

Sermon (2/18/18, Psalm 25: 1-10):

How should we pray? There are times when all of us struggle with this question. As people of faith, we talk about prayer a lot but, sometimes, we wonder where we might find its instruction manual.

How should we pray? Where's the on switch for this supposed powerful tool of faith? Do we need to be polite and careful? This is God after all, we don't want to upset him, do we? Are there special words that need to be said, a formula of some kind? You know, the kind one might use for a magic spell. What do we need to say to get God's attention, to provoke God to act, to move God's heart?

I have vivid memories of one my first, most fervent prayers. In fact, so powerful was this experience, I often look back at it as an early call moment. I was just a young kid at the time and my beloved cat had disappeared without a trace. I feared I would never see him again. I prayed harder than I ever had before. My prayer was specific and detailed, 'Please Lord, send my cat home. When I wake up tomorrow for breakfast, let me find him scratching at our side door, healthy and unharmed. May he be anxious to come in and be excited to see me. May he rub up against my legs as he always does when I prepare his food.'

You know what? It worked. The next morning, I went to the kitchen for breakfast and, lo and behold, I heard scratching at the side door. It was my cat. Everything happened just as I had asked.

'Wow!' I thought. 'This praying stuff really pays off!'

I then began to analyze all I had done. I reviewed every detail of my praying process, figuring that this was the magic formula that one needed to make prayer work. Let's see – broken heart, tears, sincerity, honesty, pleading, begging, trust that it would work. Little did I know then, that there was some truth to this thinking. No, it wasn't a magic formula, as I thought, but it did contain some important elements of prayer. In fact, some of the same elements the Psalmists teach us in their prayers. They are brutally honest, they unabashedly express the gamut of every human emotion, they pray from deep and honest places, and they bear a certain amount of trust in the one to whom they are directed.

How should we pray? For those of us who ask this question, the

Psalms provide us some helpful lessons and this morning, I thought I would spend a little time thinking through the Psalm assigned for this first Sunday in Lent-Psalm 25. In fact, it might even provide us with a helpful template for us to use in this season of Lent.

This Psalm, this prayer opens in tentative trust. It does not begin from an unshakable, strongly confident place of belief. It is more like the tentative steps one might first take to test out the ice on a pond to see if it is thick enough to hold us up.

Clearly the Psalmist is in distress and he is seeking God's help, but the Psalmist isn't all that confident God will respond.

“In you, O God, I trust but please don't let me down, don't disappoint me, don't put me to shame, don't allow my enemies the satisfaction of seeing that my trust in you was a big mistake.”

Tentative steps. Tentative prayers. Solid, immovable faith is not a pre-requisite for good prayer. Instead, honesty is, such as the honesty of this Psalmist who isn't quite sure that the recipient of this prayer will respond.

‘Yes, Lord, in you I want to trust and in you I am trying to place my trust but, to be honest, it all feels a bit shaky, it all feels pretty iffy.’

The second stanza is a confessed willingness to be taught. The Psalmist acknowledges that trust comes by way of understanding God's ways, God's truths, God's paths. Assuming that prayer is about convincing God to conform to our desires and understanding, only makes our relationship with God feel more distant. Good prayer is open to the truths of God, even when they're hard. In fact, so great is this Psalmist's desire to learn God's ways and so sure is the Psalmist that God's ways will be compelling that ‘he is willing to wait all day long’ to receive them.

The next stanza asks God to remember who God is.

‘Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, of your steadfast love. Remember the days of old during which your love held steady and saved us.’

It always seems like such an odd thing to consider that God might need reminders. It's such a mortal thing to forget. I do it all the time...I forget where I put my keys. I sit up in bed at night remembering

something I forgot to do. I forget promises I made. I forget to be kind and gracious in times when my temper has been provoked. I forget to consider the perspective and circumstance of the other when I make snap judgments about what should and shouldn't be. I need reminders all the time-post it notes upon post it notes. Remember who you are David. Remember your baptism David. Remember you can be better than that David. Remember your convictions. Remember your calling. Remember your gifts. Remember you are God's Beloved. Remember you usually leave your keys in your coat pocket. Yes, I forget these things all the time. It's something I am exceptionally good at but it's not something we normally associate with God.

In our reading from Genesis this morning, we encounter the last part of the story of Noah where God promises that never again will he destroy all of creation with a flood. Not only does God promise this to Noah and his descendants but also to every living creature and even the earth itself. It's an amazing promise and I'm sure it's the kind of promise the Psalmist wants God to remember. It was also a reminder to the Psalmist of just how far God's ways are from the ways we mortals take for granted.

This promise that God makes is a 100% unilateral one. It requires nothing from its recipients. It is completely one sided. There is no condition that humanity must first meet for this promise to be enacted. God will not repeat the devastation caused by the flood – no ifs, ands, or buts.

So committed is God to this that God hangs up his armaments, his bow, in the sky and every time God sees it, God says he will remember his promise. What? God needs reminders? Is there a danger that God is just as susceptible to impulsive, knee jerk, destructive moments of fury like we are? Does God really struggle with remembering like we do, especially in the heat of a moment? Quite frankly, I just don't know. But, perhaps, the Psalmist is praying this because he knows that when God remembers, big, important, and life-saving things happen.

In Genesis 8 it says that God remembered Noah and all the living creatures in the ark. The result? God caused the waters to subside.

In Genesis 19 we're told that God remembered Abraham. The result?

God rescued Abraham's nephew, Lot.

In Genesis 30 we're told that God remembered Isaac's wife, Rachel. The result? Rachel conceived a child in her womb.

In Exodus God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The result? God sent Moses to rescue the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.

Again and again, the Psalmist saw that when God remembers, salvation soon follows.

Remember your mercy, O God. Remember your steadfast love that has stretched throughout all of history. Remember your promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Remember the rainbow in the sky. Remember who you are, God. Remember me, O God, not because of my good-ness but because of your good-ness. Remember your good-ness which seems to have this ability to rise above all things and return to a place of unfathomable grace and love. Remember your good-ness that saves us even when we make a mess of things. Remember your good-ness which gives birth to amazing, life-saving commitments of love.

Show me your paths, O God, reveal your truths, the Psalmist prays. The fact is that we would never make the kind of one-sided deals God made with the rainbow. To do so would result in a well-deserved label of 'sucker', 'fool', 'chump'. To do so would invite all kinds of ridicule. To do so would surely lead to our destruction. Right? Well, maybe, we're the ones who need to remember that God's ways are not our ways. Maybe we're the ones who need to remember that it's upon these unilateral, holy promises that the world was created and all of creation is sustained.

'I put my trust in you, O Lord. Don't let me down. Don't give my enemies the satisfaction of seeing that my trust in you was foolish.'

On this first Sunday in Lent, we are on our way to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, to a cross. If there ever was a time when God would have been justified to renege on the promise he made to Noah, it would have been at that moment when God's very own Son, Jesus, breathed his last. Indeed, there are hints that God was heading that way – the sky darkened, the earth shook, the curtain in the Temple tore in half but then came Easter. Somehow God remembered who God was and who God would always be.

It all makes me wonder. Did God see a rainbow in those storm clouds that formed on that first Good Friday? When Jesus breathed his last, did God hear the cries of his people and remember his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Does God remember when we pray our tentative and daring prayers asking God to remember who God is? Does God remember when we open ourselves, in humility, to God's ways even though they tend to go against the grain of everything we've learned to put our trust in?

I was just a little kid when my heart broke over the loss of my beloved cat. I prayed like I had never prayed before, trying everything I could think of to get God's attention. No one was more surprised than I when, in my own small way, I sensed that God had heard even me.

'O Lord, hear our prayers. In you we are trying our best to put our all trust.'

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious God, in you we place our trust. To you we lift up our very souls. Be attentive to our prayers, we ask. Don't make us look like fools because we have staked our very lives, our very hope on you.

We come in humility, O God, realizing that our thoughts are not your thoughts, our ways are not your ways, our assumptions about life might be far different than your wisdom. We come knowing that if our relationship with you is to grow, we need to be open to your teaching, amenable to your guidance, and willing to take the paths you lead us on. Help us to do so, we ask.

Holy God, we are in great need of your mercy. The kind of mercy you joyfully exhibited when you first created the universe. The kind of mercy you promised when you placed your bow in the sky. The kind of mercy we saw in your Son who walked upon the earth and showed us love, who wept over the city Jerusalem which rejected him, who gave his life for us on the cross.

O Lord, remember your ways. Remember your good-ness. Remember your steadfast love which filled our lungs with breath, baptized us, and declared us to be your Beloved.

Remember us, O God, and, in turn, help us to remember you and the redeeming power of your ways.

To you, O God, we lift up our lives. In you we put our trust. Be attentive to the tears of those who weep today. Hear the cries of those who are in pain, ill, and wounded today. Hear the pleas of those who ache for something new today – a new hope, a new lease on life. Hear the voices of those who are suffering, hungry, thirsty, and defeated today. Hear the petitions of earth's citizens yearning for systems and leaders who will follow more

closely the ways of your justice and good-ness. We pray all of this, God of mercy and grace, even as we now lift up to you these prayers we boldly pray in silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.