

While Praying

Luke 9:28-36

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Abraham Lincoln said this: “I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day.”

I’m not in the habit of comparing myself to Abraham Lincoln, as I would too often be in the unflattering end of that comparison, but boy oh boy do I know what he’s saying here. It has been a week, several weeks really, well, maybe a couple of years, or maybe longer than that, where I feel daunted and dismayed, fearful and timid, overwhelmed and snowed under, by the amount of pain and trouble in the world. I’ve felt Lincoln’s insufficient wisdom. I’ve felt that I had no where else to go. I expect you have too. And it’s not just an experience of the past few years, but a repeated experience over a lifetime.

Though I don’t think we often want to make this comparison, Jesus felt all that, too. Jesus turned to prayer throughout his life. The Gospels don’t always tell us why, but they tell us that he prayed. And it wasn’t just for show. It was real, driven by the conviction that even within his divine and human self, he didn’t have the resources he needed. I’m not completely comfortable saying that. It seems like Jesus should be sufficient and confident and have all that he needed to face each day and save the world. But then we overhear Jesus’s agonizing prayer in the garden—take this cup from me, but not my will but yours be done. We hear his prayer on the cross—Father forgive them, for they know not what they do. We can’t ignore those prayers and pretend like they didn’t happen in order to protect or preserve our understanding of Jesus as perfect and whole. Jesus needed help. Jesus’s own inner resources were insufficient to meet the challenges that he faced. Needing help is never described or portrayed as sinful, though. It’s just a part of the human condition.

Luke stands out among the Gospel writers as portraying Jesus in prayer more often than any other. Jesus prays at crucial points in his life and ministry. Today’s passage is one instance, but let’s take a quick look at the others. A few weeks ago, we read about Jesus’s baptism (3:21). While he was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven. All while he was praying.

A few chapters later, Jesus goes out alone to pray all night and comes down

the mountain to call the disciples (6:12). Just before our reading today, Jesus was praying and the disciples were with him. He said “Who do the crowds say that I am,” and Peter answered correctly “The Messiah of God.” That answer will be confirmed in the Transfiguration, which comes next. We’re going to come back to that.

In chapter 11, Jesus was again praying, and the disciples take the opportunity to ask him to teach them to pray. This is the occasion in Luke where we find the Lord’s Prayer. In chapter 22, we get a glimpse of the content of Jesus’s prayers, because he tells Peter he has prayed for him, that his faith might be strong. And then in the garden, just before his arrest, Jesus prays the prayer we mentioned earlier: “Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done.”

In today’s reading, as it opens, Jesus is praying. Luke tells us twice. Matthew and Mark don’t mention prayer as part of the Transfiguration. John doesn’t mention the Transfiguration at all. While Jesus was praying, his face changed, and his clothes were dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appeared. While praying. The disciples, notably, are not praying. They’ve just about drifted off to sleep, yet they get to witness this deeply spiritual event anyway.

So I’m wondering what this has to say to us. Do we enter prayer with the expectation that something miraculous or deeply spiritual, will happen to us, while we’re praying? Do we enter prayer with the expectation that God will check off, one by one, our long list of requests, while we’re praying? Do we enter prayer with agendas of our own and limited understandings of our own, while we’re praying? Well, of course we do. We’re human. We carry all those expectations and hopes and dreams and lists with us, pretty much wherever we go.

But it seems to me that the quite human Abraham Lincoln has something in common with Jesus, in these passages about Jesus praying. Luke portrays Jesus praying when he has the conviction that he has nowhere else to turn, when his own strength and wisdom seem to not be enough. Jesus doesn’t seem to approach prayer with a lot of expectations for it. He doesn’t seem to expect a deep spiritual experience; or the answering of a laundry list of concerns; or really—much of anything. He reaches out to grasp the hand that is already reaching out for him. The need for prayer far outweighs the content of the prayer, or the expectations of the prayer. The turn to prayer is a prayer in itself.

For a week like this, turning to prayer is our prayer. May God transform our prayers into something beyond our expectations, something not on our lists, something that we are shocked to witness.

As a closing prayer, I'm borrowing one from the poet Ann Weems. It goes like this:

On the edge of war, one foot already in,

I no longer pray for peace:
I pray for miracles.

I pray that stone hearts will turn
to tenderheartedness,
and evil intentions will turn
to mercifulness,
and all the soldiers already deployed
will be snatched out of harm's way,
and the whole world will be
astounded onto its knees.

I pray that all the "God talk"
will take bones,
and stand up and shed
its cloak of faithlessness,
and walk again in its powerful truth.

I pray that the whole world might
sit down together and share
its bread and its wine.

Some say there is no hope,
but then I've always applauded the holy fools
who never seem to give up on
the scandalousness of our faith:
that we are loved by God.....
that we can truly love one another.

I no longer pray for peace:
I pray for miracles.

- Ann Weems

