

Intention: Praying for Lent

Lots of people fast from pleasurable things during Lent. Or take up new habits that aim to draw them closer to God. For the next 6 weeks or so, we are asked to make some special effort in our spiritual lives. I don't know about everyone else, but over the past 12 months, I have been putting in a special effort in every part of my life. It has taken so much more during the pandemic to do things I used to take for granted. I can hardly keep up with my basic level of effort - and now Lent is coming back around to ask for *more*? So, I'm not going to ask you to read a whole book every week or get up an hour early to meditate. All I ask is that we use this season of Lent with *intention*.

A few intentions I have: to draw closer to God and to draw closer to my community. For Lent this year, I am not making a physical sacrifice of fasting just out of obligation. I'm not adding any new ascetic practices to my life either. What I am going to do is enter into every day with the intention of drawing closer to God. Every moment of silence: am I listening for God? Every conversation that I find myself in: how is this drawing me closer to my community? Every new morning and long afternoon, every evening spent relaxing with a favorite movie: my lenten discipline is not (necessarily) changing anything I am doing, but to do those things with intention.

My intention for this time together each week is that we learn about and practice different forms of prayer. The past year had been filled to the brim with disruption and distraction. I know I've had to be creative and start new habits of prayer. I've prepared several weeks' worth of practices and scripture passages (and crafts!) to start us off. And I look forward to exploring different ways of praying with you each week. The only prerequisite for this time together is that we have the intention of learning as a church community. There's nothing too simple or too complex for us to explore together. If there's a practice you want to share, or an experience that has drawn you closer to God, or something that has been especially difficult or isolating: this is the community with the intention of drawing closer to God *and* closer to each other.

What about our day to day? What are the small things to be intentional about? There's a sort of badge of honor that my seminary classmates think they are earning by memorizing all the canticles in Morning Prayer. I'm not saying that memorization is bad!! But. There is a point in the memorization where the words on the page become only so many syllables as they are spoken with meaningless monotony. You know what I'm talking about. You've heard it in every elementary classroom as they recite the pledge of allegiance. You might have even heard it in the recitation of prayers in a neighboring pew. Is that any way to treat communication with God? That what prayer is, right? Conversation with God.

The written-out prayers of our Prayer Book don't have to be monotonous. Imagine how many saints in the kingdom of God have prayed these same words...talk about drawing close to community! And drawing close to God? What if God were sitting across from you while you pray? What if God were on this zoom call? God knows when we're tired; God doesn't care if we get a word wrong or speak out of turn. The words are there so that we can join in the intimacy of conversation with God and not be tongue-tied by unimaginable transcendence!

This season, let us be intentional about our prayers, our conversations with God. As a first try, let us read the passage of the gospel of Matthew where Jesus teaches his disciples to pray with words we still pray today: the Lord's Prayer. (In the gospel according to Luke, it is the disciples who ask to be taught to pray. In Matthew, Jesus includes this teaching as part of the Sermon on the Mount)

Matthew 6:5-14 (NRSV)

5 “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

7 “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9 “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

10 Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.