

“Create in Me a Clean Heart”
September 15, 2019
The Rev. Dn. Nancy Casey Fulton

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.*

Today’s readings from Scripture continue the theme we heard on the last Sunday of July, the various accounts of the Israelites learning how to pray, how to be in relationship with their Creator.

We saw Abraham pleading with God to forgive the sinful people of Sodom, and God relenting, agreeing to spare them if only a few righteous people inhabited the city.

We saw Abraham leading his son up a mountain so that he could sacrifice him, as God commanded, and God relenting, placing a ram for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son.

Today we continue that theme in the reading from Exodus. At God’s command, Moses has gone up Mt. Sinai to meet with God, to hear God’s instructions for life and worship as God’s people. But Moses is a long time up on the mountain, and the people, not able to see him in the thick clouds shrouding the mountain, are afraid that he will not come back. God has freed them from the Egyptians: they should be joyful, and thankful, but waiting for Moses in the barren desert they have lost their nerve.

And so, instead of praising God, they have cast for themselves the image of a calf to worship in place of their Creator, who seems to have forgotten them. God tells Moses what he thinks of their behavior: “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of YOU—Moses—I will make a great nation.”

Moses, like Abraham, argues with God. He asks God to remember his promise to Abraham to multiply the Israelites, to make them as numerous as the stars of the sky; to make of them a great nation. Hearing Moses' plea, God "changed his mind about the disaster that he had planned to bring on his people, and promised instead to give them land and to make them a large and powerful nation.

Fast forward through generations of God's people, who attempt to understand and obey their inscrutable Creator; who attempt to strengthen and enlighten their hearts, often in the words their ancestors have prayed for generations, and who fear their Creator, pleading in prayer for his forgiveness:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness;
In your great compassion blot out my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness
And cleanse me from my sin.*

Fast forward again, this time to the ministry of Jesus, whom the writers of the Gospels call the "son of God." This humble man, born of Joseph and Mary, outlines for his disciples a more hopeful account of their relationship with God. To help them understand this new vision of God, he tells them a parable, not a promise of power and wealth, but of love.

Hear the words of Jesus:

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul echoes this thinking. *Even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence. . . the*

grace of our Lord overflowed me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Through the centuries, God's people have traveled many miles, following Moses through the desert and Jesus along the dusty roads of Palestine, always hoping to see God, to know what God wants of them. The God they imagine through the long years before the coming of Christ is the powerful God who fashioned earth, sea, and sky who asked those who believed in his presence and his mighty power to carry out impossible tasks.

Those believers left as their legacy a treasure trove of manuscripts and oral history that united and guided the men and women who followed in their steps. Our Psalm this morning—number 51—is among those manuscripts.

Scripture tells us that David, a mere shepherd who became a king, wrote the Psalms. Some scholars make claims for other poets, but whatever the truth may be, the Psalms are eloquent portrayal of God's power, God's creativity, and God's love.

In the words of the Psalmist:

“Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure;
wash me and I shall be clean indeed.”

The constant struggle of men and women has been to understand our presence on this planet. Our ancestors in faith believed that God was a real presence, literally ceding to them great stretches of land and the power to drive away and rule all peoples who live in their path. Ours is a more skeptical time. Our worldview is complicated by the wealth of scientific discovery and by our knowledge of the diversity of the people who live on this earth.

And yet, despite all we know, we still yearn for a real presence of God, a guiding warmth. A few weeks ago Henry and I watched a program on PBS about the creation of our solar system. I found the enactment of the creation of the various planets and other objects in the solar system hard to watch. Where, in the violent birth of our solar system, is the loving God who made the creatures we call children of God? Where, in the midst of the hurricane that ravaged the Bahamas two weeks ago, is the God we call “Father?”

When I ask these questions, I am my eight-year-old self, overwhelmed by the reality that God has always existed, and will always exist, deep into a future that seems to be endless. I am also my 70-year-old self, who turns to Jesus, the son of God, to lead me into a new understanding of the powerful God who is also the God of love.

And I pray in the ancient words of David and his cohort:

*For behold, you look for truth deep within me,
and will make me understand wisdom secretly.*

Amen.