

24 February 2021  
Lent 1 Midweek

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Cleansed”

Text: 2 Kings 5:1-14; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; John 12:1-8  
Psalm 51:1-12

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

**H**old a diamond up to the light and turn it around, and it refracts the light into many colors. It's quite astonishing to behold, and the best of diamonds produce the most amazing array of colors. This Lenten season, we're holding forgiveness up to the light and seeing its many colors; its beauty. It's good to do so.

Forgiveness is mentioned so often in the church, that perhaps we forget its beauty, how astonishing it is, and that it really is the most precious jewel the church has.

Tonight, the facet of forgiveness we will consider is perhaps the most natural image, and certainly one of the most well-known: that of *cleansing*, or *washing*.

It is one of the most natural images because it is, for us, an everyday thing - especially now, in these COVID days. There are signs and reminders everywhere to wash your hands, use hand sanitizer, use bleach wipes, wipe everything down. Advertisements lure people with claims that its product kills 99.9% of germs. We've become obsessed with cleansing.

But even before this past year filth and the need for cleansing has been no stranger to us. And from our earliest days. Babies soil their diapers, children play in the mud, we spill on our carpets and stain our clothes, we touch something dirty or step in something, and then transfer that dirt with us wherever we go. Our teeth need cleaning, even whitening to get out the stains.

And so you know, too, there's a right way to clean something, and a wrong way. If you spill something on your shirt or on the carpet and try to rub it out, it doesn't go away - it spreads and, in fact, get bigger. When something gets dirty, you also know not to wait. The longer you wait, the harder the stain sets in and it becomes much more difficult to get out.

So it is with sin. Sin that is like Naaman's leprosy on our bodies and souls. Sin that is often described as filth in the Scriptures. Like babies, we've soiled ourselves with sin. Like children, we've played in the mud puddles of sin. Like adults, we step in it and spread it around our lives and to others. And we need cleansing; we need washing.

Trying to rub out our sins with our explanations, excuses, and promises to do better doesn't work. In fact, that just makes them bigger and worse. Ignoring them doesn't work either. That just sets them deeper in our souls. That's what happened to David after his sin with Bathsheba. The longer it went on, the more he tried to explain, excuse, and deal with it himself, the more he put it off, the worse it got. The worse he got. Sin added to sin. Accomplices dirtied with him. His sin spread around.

Finally the prophet Nathan got him to look in the spiritual mirror and see how dirty and disgusting he had become. And so he prayed, he begged, as we sang earlier: ***Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God!*** For that's the only way he could be, would be, cleansed.

And God did. And when God washes, you do not get 99.99% clean - you get 100% clean. Like Naaman, when he came up out of the water of the Jordan, ***his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child***. That is, perfect. No scars, no blemishes, no scrapes, no blots. Perfect. Like new.

Which is also how St. Paul describes the washing we receive from Christ. He says that *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish* (Ephesians 5:25-27). That's you when you come up out of the waters of baptism. That's you after the washing of Absolution. That's you after the Gospel applied to you. Like new. Like your sin never happened at all.

That's how powerful the blood of Christ to cleanse. Blood, which *normally* stains. Except when it's Christ's blood. God using what normally stains to cleanse. And so the sins which stain us He puts on Jesus, soiling Him, staining Him, filthying Him, and then His blood poured out cleansing us; washing away our stains. ***Thoroughly***, as David prayed, and as happened to Naaman. Even if you once were all those things we heard in the reading from Corinthians - the worst of the worst, a sinner of sinners, hard-boiled, marinated in sin. ***But***, Paul says, ***you were washed, you were sanctified*** (made holy), ***you were justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God***. You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Water and the Word, brought together, washing, cleansing. Perfect. Like new.

Now, maybe that all sounds familiar to you. I hope it does. But I also hope that it gives you a little greater appreciation for the cleansing we have, that maybe we take for granted at times.

But there is one more part of this to mention that perhaps you haven't considered before, and that is that **clean isn't just a matter of the eye, but of the nose**. You can also smell

filthy. The first indication a diaper needs changing isn't by sight! Walk into a room that hasn't been cleaned in a while, and it stinks! And when the prodigal son returned to his father after wallowing first in his sin and then with pigs, I'm sure you could smell him coming a long way off!

But you can smell clean, too. Cleansing takes away the filth **and leaves behind a new smell**. What does clean smell like for you? Maybe lemony or pine, like many household cleaners smell. Maybe like the fresh clean clothes right off the line on a bright sunny day. Or maybe like your house when you get to open up the windows and a fresh spring breeze pushes out all the old, stale, cooped up air of winter.

The Scriptures speak in this way as well. **That clean isn't just the absence of stain but the presence of a wonderful fragrance that comes with clean.** Forgiveness takes away the old, but also brings something new.

And so tonight we also heard a story of smell - of the fragrant aroma that filled the house when Mary anointed the feet of Jesus. This is one of the few stories told in all four Gospels - so it must have significance. Judas raised a stink (not sorry for the pun there!) about such a waste of money. But what does Jesus say? He points to His burial, which was about to take place. He points to the cleansing that was now about to take place by His death and resurrection. Death stinks. But Jesus' cleansing death has a fragrant aroma. Because it is bringing in the new. Or as Paul said in Ephesians (5:2): *Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

So not only is there washing here for you, cleansing, but the fragrance of forgiveness, of the new, of clean, as well. That you now take with you out into a world that stinks with sin. Your lives as Christians like a breath of fresh air, of Christ and His truth, the Spirit and His holiness, blowing through your homes and schools and workplaces and neighborhoods. And don't think others don't notice. They do. Some, like Judas, will raise a stink, won't like it at all. But others will rejoice. That there is something else in this world besides sin and its stink. That there is hope. That there is cleansing. In Christ.

Spend some time appreciating that facet of forgiveness this week. For we can become eye blind and nose blind to our sin. So repent, but also spin the diamond around. Marvel at this color of forgiveness. Marvel at the fragrance. The brilliance, the newness, the freshness of being cleansed. Of forgiveness. This wonderful gift of God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.