

Living the questions, praying the psalms
3/22/20

Greetings, friends. What a strange period of time to be living in - beyond what most of us could imagine!

It also feels a little strange to be a scattered community “gathering” for worship this way, too. But, with the aid of technology, we’re beginning to figure it out. As Susan said, we’re determined to find ways to stay intentionally close as a faith community - even while needing to intentionally maintain our physical distance.

It’s not every day that Dave quotes scripture to me, but on Friday morning he observed, “There’s a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.” (Ecclesiastes 3:5b)

We laughed ruefully. So true. So wise. But it’s still tough.

Missing face-to-face community

One reason it’s especially tough is because at CMCL we believe in face-to-face community. Genuine smiles and warm handshakes and friendly hugs as we greet one another on Sunday mornings. Expectant mothers, and little ones who skip up front for children’s time while we sing *Come and see*. Older kids and senior youth and adults who read scripture, share music, and welcome us into the simple and beautiful space where we meet.

I especially miss the energy of us being together. The sight of original Lenten artwork created by CMCLers. The sound of instruments being tuned; a hymnal being dropped; young children playing with toys in the back. I miss singing together; simply breathing the same air. Then, after worship, our time in Christian Ed to lean in and meaningfully share where we are in our lives and faith.

In short, I miss what happens when we step away from the busyness of our individual lives and pause to gather together to meet God and each other; to

draw strength, and to challenge one another to continue to live and love and be Christ in the world.

But we're having to pause now in a whole different way, aren't we?

To state the obvious, this pandemic is a really big deal - it's changing everything. How will we handle this crisis? How long will it last and how bad will it get?

In recent weeks, I've been thinking about stories of people living during extremely hard times in history. I'm finding myself quite taken by the question of how others in the past found ways of coping when faced with uncertainty and crisis – their raw human emotions and experiences can be cathartic in a way.

That's what comes to mind today when I consider the Exodus 17 passage (which was last week's lectionary text that I was set to preach on before our regular services were cancelled).

Having fled to the desert to escape being held as slaves, the Israelites were pursued by their captors. After God delivered them from the Egyptians once again, they then faced the very real problems of undrinkable water and no food. Again, God was with them and provided what they desperately needed.

In Exodus 17, they continue on through the wilderness and set up camp, only to face another immediate life-and-death crisis – not a single drop of water to drink. Their understandable response is panic and frustration – expressed in a barrage of anxious demands and fearful questions of Moses.

“Give us water to drink! Why did you take us from Egypt and drag us out here with our children and animals to die of thirst? Is God here with us, or not?”

In turn, Moses demands an answer from God, “What can I do with these people? Any minute now they'll kill me!”

Once again, God remains with the people and acts with them to meet their need. Telling Moses to bring some leaders and his staff and go to the rock of Horeb, God says, “I'm going to be present before you... You are to strike the rock. Water will gush out of it and the people will drink.”

Living the questions and praying the psalms: spiritual disciplines that keep us connected to God and each other

In addition to the reassurance that God was with the people, what I notice and appreciate most about this ancient crisis story is how the people brought their raw questions and authentic real-time emotions before God and each other.

Their example of living honest questions in the midst of hardship strikes me as a kind of spiritual discipline. Perhaps this is not what we usually think of when we think of a spiritual discipline. But living – and naming - our questions in hard times certainly has a long tradition when we consider the psalms; and that feels like a good reminder to me right now.

This Lent, we have been considering hollaways - pathways formed by faithful footsteps across generations. In these weeks leading up to Easter, Pastor Susan and Worship Committee have invited us to choose as our companions the scriptures, stories, and practices that countless seekers and believers before us have chosen.

Praying the psalms is a discipline that has been practiced by people across the centuries. Using these prayers uttered from the core of human experience, people have drawn on the raw language found there to express the full range of their own human emotions and to find strength in all seasons.

Eugene Peterson, writer of *The Message* (the Bible in contemporary language), reportedly enjoyed introducing people to the book of Psalms. When they expressed surprise to find this kind of language there, he would say, “Did you think these would be prayers of *nice* people? Did you think the psalmist’s language would be polished and polite?...”

“Prayer is elemental...It is the means by which our language becomes honest, true, and personal in response to God. It is the means by which we get everything in our lives out in the open before God.” (*The Message*, 910)

Last week, the lectionary brought us the Exodus story – people in crisis reacting in raw human ways and bringing their real feelings before God and each other.

This week, the lectionary offers us Psalm 23 – easily the most well-known of all the psalms. As was true for the desperately thirsty Israelites in the desert, this prayer is a welcome reminder - in the face of our own anxious questions - that God is with us now as well, working with us to provide all that we need.

Being and doing church together looks very different right now; and it's still evolving, so stay tuned. We're all figuring this out as we go along, so we appreciate your patience and the ideas and offers of help we're receiving. Keep them coming!

We also ask that you please let one of your pastors (Susan, Malinda, Amanda, or me) or a member of Pastoral Team (Sue Stoesz, Darrell Yoder, Elizabeth Nissley, Dean Clemmer, Rhea Miller) know of any needs you have. While staff are working from home, we are still praying for you and offering support in new ways.

In addition, I've been so moved and encouraged this week to see and hear about some of the many ways that you all are finding to care for one another, too! In these ways, you are showing that CMCLers are staying true to our core values and continuing to live out our love for God, for each other, and for our neighbors.

Here are just a few examples:

- CMCL's Coronavirus Task Force helped Council and staff sort through all the CDC and other recommendations this week – we are so grateful!
- Susan, Sallie, and others got creative and worked hard this week to share a meaningful service with us – thank you!
- Pastoral Team reached out to many CMCLers – if you are in a high risk group or in need of groceries or other support, please let us know!
- PAX JC researched needs in the broader community and found ways we can help – to get involved see Friday's email with announcements for more details
- So many of you are posting songs, praying, gardening at church (6 feet apart!), offering words of encouragement and hope, and finding ways to connect via Zoom, Google, email, etc. – if you'd like to connect in one of these ways, please let one of the pastors know

So many of you have also mentioned the beauty of spring – another hopeful reminder of God's presence with us in the world.

In this season of both beauty and uncertainty, I'm so grateful for all of you. With God's presence and help, let us trust that we will continue to find our way together.

Psalm 23

In closing, I invite you to join me in praying Psalm 23. (Eugene Peterson's version is included below. At the same time, I know that so many of us grew up with the King James Version of this psalm – so please feel free to say or read that version if it's more meaningful for you.)

Let's pray...

God, my shepherd!

I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
When you walk by my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
Makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.

Thanks be to God!
Amen

(NOTE: All quoted scripture from *The Message*.)