

"Where'd You Go?"

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - Psalm 22-1-6, 16 NEW TESTAMENT LESSON – Matthew 26:36-46

Since the beginning of January, I've had two standing appointments on my calendar. One at 6:45 a.m. and the other 5 p.m. Both appointments said Devotional Time. Each day like clockwork my Smartphone would flash me the appointments. Now, I wish I could say that each day like clockwork I had my devotional time, but I can't.

Last Wednesday, however, I changed the morning appointment to simply say "Christ," and the evening appointment to say "God." Having shifted the focus from *my* Devotional Time to keeping an appointment with God, I've found that, instead of it being one more thing to pass by that day, it's all of a sudden somehow a little harder to neglect.

From *my* – *your* – devotional time to God's appointment with you – with me. Just semantics? Maybe. Is there any difference? Maybe. Maybe what we say and how we say it has a relation to what shows up in our lives – a little extra time to devote to God, or whatever else we might pray for. Maybe that word "Christ" on my calendar, that word "God" is more than just a word. Maybe it's a form of prayer. Prayer is making our hopes and dreams and intentions known to God, breathing life into them for us and for others. I know, for example, that telling you about my daily appointments with God somehow makes what I know and desire in my heart take on a deeper richness in my life. And who among us doesn't want a deeper, richer relationship with God?

One way to develop a deeper, richer relationship with God is to have a plan – like scheduling it in your planner or calendar. Kind of like having a divine *calling plan* that gives you "extra free minutes" to speak with God. In all the ways that we can grow in relationship to God, the one common element is speaking to God in one form or another.

We can hear all about God, even witness miracles, but unless we give voice to our faith it's muted. Hearing *Isn't* Believing, Seeing *Isn't* even Believing; but speaking, *Speaking* Is Believing. Speaking is active – it takes something of us – while hearing and seeing are passive – they happen to us whether we like it or not. And we get to shape our speech, which in turn, has the power to shape our world.

In today's Old Testament Lesson, the Psalmist shapes his world through a lament to God, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Even when the Psalmist no longer sees or hears God in his life, he still holds God as the one to turn to, certain that God cares, and that God has a plan.

Jesus, upon his death, gives voice to the very same belief: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” (ē' lī • ē' lī • lah-muh • sabok-tanee) – which is the same phrase that the psalmist uttered, but in Aramaic. Jesus takes the doubts and fears and frustrations and disappointments of his own death and shapes them into a faith-statement that puts God at the top of his life. He uses his last breath to turn to God, to breathe life into his faith in God, that his faith might breathe life into us. Sometimes the most honest prayer is the one where we turn to God and say, “Where’d You Go?” But even at such a time as that rarely does one’s faith become a matter of life and death for us. Mostly, our decisions about our faith are questions of convenience and priorities. (In our video clip today, Grandpa Nathan’s priority was to spend time in prayer, even if it was awkward for his granddaughter. And God used that faithful-yet-awkward moment to begin healing a fractured relationship, to breathe life and hope into a dead-end family squabble.)

Coming to church on Sunday is not always convenient, spending time in prayer is not always our top priority, serving in the community takes time away from “chill-laxin” at home or hanging with our friends, visiting someone in the hospital or a care facility can be a downer for some people. But each of these actions gives voice to our faith and belief in God. Each of these actions becomes a prayer to God. Our actions give voice to our beliefs.

Kathleen Norris in her book “Amazing Grace,” says, “Prayer is not doing, but being. It is not words, but the beyond-words experience of coming into the presence of something much greater than oneself. . . . Attentiveness is all; I sometimes think of prayer,” says Norris, “as a certain quality of attention that comes upon me when I’m busy doing something else. When a person – friend or foe – suddenly comes to mind, I take it as a sign to pray for him.”

Under Norris’ definition, prayer is all about attentiveness (turning our attention – and intentions – toward God; or toward another human being, or the world, or ourselves, or a fear or concern or situation in relation to God). That’s *how* we pray. Easy enough. The real question is *when* do we pray? According to Norris, we pray “when a person – friend or foe – . . . comes to mind.” We can pray any place and any time.

Not a bad model for prayer. *Prayer is turning our attention and intentions toward God*, whenever someone or something comes to mind, wherever we find ourselves. Now doing that would put our faith to the test. If everyone turned their intentions toward God, can you imagine the peace and wholeness that would envelop the earth?!? And all it takes is practice; a faith practice such as prayer.

What are some of the ways we can pray?
Where are some of the places?

A parent was teaching his 3-year old daughter, Caitlin, the Lord's Prayer. For several evenings at bedtime, she would repeat after him the lines from the prayer. Finally, she decided to go solo. The father listened with pride as his daughter carefully enunciated each word, right up to the end of the prayer: “Lead us not into temptation,” she prayed, “but deliver us some E-mail. Amen.”

You laugh, but I actually found 374 apps on my Smartphone to help people pray more. Unfortunately, most of them seemed useless. Or maybe fortunately they seemed useless,

because that turned my attention away from my Smartphone and back to God. We don't need a fancy device to help us pray. We just need to do it. *Prayer is something that can be done by anyone*, and I know a lot of you do it. We pray all the time, sometimes without even knowing it. In this way, prayer becomes a part of our lives. One of the more popular times for prayer is while exercising. Some people pray while jogging, others on their Nordic Track or treadmill. Music and the arts also help spark prayers in our hearts, whether it's classical or contemporary, Bach or K-LOV 97.3. Some people pray while they work, while for others prayer *is* their work.

An anthropologist (Susan Guise Sheridan, at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana) studying the skeletal remains of a large monastic community from fifth-century Jerusalem found that the monks shared several traits: they were robust, well-nourished men; lived on average into their 40s; and all had bad knees. Turns out that for monks, prayer is an occupational hazard.

Thomas Merton began his prayer life polishing floors and scrubbing dishes while waiting for acceptance into the Order of Gethsemane, which is headquartered in Kentucky, if you didn't know. But most of us aren't cut out to be monks. We live life, in what is, comparatively speaking, the fast lane. And that's okay. In his book, "Prayer, the Mightiest Power in the World," Frank Laubach, invites us to send out what he calls "flash prayers." Passing someone on the street that looked upset or troubled, Laubach would silently pray, "God help that man." He offered prayer such as this in any moment of the day – whether seeing a beautiful sunset or selecting fresh vegetables at the store. And he encourages *us* to pray like this throughout the day, when waking up in the morning, while taking a shower, and in all the odd moments of the day. Now these shouldn't be meaningless, trite, forgettable prayers offered throughout the day. "Flash prayers" and all *prayers in general are designed to have an effect* – and by their very nature they do.

According to Dr. Harold Koenig, associate professor of medicine at Duke University and the country's leading authority on faith and medicine, academic research shows that prayer has beneficial effects, and this is especially true for the person doing the praying. Hundreds of studies published in mainstream medical journals show that people who attend religious services, pray and read scriptures live longer;

- are less prone to depression, suicide, alcoholism and other addictions;
- have lower rates of cancer, heart disease and other major illnesses; recover better from sickness and surgery; and cope better with chronic illness.

Now, you might think that's kind of one-sided – all these benefits for the person doing the praying. But actually, all people benefit from prayer, both those doing the praying and those prayed for because God works through prayer. By giving voice to your faith, by showing the world that we know God is active in our lives and cares about our future, we breathe life into a world of despair. And in doing so, we invite people the world over to do likewise.

By turning our attention and intentions toward God, whenever someone or something comes to mind, wherever we find ourselves, we become a channel for the peace and wholeness that God is sending throughout the world. And all it takes is practice; a faith practice, such as prayer.

Will you pray with me now?

Almighty God, who gives us the gift of prayer, we thank you for the voices of the prophets of old, through which you continue to speak to us and enliven our faith. Allow our words and actions to be prophetic still, as you breathe new life into this church and its ministry to the world, through our prayerful intentions turned toward you. Amen.

PASTORIAL PRAYER

God of compassion, we turn to you on behalf of all who cry out to you day and night, yet hear only silence, who search for your presence with them, but have felt nothing, who come to you in their pain or suffering, yet still long for your healing touch.

In your holiness, you have blessed the faithful for centuries. You have been with us, too, since our births, granting us fullness of life. Each morning we witness the miracles of nature, of the rising sun, of the budding leaves. In the faces of our loved ones, we find friendship and nurture. In our communities you bless us with resources to share.

Yet many of us still need deliverance. Many of us feel surrounded by monsters too fierce to conquer alone. Many of us fear that our bodies will melt or our souls will shrivel up if we do not sense your presence. We weep with those who weep ... because of hungers, spiritual or physical ... because of pain too strong to bear ... because of grief that threatens to overwhelm and pull under ...

God who knows our deepest needs, as you have saved your people in the past, deliver us. Grant us the strength that comes from crying out to you, the hope that even when we cannot sense you, your healing love is at work. Give us voices to sing your praise once again, that all may know of your abundant mercy, even as we pray together saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.