

## Devoted to Prayer

TEXT: Acts 1:6-14

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 21, 2023*

There is a lot of ascending going on right now. As the church remembers the ascension of Jesus into heaven, families are marking the ascension of graduates or of children moving from one grade or school to another. Other programs also mark ascending transitions at this time of year. Quinn MacLean Albee just ascended to the rank of black belt in karate. Our parking lot was mobbed after church last week as scouts returned from a camping trip where new ranks were awarded, and eligible cub scouts “crossed over” to become part of the older scout troop.

Life is full of ascensions of many kinds, including marking our ascent in age every time we have a birthday. Even funerals are a kind of ascension, as we commit the spirit of our loved ones into the hands of God and mark their new, resurrected lives. All of those ceremonies and recognitions focus on those who have ascended, just like Ascension Sunday is all about Jesus in his glory.

But we don’t live in a void. When a person ascends to a different stage of life, however slight or grand that ascension might be, every system they are a part of changes, too. Parents and grandparents watch their children graduate or marry with both pride and nostalgia. As Fiddler on the Roof put it so beautifully, “Is this the little girl I carried? Is this the little boy at play? I don’t remember growing older; when did they?”

Parents often have a difficult time adjusting to the “empty nest,” even if the kid comes home for Christmas and finds their room is now an Airbnb. As we ascend from work to retirement, there are major adjustments for the person who has retired. For some it brings on an identity crisis; others find gateways to new hobbies and interests. But retirement also requires adjustments for others in the new retiree’s circle of family and friends. If you retire before your peers, you are now free when they are not, which can shift routines of socializing. If you retire later, they may have moved on without you. Those you live with will all need to adjust to a new schedule of when you are home and available. The list goes on and on.

In the same way, Jesus’ ascension impacted many others besides himself. For Jesus’ disciples, their lives were completely disrupted. Again. They were first pulled out of their lives and jobs when Jesus called them to become disciples. They traveled with him for three years; building a new identity, mission, and purpose around their lives and purpose. Then came the brutal crackdown on their movement with Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion; events set in motion by the betrayal of one of their own. They went into hiding for fear of their lives.

A few days later, the women bring news that Jesus’ body is not where it’s supposed to be and that angels have told them that Jesus has risen from the dead. Jesus starts appearing to people, often in ways they don’t recognize at first. He appears to a few and then to as many as 500. Forty days after Jesus’ resurrection, the resurrected Jesus ascends into heaven, telling his disciples before he goes not only that they can’t come with him, but they shouldn’t even leave Jerusalem because more was coming.

Jesus went through a lot, no question. But so did his disciples, and the impact of the events of the past three years on *their* lives is only just beginning on Ascension Day, with the person who has guided them all that time now truly and thoroughly gone. And although Jesus left them with lofty-sounding promises; it was a bit short on the details. They understood what baptism in water looked like—where to go, what to do—but baptism in the Holy Spirit? Sounds good, sure, but how will we know it when it comes?

And speaking of when...got any more details on that Jesus? Nope. Just don’t leave Jerusalem until you get it. Then Jesus gets his shining diploma and he’s gone.

While there have been many points along the way where Jesus’ disciples are slow to understand, in this instance, they show that they have indeed learned a thing or two. The disciples—people who study to be like

a master—are about to be deployed as apostles—those who are sent out. Their own kind of graduation is coming. Soon. And they prove themselves ready for that promotion from disciple to apostle in what they decide to do while they wait for whatever this graduation ceremony will look like. They devote themselves to prayer.

That sounds like something religious people should do, but what does it really mean? Is it a cloistered existence like in a monastery, where you join in formal prayers seven times a day? Is it like the old Methodist camp meetings where people leave home for a week or more, camp out together with a leader, and have services day and night? Do you go out alone to pray and fast? What, in a practical sense, did it mean for the disciples to devote themselves to prayer?

One of the simplest ways to grasp what being a Christian means is to recognize that being a disciple of Jesus—that is, being someone who is learning to be like the master, in this case, Jesus—is following his example. So, if we want to know what prayer is and how to do it, the life of Jesus is where we start.

Examples of Jesus praying in the Gospels are—in no particular order—when doing a ritual blessing, like before a meal; going off to a garden or hilltop by himself to pray; occasionally asking only his very closest disciples to come and keep watch with him while he prays, like in Gethsemane; crying out to God in prayer as he does from the Cross, and creating a model for individual prayers by teaching his disciples what we’ve come to call the “Lord’s Prayer.” It’s also notable what Jesus does not do.

Never once does Jesus call people together for anything resembling a prayer service. When he teaches, he does not open and close with a public prayer. And he certainly does not do what is a pet peeve of mine in clergy, which is to stick a “Dear God” in front of a sermon and call it a pastoral prayer.

We know Jesus attended synagogue, and likely at least some of his disciples joined him. Those services used an ancient prayer book, which is actually an ancient hymnal; the prayers were meant to be sung. We use that same ancient hymnal in churches today. We used it this morning. It’s the book of Psalms.

We know some of the Psalms were sung on certain Jewish festivals, frequently in a call and response format. But the purpose of the psalms when used in public liturgy is not now and never has been to lift the words up as model prayers. The Psalms are not examples of how people *should* pray; they are songs that do what any and every song, both sacred and secular, seeks to do—to put words to the experiences of human life, especially in times when the experience is so intense that we find it stuck inside our throats with no way to give it voice.

Those experiences might be overflowing with joy and wonder or they may be shrieks of pain and rage. Remember when Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That’s the first verse of Psalm 22. Any and every emotion that has bubbled up inside of a person anywhere can be found somewhere in the Psalms.

We tend to pick Psalms for worship that echo positive emotions and thoughts. So lots of people think they’re all like that. I’ve run into many people who get tripped up reading the Psalms on their own when they hit ones that are much darker in tone. The shining example of this kind of psalm is Psalm 137. It begins in lament, and we can generally handle that. If you remember the musical Godspell, the opening of Psalm 137 might ring a bell...on the willows there, we hung up our lyres.

The event being lamented in Psalm 137 was the horrific siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It lasted years, as people watched their loved ones die slowly of starvation, dehydration, and worse. When Jerusalem was weak enough, the Babylonians came in, torched the city, and marched everyone they thought could be in any way useful to their empire out of Israel and over to captivity in Babylon. They were put in a camp in Babylon by the River Chebar. Psalm 137 is the lament of those traumatized exiles, and it begins with the grief in what they’ve lost.

“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”

Then they lament specifically for Jerusalem, “If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.”

But then the psalm turns, as grief generally does, to rage. Here are the final three verses of the psalm: “Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. ‘Tear it down,’ they cried, ‘tear it down to its foundations!’ Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.” That is how the Psalm ends.

The “Psalms-as-model-prayer” advocates are up a creek without a paddle in Psalm 137, except for a few barbarous fundamentalists who think the Psalm is condoning infanticide for one’s enemies. Godspell cut out after asking how to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.

I’ve known people who want to toss out the whole Bible after reading that Psalm. “How can God want prayers like that?” they ask. Well, that’s my point. The Psalms—even the joyful and comforting ones, are not model prayers. They’re not the prayers God *wants*; they are examples of the prayers people actually pray in and through every human experience imaginable.

I’ve used the entirety of Psalm 137 in worship. I pulled it out for a vigil the week two planes killed 3,000 people and forever changed this country on September 11, 2001. I didn’t use it as an example of how people should pray in such a moment. I wasn’t sanctioning vengeance, and neither is the Psalm. I used it to give voice to the anguish, fear, and rage in people’s hearts, to encourage people to be honest about those emotions when they pray, and to direct all those thoughts to God, who is the only one able to transform them into something helpful. Because, if we don’t let all that stuff out somewhere, we might, you know, start a war or something.

Psalms like Psalm 137 are there to say, “Let me give voice to your rage and help you put it in God’s lap. Let God have it; let God handle it, so that the love that is in the deepest part of your soul has a chance to surface and guide your response to what has happened.”

Public prayer is at its best when it speaks to moments that are common to the community of those praying. It gives voice and shape to something we have a hard time grasping, can help us feel that we are not alone—either in joy or in sorrow—and the presence of others can express the magnitude of our emotion, when it seems like just one voice can’t possibly be enough. That is also why music is prayer and why the Psalms are not just prayers but songs. The squeal of wonder, the wail of mourning, and the sighs of loving comfort are the first echoes of song. They rise, like incense, to God as prayers.

So, to our original question, what did it mean that, after Jesus ascended, his disciples devoted themselves to prayer? I think it meant that they gathered in groups large and small and sang a lot of Psalms as they sought expression for a recent past they couldn’t really process and a promised future that remained a mystery. I think they lamented and rejoiced. Their songs may have raged at Judas or questioned God. I suspect some may have been loud and others muttered under their breath, as they sought comfort in familiar words and tones.

But I think they also had learned enough from the practices and teaching of Jesus that a lot of the days to come were spent in prayer alone—maybe using a Psalm as a jumping off place, but maybe not saying much of anything at all. Prayer is most frequently a cry from the heart not the lips. It is setting our conscious self aside and inviting God to reach into our hearts and transform anything that needs it. It is our hearts extending out from our physical bodies to meet God’s Spirit to gain a touch of peace, of hope, of love.

Prayer isn't really something that happens *in* worship. Prayer *is* worship. When we're doing it well, the entire service is prayer—even the announcements. When we're living into it fully, our entire lives are a prayer. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 that we should pray without ceasing. That doesn't mean we can never eat breakfast or that we can show our holiness through calloused knees. It means that prayer is a way of connecting with the world both within ourselves and outside of ourselves.

To be devoted to prayer is to be in a constant, ongoing conversation with whatever our conception of God might be. Sometimes we capture snippets of that conversation verbally, either alone or in community. Sometimes we hear it in music, express it in the movement of our bodies, see it in squirrels playing, feel it in the air on our skin.

Prayer isn't here or there. It doesn't start or stop. It is the air we breathe, the water in which we swim, the community of others around us. It is where we live. Sometimes we express it; sometimes we note how the prayer around us speaks to our hearts; sometimes we engage it directly; sometimes we lay back on the water and float or fill the banks of its river with our tears.

When the American Trappist monk, writer, and activist Thomas Merton was asked how he prayed, he responded, "What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe." To be devoted to prayer is simply to be devoted to life; to live with the awareness of being surrounded by the sacred at all times, in all places, and in all circumstances. The shape and sound of our life prayer changes with the circumstances—a squeal, a sigh, a gasp, a wail.

But, whatever its shape and sound, God picks it up on the wind, fills it with love, and breathes it back into us as God's own spirit. Which is what happened to the disciples, ten days after Jesus' ascension on the day of Pentecost, when the intensity of their devotion to prayer came back to them in power. Tune in next week. Amen.