

Lent Midweek Three –March 19, 2014
Text: Psalm 51:10
Theme: "Lenten Customs: Penitence"

King David was confronted with his sins—adultery and murder—by the prophet Nathan. His response is recorded in a great psalm of confession and forgiveness, Psalm 51. Historically this has been the prayer of the Lenten season. Our text summarizes the essence of the psalm: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (v 10).

In the early centuries of the church, the Lenten season was the culmination of a long period of preparation for the catechumens, which at that time, were adults being prepared for Baptism. Their training and instruction sometimes lasted several years and at the end, the catechumens underwent a rigorous Lenten fast to show their devotion to Jesus. Finally, they could be baptized on Holy Saturday night. They would share in Christ's death and resurrection, being buried with him in Baptism so that they could rise with him to live a new life on Easter morning.

Later, around the sixth century, the practice of Lent as a penitential season became more widespread in the church. The bishop imposed penance on those guilty of public sins, and on Ash Wednesday they were ceremoniously expelled from the church. For the next 40 days they were "quarantined." In fact, the term

“quarantine” comes from the Latin word for 40. These sinners were excluded from the worshiping community and then restored on Maundy Thursday for Holy Communion.

All of this seems quite severe to us as though all this penance stuff is a relic from a different age. But I think we are hasty when we dismiss these former ways as “old fashioned,” because what was gained for these Christians was genuine discipleship. Through these difficult steps, they fed their faith well and developed a powerful commitment to Jesus.

What is the goal of life in our society? During the Medieval period, the development of character was the goal of society. Moral character was esteemed above anything else. Repentance is the idea of turning away from immoral behavior and toward moral behavior. So the Lenten season was an opportunity to take inventory of one’s life, to repent or turn from immorality and to be renewed. It was a time to pray with David, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

Although our society sometimes seems to have forgotten about the benefits of morality, penitence remains a central theme of this sacred season of the church year. One of the purposes of this season is to encourage us take an inventory of our habits, relationships, priorities, and attitudes and to find where we have been acting

immorally. We ask for God's forgiveness, which turns us away from immorality and toward God.

Penitence is God's gift to us. He knows there is a constant war going on in our heart between our sinful flesh and the Holy Spirit. St. Paul says,

"What I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. . . . What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:19, 24–25).

God knows we are helpless against our sinful nature and the wiles of Satan. Repentance is a new beginning. It is the Spirit of God at work in us to turn us toward God. It's easy to dismiss penitence. It's such a "downer," and we like to feel good. It hurts to take an honest look at ourselves in the mirror, so we avoid it. We have deep inner pain. We struggle to love and respect ourselves. We know that behind our mask, sin and rebellion and deception are hidden.

Lent asks us: Are you going to keep on denying sin and guilt or are you going to confront it? Lent calls us to repent, to confess, to place our sin at the foot of our Lord's cross, to die with him in Baptism, and to rise with him to live a new life.

We need penitence not to put ourselves down but to build ourselves up. You're carrying all that baggage of sin. Those attitudes and habits are weighing you down. Satan is using all that inner guilt to keep you from a joyful life. He's saying: "You're horrible, hopeless, useless, rejected." But listen to what God says: "You're loved, valued, honored, welcome."

Your sins and failings are indeed grievous. The holy God must punish them. But he's already done it. Christ took upon himself our every sin. He paid the price on the cross. So, with St. Paul we can say, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13-14).

"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."