

This month we have been going through a series on prayer. In the Christian faith, we believe that we can come to God with cares and worries because God cares for us.

In Psalms 27, King David wrote about his relationship with God and said:

“Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me! You (God) have said ‘Seek my face.’ My heart says to you, ‘Your face, Lord, do I seek.’”

Here King David is writing about the intimate relationship he has with the God who calls David to come to him and seek his face. Seeking someone’s face is to know them. When we are in a close relationship, we speak to one another while looking into their eyes, looking at their faces. We can feel that we can tell who a person is when we look into their eyes. God wants us really to know him. He wants us to seek his face.

And in Hebrews 4:15 it is written:

“With Jesus as our high priest, we can feel free to come before God’s throne where there is grace. There we receive mercy and kindness to help us when we need it.”

Many times, in our weakness, we feel that God is going to be angry at us, that he is waiting to give out punishments and wraths upon us like a stern sky-father-Zeus, but we read in Hebrews that it is not actually so. In Hebrews, it tells us that Jesus Christ, our clearest picture of God, understands our weaknesses, and he wants to help us. He wants us to come to him because he is establishing a relationship with us and waiting to help. He is merciful and kind, and he will help us in that time of need.

Unfortunately, sometimes we try to use God like a genie from a magic lamp. Many prayers are very self-centered. We know this type of prayer, right? Some people have developed a strong reaction against these prayers, and rightfully so, because they sound like they are trying to use God to manipulate the world. But the world is not so simple, is it? Our God desires to have a relationship with us. He cannot be manipulated because he is a person and not a miracle gumball machine, but we can come to him because he is our God, who Jesus teaches us to call Father.

We do not need to patch ourselves up, clean ourselves up, straighten out our lives to be able to pray. We look at Job and some of the angry psalms in the bible and we can see people coming to God just the way they are, an emotional mess crying out to God. However, there needs to be a good balance of humbling ourselves to come before God while we stay true to who we really are. Otherwise, prayer just becomes self-centered emotional venting instead of pushing us outside ourselves toward God and the world. I believe prayer and communicating with God allows us to seek that balance. As we pray “God, may your kingdom come,” we are reminded that there is still so much in us that contradicts his kingdom even as we pray. In Romans 8:26 it says:

“...For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

We have to keep reminding ourselves that we can come to God as we are. We do not have to present ourselves as perfect or especially worthy. We can pray to God and pour out our hearts openly. The Spirit will help us in our conversations with God and will mold us to become a person of God's heart.

Today we read about Simeon. This passage tells us a few things about this man. Luke writes that he was a person who prayed. His prayer has a global scope. He sees the messiah as meaningful to the world. He carried the nations in his heart and had been interceding for them in prayer. He prayed for God's intervention in this world. In his days, the poor and powerless were oppressed and the weak were disregarded. That is a perpetual problem and, when looking at those problems, we can feel that God's salvation is far away. But Simeon believed that God was still doing something in history and prayed with hope that God's plans would include his people and the nations.

We read in verse 29-30 about Simeon's prayer as he took baby Jesus into his arms. He prayed:

"Sovereign Lord now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!"

First of all, this prayer sounds like Simeon has prayed and waited on God for a long time. I wonder how long he has been praying for the salvation of the nations.

Sometimes when we pray, we feel like we have exhausted our words and have prayed the same prayer over and over again. God, how many other ways can I pray this prayer? I have used up all the words and phrases possible to describe the situation and to bring you this petition. There are no more words to keep this fresh, and all the prayers sound like repetition of words. Sometimes we feel like we fall into a pattern and lose our authenticity. We can even hear ourselves before we start praying. I think Simeon's prayer was a long journey.

When I was in high school, our church started to pray for a new church building. This project came out of a desperate need. Our ceilings leaked whenever it rained, and we were using all the pails we had to catch the rain drops. The floors were getting weak, and the bottom line was that the building was really old and could not last much longer. The whole congregation of over 200 people prayed together on Sundays. We prayed during every prayer meeting, and also had a day set apart to pray for this project during the week. This went on for over 20 years.

There was one funny instance. One day, as we gathered in prayer and people's eyes were closed, we heard a loud noise on the roof. The prayer paused and everyone raised their eyes towards the roof. What we saw next was shocking. A big cat was hanging by its paw on the ceiling trying not to drop into our room full of people. He had fallen through one of the soft spots in the roof and made a big huge hole on the ceiling. We all burst out into laughter, but this gave us to a sense of urgency and taught us to pray in a new way. It became a funny

experience we all got to share. It was a good laughter especially when our hearts were becoming weary of praying for the same thing.

What Simeon had prayed for over many years was more than a church building. He was asking for salvation to come to all nations. It was a big request. The world he knew was a world of power and violence, a world of bribery and favoritism, just like our world. But it is written in verse 25 that Simeon was a righteous and devout man, who had been waiting for the consolation of Israel.

It seems like Luke is setting up Simeon to tell us something like a prophet or a wisdom writer of the Old Testament. In this frame, Simeon becomes this picture of the righteous man, the man who loves God and does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scornful (Ps1:1). How do the righteous survive in this world where there are so many people trying to just get ahead and take advantage of us? To live in this world as people of God, I believe it is impossible to survive unless we pray. Unless we have an ongoing relationship with God in prayer and allow God to walk us through life, our faith will suffer and we will not have the strength to continue as a righteous person in a difficult world.

One of the key things Simeon did as a righteous man was to wait. Many Jewish people at this time were ready to jump onboard with a revolution. There were people around the time of Jesus claiming to be the leader that was going to save the nation. Is that what Simeon had in mind? Maybe, but Simeon's vision here in Luke is wider than just beating the Romans. Simeon waited on God. He was looking for something bigger, more beautiful, with a horizon that encompassed the world. He was waiting on God's confirmation and for God to move.

Luke's Simeon was a man of God who could pray for the nations when his nation was in jeopardy. He is portrayed as a man of God who could pray for the nations when people were praying for themselves. Maybe people would have accused a prayer like this of not being patriotic enough. He is praying for the nations, even when a nation like Rome was ruling over his people. Simeon believed that God was going to bring salvation to the nations through Jerusalem. He did not know how, but he believed that Israel will be consoled when God saves all nations, and he waited.

When we look at Simeon's direct context, his world was not a peaceful world. He was living in the city of Jerusalem that had become a Roman ruled city. For the Jewish people, the city of Jerusalem was very important. It was the center of their identity. It was a symbol of God's presence.

Around 160 years before his time, Jerusalem was ruled by the Greeks. The Greeks had brought in their own gods into the temple and desecrated the Jewish sacred place. This was when a priest named Judah Maccabee violently drove the Greeks away and cleansed the temple. In Simeon's time, the Jewish people saw Judah Maccabee as a hero who reinstalled Jewish rituals in Jerusalem. Many people wondered whether Judah Maccabee was the long-awaited savior, and some were even waiting for another revolutionist like him to appear. Maybe Simeon might

have been looking for similar person, but God was leading him and preparing him to meet Jesus. Jesus, we know, is a very different kind of messiah, probably one that a person like Simeon would not expect.

Israel had not been a country for almost 500 years. What Simeon was praying for was very contradictory to what was happening. It must have been traumatic for generations of Jews to watch power clash with power, one set of foreign overlords be replaced by another, and many innocent lives lost in between. Simeon's prayer, one might say, was too big, and too unrealistic. It seemed impossible. How does salvation of any kind come in a world like this? Many believers who prayed with Simeon passed away and the prayer of salvation for the nations did not come to fruition yet. When we pray for this world and are reminded that we are such a small tiny dot on the spectrum of history, sometimes we feel that our prayers for the world seems insignificant. People have prayed for similar things like world peace, and they have passed away, and we feel like we too will pray and will soon pass away without making much differences. But I believe when God gives us a specific context, he is giving us that context to relate to him from there. He will hear us, and even in our insignificance, he will come to us and walk through that time with us. So no prayer is lost before God. We may not see it answered, but it is not lost. In our insignificant intercessions, we might be taking on the work of preparation with God for the next generation.

I want to come back to the story of praying for the church building. One of the most difficult things for me about this prayer journey was to say goodbye to the people who started the prayer and led the building project. They were called back to heaven. They were the ones who could envision its fulfillment. They were very passionate in their prayers and in their giving. The building project had layers and layers of complicated components, there were city government negotiations, loans, and at times it seemed impossible to stay in the same city, but these people believed that God was preparing a place for us in the that city. As the years passed, we had to say goodbye to many leaders who started this project. Many said the same thing before they died, that they wished they could stay to see the church built. But when they had to go, they rejoiced in the promise that the younger ones will receive the building one day. And that was true. The new church was opened a few years ago and stands in the same city, Funabashi today.

I wonder if Luke was expressing a similar feeling through Simeon's prayer. Generations of Jewish people had been waiting for the messiah. Generations of people had been suffering under foreign rule while praying for God to do something new. People who loved God and prayed for God's salvation of the nations with Simeon went back to heaven without seeing its fulfillment. But their prayers, their relationship with God, the passion they had to see God do something new, was kept alive by their devotion. Luke is able to draw on this tradition and point toward Jesus because so many people kept praying and hoped through hard time. They had done their part before God and humans.

My heart is greatly moved when I read what Simeon said in verse 29.

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples...”

You know, when we think about how we are able to worship God in a church, I believe we are standing on Simeon’s faith who could pray to God for such a big prayer when his environment was not promising at all. In the days of violence and rampant injustice, a God-fearing person prayed for the nations including you and I to see God’s salvation. Simeon holds baby Jesus in his hands, but we have been able to receive Jesus in our hearts as our savior. We get to see God’s salvation through the cross. What a privilege we all are given today. We are standing in a long line of intercessory prayer and people who have hoped even when hoping seemed ridiculous.

And the inspiring thing is, when Simeon prayed, he may have envisioned a different kind of savior who is powerful and would rule the nations in peace. He may not have pictured Christ who dies on the cross. But the important thing about prayer is that someone had asked and communicated with God about the needs of this world and have interceded before God. The savior given to the nations was not just about God sending good things to us. It was also about humans having partnered with God in asking and praying and interceding that it has become a beautiful two-way stream of communication. In prayer, we are led to know God’s heart, but we are also helped in the understanding of ourselves. The Spirit reveals to us the inner desires of our hearts, and he also points to our weaknesses. When we pray, God speaks to us and shows us so many things including our hearts to be able to receive his answer.

From retrospect, we cannot say to Simeon, “Your request to God was too big,” or “You are not the right person to receive such a big answer from God,” right? This minor character in the Gospel of Luke walks on and off the stage to point us to a hope that is continuous with the hopes of his own people. He has a small role, but he participates in the story of what God is doing.

If so, can we remind ourselves that it is okay to pray outsized prayers and no person is too small to receive an answer from God. When we receive an answer, though, we may receive an answer that is different from what we had expected, and sometimes we feel that God is distant. But let us be encouraged that God actually loves us and wants to bless us. Everything that God does for us, it is coming from a loving Father’s heart. God reaches toward us in Jesus and this God has initiated the relationship, wants to commune with us, and Jesus taught us to call him our Father.

In verses 27-28 it says:

“And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, (Simeon) took (baby Jesus) in his arms and blessed God...”

One of the privileges of the journey of prayer is the intimacy with God. When we pray and journey on with God, God shares himself with us. He knows us very well and every little thing in our hearts is visible to him. As much as we start to understand what pleases God, when we

communicate with God and allow him into our lives, He also brings joy to us. I believe it was in this intimate relationship that Simeon was promised to see the messiah, the salvation that God would provide.

So, when Jesus was taken to the temple courtyard by his parents, Simeon was also led there, and he knew that this baby was special.

I must say, in proportion to Simeon's big prayer of salvation for the nations, the answer to his prayer was a little tiny helpless baby. If I were the one in the courtyard and was told that this baby was the grand savior, I might have raised my eyebrows.

Furthermore, the baby's parents were offering a pair of turtledoves to God. This type of offering was done by the poor people. Is this baby really going to survive as the promised one? Or is this the right person we are looking for? God, are we mistaken? It is easy to jump on the revolutionary bandwagon of a bellowing Hercules with a sword, but it is hard to get excited about a baby. Are we looking at the wrong person? But Simeon raised none of these issues. Luke tells us that he was led to bump into baby Jesus, he knew that this was the baby, and he was filled with joy.

I believe this is the greatness of a life of prayer. When we have prayed to God and have conversed with God thoroughly, we are also prepared to receive his answer. When we receive confirmation from God, and we know that He has answered, we do not need to have everything played out in front of us. There is a sense of peace that comes to us.

This is a very short episode and we are not told much. In the courtyard, Simeon was given confirmation that this baby was it, so he believed and gave thanks. He did not even feel the need to be there for all of what this baby was going to do. He just received God's promise with joy and concluded that his part had come to an end. He was even ready to be taken back to heaven. When Simeon held the baby, he was receiving the fulfillment of the salvation of the nations. He held the baby and in faith received what he had asked for in prayer.

In Hebrews 11:1 and 13 it says:

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... "

The writer gives us many examples of people who lived by faith, and then goes on to say in verse 13:

"These (people who lived by faith) all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but have seen them and greeted them from afar..."

We looked into the prayer life of Simeon and saw how intimately he was able to walk with God. This intimacy with God is amazing. Do we also wish we could have this communion with God?

It is an amazing blessing to know that God hears us. He hears us with a Father's heart. He cares for us and is calling us to come to him. He wants us to seek him wherever we are in life. He is waiting for us to open up our hearts to him. He wants to have a deep relationship and share

with us the things that are in his heart. Isn't this a blessing to have a God who would walk with us in life and would help and guide us all the way, even when things do not work out the way we imagined they would? This is the God who we pray to, and prayer is the constant communion with him.

When we walk with God in prayer, and as he shares with us the things that are in his heart, sometimes he calls us to partner with him in something that can be overwhelmingly big. But when he shares with us and gives us a portion of his burden to carry, let us be encouraged that God will be there to carry it with us. Whether it will be a long journey of prayer or a shorter one, the Holy Spirit will help us to pray and walk through the path with us.

Our series on prayer ends this week, and from next Sunday we will be entering into the season of Advent. It is an appropriate time to look back and give thanks to God for all those who have prepared the way for us to receive Christ. Let us give thanks to God for answering their prayers generously, even to the extent of giving us His only Son, Jesus Christ. And finally, let us also consider praying for and taking up our share of burden for this world for the generations to come. We are given a particular context in this world, and there is a share only you and I can pray for. If we are new to prayer, we can start by asking the Holy Spirit to help us to pray, especially to be able to pray from our hearts.

If you feel like you could use some assistance, pastoral team will be around so please feel free to ask Lorne, Lee or me.

God is calling us to seek him, to come and seek his face. Let us come before God with our hearts open to pour out and our hearts open to receive.

Benediction:

“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever.” (2 Corinthians 13:14)