

Isaiah 40: 21-31
Mark 1: 29-39
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
February 8, 2015

At its deepest level, prayer is not something we *do*. Prayer is a fundamental attitude of trust that there *is* a God who made heaven and earth, who has been known and experienced in human history and who has revealed himself completely in the person of Jesus Christ. It is this “in the marrow of the bones” trust which allows a person to weather the storms of life, to be a hopeful presence in the midst of suffering and to communicate God’s presence to others.

Whatever words we may direct heavenward on behalf of or ourselves or others, it is this simple and profound trust that which makes the words *prayer*. This is why, when any act of love and service is the outcome of this basic trust in the reliability of God, that act is an expression of *prayer*.

I say this because many people feel defeated by the idea of prayer. It is something *spiritual* people do. When we say this we mean people other than us. We imagine these people as having a deeper connection with God than we do. We imagine they are *better* at prayer than we are. We imagine these people communing with the Divine every day and emerging serene and untroubled by the world around them. When we try to pray nothing happens. Within seconds we are caught in the whirl of thoughts, reactions and anticipations which feel like the very opposite of what prayer is supposed to be. Then too, we are suspicious of the idea of God answering prayer, as if the almighty God of the universe has time for our petty concerns. We are suspicious and maybe a bit jealous of those who report a personal response from God to a personal request.

For me it is like dieting. I don't like it. I don't do it very well. I don't expect it to work and...big surprise, it doesn't. But boy do I envy those succeed!

So I hope it is good and encouraging news to you this morning to discover that in the Bible, prayer is not a thing we *do*. It is a fundamental attitude of trust in a power far greater than ourselves which is just as much evidenced in the things we do as it is in our moments of quiet reflection.

We witness this truth in the passage from Isaiah. God through the prophet addresses people who have been militarily crushed and sent into exile far away from home. They have lost everything. They are in a foreign land in which they are aliens. Worst of all they are crushed in spirit. Their faith in God has been so deeply shaken it hardly looks like faith any more. We hear their despair in their own words quoted by Isaiah:

Why do you say, Jacob and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the Lord and my
right disregarded by my God?"

Who has not felt this way? This is the voice of one who through bitter experience or ongoing disappointment believes that, if there is a God, he is distant and indifferent. This is the voice of one whose childhood faith has been shown to be an illusion and who feels betrayed and abandoned. It is the voice of one is in spiritual exile from the faith that he or she once accepted without question. We dare not judge these people or dismiss these voices. They have been and maybe are even at this very moment our own. God certainly does not judge or berate his people. Instead through the prophet God pleads with them to remember his power and faithfulness.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is everlasting, the Creator of the ends of the earth!

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and grow weary and the young will fall, exhausted; but those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint...

The Hebrew word translated “wait” means to expect, to hope. It is the attitude of trustful waiting for God’s promise to be fulfilled. Far from being a passive experience, this waiting is very active. It is the active engagement of every day in the trust that God is alive and is *already* at work in a person’s life and in the life of the world. Those who *wait* upon the Lord and who renew their strength are not sitting on mountain tops waiting for something to happen. They *run and walk*. But because of their attitude of trust and the belief that they are renewed by a power greater than themselves, they do not grow weary or faint.

Yet having said this, I do not believe that this renewing power can be sustained without a daily halt to be intentionally in the presence of God. Even the most extroverted disciples need to stop and listen for the still small voice of God’s presence. For this we need look no farther than Mark’s recounting of a day in Jesus’ life. The day begins in the synagogue on the Sabbath where Jesus teaches and casts out a demon. After this he goes to the home of Simon and Andrew for a meal. Upon entering, however he discovers that Simon’s mother-in-law is acutely ill. He restores her to health. That evening people came from all over came for Jesus to heal and teach and counsel. To Mark any way it seemed that the whole city was at the door. We know from the time when Jesus experienced a significant draining of energy when a woman in need of healing touched his robe that Jesus has to be exhausted at the end of the day.

Does he drink a bottle of 5 Hour Energy and get up and do it all again? No! Mark tells us that early in the morning, before anyone was up, Jesus withdrew to a “deserted” place—a place

where he could be quiet and alone. The literal meaning of the Greek word translated “pray” is very close in meaning to the Hebrew word “wait” which we heard in Isaiah. In short Jesus withdraws in order to renew his mindful awareness of the presence of God which guides him and sustains him in his daily ministry.

And so it is with us.

Without an intentional time of quiet listening, how do we tell the difference between the voice of God and the demands of the world? Without taking time out every day, how do we tell the difference between a life powered by the Holy Spirit and one powered by adrenaline? Without a daily withdrawal from the buzz of the world how do we know when we are thoughtfully responding to someone or some situation or simply reacting to external stimulus?

But when we cultivate daily the habit of waiting on the Lord, we begin to realize that *God is* in charge of our lives! We begin to internalize this truth: that *God is able* to supply the renewable energy we need to be hopeful witnesses to his son Jesus. We begin to become evidence to the people around us that *Jesus is* the bread of the life that really is life; and that *he is* the living water which revitalizes our souls! Amen.