



Sermon for The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2020
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Journeying the Way of Love through Lent - Pray

When I was a child--I couldn't have been more than 8--I wrote a note on a pad of paper and left it by my pillow before I went to sleep. It said something like this: "God, if you're real, can you please write back. Thank you. Love, Jenny" When I woke up in the morning, the pad of paper was still next to my pillow, but the only words on the page were the ones I wrote the night before. I don't remember being devastated. Somehow even my 8-year-old mind knew that it didn't prove anything. I knew that wasn't how God worked and I was okay with it. My childlike faith remained intact.

That day I learned that having conversations with God were not always going to be straight forward. Three decades later, and I still don't think conversations with God are often as elementary as I would like. I mean, wouldn't it be nice if we could send a text message to God and get the responses, without any of those flashing ellipses.

While I've yet to receive an email from God, I have learned that there are many ways that God does write back. And so this keeps me intentionally talking with God regularly.

For Lent, I have been inviting the community here at Grace to join with our Episcopal Sisters and Brothers and explore the *Way of Love*,¹ a series of seven practices that guide us on our journey with Jesus Christ. We have already addressed Rest, Turn, and Learn. This week, we will focus on Prayer.

I venture to guess we've all been filled with prayers the last few weeks: "God, please keep my family and friends healthy." "God, Thank you for all the medical staff who are working so hard right now under such challenging conditions." "Lord, please help guide government officials



¹ <https://episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love>

both locally, nationally, and around the world.” And don’t forget, “God, please let me find some toilet paper at the store today.”

What is prayer really? Is it our way of passing on our wish list to the great Cosmic Santa Clause? Is it something more than talking with an imaginary friend? Is prayer a way to change the mind of God and the outcomes of the universe?

I would like to suggest, prayer is the practice of intentionally acknowledging that God dwells with us and us with God. Praying is listening to, speaking to, and at times simply being with our Divine Parent.

Have you ever tried being in a relationship with a friend but never communicating with this friend? It just doesn’t work. Relationships require communication and intentionally being with the other. As true as this is with friends and family members, it is also true with God. Prayer is one practice that helps to strengthen one’s relationship with God. Prayer helps us to become more fully aware that God is God and that we are God’s beloved children.

Anne Lamott in her book on prayer, entitled “Help.Thanks.Wow” writes: “Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up. The opposite is true: We may not be able to get it together until after we show up in such miserable shape.”²

Sometimes prayer comes easy to people. Some can picture God sitting down at the table with them and sharing a cup of tea or a pint of lager while sharing with God all that is going on in life. But there are times when it feels almost impossible to pray. No words seem to be sufficient. I am grateful for the Episcopal/Anglican tradition, for the theological & biblically-based and well thought-through prayers that have been passed down to us in our prayer books.



There are times when I do not know quite what to say or don’t have the strength to pray on my own. But with the prayer book I can pray with the generations that have come before me.

Even before we had the Book of Common Prayer, we were gifted another book of prayers, the Psalms. There are psalms for just about every moment of life: for times of thanksgiving and praise, times of grief and lamentation, times of strife and struggle, times of fear and uncertainty.

² Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 5-6.

These are rich prayers that have been passed down from generation to generation. These are the same prayers that Jesus himself prayed some 2000 years ago. So when we pray with the psalms, we are praying with sisters and brothers, not only around the world, but also across time.

The psalms also teach us how to pray. They teach us that it is okay to simply be honest with God. They teach us how to be open about how we feel, what we think we want or need--even when it's ugly or even if it's spiteful. (And let me tell you, some of these psalms seem pretty vengeful to me. But remember, that just because we request something, doesn't mean that we will receive it Thank God!)

The psalm that we read today is quite possibly the best known psalm out there. We hear it in movies and we've recited it at bedsides and gravesites. Of course most of us know it best in the King James Version:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.



I would venture to guess that at one time or another many of us have each clung to this psalm, praying these words as if our own soul wrote them. I think it is partially because of the familiarity that we cling to it. But also because of the power in the words themselves. The image of being tenderly cared for by the Great Shepherd God, and the peacefulness of a lush green pasture where we can relax without any anxiety, is an image we can all relate to. (I don't know about you, but right about now I could go for an afternoon nap out in the warm sunshine, free from all care and anxiety.)

Let us look for a moment at the third verse, It is often translated: "He restoreth my soul". The word soul, in the original Hebrew is Nephesh נֶפֶשׁ. Nephesh means more than simply soul, it is the life, or life-force, or life-breath. Remember it was when God breathed life into the first human that it came alive. Eugene Peterson in the Message paraphrases the verse: "You let me catch my breath." Robert Alter the Hebrew Scholar translates it: "My Life he brings back."

We have all experienced having the wind knocked out of us, whether literally or figuratively. When this happens, it is hard to get that first breath back into our lungs. It is hard to find our footing. It is hard to function as normal. I feel like all of humanity has collectively had the wind knocked out of us. The COVID-19 Pandemic is a challenging time for us all. We are startled,

shocked, struggling to breath (some literally), as we try to orient ourselves in this present reality. But just as the psalmist reminds us, God restores our breath, brings back our life, restores our soul, and gives us a safe place to rest.

The safety that the Good Shepherd provides does not guarantee that life will be easy though. The psalmist reminds also that there will be valleys where death looms large. And even when our needs are provided for, it may be with the company of our enemies. Evenso, the promise is set out first in the psalm. We have the Good Shepherd to get us through. The psalmist's words are simply a response to this promise.

We are currently living in uncertain times, there are dark valleys that we have to pass through: We don't know when we will get to come together again to worship as one community; We all have fears of loved ones getting sick; We are anxious over our economic well-being. I will not give us a false claim that we all walk through this time unscathed. But we have the promise that God is with us. As the psalmist writes: "For thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."

God is with us always, even before we pray. Prayer is not so God can be present, but a practice to help us acknowledge that God is already present and then prayer helps us to bend our will, our heart, and our mind towards God.

There is no one way to pray. But for me, when I've felt like I've had the wind knocked out of me, it's hard for me to find the words to pray. At these times, I am grateful for the psalms to pray with and for me.

As we continue our journey, as we seek out new practices--not only for Lent but also in our present COVID-Shelter-in-place reality--I invite everyone to spend some time reflecting on prayer. Ask yourself: Where has prayer been a balm to your soul? When did prayer enhance your awareness of God's presence? What types of prayers are most life-breath giving for you? Are you open to trying a new type of prayer this season?



It is my belief that after this pandemic, we will be a healthier community and a stronger church. May this time be an opportunity for each of us to examine our own prayer lives and introduce into our daily rhythms new practices of prayers that will not only sustain us during this season but long into the future.

Let us pray together:

1 The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:

for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

AMEN.