PRAYER OF THE DAY FOR PALM/PASSION SUNDAY

P Almighty God, you sent your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take our flesh upon him and to suffer death on the cross. Grant that we may share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C Amen.

HOLY SCRIPTURE.......................................................................................................................2 Samuel 12:1-20, RSV

1 And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had very many flocks and herds; 3 but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. 4 Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” 5 Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; 6 and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

7 Nathan said to David, “You are the man. Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul; 8 and I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. 9 Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the Ammonites. 10 Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ 11 Thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun.’ 12 For you did it
secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.” 13David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. 14Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die.” 15Then Nathan went to his house.

And the LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore to David, and it became sick. 16David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in and lay all night upon the ground. 17And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground; but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. 18On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead; for they said, “Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us; how then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm.” 19But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David perceived that the child was dead; and David said to his servants, “Is the child dead?” They said, “He is dead.” 20Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he went into the house of the LORD, and worshiped; he then went to his own house; and when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate.

[By way of introduction to our Gospel Lesson, let me mention that this day, Holy Wednesday, is sometimes called “Spy Wednesday.” That is because the appointed Gospel Lesson for today concerns Judas, who was among the Twelve, as it were, as a spy. Part of the sorrow of this reading is that Judas goes out into the night to betray Jesus right from the midst of that supper in which Jesus has knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples. That is the story for tomorrow evening, Maundy Thursday. Jesus gives this great example of humility and service to others, and Judas responds by going out into the night to betray Jesus.]

HOLY GOSPEL ............................................................................................................................John 13:21-32, RSV

21When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” 22The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. 23One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; 24so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, “Tell us who it is of whom he speaks.” 25So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, “Lord, who is it?” 26Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. 27Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” 28Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. 29Some
thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the feast”; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night.

31When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.

HYMN

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon for those of you who might have suffered some blow so heavy that you have wondered whether you can recover from it. Or it is a sermon for those who might suffer such a blow in the future. And this is a sermon for those who have committed some wrong so heavy that you wonder whether you can be forgiven. In all these cases, the Lord does not want you to despair. And so this is a sermon against despair and in favor of hope.

Of all the verses in this evening’s famous story of David and Nathan, the one verse that especially captures me this time round is the verse at the end of our reading — the one about how David went and worshiped. David has just received the news that his child — the child of Bathsheba and him — has died. He responds to this sad news by worshiping. The passage goes this way:

…and David said to his servants, “Is the child dead?” They said, “He is dead.” Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he went into the house of the LORD, and worshiped...
(2 Samuel 12:19-20, RSV)

So, that is King David. Oh, that Judas had responded in the same way! But instead, Judas despaired and took his own life. St. Matthew tells the tale of Judas’s end this way:

3When Judas, his betrayer, saw that [Jesus] was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, “I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.” They said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. (Matthew 27:3-5, RSV)
This is what I oppose. Never let us imagine that we have done so much wrong that we cannot be forgiven. Never let us imagine that we have suffered such a blow that you cannot recover and that life is ruined for us. Instead let us follow the example of King David who confessed his sin, grieved over his sin, suffered a terrible blow in the death of his child, but then looked up, washed his face, and went into the house of the Lord to worship.

By tradition, Psalm 51 is King David’s prayer of confession and sorrow for sin. His sin is grievous. The prophet Nathan helps David to understand how terrible David’s sin is against both Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah. The Fifth Commandment says thou shall not hurt thy neighbor by murdering thy neighbor. The Sixth Commandment says that thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor by breaking thy neighbor’s heart through adultery. King David did both: He committed adultery by commanding that Bathsheba should come to him – an ancient case of sexual abuse. And then the king murdered Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, by sending him into a hopeless battle. The King has done much wrong, and Nathan helps him to see the wrong he has done. Then David laments his sin in Psalm 51. The words are famous. They are words of longing—longing for innocence again. Let me lift up two verses in particular. They are side by side — verses 9 and 10:

9Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.  
10Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:9-10, KJV)

“Hide thy face from my sin,” David cries. Do not look upon my sin, O Lord, for if you do that, if you regard my sin, then I am lost. All the universe would be against me, and I am lost. Please do not study my sin. Hide thy face from my sin. So cries David.

And consider his next prayer— the one about a clean heart. Listen to the longing in this prayer:

10Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10, KJV)

Would it not be wonderful to have a clean heart again? Our hearts become soiled by our sin. The years go by and maybe no one outright condemns us. Maybe the world credits us, on average, with being pretty good people. But we know ourselves. We know we have done wrong. We know the accumulation of sin that soils our heart. We know the rust on our souls. And so we can sympathize and identify with David when he longs for a clean heart again.
I bet Judas would have loved to have a clean heart again! But he seems to think it impossible. He seems to think that he has sunk beyond redemption. But it is not so! Never think it is so. Jesus forgave Peter who denied him. He could have forgiven Judas too. I am not saying that the process of forgiveness would have been easy. King David grieved much over his sin, before he looked up, washed his face, and went into the house of the Lord to worship. And the reconciliation scene between Peter and the resurrected Jesus could make us tremble at the thought that we too will have to go through something like that someday. But the reconciliation scene with Peter got the man back on track. He went on to become a saint and an apostle. There could have been reconciliation and forgiveness for Judas too, if only the man had not despaired.

Never despair. Never imagine yourself to be lost. Remember Jesus, who on the cross died saying, “Father, forgive...”

Have no fear, little flock;
Have no fear, little flock;
For the Father has chosen
To give you the Kingdom;
Have no fear, little flock. (LBW 476)

And finally, a few words for those who are not so much conscious of their sin, but are rather staggering under some heavy blow. Maybe it is bad medical news or bad financial or professional news. Or maybe it is that you have been betrayed. Someone has let you down in an awful way. Never can a pastor or a friend be lighthearted about what you have suffered, and yet, we can ask you to lift up your heart and trust in God. Your story is not yet done. You are not alone in this hard time, nor will you be alone going forward, for Jesus lives to walk with you and to make things better in the future. Nothing can stop him from that—not even death. You might have many years ahead, or only a few, but in any case, try to keep your eyes and your heart open for signs of God’s love for you. There are still good people for you to meet in this world.

There is much that simply cannot be taken away from you. Bad news can come your way, and people can let you down in awful ways, but such blows cannot strip you bear. Nothing can deprive you of Jesus, who loves you, who knows what it is like to suffer pain and abandonment, and who means to walk with you through this dark valley. Nothing can deprive you of heaven, where even the lame person will run and leap like a deer. Nothing can remove you from the Communion of Saints, where you have many friends here and now, and many, many more you will discover when you get to heaven. No wall can be erected to keep you from the Holy Communion, from the Bible, from friends in the church. No net can catch your prayers and hinder them from reaching the heart of the God who loves you and means to make things better,
even the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.