

Living Prayer
Week 2 All Times, Places and Circumstances
March 4, 2018 Pastor Roger Barkley
Congregational Church of Northridge

Earlier this week, I sent a prayer request to our Prayer Team and to some others because our church environment felt like chaos.

On Wednesday morning I walked in to the sight of puddles of water all over Fellowship Hall, the kitchen and our offices.

As it turns out, our roofer had not put the final touches on his job by sealing all the seams, and so the Tuesday rains found their way through.

And that comes on top of several weeks of our being without gas for the furnaces and hot water during the coldest weeks of the year – so it felt out of control.

Often when a person or a church is being faithful or is on the verge of a breakthrough, they find themselves under attack.

We had just begun a successful advertising initiative because we want to share our ministry with our neighbors – and it was getting a strong response.

Many more people had visited our website, Facebook and Instagram pages than ever before.

And after months of prayer and careful searching, we have called a woman we believe will inspire and grow our youth ministry.

In addition, Cross Culture Church has launched a major outreach at the CSUN campus that begins this week, West Valley has a new minister who's getting things hopping in that congregation, and so keeping our facility cold, damp and uninviting feels like an attack.

As I sat down to prepare today's lesson as part of our series on prayer, this seemed like the right place to begin.

How do I pray when my world feels under attack or out-of-control?

Maybe some part of your life feels unmanageable: a relationship, your job, your health ... or maybe you feel like you are being jerked this way and that.

Psalm 46:10 tells us where to begin: *Be still and know I am God.*

There are two commands in that passage.

First, be still.

You know what my first instinct is when life swerves off-course?

“Do something!”

You know, “Fire, ready, aim.”

I’ve made some big mistakes when I’ve reacted instead of considering a constructive response.

But that not only leads to hasty mistakes, it also perpetuates an atmosphere of confusion and chaos.

In the movie, *Beyond the Clouds*, an archaeologist hired some Inca tribesmen to lead him to an archaeological site deep in the mountains.

After they had been moving for some time the tribesmen stopped and insisted they would go no further.

The archaeologist grew impatient and then angry.

But no matter how much he cajoled, the tribesmen would not go any further.

Then, all of a sudden, the tribesmen changed their attitude; they picked up the gear and set off once more.

When the bewildered archaeologist asked why they had stopped and refused to move for so long, the tribesmen answered, “We had been moving too fast and had to wait for our souls to catch up.”

So, first, be still.

Make a space, find some quiet time ... even if you don't feel like being quiet and being still.

Do the breathing exercises we've talked about, read a devotion ... be still.

Find your calm center where you connect with the Holy Spirit.

Then, the Psalmist says to remember who God is.

The way you characterize God will determine much of how your life goes.

If you see God as cold and distant, then you'll not naturally turn to Him or trust Him when troubles strike.

If you see God as a harsh judge, then you'll live a guilt-ridden, rigid life ... probably trying to hide your real self from God – and even from yourself.

But ask any politician and they'll tell you that the cover-up usually leads to more trouble than the original sin.

Be honest – reveal yourself to God so that He can go to work healing you.

Revealing your feelings is the first step to healing.

But that is hard if you see God as a judge who is out to get you.

But if you see God as a partner, the co-creator of your life, then you'll turn to Him regularly and easily ... and your prayer life will really take off.

Remember who God is.

Remember God's promises.

Remember who scripture says God is.

So, start your prayer, as best you can, by mentally, emotionally and spiritually aligning yourself with God.

That way you're stepping into the shared space with God – you're on common ground so you can pour out your heart to God, so you can hear God, and so you can be nourished by God.

Romans 8:9 Nevertheless, once the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead lives within you he will, by that same Spirit, bring to your whole being new strength and vitality...

Be still and know I am God ... be still and know that the life-giving Spirit lives in you.

I know that sometimes it doesn't feel that way.

Maybe life is chaotic and you're feeling overwhelmed.

Maybe you are ashamed by some compulsive behaviors and addiction.

Maybe you are weighed down by regrets, self-doubt, or fear.

But the truth is that you were born as a child of God, and sometimes you just need to be reminded of that.

No matter who you are or what is happening around you, you are a beloved child of God; you belong to the family of God whose members are like your cheerleaders.

Romans 8:14-15a All who follow the leading of God's Spirit are God's own sons (and daughters). Nor are you meant to relapse into the old slavish attitude of fear—you have been adopted into the very family circle of God

How do you grasp that reality when you're feeling stressed?

Kerstynn brought her two puppies, Winnie and Lulu, with her from Georgia.

When they first arrived in this strange house they were anxious and easily startled.

But within a few days they relaxed as they realized they were being adopted into our larger pack.

They are all over the place because they love to explore, but sometimes they sniff around behind a door and inadvertently push it shut.

The first time that happened, they were both shut into a dark bathroom, which must have been a scary experience for them.

They must have sat there in the dark for a half hour or so, not making a peep until somebody figured out where they were and opened the door.

But now when that happens they know that can let out a single, sharp bark and someone will come running to open the door and let them out.

They may even get a “poor boy” and a scratch behind their ears.

They have no fear of running around, even into dark rooms, because they know that they’ve been adopted into our family, and we can be trusted to love them, care for them, and rescue them from dark rooms.

That is just what Paul is saying: *you’ve been adopted into the very family circle of God.*

God not only loves you, He is looking out for you.

You can tell a great deal about someone’s image of God and their relationship with God by the terms they use for God in prayer.

For example, “Lord God on Your heavenly throne” indicates not only a formal relationship, but also a distant one, like someone asking for a bank loan, or giving a legal deposition.

On the other hand, Paul describes an intimate relationship.

The Old Testament has a few references to God as father, but Jesus took that understanding to a whole new level.

Not only did Jesus refer to God as Father, he also used the personal term *Abba* for father, and Paul invite us to do the same.

Romans 8:15 ... *and you can say with a full heart, “Abba, daddy, my Father”.*

Of course, we are always using metaphors to describe God because God is beyond knowing, but from beginning to end, the Bible insists that God is personal.

God longs for relationship, which is why we are created in God's image, and why prayer is woven into our DNA.

Yes, in fact God is beyond knowing, beyond any name we can give, but God is personal.

And God asks for our passionate connection – described in the translation by saying “with a full heart.”

God is the majestic “King of kings” and the “Lord of lords”, but also more.

We've talked about all this before, the “and both” nature of God.

God is the transcendent, all-powerful Creator of Heaven and Earth, and also the immanent presence that is closer than our very breath.

So, when Jesus said, "This is how you should pray," he said, (Matthew 6:9) "You should call God 'Father.'"

Now, for the past three or four decades there has been much discussion in mainline churches about whether to use masculine references for God.

Being sensitive to the sexism in society – and especially in the history and hierarchy of the church – some have entirely removed gender-specific terms for God.

The UCC hymnal, for example, replaced every mention of “He”, “Him, and “Father” with “God”, and the word “Kingdom” with “Reign”.

I was on-board with that for a while, but I came to realize that it is hard to have a personal relationship with an impersonal God.

Some have rightly pointed-out that the biblical narrative took place in a patriarchal world that naturally used masculine characterization for God, but that we are moving beyond that, and so should our language.

And some have added to that that they've had difficult – even abusive relationships with their father figures, so calling God “father” has created distance rather than closeness for them.

On the other hand, Vivienne, who was raised by an extraordinarily violent and abusive father, says that the first healthy relationship she's ever had with a male was with God her Father.

Through God she learned what a strong, but caring and compassionate, man can be.

God taught her what it means to be a caring father.

Some have said we should call God “Mother” - and there certainly are feminine images of God in the Bible and early Christian movement, most of which was repressed or erased by the early church patriarchy.

But characterizing God as Mother has problems of its own, not the least of which is that some of us had troubling relationships with our mothers.

Some of our mothers were crazy, controlling and abusive, and some had been so beaten down that they became damaged and submissive.

So, substituting feminine imagery for masculine imagery, alone, doesn't solve the gender image problem.

And some have said that we should use the inclusive “Mother/Father God”, or “Heavenly Parent”, which feels correct, and may be the best we have, but again is not fully personal, and even a bit contrived.

All of those names for God have validity, but they all fall short because, ultimately, we are trying to describe the indescribable.

OK, maybe your father wasn't a very good father – but God isn't like a human father.

God is our perfect Father, strong, caring, close, considerate, consistent, and capable.

So, it is with that foundation to our prayer that we turn to God.

What do you say to God?

In your own words, tell Him what's happening, what you are feeling.

“Father, I feel over my head right now. My boss wants me to work on Saturdays and we sure could use the money, but my wife and I want to spend more time together.”

You don't have to wait until there's a problem.

You can just check-in.

When I walked into a flooded church last week, I went to my office and became quiet so that I could sense that God was there with me.

Of course, I didn't need to summon God, I needed to be aware that God is always present, even in a damp, smelly office.

“Father, I need your help. We've been without gas for three weeks, our new roof is leaking. Look, this is your church. I'm frustrated, I'm angry at the contractor, I'm not sure what to do. I need you to step in.”

Sometimes we don't even know what to say.

Romans 8:26- 27a If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves....

So, here's the deal.

This week, practice coming to God by beginning your prayers with a minute to visualize yourself as a member of His family.

God is the caring, compassionate, capable head of the family – and God will look out for you.

You can even say, “Abba, daddy, thank you for adopting me out of the cold world and welcoming me into Your family. In this moment I know that you care for me,

you are capable and wise – and so right now I need to talk to You about what’s going on.”

And go from there.

And when you finish your prayer, say something like, “I know You love me and know what’s best for me, so I want to hear from You.”

And then be still.

And let God be God.