

Christ Church + Washington Parish
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
Way of Love Series: Pray
Transfiguration: Exodus 24:39-45; Luke 9:28-36

When Moses stepped off the mountain, “he did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.” When Jesus was on the mountain, praying, “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” In some of the deepest prayer experiences of my life, I can’t imagine that either my face or clothing changed – but I guess I don’t know that because my eyes were closed. If you stumbled across me in my normal prayer time, you might think I’m asleep. I have a prayer chair in my office – really a prayer recliner. There’s a 50% chance on a given day that I will spend 10 minutes there praying. It’s amazing how much prayer you can get done in ten minutes – I thank God for a few things, pray for a few people, and spend most of my time reflecting on a Scripture passage. Then, I get up and get to work. I’ve had dull and distracted prayer times and vivid and meaningful ones, but I’ve never noticed even a glint of dazzling white from my clothes.

The story of Jesus’ transformation on the mountaintop is the one we always get on the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the liturgical season of Lent. It is a startling visual of the beginning of the journey Jesus makes to the cross. A journey that begins with spiritual transformation. The part of that transformation that I’m going to focus on today is Prayer. One, because both the Exodus text and the Luke text, clearly connect prayer with transformation and because we are on the last week of our Way of Love spiritual practices series and the last practice we have is Pray.

Three years ago I was part of a preaching seminar and one of the central questions posed was – “does your preaching help people pray?” Now I consider myself, even on my humble days a good preacher, but that question stopped me. I hope that my preaching engages you with the Bible, helps you reflect on your life, and orients you to living your faith. But preaching that helps people pray – I couldn’t even imagine what that looked like, let alone identify if I had been doing it. It made all the sense in the world though – preaching can stimulate the mind and the heart but if it doesn’t enrich one’s prayer life, then the relationship with God part of this whole faith thing languishes. And that’s a pretty important part. Even after making “helping people pray” one of my preaching goals over the last few years, I’m still a novice. But I can’t imagine anything more important to give another shot as I begin my last four sermons with you, and I pray that God can do something with it for your prayer life.

Prayer, simply put, is conversation with God. That means there is communication from you to God and from God to you. That communication can occur with words, with action, and in silence. The purpose of prayer is to build a relationship; you can’t have a relationship with someone you primarily just think or talk about, either you become too detached or you go the other way, and you create someone who doesn’t really exist – it’s all a result of your own projections. I know that’s odd to think about because critics of religion say that God to begin with is a result of human projection, and I absolutely understand their case, but I have found that if you assume God does exist, and then you interact with God, regularly and honestly, it’s way harder to project upon God. Just like it’s harder to project on people the more you intentionally try to get to know them. Interaction is key. Prayer is interaction between you and God.

Our first introduction to prayer is prayer that happens in worship or at bedtime or mealtime – prayer as ritual and communal. We do a lot of that type of prayer together in worship, so I want to focus more in on personal prayer time. Now some of you may remember being taught to pray on your own with the acronym ACTS – the teaching that prayer involves Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. God, you are so great – Adoration, we screw up – Confession, but you still give us so many blessings (Thanksgiving), so please, if it is your will, heal this person, give this one peace, etc. – Supplication. You can actually see how many of our communal prayers are structured this way. Another piece of advice on prayer comes from the Rev. Adam Weber, “Keep it simple, keep it honest, keep it short.”¹ Both are great advice for people starting out in personal prayer about what to say, but they offer little when it comes to the other part of the equation – how to hear.

There is far more to prayer than is possible to address in one sermon, so I’m going to focus on this part – how to hear God in prayer. That then bids the question, Does God speak to us? The question even makes me uncomfortable because while I support a yes to this. I can’t give you proof or reasoning that would stand up to objective scrutiny. In Scripture, God absolutely speaks to people. Sometimes in words, sometimes in action, sometimes through others, sometimes in nature or music, sometimes through dreams, sometimes through feelings. In the Moses and Jesus story today, we have two people who experience God in prayer. The dazzling white is our clue, which goes to show how hard it is to put the actual experience of God into words. If the writers of these stories could do it, they would have. But they hear God, experience God,

¹ Adam Weber, *Talking with God: What to Say when you don’t know how to pray*

encounter God – in what way, we don't know – but God communicates with them. They communicated with God and God communicated with them. Prayer

The great scientist George Washington Carver often prayed, addressing God as “Mr. Creator” One night he walked out into the woods and prayed, “Mr. Creator, why did you make the universe?” He listened for God to answer, and this is what he heard: “Little man, that question is too big for you. Try another!” The next night he walked into the woods and prayed, “Mr. Creator, why did you make man?” He listened and he heard this: “Little man, that question is too big for you. Try another!” The third night he went into the woods and prayed, “Mr. Creator, why did you make the peanut?” This is what he heard: “Little man, that question is just your size. You listen and I will teach you.” Carver invented some 300 ways to use the peanut.²

Most of the time when I hear God in prayer, I hear it in conversation. God doesn't answer my lofty questions or predict the future; God often anchors me in humility reminding me what I can and cannot control, can and cannot know. God brings out of me what is inside and pokes and nudges, making connections, inspiring. God also comforts, breaks me out of negative patterns of thinking, and occasionally graces me with some wisdom about my own life. Now I know I can't say for sure it's God. I have an inner voice too and that is active in my prayer time, but I like to think God guides my inner voice to places it wouldn't go otherwise, and occasionally I do hear a voice that is distinct from the one that typically talks in my head.

² Foster, Richard J. *Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditative Prayer*, p.84

Other times I experience God's response in a feeling, and sometimes not until hours after prayer in an interaction with someone, or some small thing I choose to interpret as a sign. And sometimes I get no response from God at all. Days, weeks, even months. It can be connected to my own lack of attention to God or despite intense prayer efforts. But I've come to accept that that is just part of the life of prayer. Renita Weems, in her book *Listening to God* – which is one of the best memoirs of prayer I've read, remarked about these long absences of hearing from God, "That is faith, I suppose, learning how to live in the meantime, between the last time we heard from God and the next time we hear from God."³

So how can you hear God? First, give God some time and space in your life to speak. Daily quiet prayer time is good, but also don't fill every moment of your day with something – let yourself reflect on your life – journal, conversation with a friend, just sitting and doing nothing. If you want to turn up the receiver on your God hearing aid so to speak, invite God into the things you are doing – let me hear you today God in the work that I do, the people that I meet, the words that I speak. If you do choose to set aside time, I recommend using the same place and the same format; it'll cue your body and spirit to be receptive. If you are in a small group here at church, find a way to work it into your conversation together to answer the question each week – Where did you experience God? Having to answer the question at some point in your week will help you see the ways God may be already speaking to you in a way that normally you can't hear over the other noise of life.

³ Weems, Renita. *Listening for God: A Minister's Journey through Silence and Doubt*, p.174

There is so much more to say about prayer. Everything from tips to give to talking honestly about when you just can't pray. It's impossible to cover it all in one sermon, so instead I want to leave you with something I find myself doing at times when I'm just not feeling God in prayer. I'm too distracted by the voices in my head or just wanting to get on to the next thing and it feels anything but holy, and it's time to just cut my lost time and end it. I say to God – "well, I'll keep showing up." And God responds, "So will I." I've found that, like in most things, if you keep showing up in your prayer life, you get better at it, you go deeper, and the relationship with God that comes from that – it transforms you.