

### **“Real Renewal”**

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

In most circumstances, people give you presents on your birthday; but I was recently reminded that things are different in Ontario. As your birthday approaches, you receive a piece of mail from the Ministry of Transportation inviting you to give *them* a present: renewing your vehicle registration. And so as my March birthday approaches, I found myself at the Service Ontario office on Graff Avenue turning over a few hundred dollars of my hard-earned money so that the registration for our two cars could be “renewed.” But when I got home and put the new stickers on our licence plates, I noticed that there other than that new sticker there really wasn’t much about those two old cars that appeared “renewed.” They looked exactly like they did before I accepted the MTO’s offer of “renewal.”

In many situations, offers of “newness” and “renewal” often leave us underwhelmed or disappointed. Advertisers will tout the benefits of a new product, but when we get it home it really doesn’t seem all that different from the old one. In an election year, politicians will promise new programs and a renewed emphasis on providing responsible government if only their party is elected. Even in the depths of winter, the promise of spring inspires us to look to renew our homes, our yards, and even the manner in which we live our lives. But unfortunately, these and many other promises of newness and renewal often don’t live up to their hype, leaving us disappointed and skeptical whenever someone makes a promise of renewal for our selves or our communities.

We may even bring such skepticism with us to worship this evening as we hear the message of Scripture on this Ash Wednesday calling us to embrace the renewal that is at the heart of this Lenten season. After all, we’ve been through many seasons of Lent over the years and heard the same calls to repentance, the invitation to return to the Lord and have our hearts and our spirits renewed. But has such renewal every really taken place? Can we honestly say that we are any different at the end of the Lenten season? Is there any discernable renewal that has taken place among us in the church after we have been through this penitential season, or is the renewal as negligible as the “renewal” that my automobiles experienced when I slapped a new sticker on each of them?

The message of renewal is at the heart of Psalm 51, the psalm which has called us into the Lenten season for generations. Psalm 51 is ordinarily classified as a prayer for help or an individual lament. What sets it apart is that the psalmist’s lament involves his or her own sinfulness: *“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from me sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before you.”* (51:2-3). As the psalmist implores God to forgive “the iniquity of my sin,” he or she also expresses faith in God’s transforming power, that God can and will *“create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”* (51:10). The word “create” (*bara*) is used in the Old Testament only in reference to God’s activity; it is particularly prominent in the creation stories in Genesis 1 & 2 as well as in Isaiah 40-55, where God’s creative activity involves the doing of a “new thing”:

- “I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, the King. Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” – Isaiah 43:15-19.
- “You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forward I make your hear new things, hidden things that you have not known. They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them, so that you could not say, ‘I already knew them.’” – Isaiah 48:6-7.

The word is also used in the context of God's self-revelation in Exodus 34, in which God promises to "*perform miracles, such as have not been **performed** (lit. "been created") in all the earth or any nation.*" (34:10). In short, it is God's fundamental character to restore, rehabilitate, and re-create sinners. The psalmist affirms that his or her life also depends on God's willingness to forgive and God's ability to renew the lives of sinners.

The text also calls to mind Ezekiel 36:25-27, which also testifies to God's willingness to forgive and ability to recreate:

- "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." – Ezekiel 36:25-27.

For the psalmist to receive a "new spirit" and to live in the presence of God's Spirit means nothing short of new life. In biblical terms, to be "saved" means to be restored to conditions that made life possible; for the psalmist, forgiveness means salvation.

Forgiveness, reconciliation and re-creation are the invitations that are once again issued to us on this first day of the season of Lent. It is the invitation issued through the prophet Joel that calls on God's people to return to the Lord, to stop travelling along paths that lead us away from God's presence into places that are far removed from what God would desire for all of God's children:

- "Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding from steadfast love, and relents from punishing." – Joel 2:12-13.

In the midst of his troubled second letter to a deeply divided Corinthian church, Paul reminds the Christians in that city that in Christ there is true renewal and reconciliation, and that the mission of the church is to be the emissaries of proclaiming this new possibility to all people in every generation:

- "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." – 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.

Our Lord Jesus Christ emphasizes that the signs of this new creation are when our devotion – prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – is no longer done to impress others ("*... as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others.*" – Matthew 6:2) but done in secret by those who have now been born anew and blessed by the knowledge that our true treasures are in heaven, "*where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.*" (6:20). When we have experienced the real renewal that is ours in Jesus Christ, then we know that what is truly valuable is not what we store up for ourselves, but the true treasures that are ours as those who have been given "*a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*" (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Those of us who have worship in the Lutheran Church for some time may recall that the offering song in the *Service Book and Hymnal* (the original “red book”) was to the words of Psalm 51:10-12; I can still recall singing these words as I collected the offering plates in my home congregation. In Lent and every season of the church year, they were a reminder to us that we were not merely offering our financial contributions as we brought forward that morning’s collection; we were proclaiming that the greatest treasure we possess is now what is in our wallets or bank accounts, but the new life that God has instilled in us, the clean heart and renewed spirit that are ours through the one who offered his very life for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. As we have been born anew through water and the Holy Spirit in Baptism, we come before our Lord with our offerings beseeching that God will continue to restore in our lives the joy that is rooted in our salvation and will strengthen and sustain us so that we might have a “willing spirit” eager to “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9).

- “Looking back upon the message and meaning of the Gospel, and also looking forward to the celebration and reception of the Sacrament, we offer to God ourselves, our substance, and our praise in an act of corporate dedication and thanksgiving.” – Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*.
- “We have nothing to give God except our need and our hopes (‘Create in me a clean heart, O God...’; ‘Gather the hopes and dreams of all...’), yet we try to make a humble gesture of giving. God, who has given the fruitful vineyards and fields, gives yet more – the bread of life, the joy of salvation, the body and blood of Christ, a foretaste of the all-healing feast – and so turns our giving towards other people, who also have broken hearts and needs and hopes and dreams.” – Lorraine Brugh and Gordon Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly*.

On this Ash Wednesday, we are once again invited to reflect on the ways in which we have separated ourselves from God’s presence, the many times when we have turned our backs on God and travelled life paths that have taken us far away from God’s love. We begin this holy season by “*acknowledging our need for repentance and God’s mercy ... our sinful rebellion separates us from God, our neighbours, and creation, so that we do not enjoy the life our creator intended.*” As we bring our faults and our failings before God, we pray that God will “*restore us ... and let your anger depart from us.*” But while we come before God in solemnity and with contrition, we do not come into God’s presence today or any day in fear or terror; because when we confess our sins, we believe that our God of steadfast love will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, creating in us clean hearts and a truly renewed spirit.

- “Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive the absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God himself and by no means doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.” – *Small Catechism*.

Renewing our registration stickers allows us to continue to drive our cars legally on the roads of Ontario; but it really hasn’t brought any discernable renewal to either vehicle. The “new” and “renewed” products that are being advertised may provide slightly better results or make our everyday tasks a bit easier, but they won’t affect any profound changes in our lives. But when we come into God’s presence today and throughout these weeks of Lent, we open ourselves up to a real renewal, a renewal that will impact our relationship with God, the manner in which we live together as sisters and brothers in Christ, and the way in which we look at the world around us and into the future that is before us. When we entrust ourselves into God’s care as we return to the Lord of steadfast love, there is no doubt that we shall be changes with a clean heart and a renewed spirit.

- “I no longer have to be concerned about anything to do. I have no hand in the arrangement of one single moment of my life; everything belongs to you. I do not need to add or subtract anything, nor to seek after or mull over anything. It is for you, Lord, to regulate everything: direction, humiliations, sanctification, perfection and salvation – all are your business, Lord. Mine is to be satisfied with your work and not to demand the choice of action or condition, but to leave everything in your good pleasure.” – Jean-Pierre de Caussade, “Surrender is Everything.”

So let us enter in Lent in confidence, knowing that there are new possibilities for us; there is hope for a brighter and better future; and that the renewal that our Lord offers us is real. May God make us a new creation, renew a right spirit within us, and restore unto us the joy of salvation that is our in the one who makes all things new, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.