

Altar call: Psalm 51:1-17

Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten journey to Jerusalem. It is best not to journey alone.

by [Fred Craddock](#) in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue

Ash Wednesday is a day of penitence marking the beginning of Lent, a journey of 40 days to Good Friday and Easter. Ash Wednesday is a time of recalling our mortality (“ashes to ashes”), repenting of wrongs, and preparing for death and resurrection, both of Christ and of ourselves.

To be sure, the reformer among us warns of the dangers of ritualizing repentance and calendarizing seasons of the soul. Can the church effectively assign a day of penitence or reasonably expect a pilgrimage of preparation to begin and end according to the church calendar? A proper question, and a caution to be heeded. However, on the backside of empty ritual and religious exercises unappropriated, another danger lurks: the triumph of private feelings and the subjective captivity of the gospel. Radical individualism may regard as authentic faith only that which is confirmed by the pulse, when the truth is, some things are more important than how we may happen to feel about them on any given day.

The Christian faith is incarnational and historical and therefore involves times, places, memories, traditions and communities. Separated from these, faith evaporates into a mood. The whole of God’s way in the world cannot be written on the small screen of one human heart. And if the liturgical movements of the Christian community at some time and place seem not to move or stir, bending no knee, bowing no head, drawing no tear, lifting no heart, the intent of the liturgy is not served by abandoning it. Rather, one is better advised to join the assembly of others who struggle with their faith and in their faith, and in this company pray together: “Do not cast me away from your presence; do not take your holy spirit from me; restore to me the joy of your salvation.”

Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten journey to Jerusalem. The way is often desert, but the destination holds most meaning for those who make the trip. And since the way

is often desert, it is best not to journey alone.

No biblical text is more appropriate for a day of repentance than Psalm 51, but strikingly, this text also speaks to the matter of life before God as both individual and community. That the psalmist appears alone before God is clear: all self-referencing is first person singular (I, me, my). That is as it should be. Whether or not this penitent worshiper is David is a debate for the historians. But the content and mood of Psalm 51 fit the portrait of David in 2 Samuel 12:1-23, after the prophet Nathan holds a mirror before the king. Shattered and grieving, David feels almost unbearable pain over his sin and its punishment.

But one does not need the prophet Nathan to feel exposed before God. The altar itself is a most powerful moral and ethical force. Jesus himself said, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you . . ." (Matt. 5: 23). At the altar the memory of what one has done or not done is as clear as noon because at the altar, the light is different. At the altar, all locomotion stops and the busyness which obscures clear vision and permits illusions grinds to a halt. At the altar, there is no looking around, comparing and being compared, hoping that God will grade on the curve. Lame generalities such as "We are all human" fall unspoken to the floor, while glib and painless confessions of fault are awkwardly out of place. The truth is inescapable: "Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight" (v. 4). The one relationship, which means more than life itself, has been violated.

The psalmist had apparently been breezing along, when he decided to make a stop along the way to lay a gift on the altar and pay respects to God. We all have a residue of faith, right? My sainted grandmother, bless her Bible-quoting memory, would be pleased. Then the arresting truth: I have sinned. In my carelessness, which I called freedom, I have no doubt left many casualties, but most grievous is the damage to my relationship with God. Is it irreversible? Is it fatal? Already the thought of it has robbed his heart of joy and the weight of it has crushed his body into uselessness. Then comes the most painful thought: if God withdrew from me, cut me loose, left me to my own devices, I would be as an animal, unable to worship, incapable of the joy and the sorrow known by those who daily lay hold of the One who has already laid hold of them. He has no one to blame but himself; there is no one who can help except the God against whom he has sinned.

So the penitent worshiper kneels alone. Does not Psalm 51 argue persuasively that genuine religious experience is individual? Where is the community? *There*—surrounding the kneeling penitent, not for consolation or support or fellowship (often the roles of the community), but likewise in penitence, confessing sin and seeking forgiveness. How is this evident since the community seems not to be present in the text?

The community's presence is implied in the literary form of the text. Psalm 51 is one of the seven classic penitential psalms used in the assembly on occasions of confessing sin. The form of this liturgical piece is clear: sin is acknowledged with frequent repetition for intensification of feeling; petition is made for divine favor; a vow to God is made; worshipers affirm what really matters between them and God. The presence of the community does not weaken the individual's experience.

On the contrary, what could be more moving than an entire assembly in penitence, each one saying, "I"?