

Not only is today the kick-off of our year-long 130th Anniversary Celebration, it’s also the 4th in a 6-week series of messages on the theme: “Ask God Anything.” During Advent, many of you responded to the invitation to share the one question you’d like to ask, if you could ask God anything. The questions we’ve covered so far include: “God, How Can You Put Up with Me?” “Why Do You Tolerate So Much Evil and Suffering?” “How Should We Read the Bible?”

If you are a guest this morning and one of those questions resonates with you, those past messages are on our church website in both video and printable formats. Print copies of the past 3 weeks of messages are also available in the foyer. Several people shared that last week’s message, “How Should We Read the Bible?” was one of the most informative they’d heard about Scripture; one person who heard it asked for some credits to be added to their college transcripts.

This Sunday’s focus is, “God, How Do You Handle My Prayers?” This focus emerges out of a number of questions about prayer: “Do our prayers influence God?” “Does prayer change our circumstances?” “Does God hear prayers of non-Christians: Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, etc.?” “What is the power of prayer?”

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On this celebration Sunday, I can’t help but imagine all of the prayers that’ve been lifted by the faithful of St. Paul’s over the past 130 years! Prayers for a spouse who is about to die. Prayers for a close family member or friend to embrace Jesus as Christ. Prayers that an adult child would escape the chains of drug dependency. Prayers that the youth group would be safe and blessed as they headed out to camp. Prayers for release from sexual temptation; addiction to pornography. Prayers that a husband, wife, child, or grandchild deployed overseas would return safely home. Prayers that physical abuse in the home might cease. Prayers for healing from cancer. Prayers that someone contemplating suicide might hang on long enough for light to dawn again in their lives. Prayers for the healing of a fragile marriage. Prayers that peace on earth and good will towards all might prevail.

More than a couple times there were prayers that St. Paul’s would be blessed with the financial resources to keep the doors open and lights on... Apparently, God responded positively and moved some hearts to give since we are still here! (And are we not REALLY here?)

In the Korean tradition, there’s a form of prayer known as Tongsung Kido where the whole congregation is invited pray aloud, all at once, offering individual prayers of petition or supplication. It’s incredibly intimate, and vulnerable, and powerful to experience this: hearing the cacophony of every voice praying personal prayers aloud in a sanctuary. Today, I’m imagining how our sanctuary might sound if all of our voices were joined together, combined with the pray-ers in the “Cloud of Witnesses” of St. Paul’s over these past 130 years. I imagine that would be a thunderous and glorious sound.

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According to scripture, it is prayer that can lead us into an intimate, vulnerable, and powerful place with God. Can you imagine the moment when one of the disciples built up the courage to ask Jesus, “Would you teach us to pray?” I picture the scene. Jesus is there, praying in a certain place, his disciples watching him for who knows how long (because we know Jesus could pray for a LONG time). I imagine one of the disciples watching and thinking, “How does he pray for so long?” Another’s thinking, “What is he praying about?” Another’s thinking, “If he’s the Son of God, isn’t prayer just talking to himself?” Another’s thinking, “I hope he gets done so we can get some lunch.” But at least one of them is thinking, “I want to know how to do that! I want to know how to talk to God! I want to know how to pray. When he’s done, I’m going to ask him.” And he does.

Notice how intimate, vulnerable, and powerful is the prayer Jesus teaches, “Abba, Daddy, your name is too holy to even speak aloud. And more than anything, it’s your kingdom -- your reign -- that’s needed on earth! In the meantime, just give me enough bread for my hunger today. I don’t need anything else. And I promise to be forgiving of others more than I think they deserve because you forgive me much more than I deserve. And keep me far removed from evil and temptation.”

Truth be told, as I thought about the question this week, I had a startling realization that took me a different direction than I’d anticipated. I reflected on how of all the prayers that are imprinted in my memory, the prayers I remember most are not usually those where I was speaking to God... Rather, the prayers I remember most are when God stirred in my heart while I was quite and still. I remember when I got my call to ministry at age 12; how it shocked and confused me. We read how that happens to many who are called by God. And like Jonah, I did my best to run away...

At a couple of the No Apology Lasagna Suppers we are hosting at our home, people have asked how my wife and I became a couple. Since I’m emphasizing how intimate, vulnerable and powerful prayer can be, I’d like to share about this... Jennifer and I had gone on a couple platonic dates, and, as she tells it, she was alone in prayer when suddenly she saw me in her mind’s eye and heard God say, “I give you this man to love.” Startled, she protested, “But Robb’s not interested in me that way.” She then heard this, “That is not your business. I give you this man to love.” After a few more protests (just as we read of some Bible heroes who argue with God’s call), Jen finally told a friend of hers (who happened to be a minister), “I’m going to marry Robb Fuesler.” Her friend asked, “Have you started dating yet?” This, of course, was something I knew nothing about until something else happened...

That same week I had attended a prayer and healing service at SD-FUMC in Mission Valley. I’d never attended anything like this, but after the message I responded to the invitation for healing prayer. As I was in the midst of a very hard time in my life, I went forward and felt comforted by sharing my concern, being prayed over, and then anointed with oil. I felt good about it.

I went home, went to bed, and woke the next morning... (Now, before I go further, let me say that my faith has mostly been an intellectual journey, peppered with several rich spiritual experiences. That is to say, if I were accused of being ‘Pentecostal’ I would be found NOT GUILTY!) So... I woke the next morning and felt an urge to pray. As I lay in my bed, I felt a nudge to lift my hands, open-palmed toward the ceiling.

Which is something I’d never done before. And suddenly a charge of energy rocked my body. I was physically jolted in the bed, sort of like a seizure. And then I ‘heard’ – though not audibly – I heard these words: “I give you peace.” Unbidden, the face of a woman with whom I had recently shared two platonic meals, appeared in my mind. I lay there stunned. After a while, I called Jen and said I thought we needed to talk... (And, as we joke, it’s been rainbows and unicorns ever since!)

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Tony Campolo, a popular evangelical author, doesn’t mince words when speaking about prayer: “Prayer has gotten a bad name because so many people make prayer into something selfish and stupid.” I agree with him wholeheartedly. Some people talk about prayer as if it is akin to magic. If we say the right incantation, with the right spirit, then our wish is granted. Just this week, my step-brother, paralyzed after he had his spine snapped, was told, “If you just believe, you will walk again.” I fear that statements like that, masquerading as deep faith, sometimes represent a heinous form of self-righteous cruelty. Is there perhaps a healing that God will work for my step-brother that is much deeper, but far richer, than we can ask or imagine?

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This is nowhere near the sermon I thought I’d be preaching when I began to consider this question: “How do you handle my prayers?” I trust I was led in this direction by the Holy Spirit, because while I think God hears and embraces every prayer we utter, the main point of prayer is to give ourselves to God, and to let God speak into our lives and use us for divine purposes that we can barely even fathom.

While I’ve not cited lots of scripture this morning, my sense of scripture on the topic of prayer suggests to me that if God were to respond to the question, “How do you handle my prayers?” God would say something like this: “I love each of your prayers and there is truly nothing you cannot say to me. I would like it however, if you took a little more time to attend to my voice as you pray, because I have some things I’d like to do in and through you if you will listen more closely.” Amen.