

Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God

*Create in me a clean heart, O God
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from thy presence,
and take not thy holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of thy salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.
~ PSALM 51:10-12 (RSV)*

Lent offers us a time to reflect on our spiritual lives. The words of Psalm 51 invite us into David's concern that God's holy Spirit might become dormant in him, resulting in a dull response to the presence of God.

Lent is a time for us to reconnect with the Holy Spirit dwelling within. When John the Baptist baptized Jesus, the Holy Spirit fell upon Him. In our baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit. There are days that I echo David in his concern about recognizing the presence of God. Lent is 40 days. During the 40 days, we are called to stop, clear our hearts and minds of excess baggage, and listen and respond to the Holy Spirit. Jesus went into the desert and was tempted. Do we live in the desert experiencing temptation? If the Holy Spirit is allowed an active presence, we can be lifted out of temptation and the Spirit within us can be renewed.

David begs God to renew in him the Holy Spirit. My prayer this Lenten season is to slow down and let God renew and cleanse my spirit. Recognizing renewal in myself will lead me to more fully experience "the joy of salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit" (verse 12).

God is with us. God loves us. Let this Lenten season open our hearts and minds. May we pray with David that God's presence not be removed, but instead that we may remain responsive to His leading and to His will. Then we may pray that our blessed fellowship with Him will not be forever lost.

"Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: 'Here am I'" (Isaiah 58:9 NIV).

Thank you, God, that you are always present in our lives. Let our hearts and minds always be open to you and the new possibilities on our journey!

MARY PERRIN SCOTT
BETHLEHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH

Be Determined to Be Fed

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.

~ 2 TIMOTHY 4:7 (NIV)

Determination can be defined as “firmness of purpose or a firm or unwavering adherence to one’s purpose.”

Squirrels are an example of determination. If you have bird feeders on your property like I do, you know what I mean. Once a squirrel finds out there are feeders on your property, it will try relentlessly to get to those feeders and be fed. The squirrel will want to feed there every day, usually multiple times a day. No matter what obstacle you put in front of that squirrel, it is determined to get around it. Once successful, it will bring others to the feast.

As Christians, we should have the same drive and determination to be “fed” by the Word by daily Bible reading and then spreading the Good News to others. However, Satan continually puts obstacles in our way to try to prevent us from being “fed” by the Word and spreading the Good News to others. Satan uses emergencies, fatigue, family and job issues, illness, pride, or financial problems as obstacles to try to derail us.

We need to get into some kind of a routine so that each day we make the time and effort to be nourished. Since retirement, my plan has been to pray, read my Bible, then do my devotions before I pick up my phone or have breakfast. However, even with my so-called retired schedule, obstacles spring up that throw me off my daily routine. So with those of you still employed, I get it; I know time is at a premium. I have been there and done that. When I worked, I did not have a routine for praying and Bible reading. I did, however, try to spread the Good News when I could — by example, if nothing else.

As you know, Jesus is aware of the obstacles you face on a daily basis. Whatever obstacles Satan throws at you each day, Jesus expects you to do your best to handle them. He told us we would face trials and tribulations. There are 24 hours in a day, and your effort to be fed can occur anytime. Jesus came into this world to feed His flock. When He left this world, He expected us to continue to feed ourselves and others as well. Let’s work through those daily obstacles with squirrel-like determination.

TED FRETT

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Perseverance

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ~ JAMES 1:2-4 (NIV)

Attainment of goals requires perseverance, hope, faith, belief, trust, dedication, and hard work. Did you ever try to encourage and motivate a loved one struggling with a monumental task? Were you trying to teach about trust, faith, and hope without preaching? It's certainly a two-lane highway!

As I watched our son struggle to achieve his dream of earning his doctoral degree, I realized I was on a personal journey with him by having to persevere with prayer, hope, and faith in God's great plan. I couldn't get "preachy" with him as it would certainly be a turnoff, but I know he's a believer, and I could at least tell him my prayer warriors were praying for him. I truly believed that he would eventually be successful but only in God's time. More than three years of hard work and anguish are but a blink of an eye on God's calendar. With joy and thanksgiving, I announce that our son has earned his doctorate in education!

If we could just learn to persevere in our tasks with hope, faith, joy, and belief in God's master plan and calendar, I'm sure Jesus would lighten our load. Then our struggles would lessen immensely.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for giving my son his dream and helping him along the journey to achieve it. You have promised to never leave us alone in our struggles, and we are grateful for your tender mercies. Thank you for so many blessings. In the precious name of Jesus, amen.

KATHY CHANDO
ZION UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Let us...

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

~ Hebrews 12:28-29

Moving On

Then David got up off the ground, washed himself, brushed his hair, changed his clothes, and went into the Tabernacle and worshiped the Lord. Then he returned to the palace and ate. ~ 2 SAMUEL 12:20 (TLB)

The email inviting me to write a devotional for the Lenten booklet took me by surprise. My Christmas tree was still up and the Advent booklet was still on my table. We had barely gotten past Christmas and now it was time to think about Easter!

Advent tells us to prepare, while Lent tells us to repent. Over the years I've formed the impression that Advent is about looking to the future, while Lent is all about the past. But there's more to repentance than trying to undo something that was done in the past. To repent, we must turn *from* something *to* something. Lent is as much about the future as it is about the past.

During this pandemic we've all experienced loss. We look back and remember the "good old days" when things were "normal." Many of us have suffered permanent loss: the loss of jobs, lost relationships, the death of loved ones. We are constantly drawn by memories of the past, and we keep wishing we could have what we once had.

In 2 Samuel 12, David was enduring loss. He had committed murder to cover up his adultery. Then he lost the life of his child. His sin was ever before him, and his relationship with God was damaged.

And yet David chose to look forward. When it became clear that the "new normal" wouldn't include his newborn son, David got up, changed out of his mourning clothes, cleaned up, and moved on. He repented of his past sin and embraced the promises of the future (Psalm 32). He pleaded with God to "restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Psalm 51:12).

In Advent we prepared the way for a life in Christ so that we could experience a new future, a life where God "renews a right spirit within me" (as David prayed in Psalm 51:10). Jesus said that He had come so that "they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). The promise of a renewed spirit and abundant life is before us. The challenge of Lent is to move on from the past so that we can embrace that promise of abundant life.

Father God, we've gone through a lot of difficult times. We've suffered losses that seem to hold us back, drawing us to what was and distracting us from what can be. Thank you for your patience, your grace, and your eternal love.

LARRY BAKELY
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Kintsugi

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. ~ EPHESIANS 2:10 (NIV)

In one of the first sermons I preached, I shared about a Japanese artistic philosophy called kintsugi and wabi-sabi. According to 15th-century lore, the Japanese shōgun Yoshimasa's favorite chawan, a tea bowl used in ritual ceremonies, shattered. Wanting his bowl repaired, Yoshimasa's ceramists quickly got to work to find a way to put the bowl back together. What they created would become an art form in itself known as *kintsugi*.

In kintsugi the broken pieces of pottery are placed back together, but instead of hiding the cracks and imperfections, they are accented by precious metals used to secure them: silver, gold, and platinum. Kintsugi and wabi-sabi have since become a philosophical way of embracing the imperfect and seeing its true beauty and what it has become.

I think that is a great metaphor for what God does in our lives. We all have flaws, imperfections, and brokenness we want to hide. We may think, "How can God use me? I am all messed up." Scripture is full of imperfect people being invited to partner with God for great things.

God makes all things beautiful. Like in kintsugi, it takes the Master Potter to put the broken pieces together, and the lacquer that is used (Christ) is more precious than silver or gold. We are God's handiwork.

Truth is, we are fragile beings. And like a piece of ceramic stoneware put back up on the shelf after being joined in grace, we may fall off and break or crack again. We don't need to hide from our past or what we are going through today; we don't have to believe the lie that we are too far gone. Jesus sees and meets us where we are to put us back together, in a state of shalom that reveals the true beauty of what God is doing and has done in our lives. These beauty marks tell stories of the amazing grace, mercy, and love of the Triune God.

Great Potter, you make all things beautiful and bring all things together for good. Mold and shape us, work in our fractured lives, so we may be living installations of your love, grace, and mercy, to draw others into the new things you are doing. In this, we give you thanks. Amen.

REV. TIM CONAWAY

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Our Actions Reveal Our Beliefs

Read Daniel 5 and 6

Imagine sitting at a king's feast eating good food, drinking the finest wine, and talking with those of nobility. You're taking a bite of your bread when suddenly you see something strange out of the corner of your eye: a human hand floating in mid-air. The hand begins writing on the palace wall, and you watch as words are written out. As bizarre or fictitious as this story sounds, it's real! Daniel 5 describes King Belshazzar's feast and Daniel's interpretation of the message the hand had inscribed on the wall. It was a message from God to the king that would tell the king his time of ruling was coming to an end.

Before revealing what was written, Daniel tells him, "You have not glorified the God who holds your life-breath in His hand and who controls the whole course of your life" (Daniel 5:23c). Not only is this statement direct, it is full of truth about God, which I think we often forget: God holds our life-breath in His hand. He has control over the course of our lives. Every breath that keeps us alive is in God's hand.

Fast forward a bit to find out (spoiler alert!) Belshazzar is killed and Darius the Mede takes over as king. Daniel, at this time, had become an administrator for the kingdom, and the king wanted to put him in charge of the entire realm. However, others were upset. So the other administrators and local rulers convinced the king to sign an edict saying that anyone who consulted another god or ruler besides Darius would be thrown into the lions' den. When Daniel heard this news, he went home and prayed to God, "as he had done before" (Daniel 6:10).

This is significant to note because Daniel didn't start praying for the first time in months or suddenly freak out and beg God to do something. He did what he always did — spent time communing with God and thanking Him. Daniel's reaction to the news showed how much trust he had that God was in control. I think a lot of times when we face scary or uncertain circumstances, we immediately feel afraid and beg God to change what's happening in our favor. Whether we realize it or not, every action and reaction we have shows what we believe about God. Most times, we live as though God can't be trusted.

One of the most encouraging quotes I've heard lately comes from Jackie Hill Perry's book *Holier Than Thou*: "If God is holy, then He can't sin. If God can't sin, then He can't sin against you. If He can't sin against you, shouldn't that make Him the most trustworthy being there is?" When circumstances change, God is still the same as He's always been, and He can be trusted to have control.

Are we living like we believe God is trustworthy?

KAYLA HARRISON

ST. JOHN'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Walking in Faith

And when He comes, He will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer and those who cannot speak will shout and sing! ~ ISAIAH 35:5-6 (TLB)

Often God works in ways that don't look anything like a blessing. But God has used our pain and the loss of our dreams. Through our daughter, Caitlin, God has been teaching us some very important lessons that we needed to learn in our walk of faith. Caitlin has a rare genetic disorder called STXP1, which leaves her physically unable to do anything for herself.

Caitlin has been our teacher. She has taught us what is really important in life. She has shown us how to bring joy to others just by giving a smile. She has given us and taught us the meaning of unconditional love. She has gifted us with her innocent trust, her dependency upon us. She has shown us how to live a life of contentment. She doesn't worry about whether her needs will be met. She just trusts that we will meet them. What a reminder to me of how I need to just trust my Heavenly Father to take care of my needs! She has taught us respect for others and their uniqueness. She has taught us about the sanctity of life, about how very precious this life is, and about not taking things for granted. We have learned about forgetting our own needs and desires and dreams and about giving ourselves to the needs of others. Most of all, our hope and faith in the Lord's promises have been affirmed because He shows Himself every single day to be faithful.

One of my greatest blessings is knowing that the first steps Caitlin takes and the first words she speaks will be to her Creator. To the God who formed her in His very image. To the God who knitted her together and knows how many hairs are on her head.

Our dreams changed. They shifted greatly. But how wonderful to know that we serve a God who does NOT change — who will remain faithful through anything we go through.

Dear Lord, thank you for being our anchor. Our support. And our faithful friend. Guide us as we walk through this season of Lent.

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