



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
August 26, 2018
Sermon: Questions for God: "Stay Awake and Pray"
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Psalm 35:15-22
Matthew 26:36-46

Questions for God:

- 1. When people pray on earth do you hear it as a separate consciousness?*
- 2. Are you really my co-pilot?*
- 3. Why do you leave so many questions unanswered?*
- 4. How do you prioritize the daily prayers that come to you from everyone everywhere let alone the ones that I throw at you every day? Do you deal with them yourself? Do you have a staff to which you delegate?*

The year was 1970. Ken was sitting on the floor with the youth group he was leading. One of the youth began to cry. He shared that a close friend of his was in the hospital and badly in need of prayer. And so, they stopped everything: held hands and closed their eyes. Ken led them in prayer.

And then something unexpected happened. His words became coupled with a melody.

A melody that lifted this prayer to a new place:

(singing) "Lord listen to your children praying..."

Lord listen to your children praying...

Lord listen to your children praying..."

Again and again, this melody poured out from him until more lyrics entered in. Members of the youth group started to hum along, stumbling to master the song. Then after a few repetitions, their voices grew stronger. They sang out together, praying...

(Choir sings)

Lord, listen to your children praying.

Lord, send your spirit in this place.

Lord, listen to your children praying.

Send us love, send us power, send us grace.

(Congregation sings)

Lord, listen to your children praying.

Lord, send your spirit in this place.

Lord, listen to your children praying.

Send us love, send us power, send us grace.

There is nothing more mysterious and more essential to Christian life than prayer. Since the beginning of time, prayer has been a part of our spiritual DNA. From Adam and Eve in the garden, to Abraham high on a hill, to Hagar in the depths of wilderness, to Jonah in the belly of a whale, to Mary alone in a room, to Jesus in the garden before dawn....

Our ancestors have prayed to God again and again: seeking understanding, guidance, mercy and repentance, praising the Lord, begging for help.

Prayer is so much a part of our Christian lives and we approach it in various ways. Some of us find a quiet place to bow our heads, some of us plant crops in the garden, some of us hike in the mountains or run alongside the river, some of us dance in the living room or sing in the choir, some of us march in the streets or teach in our schools. Prayer has many languages and takes many shapes.

We know that prayer also enters into our national rhetoric. It has brought us together in times of sorrow, helped us celebrate and feel united. It has also been misused as a tool for manipulation, a way to assert one's particular agenda. After school shootings, politicians ask that we keep victims in our "thoughts and prayers" – translation for nothing will change. When more abuses by priests have come to our attention, we hear that abusers have been told to retreat into a life prayer – translation for no justice will be served.

It is no wonder to me that this week, we had a batch of questions dealing with prayer. We talk so much about prayer, but we rarely get below the surface: take the time to work through our expectations and disappointments, tap into its power, its wonder, its sacred purpose.

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In today's text, we find Jesus in his final hours before his arrest. He has given his life over to pushing every social and religious boundary. He has infuriated those in power and even his closest friend has betrayed him.

Jesus who knew death that would come, is now coming face-to-face with it. In this most human moment, our Savior no longer appears fierce and prophetic, but instead fiercely vulnerable and afraid.

He turns to God in the way his parents and the rabbis taught him to – through prayer. He prays, once, twice, three times. He prays and prays and prays. And then in the distance his betrayer enters the scene. This feels unsettling. Jesus goes through all of this trouble of falling to his knees in prayer, opening himself up to God, and this does not stop him from being kissed, crucified, and buried. What then is going on? Is God really listening when Jesus prays?

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As people of faith, we often speak about prayer as a transactional conversation. We initiate. God responds. We ask a question and God gives us an answer (and preferably as quickly as possible and in the way that we would like).

We depend on God to pay attention, to prioritize our requests and to promptly fulfill them. Could it be that Jesus prayed three times just to make sure that God really got the message?

Let's be real, we want prayer and we want God to be simple. The Lord must come through on our terms and on our timelines.

But what happens when God doesn't respond in the ways that we would wish? What happens when the pain continues, when the path remains unclear, when the relationship is still un-mended? *What then?* Surely in these moments, we can find ourselves doubting everything – even the very existence of our Creator Herself.

But God is not simple and our prayers are not swift bank transactions. Maybe we are approaching these conversations all wrong. Maybe prayer is far more mysterious, far more wondrous than this.

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This week, I decided to investigate the “genesis” of prayer in hopes to get some clearer answers. I turned back to the beginning of our Biblical history, searching for our initial conversations with God – our first recorded prayer.

What I found was surprising. It happened in the garden. Adam had just taken a bite from the apple and was now hiding from God, ‘naked and afraid’. What struck me most about this prayer is that it is not Adam's voice we hear first. It is God's. “Where are you?” the Lord cries out. Adam responds “I was afraid, so I hid from you.”

From the dust of God's question – prayer is born. Adam does not reach out to God, God reaches out to him. The Lord is not only listening, but initiating the conversation itself.

Prayer then feels less about our crying out to God (in hopes that God will hear) and more about our responding to God, who is already crying out to us: “Where are you? How are you? Will you let me help?”

In the garden that night, what if it is God who is calling out to Jesus in anguish: “Where are you?” “Where are you?” “Where are you?” And it is Jesus who is responding in sorrow and in faith: “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

What difference does it make for us if our prayers are not built on waiting for answers, but rather on acknowledging a God who is already bursting at the chance to offer healing and wholeness.

Theologian Walter Wink writes “Prayer is rattling God’s cage and waking God up and setting God free and giving this famished God water and this starved God food and cutting the ropes off God’s hands and the shackles off God’s feet and washing the caked sweat from God’s eyes and then watching God swell with life and vitality and energy and following God wherever God goes.”ⁱ

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The only thing that Jesus’ disciples ever asked him to teach them was how to pray. And in his final hours in the garden he looks to them to remember all that they have learned: to trust in it and practice it like never before.

He calls out to them: “Stay awake and pray with me.”

Jesus does not ask them to pray because they are the most faithful or poetic, or learned bunch. In fact, in just a few short hours, they will be the ones to doubt him and deny him. Jesus knows this and still he begs them: “Stay awake and pray.”

But they cannot seem to keep their eyes open. Even as ‘God on earth’ is standing before them, reaching out, their spirit is willing, but their flesh is weak.

In this instance, Jesus is desperate to teach them, and to teach us that the most important aspect of prayer is not whether we feel satisfied by God’s answers. The most important thing is that we never give up on it: that we keep at it, we embody it, practice it, listen for it, awaken ourselves to all its wonder and possibilities.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says that “to pray is to open a door.” When we pray, we open the door to the Holy Spirit. We let it run wild, bringing hope to even the most unexpected places.

When Jesus prays to God three times that night – it is not because he is certain that his cup will finally pass over, but because he needs reassurance that even in this most devastating moment, he will not need to drink from this cup alone.

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While in seminary, I served as a hospital chaplain. One afternoon, I was doing rounds in the intensive care unit, when I locked eyes with a young man in a corner bed. Although he had IVs in his arms, and a trach tube down his throat (that prevented him from hardly speaking), he welcomed me in with a warm gesture. I stared into his eyes, and asked how he was feeling. I heard some faint whispers and managed some lip reading.

I learned that his name was Seth and he was desperately awaiting a double lung transplant. He was just a year younger than me, and half Presbyterian. He shared that he too felt called to the ministry, and had been accepted to study at Union Seminary in New York City- where I was a student. With similar callings, yet such starkly different circumstances, I could not help but feel conflicted. Guilty even.

I asked him, “Do you ever pray to God while you lie here day after day?”

He whispered, “Yes. I used to ask God, why me? But now when I pray, I just say - thank you, thank you for the opportunity of living.”

In Seth’s most vulnerable state, surely there must have been times when felt abandoned by God, unheard and all alone. And still he stayed awake and prayed anyway – he kept alert for the sound of God’s voice and he opened himself up to unexpected, grace-filled healing.

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Friends, Jesus teaches us that no matter how late the hour,
no matter how troubling the circumstance,
no matter how speechless and afraid we are -
it is never too late to pray and pray and pray.

Prayer is not simplistic or stagnant,
it is not transactional or controllable,
it is not a band aid or an excuse.
It is active and alive.
And it is a gift from God.

Prayer connects us with the One who will not rest.
The one who keeps moving and reacting,
listening and understanding,
surprising and shifting,
radically transforming the lives of those who pray and the world as we know it.

Jesus calls us into prayer.
Keep at it. Practice it. Embody it.
God is speaking and the Holy Spirit is at work.
We need only stay awake and pray.

*Lord, listen to your children praying.
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Lord, listen to your children praying.
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ⁱ Wink, Walter. *The Power That Be: Theology for A New Millennium*. New York: Galilee Doubleday. 1989, pg. 186.