

**March 21, 2021, Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34 Psalm 51:1-13 Hebrews 5:5-10 John 12:20-33**

When we read that Psalm this morning, how many of you thought it sounded familiar - especially the last two verses? Have you heard those words before? I wonder if you realized that it is one of the offertories that was, and sometimes still is, used in our worship? How many of you knew before this morning that that offertory came from Psalm 51? I'm not even sure I did myself until it showed up in the lectionary, or assigned readings, for today.

We often don't realize how much of our liturgy comes from scripture. In the blue "With One Voice" hymnal, that was a supplement to the Lutheran Book of Worship, or the Green Hymnal as it was affectionately known, there are citations to let you know what part of the scripture the liturgy comes from. Unfortunately, our current Evangelical Lutheran Worship, or Cranberry Hymnal, not to be confused with the older Service Book and Hymnal, or Red Hymnal, doesn't offer those notes, so quite often we don't realize that our liturgy is scriptural.

Lutherans are sometimes criticized by other denominations, saying that we're not a Bible-based church, but when you realize that our whole liturgy, or at least a major part of our liturgy, is actually quotations from scripture, you begin to recognize that we *are* a solidly Bible-based church. Also, when we better understand that our liturgy comes from scripture, we can gain a lot more from worship. You see, we are sometimes under the mistaken impression that the only scripture in our worship services is in the readings. We don't realize that our liturgy is rich in Biblical content. When we understand more about what it is that we do when we worship, we can take home much more from that worship. It is scriptural worship that we're doing. It's not something that someone just sat in a back room and made up. It comes from the Bible.

To help us better appreciate our liturgy and that it is Bible-based, we need to understand that the word *liturgy* means "the work of the people." You see, when you come here, or join us digitally, to worship you are a participant not a spectator. You don't join us to watch, you participate in worship. It's the work of the people, it's something we do together.

When you see worship that way it can take on a much different meaning. When you participate in worship, the words we use, the songs we sing, when we sing, become your words. They're not just words written on a page, something that we memorize or simply spout out week after week with no meaning. They become our words because the liturgy is our work. When we understand that we are active participants in the worship, it takes on a deeper meaning. The words we say are words we believe; they're words we feel. The words have meaning that is very personal to us.

To illustrate what I'm talking about, I had the opportunity some time ago to offer the opening prayer for a County Commissioners meeting. Part of that opening ceremony, if you will, is the Pledge of Allegiance. Now, here we are at the courthouse with a group of people who may or may not be interested in what's going on. They stand, they face the flag and they repeat the pledge. Very little feeling, very little emotion, just reciting words that they'd memorized since their school days, doing it as a ceremony with very little sincerity. I've also had the opportunity to open meetings at the VFW. When you stand with a group of veterans at the VFW, those who have fought for their country, those who have risked their lives to preserve the rights that we enjoy in this country and you say the Pledge of Allegiance with them, they don't just say it, they feel it, they mean it. It has personal meaning to them. They're enthusiastic about it.

Our liturgy has that same kind of personal meaning to us. We don't just say the liturgy, we live the liturgy. As Christians it's a part of our life. Christ laid down his life for us, and so when we come here to worship him, the liturgy has personal meaning. We say the words not just because we've memorized them, not just because it's ceremony, but because we believe them. Now, I encourage you, when you come into church on Sunday morning, join us remotely, or whenever you participate in worship, do it with the mindset that you're leaving the world around you behind. You're coming into a place where you're about to worship God. You have an opportunity to come into God's presence uninterrupted and having the chance to worship our Lord and Savior. Come in with the mindset that you're leaving the world behind. Ask God to focus your heart on God. Take the opportunity to prepare to live the liturgy - to live the worship service - to become a part of the service. Don't just attend worship, be a part of it.

Psalm 51, that we have as one of our offertories, was (like many of the others) written to be used in worship. The Psalms are the songs of the ancient church. The ancient worshipers used the Psalms as their hymns. There's a heading above many of the Psalms in certain translations of the Bible. Superscriptions, they call them, and the superscription that goes with Psalm 51 says, "A Psalm of David when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone in with Bathsheba." Now if you know the story of David, you'll know that David was a king of Israel, a man after God's own heart, but David was also a sinner. David committed adultery with a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, and when he was afraid of getting caught in what he did, he had her husband killed. The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront David in his guilt. David confessed to the Lord, "I have sinned against you, O Lord" and the Lord forgave him of his sin (although David still had consequences to pay). This hymn was written in response to that confrontation between David and Nathan. David wrote those words so the people gathered in worship could understand the feelings of his guilt and could appreciate the forgiveness that God offers us. David's words help all of us to share that experience of admitting we are sinners and also appreciating the fact that we are forgiven.

You might say that it seems strange to use other people's words to express our feelings. People have told me that it seems less personal that we use someone else's words, but really, we do that all the time. We turn to the poets, the songwriters, the artists of our world to express the feelings that are so deep we don't have the words for them ourselves. There's a little company called Hallmark that's made millions of dollars counting on the fact that we don't have the words ourselves to express what we feel, and so we turn to others to express those words. Our liturgy can do the same thing. The words that we use in worship become our words, but words that we may not be able to express ourselves, feelings that are so deep that we might not have the words in our daily language to express them ourselves.

When we take part in the confession of sins, for example, we are telling the world that we are sinners. I'm afraid that sometimes those words just roll too easily off our tongues, they come out of our mouths with very little meaning to us. "I confess that I am in bondage to sin. Gracious God have mercy on us." Think about being in the presence of other people and admitting that you are a sinner. That's what confession is all about. We should feel that -we should experience that when we take part in worship. But then also whenever we receive the sacrament of Holy Communion and we hear the words, "This is my body and blood given for the forgiveness of sins" we should also feel the joy that our sins are forgiven. Yes, we are sinners, but we are forgiven sinners and that should also be real for us -especially in the communion when we see God's body and blood given for the forgiveness of our sins. Our worship is part of our life. We need to live the worship, live the liturgy, not just watch it and not just attend church but be part of church.

In our worship we use words that were written by writers like David thousands of years ago. Some much more

contemporary writers have given us words that we use in our liturgy also. We use those words to express and experience our worship, to experience the confession -to experience forgiveness, to experience joy. All those experiences should be real for us in the words that we use in worship -confession, thanksgiving, repentance and praise -until it becomes real for us in every part of our lives. We live the liturgy in the time we worship, then we can truly go from worship back out into the world restored in the joy of salvation and sustained by God's bountiful spirit.

Amen