

“Teach Us How To Pray”

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*I will bow down toward your holy temple  
and praise your name,  
because of your love and faithfulness.*

Our readings today open with the account in Genesis of Abraham and God bargaining for the bodies and souls of the people of Sodom. God, having discovered that the people of Sodom are living in sin, threatens to slay both the righteous and the wicked. Abraham is appalled that God contemplates such drastic action, for he has experienced a different God.

- He has experienced the God who stood with him in the desert, his arm around his shoulder, promising him progeny as numerous as the stars in the sky.
- The God who appeared as a traveler under the oak of Mamre, again promising Abraham progeny
- And when Abraham had a son, the God who tested the faith of Abraham, demanding that he offer his son as a sacrifice, then relenting when he witnessed Abraham’s belief and courage

In today’s reading, Abraham and his creator are arguing, until God agrees that if there are ten righteous people in Sodom he will forgive the city’s sin. I think that Abraham’s verbal wrestling with God, his pleading for the people of Sodom, is a primitive prayer, And it is a heart-felt prayer, pointing toward the Genesis account of Jacob wrestling with an angel in the desert. If this seems to us a harsh God, who needs a mere mortal to tell him he ought to forgive his wandering children, we must remember that the people of Israel are in the early days of their relationship with God.

Scholars believe that Abraham lived about 2000 years before Jesus came into the world. His pleading with God for Sodom, then, is an old, old prayer. But it is still young compared to one written by Enheduanna, the earliest identified author of either gender. The daughter of Sargon, the Sumerian king, Enheduanna was a high priestess in the service of the moon-god and moon-goddess, Nanna and Inanna. During a time of civil unrest, Enheduanna was sent into exile. She prayed to Inanna for release from her exile in powerful words, resonant of the story of the flood:

*Like a dragon,  
 You poisoned the land—  
 When you roared at the earth  
 In your thunder,  
 Nothing green could live.  
 A flood fell from the mountain. . .  
 You rained fire on the heads of men. . .  
 Taking your power from the Highest,  
 Following the commands of the Highest  
 Lady of all the great rites,  
 Who can understand all that is yours?*

Did this prayer come down to the Hebrew people? Did it shape their understanding of the flood? We have no way of knowing, but today's Psalm, an early prayer of supplication to an all-powerful God, seems a good response to the harshness of God we hear in the reading from Genesis:

*Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe;  
 you stretch forth your hand against the fury of my enemies;  
 your right hand shall save me (Ps. 138: 8)*

The reading from Luke also speaks of the power of God to answer our prayers, a reminder that we should never give up on God. But the disciples did not trust their own ability to pray, and so Jesus gave them a starting place, the Lord's Prayer, which we know in many forms.

Some of us, of course, are not always satisfied with the prayers given to us for liturgy or private prayer, and so we write our own. Mary Oliver, a deeply spiritual poet who died this year, was such a woman of prayer, pulling away from the traditional, yet still connecting with the most primitive of voices calling to the creator:

*Hear her meditation in “Wild Geese”:*

*You do not have to be good.  
 You do not have to walk on your knees  
 For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
 Love what it loves.  
 Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
 Meanwhile the world goes on.  
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
 Are moving across the landscapes,  
 Over the prairies and the deep trees,  
 The mountains and the rivers.  
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
 Are heading home again.  
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
 The world offers itself to your imagination,  
 Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
 Over and over announcing your place  
 In the family of things.*

By writing prayers—for ourselves or for use in the liturgy—we can reflect the shift in values and beliefs of the Church through the centuries. When I first worshipped here at St. John’s, the national Church was undergoing a massive revision of “The Book of Common Prayer.” This was a stressful time, because everyone had strong ideas about the language of our worship, especially those who did not want it to change.

I had grown up with Latin, so I had shifted easily into the archaic English of Thomas Cranmer in the 1549 and 1928 prayer books, and then again to the current version. Today we use a print-out of the service, allowing a variety of prayers in our worship that are not in the earlier “standard” translations. My liturgy professor, the Rev. Dr. Ruth Meyers, encouraged me to write Prayers of the People and alternative versions of the Communion service. And so, with some trepidation, I began to write prayers for worship, believing that the call to approach God belongs to us all.

I know through experience that we are drawn to modern prayer, and to prayer that is more traditional: both have the power to move, comfort, and surprise us. As a hospice chaplain, I’ve sat with many men and women who were close to death, and learned early on that the sixteenth-century version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is embedded in the memory of many Christians. . . including me! At the bedside, and later on in the funeral or memorial service, those present would join with me in the King James’ version of that beautiful prayer.

When I was in church choir Mary Lou introduced us to a small piece by Henry Purcell, part of a larger work written for the funeral of Queen Mary II (December 1694); Purcell himself, a young man, died less than a year later. The harmonization is exquisite, especially for altos. And the language is of its time, the tumultuous years of the Reformation:

*Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts.  
Shut not thy merciful ears unto our prayers.  
But spare us Lord most holy,  
O God most mighty,  
O holy and merciful Saviour,  
Thou most worthy judge eternal.  
Suffer us not, at our last hour,  
For any pains of death,  
To fall from thee.*

When we ask Jesus to teach us how to pray we are often surprised. . .  
and comforted. Amen.