

“Priest of Joy” GPPC 3-18-18
Psalm 51:1-12, Hebrews 5:5-10

Scholars believe the Psalms were written by a number of anonymous authors over many years. The 51st Psalm has traditionally been attributed to King David, written after his infamous episode with Bathsheba. We’re not certain if David actually wrote this Psalm, but if he didn’t, he should have.

You may remember how things had unfolded in the Book of 2 Samuel, chapter 11. David was King of Israel with all the rights and perks that came with the position. As part of the culture of the time, he had not just *a* wife, but wives. But one day while walking around on the roof of his king’s house, David happened to see a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, taking a bath. So he asked about her, and discovered she was married to one of his military commanders.

Yet he had her brought to him and he slept with her. This was adultery, but when we consider David’s power, it was probably rape as well. And you may recall what happened. Bathsheba got pregnant and told David about it. His response was to attempt a royal cover-up. First,

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he had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, brought home from the field of battle. David encouraged Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba. But he refused. After all, he said, "How could I relax in my own home and sleep with my wife when my men are sleeping out in the field prepared for battle?" Uriah was a man of integrity. And that would cost him, as integrity always demands a price, doesn't it?

So David moved to the second part of the cover-up. He had Uriah sent to the front lines where the most dangerous fighting was taking place. And secretly the soldiers with him were commanded to fall back and leave Uriah alone to face the enemy. And so they did. As expected, Uriah was killed. David married Bathsheba and they had a son. What a happy ending with just a little collateral damage!

Or not.

As the writer of 2 Samuel says, "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent [the prophet] Nathan to David." Oddly enough, God has opinions about how political leaders behave. And God insists on sending prophets to speak truth to power. It happens

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in every age. Sometimes the leaders listen and repent, and sometimes they don't. But rest assured God will have the last word.

After hearing God's verdict and the consequences for his behavior, David did repent. And we hear his repentance in Psalm 51. Notice some of the features of this Psalm.

"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."

What do we notice so far? We notice that David does not make excuses. He does not say, "Well, it was Bathsheba's fault." Or "It was the media's fault." Or "It was my parents' fault." Nope. David says, "*I've* sinned and done what is evil and you're justified in your sentence and blameless with your judgment, O God." Such honesty is refreshing in our age of denying we have done anything wrong and passing the blame for our sins onto others.

But also notice David does not offer to make things right himself. He does not say, “I’m really going to bear down and make myself be good from now on. Just you watch, Lord. You’ll see. I’m not going to let you down anymore.” He does not say that.

Instead, there is a holy audacity to David’s confession and it goes in two directions.

First, he asks, over and over, using different images, for God to forgive him. “Blot out my transgressions.” “Cleanse me from my sin.” “Purge me with hyssop.” “Hide your face from my sins.”

Why so many requests for forgiveness when we know that God does not have to be badgered to forgive us? David doesn’t say, but maybe he simply feels the depth of all that he has done. And maybe it gnaws at him. So he just keeps on asking for forgiveness. As Presbyterian writer Frederick Buechner put it, “To confess your sins to God is not to tell [God] anything [God] doesn’t already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge.” (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 15.) David gives an honest confession, and his confession is a bridge.

Second, David does something even more amazing when you think about it. He asks *God* to make him into a new person and to fill him with *joy*. Seriously, David? You commit the sins, even crimes, and then you tell *God* to make you into someone new and to give you joy? And apparently you believe that's exactly what God is going to do—wash away your sins, make you new, create a new heart in you, and even fill you with joy. Who do you think you are? And who do you think God is?

Who do we think we are? And who do we think God is?

The writer of Hebrews spends some time with those questions. He writes what is called a letter, but it's actually a sermon that would have been read in worship in early Christian churches. And why does the writer preach this sermon?

A retired professor says, “His congregation is exhausted. They are tired—tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus....attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing confidence....Tired of walking the walk, many of them are

considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.” (Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, 3.)

So what does the writer of Hebrews do to help his congregation and other congregations that will follow? He preaches a sermon about who the people are and who the God we know in Christ is.

Who are the people? Well, they are children of God, precious to God beyond all measure, created in the image of God, full of the opportunity to love and be loved.

Yet they are also sinners, people who do not always say, do, or think what is right. They are sinners who unintentionally and intentionally defy God’s commands. And it is not just the occasional sin that is their problem; it is actually something intrinsic about their being.

In T.S. Eliot’s play, *The Cocktail Party*, a woman who has been having an affair, sees the affair ending. Her entire life is falling down around her, yet she has neither the faith community nor the beliefs nor the language to grasp what is happening and how to respond. In desperation she goes to a psychiatrist and she says,

“It’s not a feeling of anything I’ve ever done,

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Which I might get away from, or of anything in me
I could get rid of—but of emptiness, of failure
Towards someone, or something, outside of myself;
And I feel I must...atone—is that the word?
Can you treat a patient for such a state of mind?" (Lewis F. Galloway

referencing T.S. Eliot in *Interpretation*, July 2003, 296.)

We have this feeling not only that we are priceless but that we are also not the people we were created to be, and that nothing we can say or do can make that right. We need someone outside ourselves to intervene.

And that's where the writer of Hebrews says Christ comes in. We can say many things about who Christ is and what Christ does—Christ is teacher and teaches us God's ways or Christ is healer who is at work bringing wholeness. But the writer of Hebrews reminds us especially one other thing we can say is that Christ is our great high Priest interceding for Christ's dear but also struggling people, Christ's holy but also sinful followers.

The writer says Jesus didn't just go and set himself up as great high priest as if he were seeking a crass religious promotion. No. God appointed Jesus as great high priest who, like any good priest, sympathizes with us in our weaknesses, who knows that life is

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complicated and messy and we're going to make mistakes, because we're human beings. Jesus the great high priest sympathizes with our weaknesses.

But unlike other high priests Jesus does not have to make sacrifices over and over for the people and himself. No. As sinless and fully human and fully divine he gives his life once for all. And the risen Christ is like the mysterious biblical character Melchizedek—eternal and righteous. And he is constantly praying for us, granting us new life now and eternal life to come. Jesus is just the priest we need at just the time we need him. So he is a priest of joy.

Writer Madeleine L'Engle has been in the news lately with the recent movie adaptation of her novel, *A Wrinkle in Time*. As you may know, L'Engle was a devout Christian, an Episcopalian with a vibrant intellect. And her faith seems to have influenced every part of her life. Many years ago, in one of her books she tells about something that happened when her children were young. She says, "We spanked our son for something the younger of his sisters had done. I don't remember what it was; he was spanked because his father thought he was lying,

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rather than for any misdeed..." But when the younger sister found out what had happened she was upset. She went and admitted what had happened. The father was also very upset for punishing his son who was innocent.

But here was the amazing thing. L'Engle says that after the truth was told, confessed really, and forgiveness granted, the children were happy and loving toward each other that evening. And the whole family laughed and played games together after dinner. She says, "It was the laughter and joy of that evening which is proof of the mercy which mediated...I can conceive of forgiveness without this hilarity, but not mercy, which is the step beyond and leads to joy." (Madeleine L'Engle, *The Irrational Season*, 78.)

King David prayed our prayer, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit." And I wonder if Christ, our great high priest, comes and says to him and to us all, "I know who you are. You are precious beyond all measure, but because of your sins and the sins of others, you are hurting and broken beyond your own ability to repair. So I come to intercede for you with prayer and supplication, loud

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cries and tears, but finally with gladness and laughter and joy. And I invite you to forgive others and to forgive yourself to experience that joy even now.” Amen. ©Jeff Paschal

Spiritual practice—forgiveness. I invite you to close your eyes. Breathe slowly and deeply, slowly and deeply. Now tense your whole body. Imagine a grudge you are holding. Let go and relax. Tense your whole body again. Imagine some sin you have committed and you are dwelling on. Imagine Christ, the great high priest, coming and taking this load off your shoulders. Let go and relax and feel not only forgiveness but joy. Amen.