

# “Pray Ceaselessly”

*(3 of 9 in the Lenten series, “Prayer”)*

*Luke 13: 31-35*

*Baptism of the Lord Sunday*

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From the Pulpit

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*Prayer for Illumination: Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, O God that as your word is proclaimed, we may hear what you have for us today.*

“I don’t know much about God and prayer,” writes author Anne Lamott, “but I have come to believe, over the past twenty-five years, that there’s something to be said about keeping prayer simple. Help. Thanks. Wow.” These are the opening words of author her book, *Help. Thanks. Wow (The Three Essential Prayers)*.<sup>1</sup> Seems reasonable.

Today, we continue on our sermon series on Prayer. Lent is the perfect time to engage the deepest, truest parts of our lives and make a connection with God. Prayer enables our true selves to connect with the Real Truth (Capital T) and with Light (Capital L). Many of you have entered into the season of Lent choosing not to give up something, but to take something on. A new or renewed spiritual discipline—Prayer, perhaps? Maybe you get the church email every morning with a simple prayer from the book: *40 Days, 40 Prayers, 40 Words* by Presbyterian pastor Bruce Reyes-Chow. To engage in this practice of prayer--you just click on an email and open it up and pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Help. Thanks. Wow. (The Three Essential Prayers)*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.

Maybe you'll participate in one of the six Lenten Small Groups beginning this week and discover prayer with others who are interested in deepening their spiritual reservoir. Maybe you'll wrestle with why a dedicated prayer life is so hard and along the way build new friendships that will sustain you.

Prayer in various forms is “communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding. Communication from one's heart to God.” Sometimes the first time we pray, we cry out in the deepest desperation, “God Help Me.” Maybe that is the deepest truth telling we offer to God---when we cry out of desperation from the broken and wounded places and say that we can't do any of this on our own. Help!<sup>2</sup>

Here is one of Anne Lamott's Help prayers:

*“Hi God, I am just a mess. It is all hopeless. What else is new? I would be sick of me, if I were You, but miraculously You are not. I know I have no control over other people's lives and I hate this. Yet I believe that if I accept this and surrender, You will meet me wherever I am. Wow. Can this be true? If so, how is this afternoon---say, two-ish? Thank you in advance for Your company and blessings. You have never once let me down. Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Honest. Real. Truth. Lamott offers something refreshing as she enters into the things spaces with God.

A deep and sustained prayer life is meaningful and life giving. However, it is also hard. **I think it's hard** because we struggle with "the rights." **The RIGHT** words to pray. **The RIGHT** sentiment to share with God. **The RIGHT** time of day. **The RIGHT** tone to strike with God, so God will know we're serious, but that won't reveal too much about how messed up and screwed up things are in our lives.

The Western (Americanized) version of prayer is measured and thoughtful, carefully and eloquently crafted as to evoke a sense of space for the Holy to enter.

Except sometimes our lives are messy and our prayers **just can't** be neat nor have a good resolution. What then? When our lives fall apart. When the marriage ends. When the diagnosis is Stage 4 Cancer. **When the plant you've been** working in for 30 years closes. When your teen becomes a statistic of the heroin epidemic. **When the community you love can't find** peace in its neighborhoods. When little girls say they are afraid of the police. When too many infants in your county die before their first birthday. What then? Are there words of comfort and

praise can we script? **We just can't.** Words fail us. We need different words.

I am so glad the Bible has something to offer us.

Jesus often spoke comforting words, prayerful words. But he also spoke profoundly, discomfoting words, words that grated, words that offended, hard words – perhaps hard for him to speak, certainly hard for people hear. Jesus had a way of telling the unvarnished truth even when it was profoundly unpopular.

**In the Bible passage from Luke's Gospel today, we encounter Jesus at the middle of his career. He's headed for Jerusalem where they will want him dead. They will want him dead mostly because of the hard truth he dared to speak. As we heard in the story, some friendly local Pharisees advise Jesus to clear out of Galilee because Herod, who ruled that province, was already determined to eliminate him.**

Jesus responds by telling them to let Herod know that he has work to do and he will continue to do it whether Herod likes it or not. Then Jesus tells his listeners that he must go to Jerusalem and what awaits him there. In words that have come to be known as “the lament over Jerusalem,” he poetically addresses the city to which he's bound with very hard words

indeed: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.”

Jesus laments over the city that he loves, a city that everyone else around him loves. We know how this story will end--- (at least on Good Friday) with Jesus in Jerusalem leaving followers in distress, heartache, disbelief. Jesus Laments.

The gift the Bible gives us for times like these...is lament. The Prayer of Lament is powerful. I'll go ahead and just say that I don't think we hear the prayers of Lament enough in the church. They are the deep prayers of HELP! The Psalms are a good place to start to hear the depth and howling cries of distress. We can turn and pray Psalms of Lament when the words we are used to praying **don't work anymore**.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13)

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day but you do not answer, and by night find no rest. (Psalm 22)

Even the Psalm from today, Psalm 27, is a lament. “Hear me O Lord, when I cry. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.”

The tone is different in the prayers of Lament. There’s a cry of distress. It is a wail from the very depth of one’s soul. There is a sense of God being asleep at the wheel and not coming to the Psalmist’s aid. There is a petition for God to do something, Hear me, Come to me, Be known to me! Help!!!

While a chaplain at Nationwide Children’s Hospital, I journeyed through grief with families. Many times parents would find themselves in situations they never imagined, making decisions that no parent should have to make. One day a father. Usually full of composure and compassion for his wife and ailing son, was overcome with a cry of distress. He found his way into the nearby waiting room. He closed the door, buried his head in his hands and slid down the wall. He collapsed into his wife’s arms. He wailed. His cry filled the hallway for what seemed like an eternity. His expression of grief so great. His deep loss overtook him. All composure gone. He was in that pit of despair. Words cannot capture the overwhelming pain he released that day. No one had words that day.

When there are no words...we let the Psalms of lament be our prayer. They are our guide for a way to pray through the messiness and the heartache. They are enough to meet us where we are and name the emotions we feel.

We are grateful for Old Testament Scholar, Walter Brueggemann, who offer that these psalms of Lament speak out when we don't have words and when our prayerful words don't work. For Brueggemann, the beauty of lament is that things go wrong and it's not our fault. It's hard for us, to make lament be what it is.... A powerful expression of deep pain and woundedness that resists resolution. Lament resists resolution.

Poet Ann B. Weems after the death of her son, wrote a collection of Laments, with the encouragement of Walter Brueggemann. He asked her if he could share her prayers of lament in one of his seminar classes. **She didn't know why** anyone would want to read the psalms she wrote.

Brueggemann answered, "Because throughout history the faithful have marched to the throne of God and cried out in their pain. In your cries," he said, "you are voicing the sobs of those people." <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I commend the following by Ann B. Weems, *Psalms of Lament*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

With permission he shared her lament psalms. Shortly after the seminar ended, Weems began receiving letters and phone calls, with stories, like hers which were painful/too painful for anyone to fit their souls in to 10 correct steps of grieving. They know what Weems, knew. There is no salvation in self-help books; the help we need is far beyond self. Our only hope is to march ourselves to the throne of God and in loud lament, cry out the pain that lives in our souls. <sup>4</sup>

We trust that our God who is merciful and just, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love will hear us when we pray through the rough and challenging places. Even if there is no resolution, prayers of Lament, leave some space for the **connection of our soul's deep cry to be heard by God.** Comfort and assurance will come another day. Once reverberations of our wounded hearts have a chance to be poured out and lifted up.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Forward from Walter Brueggemann for Ann B. Weems, *Psalms of Lament*.