When I was a kid, I was enamored by the game “hide and go seek”. At age 3 or 4, this is a very nuanced game. I’d turn to my mom or dad or an unsuspecting babysitter and say, “I’ll hide and you find me.” Dad would cover his eyes and start counting. I would run around in circles and inevitably hide somewhere totally obvious. I like to think that perhaps he was actually peeking and keeping a good parental eye on me, but I think the truth is that I was just really, really bad at hiding. Behind the bathroom door or tucked between the bed and the wall remain the most predictable hiding places. And then there’s my favorite, climb under a blanket and lay on the floor in the middle of the family room as if no one would see the child-sized lump. Nevertheless, my dad would play along. If you’ve ever played hide and seek with a little kid, you know this part of the game. Where could she be? Is she hiding under the table? Could she be behind the desk? Look at that lump on the floor...I wonder where she could be? And as if he needed any help, that blanket-covered lump in the middle of the floor would begin wiggling and giggling hoping not to go one more second before being found.

As children playing this game, we can believe that we are well hidden all the while trusting that we’re never long from being found. As we grow up, however, we get better at this game. Our hiding places become more nuanced. It no longer becomes a question of where we hide but also of what we conceal and from whom.

Perhaps you walk around this campus looking put together, hoping beyond hope that no one will notice that you’re not perfect and thinking to yourself, “If anyone really knew what I was going through, knew my own faults and insecurities, knew my pain and my past, I would just melt.” Perhaps you walked into work last week, clocked in and put your head down hoping that no one would notice the shiner under your right eye from a night out gone awry. Perhaps you walked through the grocery store this week, spotted a neighbor in the spaghetti aisle, and quickly ducked down the aisle of pet food even though you don’t have a dog because if you had to talk to him, he might ask you how you really are and it’s just easier to remain distant and undercover. Perhaps you come to a gorgeous gothic cathedral like this to worship because it’s easy to hide among the crowd here where you can control what others know about you and keep your neighbor at a distance.

I wager that nowadays most of us do less physical hiding and a lot more concealing of the truth about ourselves. Perhaps we believe that if our friends knew the truth about us, there is no way they would possibly continue to be our friends. Worse yet, if we really approached God with our deepest darkest moments, could we bear God’s judgment? Would we receive God’s mercy?

If this is your story, then the start of your Lenten journey begins well with Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is often ascribed as a Psalm of David; whether he authored these words or not, they speak to him and to us at our very core. Recall David, the shepherd king. David was a born leader, picked out from the field to lead the people of Israel. As a young boy he took down Goliath with a sling shot. In his spare time between shepherding and battle tactics, he regularly went out to the field with his lyre to write music to God. David would totally get admitted to Duke. His resume and outward presentation would have him in the running for scholarships, and he could walk around campus with his accomplishments under his sleeve knowing he was “the man.” But this same David succumbed to temptations and desires led him far from the commands to love God and neighbor.
He saw a beautiful young woman sunbathing on the roof and slept with Bathsheba despite her being married to Uriah. He sent Uriah to the most violent front lines—a sure death sentence—to try to cover up his transgressions. David had graduated from games of hide and go seek in the fields to broken relationships, abuses of power, and mistreatment of women that caused him to try and hide his transgressions in a web of lies and misdirection.

But despite David’s attempts to cover up his own failings, God did not allow David to hide the truth from himself or God for long, and God’s messenger Nathan helps David to reevaluate and admit his own brokenness. So David—who on the outside looks like the picture perfect example of faithfulness—gives voice to a prayer that unearths his true, broken self. No longer hiding from his own sin, the psalm approaches God authentically and honestly. David’s words are a prayer before God when he cannot hide any more.

Listen again to the petitions of the Psalmist:

Have mercy on me,  
Blot out my transgressions,  
Wash me and cleanse me
Purge me with hyssop  
Let me hear joy and gladness,  
Create in me a clean heart  
Renew a right spirit in me  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation.

With each petition his Psalm becomes our Psalm, an honest outpouring of our desire no longer to hide from God. These honest pleas for mercy name our waywardness in the face of God’s steadfast love. This level of intimacy and truth invites discomfort, for we embrace ourselves in all our brokenness in order to face God in light of or in spite of our sin.

The Psalmist prays,

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...  
Indeed I was born guilty.

These bold cries reveal our true humanity and make us exposed and vulnerable, for the Psalmist knows that our weaknesses cannot be kept from our Creator and in fact they never were.

But in between these pleas, God breaks in. The Psalmist does not simply ask for mercy, the Psalmist yearns for mercy from a God whose very being is hoked, steadfast love. The Psalmist pleads to God to blot out my transgression because God’s character is overflowing with abundant mercy. The God we seek can wash, blot out, clean, and purge because this very God is loving and merciful, offers deliverance and knows the joy of salvation. The Psalmist speaks to a God who doesn’t just want to forgive our petty list of sins—I told three lies, cursed twice and yelled at my friend—but wants to know us deeply, reconcile with us fully and remake us down to the very bone and depths of our being. Our heart, our body, our very self is not off limits for this God.
Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the beginning of a time in which we are invited into reflection—about ourselves and our relationship with God. It marks a time in which we recognize our common humanity and our need for God. To begin the journey here, we must embrace who we really are—we choose evil over good, we choose self over God, we hide ourselves. To begin the journey here, however, we are invited to walk toward Jesus whose full humanity enabled us to know more deeply the truth of God and the depth and breadth of God’s steadfast love. It marks a time in which we choose to turn our lives toward the living and incarnate One who embodied mercy, who healed and created anew in our very midst, and whose ultimate expression of steadfast love on the cross becomes the very joy of salvation and deliverance for which the Psalmist prays.

To be marked is to take the first step toward a God that is already seeking you, whose own mark was public and visible on the cross. To be marked is to admit that we all fall short but that God’s deliverance and mercy stretch far beyond our sin. To be marked is to stand before God and one another no longer trying to hide. To be marked is to trust that we do not seek to earn God’s forgiveness but to stand before God, fully human, fully who we were created to be, offering only our broken and contrite heart. To be marked is to admit our need for God and to trust that the cross we bear on our forehead today is the surest witness of a God who deeply desires to create in us a more honest self. To journey toward the cross at Lent is to step beyond our hiding and to seek the God who has been seeking us from the start. May it be so for you. Amen.