



The Nourishing Vocation Project

Engaging the Living Word

[Psalm 51](#)

What is this particular text?

- Psalm
- Song/Prayer of desperation
 - Individual prayer for help
 - Cry for mercy
 - Speaks out of personal experience
 - Theological assertion that all sin is a betrayal of God's love
- Prayer of Confession
 - Penitential Psalm
- Plea for restoration

How does the text function within the scriptural story?

- The fullness of a biblical understanding of a penitential prayer
- Uplifts and appeals to God's gracious nature in the midst of a personal trouble

How can this text function in the church today?

- Most used of all scripture in worship
- Gives voice to both personal and collective despair
- Gives voice to both personal and collective sin and penitence
- Invitation to confession and penitence
- Invitation to named honesty before God
- Invitation to vulnerability that seeks change before God

What does the text do to you? How do you react to the text? What feelings does this text engender in you?

- It's personal and emotive
 - Longing
 - Need
 - Despair and hope
 - Sorrow and mercy
 - Burden of sin is a weight that needs lifting
- The psalmist's voice is my voice
- Taps into my own experiences of failure
- Draws me anew into God's audacious love
- Moves to trust God
- Moves me to vulnerability
- Gives me words to speak about both individual sins or wrongdoings and my condition of human sinfulness
- Moves me to tears
- Fills me with hope



What do you have to say to the text?

- How do you know me so well?
- Thank you for the reminder that it is God's grace that makes confession possible
- This gives me words when it is too difficult to come up with my own

What do you see through this text from the story itself?

- Prayer
- Intimate relationship with God
 - Unparalleled trust that God will neither turn away nor abandon, even in the face of profound brokenness
 - Spiritual depth
- It is grace that calls forth repentance
- Permission to be honest and vulnerable with God
- Permission to name personal truth
- Reminder of the character of God

What do you see from within your church/community/world? (2022)

- Critical time in the church and our wider communities
- Naming and moving to repentance for our systemic sins cannot be avoided
- It is in relationship with God that true change can happen
- Change begins with naming one's role or complicity in what is broken
- Crises of our current time
 - Church is no longer a trusted institution or voice
 - People don't know where to turn for meaning-making
 - Mental Health concerns need to be named and resourced

What do you see within yourself?

- Honesty with God is critical
- Renewal comes through vulnerability
- Vulnerability is both hard and life-giving
- God can lift the weight of brokenness and failure

What is the context – textual and historical?

- The fourth of seven penitential psalms
- Always the Psalm that introduces the liturgical season of Lent
- A hymn with a meter
- Prayer of confession that was used both personally and liturgically
- Widely used text for reflection upon various Christian doctrines
 - Character and nature of God
 - Human relationship with God
 - Sin as both condition and act
 - Grace, forgiveness, and restoration
- Composed by and or a person in trouble
- Potentially composed by David after he was confronted by Nathan
- Potentially composed during the exile as a corporate, penitential prayer

What questions does this text raise for you?



- In what ways does this tap into my own story
- What does it mean for me that God is merciful?
- How does God's steadfast love (*hesed*) impact my relationship with God?
- What makes it sometimes difficult for me to be completely vulnerable to and honest with God?
- What does God's creation of a clean heart look like in me?

What words/themes seem of particular import?

- Mercy
- God is trustworthy
- God's steadfast love is real
- Sin and its impact on our relationship with God
- Truth
- Restoration
- Cleansing
- Salvation

What is the Gospel / transforming Good News within this text?

- God's mercy is abundant
 - It will never run out
 - It covers even that which seems the most egregious
- God's steadfast love is trustworthy
- God will not cast away
- God will cleanse
- God will restore
- New beginnings are possible
- Rejoicing can follow repentance
- God literally blots out and washes away our sinfulness

What is the as-over-againstness of this text?

- Sinfulness – the condition which plagues us
- Sin – the acts that we do that are contrary to God
- It is hard to be vulnerable
- Trusting the character of God to indeed be merciful can be difficult
 - *How do we know that God will be merciful?*
 - *How do we know that God will cleanse and restore?*
 - *How do we know that God will not cast away?*
- Sin and brokenness separate us from God and harm our relationship with God

Who does this text say that Jesus is, or if not Jesus, then who does this text say that God is? What does this text say about God?

- God is the fullness and completeness of steadfast love
- God desires truth
- God doesn't want empty rituals but a confessional spirit
- God is merciful

What have others said about this text?

- [“The words of Psalm 51](#) are the desperate words of one who feels desperately cut off from the presence of God. The psalmist here is broken by sin and guilt, and is pleading with God for



restoration. There are many among our congregants who share such brokenness.” Elizabeth Webb, Theologian and Episcopal layperson

- [“The essential character of God](#) is the grounding of the psalmist’s plea, the reason it might be heard and heeded: “steadfast love (*hesed*) “ and “abundant mercy (*raham*)” (verse 1). *Hesed* is a difficult word to render into English; it has to do with the relationship between two parties of an agreement or a covenant.” Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, GA
- [“The words of Rabbi bar Tavlai](#), ‘the hyssop is crushed by all,’ reflect its widespread use for spice, fragrance and medicine. Yet the lowly hyssop never becomes proud because of its numerous useful qualities, but remains humble in appearance and modest in its demands. This symbolism of the hyssop versus the cedar also helps us to understand the entreaty of King David after the prophet Nathan rebukes him for his deeds with Bathsheba: “Cleanse me with hyssop that I may be pure; wash me that I may become whiter than snow.”[4] By taking Bathsheba as he did, David arrogantly accorded himself the unjust privileges assumed by foreign kings, thus “he became proud above his people.” David’s prayer for forgiveness can be understood like the plea of the leper: I was proud and haughty like the cedar, and now I beseech you to make me humble like this hyssop with which I ask to be cleansed.” Nogah Nareuneni

What will I teach or proclaim?

- God loves you enough to hear your confessions
- No burden is too heavy to bring to God
- God will hear the cries of your heart
- God will take your sin away
- God will restore you and your relationship with God
- God’s mercy draws you to God
- God will cleanse; God will not cast away; God will restore
- Your relationship with God will not be broken by being vulnerable with God
- Come, bring your burdens to God