

“Asking God for a New Elephant” based on Jeremiah 31:31-34, and Mark 14:12-26
Delivered on March 21, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

In Psalm 51, which we used for our call to worship today, David writes a confessional prayer. He tells the truth. He writes, *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new & right spirit within me.”* This request for a new heart comes after David has done a very bad thing. He has had an affair with another man’s wife, Bathsheba, and she is pregnant. So, David, the man to whom God will eventually promise an eternal covenant, tries to cover up his actions. He has this man killed in battle. But his actions do not go unnoticed and he is called out, made to repent by the prophet Nathan.

David recognizes the problem at hand runs deeper than merely a bad decision. He recognizes the flaw in him, namely that even he, the one anointed by God to be Israel’s King, has a heart inclined to sin, a heart that leads him astray in what it loves. It is so tainted, it is capable of leading him to murder a man who was loyal to him, who fought bravely in his army, fighting on David’s behalf, while the king stayed home from the front. He fought Israel’s enemy, the Philistines.

The Apostle Paul famously said in his letter to the Romans, *‘I do not understand what I do. I don’t do what I want, you see, but I do what I hate. So, if I do what I don’t want to do, I am agreeing that the law is good. But now it is no longer I that do it; it’s sin, living within me. I know, you see, that no good thing lives in me, that is, in my human flesh. For I can ‘will’ the good, but I can’t perform it. I don’t do the good thing I want to do, but I end up doing the evil thing I don’t want to do. So, if I do what I don’t want to do, it’s no longer ‘I’ doing it; it’s sin, living inside me.’* That’s a lot I know. But you get the point.

Friends, here are two of our shining examples of faithfulness to God, the anointed King David, through whom God united the 12 tribes of Israel, and the Apostle Paul, who preached the good news of Christ to the gentile world. Here we have two men often held up for us as examples of faithfulness, yet, they are struggling under the weight of sin and its power. They want to do what is right, but they don’t always do it. What hope is there for us then? We are sinners too. And we don’t have to look far to see, that we live in a world broken by sin. Like you and me, they are human. Like us, their hearts incline them to love wrongly.

Still, in our reading from Jeremiah, we see the promise of a new covenant. This is to be a new partnership, by which God’s law is to be written on our hearts. Indeed, God promises not to lead us by the hand, externally, but to lead us from within, to lead us by changing our hearts. As Christians, we believe Jesus has started this new covenant, *‘This is the blood of the covenant,’* Jesus tells his disciples, *‘which is being poured out for many.’* Yet, like Paul and David, I struggle, and I’m sure you do too, yes, we all struggle with sin.

What we have here is an example of what psychologists call the two systems in our brains. As human beings, we have the rational system we call our mind, or our will, so to speak. This is the part of us that plans, that analyzes. It is the part that problem solves. Then there is the emotional system, which is what we call our heart. It provides the power for the two systems.

It is what really drives us. A metaphor that might help us understand these two systems comes from a Psychologist named Jonathan Haidt. He likens the rational system to a rider, and the emotional system to an elephant. The rider has the unenviable task of trying to lead the elephant, but if they disagree, then imagine how difficult it would be for a small human rider to pull the elephant, or push the elephant, or get it to do anything it doesn't already want to do. You can see the biblical truth to this metaphor in David and Paul's words. And Haidt, even though he is not a person of faith, recognizes this. He told a gathering of Christian College officials three-years ago, that it is in our nature as human beings, to have a 'God shaped hole' in our hearts. It matters how we fill that hole, he said. *(This sounds a lot like the African theologian bishop Augustine of Hippo who wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.")*

So, how do we fill that hole? How do we manage these two systems – the elephant and rider? This has been the challenge in every one of the covenants we have studied throughout Lent. The story of humanity centers on God creating us. As Psalm 8 states, we are: 'a little lower than heavenly beings and crowned with glory and honor.' By this, it means we have been given dominion over God's creation. Yes, we have been given the capacity to love as God loves, to create as God does, and to have a share of God's sovereignty. We have a measure of free will to use these divine powers, as partners in God's creation, as partners in God's love.

Still, as we have studied, humanity has continually failed to keep its covenants. And so, it is in Jesus that we see the covenants fulfilled, we see the true partnership, because in Jesus, God shared in our humanity, lived as we live, tempted as we are, and in faithfulness to us and to God's covenants with us, Jesus died for us. As our King enthroned on the cross, he kept the law perfectly, loving God and loving us while we were still sinners. While we were still God's enemies, he died for us, taking on the rightful consequence of our sin, that we saw was just in the time of Noah. Jesus does this, not because he sinned, but because we sin.

In Jesus, we see the beginning of the new covenant that Jeremiah prophesied, because it is by Jesus's sacrifice that we are prepared, we are made clean, to house God's Holy Spirit within us, writing God's law of love within us. When Jesus says that he will not drink of the vine until the Kingdom comes, we find that on that cross is when Jesus is given sour wine to drink. The Kingdom has come, and the cross is God's throne. This is a throne on which God's self-giving love is revealed, by the one who gave his life as a ransom, as the liberating price of redemption, to make us into a new creation, citizens of God's Kingdom.

The cross is where God's plan for a covenant partnership with humanity comes together. On that cross, God in our humanity bears the rightful consequence for sin in our place. On that cross, we see the true temple, where heaven and earth come together, and we see the true sacrifice, the Passover Lamb prepared for slaughter. On that cross we see the high priest, who gives his life for us. On that cross, we see our king, who shows us true power in service, love and faithfulness. On that cross is where our hearts are changed, when we see the depths of God's love, so that God's love might change our heart, give us a new elephant, to lead us on a

path of new life, the way of the cross with Jesus, leading us to resurrection and a renewed creation.

Friends, a few weeks ago when we saw Peter refused to see God's plan when Jesus told of his coming death, he called Peter 'Satan' and told him to get behind him and follow him to the cross. When Judas exits stage left, as Rick DeKarski described it earlier this week, to go out and betray Jesus, we might want to look closer, for we may see a little bit of ourselves. We should see how he rationalizes his way as right, over Jesus's teaching. The cross frightens Judas because it is not how he would do things. He follows his heart of stone, unwilling to be changed. He does not desire a new heart. He only desires to justify the heart he already has.

But behold, this is all still very good news, because after the cross comes resurrection. I have said time and time again during this pandemic, that it is ok to pray our lament, to feel as Judas did that things are not as they should be and we don't understand God's plan. The difference is that Judas acts out of his frustrations, and no doubt believes he is justified. He tries to take matters into his own hands, to follow his heart. But the worst advice we can ever give is to 'Follow your heart.' No, our hearts, like elephants, go their own way, and in our minds, like the helpless riders. When we follow our hearts and do what we want to do, we are left to make excuses for the elephant.

Friends, our calling is not to do things as we would want to do them, as our hearts lead us, but to lament with God that things are not as they should be and seek a new heart. As we see in Paul, we must seek for our rider to guide us to do what is right, and by our reason, recognize that the path we must lead the elephant on. This path follows the self-giving love of God on the way to the cross, a path on which we tread with Jesus in the power of service. And that superpower of love, which is rightly directed, when we use it to love God with all we have, and love our neighbors, even those we don't agree with, as ourselves.

Friends, when we believe and seek God's will in our lives, it is not enough. Because like Paul, we may want to do what is good, we may want to do God's will, but the heart will lead us astray, our elephant still goes on the path it wants. This is why the first message of Jesus in Mark's gospel is to repent. To repent is to change our minds, to change our hearts, and to turn around, to head toward God and away from sin. This is not about beating ourselves up for our sin to feel bad, but recognizing that we are loved by God, called regardless of what we have done, no matter our sin, to walk in partnership with God.

But what's more: We do not do this alone. That is not God's intention. Our faith is not an individual action. We do this as a church, as a community, a people of God. Friends, as a community, we must ask God for a new elephant to ride upon, a new heart to guide us as we choose to follow our God in Christ to the cross, because through the cross, we find resurrection and a new creation.

The Holy Spirit of God is first found in the community of faith, by which we hear the good news of Jesus, not only with our ears, but in the proclamation of the gospel through God's people united together, living not by our own hearts, but by the law of love written on our

hearts by the Spirit in us and among us. We are to be an example of love for our neighbor, enemy and friend alike, through how we love and serve the community we live in, through how we love and serve one another, all of which reveals our service to God.

This begins as Jesus said, with repentance, by laying down our excuses for when we do not love, when we do not serve. We often have this example of the Christian always wanting to be David up against Goliath to slay the evil. We imagine ourselves in that role. But so often we find ourselves making excuses. We are David making excuses about Bathsheba.

We must shed our excuses for when we do not follow the law of God by asking for a new elephant, asking for God to remove our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh, beating with a love for what God loves – to walk humbly with our God, doing justice, even when it is not to our own advantage, and loving God’s merciful and steadfast love, because this is the love that we have been shown, despite our own sinfulness, our own rebellion.

And so, to understand what it means that you are loved and called to love God and neighbor. This is one part. But we must also seek to do together the fullness of God’s calling, not by following our individual hearts with their excuses, for our own needs, our own wants. We must be mindful of the elephant we ride, repent of it, and seek a new one, by joining our hearts together to love and serve God and one another, by loving and serving together the community in which we live, praying always, *‘Create in me a clean heart O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.’* Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Psalm 51:3-12 (NRSV) For I know my ***transgressions***, and my ***sin*** is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I ***sinned***, and done what is ***evil*** in your ***sight***, so that you are ***justified*** in your ***sentence*** and ***blameless*** when you ***pass judgement***. Indeed, I was ***born guilty***, a sinner when my ***mother conceived*** me. You ***desire truth*** in the inward being; therefore teach me ***wisdom*** in my ***secret*** heart. ***Purge*** me with ***hyssop***, and I shall be ***clean***; ***wash*** me, and I shall be ***whiter*** than ***snow***. Let me ***hear*** joy and ***gladness***; let the ***bones*** that you have ***crushed rejoice***. ***Hide*** your face from my sins, and ***blot*** out all my ***iniquities***. ***Create*** in me a clean heart, O ***God***, and ***put*** a new and right ***spirit*** within me. Do not ***cast*** me away from your ***presence***, and do not take your ***holy*** spirit from me. ***Restore*** to me the ***joy*** of your ***salvation***, and ***sustain*** in me a willing spirit.