

Mixed feelings about ashes

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February 8, 2016

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The lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday are the same each year. So it almost doesn't feel like Ash Wednesday if I go through the day without hearing Psalm 51: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."

Most texts attribute this psalm to David, noting he wrote it after Nathan confronted the king for the episode with Uriah and Bathsheba, so David's appeal to Yahweh for mercy is about some "transgressions." While I'm not sure I agree that his sin is only against God, I do believe him when he admits, "My sin is ever before me." That was a pretty public takedown he faced when Nathan came calling.

But then I get to the second half of verse 7, and I stop reading the psalm as one written by an ancient king. I hear the words as a 21st-century listener, and I can't keep from cringing. A lot. "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."

I realize that this verse contains a metaphor, and that some folks have altered the translation to read "purer than snow." Still, on this side of race ideology, scriptural metaphors like "whiter than snow" can easily become tools of white supremacy. On this side of climate change in the post-industrial Midwest, snow isn't pure and doesn't stay white once the salt trucks and snow plows have done their work. Between the frightening truths of BlackLivesMatter and 350.org (now known just as 350), I hear more prophetic confrontation than pardon in the phrase "whiter than snow."

David's image for remedy is meant to show a depth of contrition and hope. What I find instead is more of sin's poison.

I don't know how many of you will mark the beginning of Lent by receiving ashes on your forehead, but I've noticed this year that I have mixed feelings about the practice. The Christian tradition of wearing ashes as a symbol of penitence or grief dates back to the Jewish practice of ashes and sackcloth--think of Job, Ahab, Jacob, and David. Today, there's a decent trade in buying a plastic bag of ashes from church supply websites. A lot of practical considerations go into preparing Ash Wednesday ashes; it seems almost clinical. Charcoal-gray to black, they've been sifted and refined so their texture will be smooth and user friendly.

The more I think about it, the more I rail against the symbolism of a black mark on your forehead being equated with sin and white with forgiveness. The desire to be clean, free of disease, and rescued from moral failings are not hurdles for me. What's in my way is how easily we invoke this penitential psalm in individualistic ways.

Sometimes Psalm 51 signals the belief that, in the face of transgression, asking God for forgiveness is what matters most. Sometimes it means that poetic turns of phrase like "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me" become part of the scriptural basis of doctrine that paints each person with the same brush. Sometimes our recitation of Psalm 51 keeps us from letting contemporary prophets break into our private chambers and denounce the more collective sins for which we are all invited to grieve and lament--such as the anti-black racism that grips our society, or the way we are sucking the life out of this planet.

The last time I looked at a pile of ashes--just the other week, since my husband is routinely burning things in our backyard fire pit--I saw a mixture of blacks and whites. Maybe this year when I speak the words of Psalm 51, I'll say "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wipe the tears from my eyes, and I shall wear ashes of my grief."