

Washed Up

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Ezekiel 36:22-28 NRSV

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the LORD God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the LORD God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.

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. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Heidelberg Catechism

69 Q. How does holy baptism remind and assure you that Christ's one sacrifice on the cross benefits you personally?

In this way:

Christ instituted this outward washing and with it promised that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and his Spirit wash away my soul's impurity, that is, all my sins.

70 Q. What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit?

To be washed with Christ's blood means that God, by grace, has forgiven our sins because of Christ's blood poured out for us in his sacrifice on the cross.

To be washed with Christ's Spirit means that the Holy Spirit has renewed and sanctified us to be members of Christ,

so that more and more
we become dead to sin
and live holy and blameless lives.

Sermon

My father was not a dirty man. But he had dirty hands. It was the machines. First it was the 6,000 horsepower diesel engines of a 311-foot long, high endurance Coast Guard cutter. Then it was the refrigeration compressors of countless fish markets and grocery stores.

I remember my dad coming home every night and heading straight to the bathroom to wash up. He used a special cleanser designed to cut the grease that covered his hands. And he dried his hands with paper towels. It was always paper towels, because his hands never came clean enough for him to use one of my mother's terrycloth hand towels.

I never saw my dad with clean hands, not as long as he was working. Every day he went away, and every day he returned with his hands freshly coated in oil and grease. The grime seeped into his pores and into the cracks and creases of his palms and along the edges of his fingernails. My dad was not a dirty man. But I never saw him with clean hands, not until he retired, not until he left the machines behind.

We all get dirty from time to time. Sometimes we like to get dirty. Did my brother Tom, my cousin Johnny, and I ever have fun playing "gush gush" as we called it! We sank our hands deep into a muddy mixture that served both as mortar to rebuild the brick fireplace in our grandfather's backyard and as pancake batter to fill hungry bellies. When we grow up, we don't play in the mud any more. But we still like to get our hands dirty. To take one example, we derive a certain satisfaction from the feel of mingled sweat and soil that comes from digging in a garden.

What we like even more, though, is the way we feel after a long shower takes the grime away. We're okay with dirt, but only for a little while. No matter how hard we've been working, no matter how hard we've been playing, no matter how much we've enjoyed it, the time always comes for us to get washed up, maybe for supper, maybe for bed, maybe for a night out.

Now, not only can we get washed up, we also can be washed up. And as much as we like to get clean, washed up is not what we want to be. We never think of it when we're young. You kids don't worry about being washed up, about being worn out, with your usefulness gone. You have a whole life ahead of you and the whole world before you. And if you're wise, then while you're still young and healthy and strong, you will remember your Creator and you will give thanks to the God who makes your feet fly and your minds race and your spirits soar.

But a time comes to all of us when the picture changes. When our feet would fly, if only they didn't ache. When our minds would race, if only they could remember which direction to go in. And when our spirits would soar, if only there weren't so much weighing us down.

Life is hard, harder than we ever imagined, harder than we were ever told. There's the disappointment of unrealized dreams. There's the pain that burns in every joint. There's the cornucopia of prescription medicines to take morning and night. And there's the prospect of a final fade-out in a dingy nursing home.

There's less to us these days, and we can tell. We're fading fast. We're washed up – or we soon will be. And we don't necessarily handle that well. Sometimes we get angry. Sometimes we get mean. More often than not, we fall into despair, despair that grows with the accumulating evidence of decay, until we embody a line from an old Rolling Stones song: "What a drag it is getting up!"

Old Israel was in a similar place. Everything had started off wonderfully. They were a new people, young and vigorous. They had a new home, stocked with milk and honey, with wine and beer. And there was progress, the steady progress of laying a foundation and then building a nation. But things had turned sour in middle age. And now there was exile. Now there was Babylon. Now there was despair. They were washed up as a people. Life had drained away. Their living heart had quit beating. They were dried up, dried up like a field full of bones!

But the Lord promised something wonderful to them, something amazing. Those dry bones would live again (cp. Ezekiel 37), and lifeless stone would become beating flesh. There would be a new beginning, and all the accumulated sorrow and misery of the past would be gone. All the dirt, all the grime, of fear and failure would be washed away. They would get washed up by a holy Spirit. They would be clean, and life would begin again.

That's really what we want. And that's just what we need. We need a fresh start. We need a new beginning. We need a new life that doesn't wear out.

The Gospel promises salvation. Yet we usually limit that to the salvation of our souls, that somehow, by God's grace, we will escape the misery of ourselves and of our bodies and of our life in this world. But the biblical picture is different. Salvation is for our bodies too, these bodies that slow down and break down, that wear out and quit, bodies that are washed up, when what they really need is to get washed clean so we can start fresh.

Perhaps we need to step back and to look at things from God's perspective. As much as we are troubled by the misery we find ourselves in, as much as we are distressed by the downward slide of life . . .

Have you noticed how life is like a roller coaster? There's all the initial promise: the growing, the reaching up, the gathering of energy. Then there's the great thrill, when we release that energy in a joyful burst of accomplishment: education and career, exploration and adventure. After that, we climb the next hill, with a little less energy this time, but we manage some excitement nonetheless. From there the climbing is slower and never as high. And the trend is steadily downward, until finally we stop, worn out, all our energy gone.

But as much as we are distressed by that, God is distressed more. God did not make us to wear out and to fade away. God did not intend that for our destiny, just as he did not intend for Israel to end up in exile.

In those old days, Israel's exile was ruining the LORD's reputation. What kind of God was the LORD, the God of Israel, to claim to be the "Creator of heaven and earth" and yet not to be able to overcome the gods of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, who had torn the LORD's people out of their homeland, against whom the LORD was, apparently, powerless?!

So the LORD said through Ezekiel, "I'm going to straighten things up, but for my own sake, not yours, for my own reputation. Not that I don't have compassion and love for you. In fact, it's to assure you that I will reclaim you as my own and that I will return you to your land and that you will have a fresh start, that things will be different this time around, it's to assure you of all that and more, that I say I will do it all for the sake of my name. That's how important it is, and that's how sure it is."

In a similar way, the slow corruption and decay of every human life, the misery and brokenness in every city, the hurt that crushes so many human hearts, the tears that flow down the faces of children . . . all of this is a dark smudge on the reputation of God the creator of all, a dark smudge, if that's the whole story, if that's all there is, if the roller coaster runs down and never moves again, if we're all washed up, sunk into the grime and the filth, with no hope of rising.

But that's not the whole story. Yes, the world is a mess, and we're a mess. Yes, sin is the reason, that perverse twist in the human heart and soul. But remember your baptism, remember the gospel it proclaims: that the blood of Jesus washes away the mess of sin and leaves us clean. Yes, we get our hands in the grease and in the grime every day. But Jesus makes us clean.

And with that cleansing comes a fresh start. The Holy Spirit renews us. Already now there is change, already transformation is taking place. Slowly. Only slowly could the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz flex his joints as the anointing oil was applied. Only slowly did the dark lines of embedded grease disappear from my dad's hands after he retired. And only slowly does the transforming work of the Holy Spirit cleanse us.

I say slowly because we know that's true. We know that even with the cleansing of Jesus' blood and even with the gift of the Holy Spirit, given to each of us personally, even with all that, we know very well what still lurks in our souls and in our spirits. We know how we react to the disappointments and the pain and the never-letting-up demands of life. We know that we're not as good as we pretend to be, that we're only cleaned up on the surface, like the house is when company comes, that all sorts of things have been stuffed into cupboards and closets.

And yet, the hope of the Gospel is that the cleansing will continue. You know, the way a tough stain is cleaned little by little, with steady effort. How it slowly lifts from the surface and how it slowly comes out of the underlying layers.

But here's the thing . . . The LORD promised Israel that there would be an end to exile, that the dry bones would live. And, in fact, Israel's exile did end with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's when Jesus, the living and dying embodiment of Israel, rose from the grave, taking on new life. Beyond the end of Israel's exile, his resurrection seals God's promise of what's to come, renewal and restoration for all creation, including for you and me, who wait for it in faith, assured through baptism that, just as we have died with Christ, so too we will live with him.

Meanwhile, it's just about time for Supper. Come and get it! You're already washed up. You've been made clean by the blood of Jesus. And those greasy lines in the palms of your hands? Don't worry about those. Those will come clean, too, in time.