

A Living Hallelujah – Worship and Prayer

March 8, 2020

Psalm 95

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed. O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

We entered the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday. It is a sixty-day period leading up to Easter. Lent is designed to be reflective, to focus on our mortality and our dependence on God. We enter Lent with intentionality, desiring a closer relationship with God.

Our relationship with God is like the other relationships in our lives. It takes work. When we are committed to a relationship, we make time to be together, we talk, we listen, we make it a priority. This Lent, we're focusing on spiritual practices that can help us deepen our relationship with God. We're using Adam Hamilton's book *The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life*. We'll talk about acts of service, study, generosity, and witness. These are not only practices Jesus taught us, they are practices he lived out. This morning we're talking about worship and prayer.

Worship at its most basic is our natural response to God's grace. When we worship, we say "thank you" for all God has given us. We say "I love you" for loving me and teaching me how to love myself and others. Worship just doesn't happen in a sanctuary. Worship happens in nature when the waves lap at the shore, when the bird calls, when the trees begin to bud. Nature celebrates God the creator. We too, as God's creation, celebrate God with praise and thanksgiving.

Prayer is part of worship, as is singing, hearing scripture, offering our gifts, and greeting our brothers and sisters. Psalm 95 we heard earlier talks about making a joyful noise to the Lord. I've used dance, poetry, drama, even jazz in worship. Worship is a community practice. John Wesley said we can't fully live out faith on our own; we need to be in community. In worship, we develop relationships based on how Jesus taught us to love others. We carry one another's burdens. We hold one another accountable when necessary. We work together toward a common goal: to love our neighbors and make new disciples of Jesus Christ. In Christian community, we know we are a part of something bigger, something greater than just ourselves.

God made us to need community. We were never meant to go it alone. Over the last couple of months, I have been the recipient of your love and care. From prayers to visits to casseroles to rides, you have taken such loving care of me. Thank you seems inadequate but know I say “thank you” with my whole heart. I couldn’t have made it through without you, each one of you.

While worship is generally an act of community, prayer is something we do individually. I’ve had countless conversations over the years about prayer. “Pastor, I don’t know how to pray.” We tend to think of prayer as something formal, scripted, or poetic. Truth is, anytime we bring God into our thoughts we are praying. It could be as simple as “thank you” or “help me.” Some people have a set prayer ritual. Others pray throughout the day in small ways. I try to pray every time I hear a siren. “Lord, be with them.” That simple.

Prayer is just a conversation with God. At times, it’s hard to connect with God. I went through that when I couldn’t get past the pain and fear at the worst parts of this journey. But we don’t even need to form words. Paul writes that God hears our sighs too deep for words. I was also reminded that even if I couldn’t connect with God, others were praying for me.

I suggested with the kids that we pray five times a day – first thing in the morning, at each meal, and at bedtime. I’m suggesting the same thing for us. It doesn’t have to be complex or take a lot of time. In the morning, pray “Thank you for this day. Use me.” At meals it can be a simple “Thank you.” At night, it can be a prayer of gratitude for the day and a petition for good rest. Simple. It’s a good way to incorporate prayer into our daily lives.

You’ve been given a Prayer Journal that is part of our Lenten study. It is designed to help us pray with intention, to make it a priority. You don’t have to be in the book study or read “The Walk” to use it. We offer it as a way to enter into a deeper, more meaningful prayer life.

We are living in uncertain times. With the spread of COVID-19, we may not be able to gather in worship for a few weeks, perhaps several weeks. That means our prayer life is more important than usual. Through prayer, we connect with God and with each other. Imagine all of praying a lunchtime no matter where we are. Imagine your church family gathered, praying together. Imagine the connection formed as we pray for one another.

Its often said that prayer doesn’t change God, it changes us. It reminds us that we are part of God’s creation, that we are part of something bigger than

ourselves, that we are connected as the body of Christ. Lent is the perfect time to focus on spiritual practices that draw us closer to God. In the coming weeks we'll talk about study, service, giving, and witness. These are all practices to help us walk more closely with God. I hope you'll join me.