

The story behind the song

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The psalms are poignant. They bear emotion in a way that grabs our souls. They are comprehended by the heart in a way the head can't.

But I falter when I try to preach them. Since I started preaching, I've kept the psalms at a distance. I've seen them used effectively in worship, but I've never been quite what to do with them homiletically.

The few times I have effectively preached from the psalms, it's been because I heard the story behind the song. I remember the first time I prepared for an Ash Wednesday service. I flipped open the *Book of Common Prayer* and read the preface to Psalm 51:

To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

How had I missed this?

Psalm 51:10 is a bumper sticker verse. I memorized it as a child, and I'm glad I did. Caught stealing cookies as a child, caught sneaking out in high school, confronted by my failures as a husband...often the Holy Spirit has convicted and I've prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

Yet despite my evangelical upbringing and Bible-quizzing culture, despite my seminary training, I didn't know that Psalm 51 accompanied David's story from 2 Samuel 11-12, this week's first reading in the semicontinuous cycle.

The story behind this song is David's, and it is tragic. He is guilty of lust, coveting, murder and perhaps rape. And that's just what we see in a few verses. David is a *sinner*. So are we, and it is with this realization that we pray Psalm 51:10.

Yet even after these events, David remains a man after God's own heart. How do we know this? Because he has an insatiable appetite for grace. And so we who strive for God's heart also have the audacity to pray Psalm 51:11-12: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation."