have broken may rejoice. . . Give me the joy of your saving help again, and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit. . . Deliver me from death." The word kills and makes alive.

And in a sense, that's what this whole season of Lent is all about. We begin with ashes, certainly an evocative sign, a sign of death. We hear the Word of God tonight, and it is not just a benign message about the need to change, but it is a sword, living and active, piercing our hearts and making us say, along with David, "Have mercy on *me*, O God. Blot out *my* transgressions. Wash me from *my* iniquity, cleanse me from *my* guilt." Ashes, ashes and a rending of the heart because we know that the word of judgment – Thou art the man! Thou art the woman! – is for us. And it kills us.

We begin with ashes, but there is another journey to be made tonight, a short walk of just a few feet. At the end of this time of dying, there is life! We receive a foretaste of it tonight, on the most somber night of the church's year, a foretaste of the feast to come: "This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." The word kills, yes, but the word makes alive.

And so we come tonight, and throughout this time of Lent, and indeed on every Lord's day, we come to let the Word do its work on us – its work of killing and making alive, of convicting and forgiving, of stripping away all our pretensions and giving us instead the humility and joy of God's love poured out so richly in Christ Jesus. We come so that the Word can do its work of reconciling us to God so that we may be those who, though dying, are made alive.

Amen