

“Walking in Prayer”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

March 20, 2022 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Scripture Texts: Acts 2:14-21

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Romans 8:18-27

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Walker - Antonio Machado¹

Walker, your footsteps
are the road, and nothing more.

Walker, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.

Walking you make the road,
and turning to look behind
you see the path you never
again will step upon.

Walker, there is no road,
only foam trails on the sea.

That is the poem on which our worship experience in the season of Lent is based this year. The road we normally walk through this season is in the past. The steps we take create the road for us this year. The pandemic has changed the path, not the destination. We still travel toward the betrayal, the humiliation, the abuse, the crucifixion, and finally the empty tomb. But our road is different because we are different. We are making the road as we walk, together. As the Rev. Teri McDowell Ott said in the first reflection in her devotion series, faith is the journey, not the destination. Faith is what sustains us along the way. We cannot make the journey without it.

This is what she has written for this third Sunday in Lent:

“This Lent, we make the road by walking prayerfully and mindfully, attentive to every step that brings us closer to Christ.

“Congregations often assume that prayer comes easy for pastoral leaders, but everyone struggles with this spiritual practice, and it’s important to find a prayer practice that works for you. We can seek the Spirit through Lectio Divina or Centering Prayer. We can practice breath prayer, walking prayer, or wind our way through a labyrinth, feeling that God is with us in our journey. For years, I practiced a version of fixed-hour prayer, praying in the morning, at noon, and before bed. Writing, though, is my favorite spiritual practice and the one I always return to when struggling for inspiration. Free-writing in response to Scripture (or writing a devotional series such as this) is my surest path to epiphanies.

“Essentially, prayer is the practice of attending to the ways God’s Spirit moves and communicates with us. Sometimes this happens through words; other times, as our passage from Romans highlights, the Spirit must intercede for us with “sighs” or, as this Greek word can also be translated, “groans,” when our words are too shallow and limited.

¹ Antonio Machado, trans. Willis Barnstone from *Antonio Machado, Border of a Dream: Selected Poems*, Copper Canyon Press, 2004

“Simone Weil wrote beautifully about attention as a contemplative practice through which we are deeply rewarded and by which we can be transformed. In her book, *Gravity and Grace*, Weil writes, “Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. ... If we turn our mind toward the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself.” Or, as Adrienne Maree Brown puts it, “What we pay attention to grows.” This Lent, let us turn our minds to what is good and what is God, let us grow in prayer through an intentional practice of attention.”²

Lenten practices, spiritual practices, are formats for prayer. From music to silence to writing, walking, and fasting, our practices must be the most effective for us and our relationship with the Lord. What works for one person may not work for another. I find meaning and peace in poetry, while my son Corey finds it in music. One of my colleagues has her best prayer time while she walks. Another finds it by watching the natural world around her home outside of the city. Another simply sits in silence and lets the thoughts flow between him and God. Another finds it in reading. Sometimes we have trouble finding that way to communicate with God, and the Spirit steps in with sighs to deep for words, breathing into our chaos and unease and leading us to pay attention to what God offers to us. Prayer is our communion with God, and is a necessary part of our journey of faith.

And like so many other things along the way, it can – and will – change us.

A writer for Iona Books shared the following experience, and given my normal routines throughout my entire life, it really spoke to me. It’s called “A Long Forty Days of Silence.” A couple of years ago I decided to observe Lent by turning off the car radio. It wasn’t easy. It was a long forty days of silence. I missed the entertainment, the music, the distraction, the weather and even hearing the traffic reports. There were days I would get in the car after work and desperately want to listen to the radio for the long drive home. Yet, I persisted. I found this became a time to sit in silence, or to sing, or sometimes even pray aloud. The car became a different space, and it seemed as if time passed in a different way. Without hearing news stories of events that took place recently, I was stuck in the present, forced to pay more attention to my own mind, the cars around me and the road I was travelling. I was alone, desperately trying to remember that we are never truly alone.³

I am a radio person. I grew up that way. It’s important to me. Until a few years ago I always had the radio on so I could sing along as I drove. Then, I lost my singing voice and the radio became painful because I could no longer sing along. So I started listening to other kinds of radio – jazz, sports, CBC. I enjoyed that too. Now I have a wide collection of saved stations I can have on as I drive. I can’t imagine not having the radio on in my car. I can even listen to those sing-along stations again, although I’m still sad about the singing.

But the other day I was heading home and turned it off. I drove in silence. It was weird, and yet it was a relief from the noise of the world. And what I found really strange was not really

² “Making the Road” A Lenten series of devotions written by the Rev. Teri-McDowell Ott, Editor of *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, Presbyterian Church USA, 2022. This reading is the devotion for March 20, 2022.

³ From the worship resource *Spring*, edited by Ruth Burgess. Wild Good Publications, Glasgow, Scotland, 2019, Pg. 134.

thinking about anything significant while I drove. I simply listened to the sound of the road, the traffic around me, the clicking of my turn signal, and I found myself feeling a new sense of calm. I can't explain it, so maybe that was the Spirit stepping in with sighs too deep for words. Unlike the writer of the car radio story, I enjoyed the silence. I actually didn't miss the sound of broadcasting. It's given me a new appreciation for those moments of being on my own, silent, letting the Spirit sigh within me. It's a new sense of connecting with the Holy.

As I was thinking about the Scriptures and the devotion for today's service I also read the devotion from St. Andrew's Hall at the Vancouver School of Theology for this third Sunday in Lent. It was written by an associate with the Centre for Missional Leadership. As is so often the case, I was amazed at how it furthered my thoughts about prayer, how God works in ways we don't expect or understand, and how it speaks to this particular time in the world when we sometimes struggle with knowing what to pray.

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts"

"In this passage, God announces that the buoyant and joyful divine promises to the people of Palestine – promises for them to feast and flourish in security and peace – were coming true in a way no one expected, through the Persian emperor (who most regarded as their enemy).

"Therefore, Isaiah reminds them: God's mercy is wider than they could envision. God's ways are not their ways!

"In our polarized age, we can easily assume that God wants to curse or even obliterate our enemies just like we do.

"God's ways are not our ways, however!

"What a difference it could make in your relationships, conflicts, and political engagements if you recognize that God loves your enemies with as much abandon as God loves you.

"How might this reality impact how you engage others?"

"As you prepare to pray: Identify one relationship, conflict or political dialogue that is fractious or troublesome for you. Take a moment to envision the lavish love of God for this person or situation. Now ask God how you might re-engage anew and take time to listen to the Spirit."

As the old hymn says, take it to the Lord in prayer.

Another way I commune with God is in reading daily devotions from a couple of different organizations. One of them comes from the Henri Nouwen Society and one day this week, as I wrestled with how to conclude this message, this one arrived in my inbox: "The pressures of living in our society make us react to questions and problems more with bitterness, resentment, and even hatred. Far from being inspired, we seem to have forgotten about God. We are cynical about so much suffering in ourselves and in the world and we do not know how to integrate that with our spiritual aspirations. As in a love-hate relationship, feelings of deep disillusionment colour our capacity to relate with the One we once accepted and tried to

follow. We feel ambivalent and dissatisfied, wondering if God can really be trusted and if God really is a personal God who is ‘close to the brokenhearted.’

We aren’t questioning this with words, but our behaviour betrays us. We say to a friend, “I will pray for you.” But we walk away without any sense of a commitment to pray because we have doubts about prayers being answered. We listen to sermons... affirming the benefits of a life of communion with God, but somewhere deep down we really believe that it is action, not prayer, that will satisfy our needs. We may think prayer is good when there is nothing more important to do, but we have strong reservations and doubts about God’s effectiveness in our world, of God’s personal interest in us. We are no longer conscious of God-with-us.”⁴

Prayer can be hard. It is hard for us to pray *Thy will be done* and really mean it. It is hard for us to pray for those who persecute us and God’s people. It is hard for us to pray for the abuser, the dictator, the drug dealer, the drunk driver, the racist, the bully. It’s easy to pray for the people we love and for whom we have concern. It feels natural to pray for the abused, the innocent victims, the oppressed nation. It’s hard to pray when we see nothing change in the world. It’s easy to lose the sense of God-with-us, and wonder if God is even paying attention.

God IS paying attention. Always. But we don’t always notice it because we don’t always pay attention. We want to do something to change things, so when we don’t see God doing something to change things we get frustrated. Why is God loving instead of punishing? Why is God silent when the Spirit should be thundering? Why is God not bringing the peace for which we so earnestly have prayed, that he sent Jesus to bring?!

Because God’s ways are not our ways and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts.

God is loving the abuser, the dictator, the drug dealer, the drunk driver, the racist, the bully because our Creator’s capacity for love is far bigger and deeper than ours. God is loving the abused, the innocent victims, the oppressed nation just the same. God’s love went to the cross for us, for all people who choose to believe and trust in it.

No, I don’t get it. I don’t know why a big bolt of lightning hasn’t landed in the midst of those who initiate war for the sake of power and greed, or those who abuse spouses, children, the vulnerable. I don’t get it because I cannot understand the mind of God.

I do understand God is present, somehow.

God is working, somehow.

God is changing things, somehow.

I don’t understand, so I try my best to trust. I know it’s true. It’s just that sometimes it’s hard to believe, to remember God-with-us. And that’s why there is prayer. I may not see changes around me, but I can be open to changes within me and my perspective if I stay in communion with God through prayer. Take it to the Lord in prayer, and then wait for the answer. It isn’t a one-sided conversation, but it takes some effort to see or hear what comes in response.

This week I’ve given you a peek at how I commune with God – through a variety of writers and storytellers. How do you do it? Prayer is a wonderful, varied agent of change – within us – so we can see God in the world around us. It’s reassuring when God’s answer to our

⁴ “Does God Really Care?” Email devotion for March 16, 2022. Henri Nouwen Society (henrinouwen.org).

prayers appears to be a resounding yes, but not so much when the response is no or doesn't appear to come at all. As the Psalmist says, *Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord! (Psalm 27:14)*. It's not easy, but worth it. For one day we will understand what is unreachable for us now, and see God's glory revealed in unexpected and wonderful ways. Amen.