

Suffering and salvation: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; John 12:20-33

Psalm 51 does not let any of us off the hook—not the progressives, the evangelicals, or the feel-good agnostics.

by [Susan Andrews](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

As the Season of Lent rushes toward inevitability, scripture calls us to play the old game of Truth or Consequences—no, not the game show from the 1960s, but the old-time religion game of suffering and salvation.

In the presbytery I serve, there are several congregations that have eliminated the confession of sin from their worship liturgy. Too depressing, they say, too focused on guilt and shame. With progressive intensity, they instead offer a God of goodness and grace—a God of blessing, not punishment. This strikes me as eerily similar to an evangelical opposite—a famous church out west where the organist is forbidden to play any music written in a minor key.

The shadow side of the progressive, prophetic Protestant church is this lack of personal accountability and the elimination of personal sinfulness and clear-eyed confession. Instead, the brokenness in the world is blamed on “them”—on other people, on misguided politicians, on theological traditionalists, on systems and institutions that oppress and destroy. The result is that any energy for change and redemption is often rooted in our anger—in our own passion instead of the merciful passion of God.

Psalm 51 does not let any of us off the hook—not the progressives, the evangelicals or the feel-good agnostics. In what one commentator has called liturgical hyperbole, we are blasted with emphatic, imperative, honest words that are embarrassing in their intimacy. The psalmist does not just charge us with sin (an inevitable state of being), but also brands us with iniquity (literally being “bent out of shape”) and transgression (intentional wrongdoing toward others). There is traumatic truth in the psalmist’s plea, but also tenacious trust. It is the truth that makes the trust possible.

Rodger Nishioka and others have discovered the gap that exists between our dying churches and the hunger for Jesus that rumbles in the souls of the Gen X and Millennial generations. Two qualities seem to be central to this hunger—a deep desire for authenticity and a palpable yearning for passion. If our tired congregations don't start telling the truth about life, faith, sin, suffering, war, sexuality and death, the get-real generations will tune us out. If we don't ground the passion of Jesus in the passion of our own stories, the boundless energy of a new civic generation will pour into the secular culture and not into the church.

Part of the psalmist's truth telling is confessing the centrality of his sin and boldly experiencing the healing power of guilt. But there is more. The confession is followed by pleading, by the cry of the old heart for a new heart, a creative heart, a clean heart. We participate in a prayer of passion; we yearn for a new and right spirit, a holy spirit capable of wiping out the old and rebirthing a life, a people, a world. We know that in scripture, *heart* does not mean the soft muscle that pulses at the center of our body. Instead, a biblical heart is the strong spiritual center that integrates our feeling, knowing, experiencing into a secret self that only God knows and only God can fill. Our old selves, incomplete, inept, inhumane, can, by the grace of God, become a new creation.

The prophet Jeremiah clarifies what the psalmist pleads for—fleshing out the newness of a clean heart and a right spirit. A new heart is God's covenant translated from rules into relationship. It is written not on stone but on the soft tissue of human potential. It's not a gentle scribbling, a faint pencil sketch, but a cutting to the heart that Peter talks about in Acts—a painful, indelible etching that marks us for life and transforms us into suffering servants.

At this point in Lent, many of us may be tired of the doom and deprivation of the desert. We may be tempted to take a reprieve and skip Psalm 51, but joy can never be separated from despair. Joy is the fruit of despair truthfully confessed and providentially transformed.

In the gospel text for this day, strangers come to find Jesus, and his response is immediate. Let them stick around for a few days, he says. They will indeed see me—see me glorified through the experience of pain, death, solidarity, humility and resurrection. They will see, in the events of the coming days, the suffering servant who embodies both the agony and the ecstasy of God's redeeming joy.

When I was little our family regularly participated in a three-hour community Good Friday service. Since my father always preached and my mother always sang, we children didn't have much choice. Seven solemn words. Seven sad, sentimental hymns. Seven heart-rending solos, all focusing on sin and suffering and pain and death. Believe it or not, I looked forward to that service. I did not feel guilt or fear or despair—what many child psychologists worry that such an experience might bring. Instead I willingly participated, confessing the ways I could be better and healthier and kinder to others. I imagined Jesus on the cross, tears on his cheeks and love in his eyes for me and for the world. Most important, every year as we walked out of the sanctuary I knew that I was cherished and safe and forgiven.

Telling the truth about our beauty and our brokenness is at the heart of authentic Christian faith. The consequence can be passion, transformation, healing—a new heart and a right spirit flowing out of the passionate heart of God.