

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Prayer in the Moment

John 11

March 29, 2020

By this time, we are starting to adjust to the challenges of quarantining with our beloveds at home, social distancing, working from the living room, communicating over the internet, shopping for groceries on line, or wandering through bare shelves at the grocery. That doesn't mean we're all happy with it or feel at all at home in this altered landscape of daily life, but we are starting to adjust. Teachers and students are figuring it out.

Parents working from home are figuring it out. Children at home are figuring out their parents. Local restaurants are figuring out how to bring food to the parking lot for loyal customers. People are starting to figure out how to make daily life work through disruption.

There are massive challenges though. Whatever the daily inconveniences to which we can adjust, this crisis is still gaining strength. Yesterday, I learned that a friend of mine for my whole life since we were children—he's young, in good health, is in the hospital now in critical condition with Covid. Some of you have family members and friends around the country and the world in the same situation. The medical crisis is not going away. It is real; it is growing; it is expanding.

There is also a building economic crisis. People are losing jobs, probably many more than even the staggering unemployment numbers report. Calling it an economic crisis names the national scope of the problem and the potential solutions. Individuals and families are doing the distressing math of how long their savings will last compared to their expenses. Some of you are already facing a financial crisis as evidence of a national economic crisis.

Medical crisis, Economic Crisis. It's also a social crisis. Extrovert, introvert jokes aside, we need one another. We need handshakes for greetings, toasts at celebrations, hugs of friendship and compassion. We need to work together and play together, support groups, counselors, neighbors, and friends. Communication may be possible with technology and isn't that wonderful. It can't replace community or communion.

Medical, Economic, Social crises. How are we to pray? How are we to pray when we are haunted by what the virus is doing to lives and communities all over the world. How are we to pray? We pray actively. We pray contemplatively.

On one hand, it is time for serious active intercessory prayer. Psalm 70.1 "O God come to my assistance, make haste to help me." The need is urgent. People are hurting. And so we pray, Lord, come quickly. In John 11, Sisters Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus concerning their brother Lazarus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Is this not a prayer for our time? Lord, my friend, whom you love is ill. Lord, your children here and all over the world whom you love, are ill. Lord, your people are hurting, come quickly. It's a prayer for our time and for all time.

This prayer has been prayed more than any other line in all the Psalms. In the 6th century, St. Benedict prescribed that this should be the first prayer each morning in daily prayer, and it is to this day in monasteries all over the world. “O God come to my assistance, make haste to help me.” A thousand years later, Anglican Evensong began to use this same prayer as the opening for the service at the end of the day. So, for over 1500 years, Christians have turned to this prayer from Psalm 70 every day at the beginning and end of the day. O Lord, come quickly.

Even before St. Benedict, John Cassian pointed his readers to this same prayer saying, “Whether in temptation or calm, whether in fear or reassurance, whether in pain or pleasure, joy or sorrow, there are no circumstances in life when it is not supremely proper to pray: ‘O God, come to my assistance, make haste to help me.’ This prayer should never be absent from our lips.”

It’s not that the words themselves are a magic formula, but that they express our dependence upon God. We remember in prayer without ceasing that God’s strength is perfect when our strength is gone. We confess that we are always dependent on God’s loving kindness, and sometimes, when we are in real trouble, the words come back to us. We know we need God’s direct and immediate intervention. We remember we are not alone.

The sisters sent word by messenger to Jesus, “The one you love is ill.” What they were saying is: *come quickly*. It seems evident from the story’s timeline that even had Jesus left where he was at the exact moment the messenger found him, he still would not have arrived quickly enough to save Lazarus. As it was, after receiving the summons he waited two days before departing. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had been buried for four.

To the disciples with Jesus, his delay of 2 days wasn’t nearly long enough. They would’ve been happy if he’d waited 2 years before going to Judea, no matter the reason. With all the enemies Jesus had made of the religious and political leaders, they all knew that he would not escape from Judea alive and calculated they may not either. When he announced he was going to go there, they said in the defining act of faithful discipleship: “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

For the sisters though, Jesus’ delay, no matter the timeline, was devastating, both Martha and Mary greeted him: “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” Even in her grief, Martha and Mary still believed in Jesus. They still loved him and trusted him in everything, in life and death and life to come--in joy and hope and in suffering.

It’s this tension right here—between praying for God’s inbreaking deliverance and our awareness that we may have to wait for it-- that gives rise to not a competing spirituality for this time, but its complement. If one way of prayer is appeal to God to change the situation, then the other way of prayer is to ask that God to help us be fully present to the moment we’re in when we’re in it, no matter what it is or how long it lasts.

The goal of the contemplative life is never just to get back to life as it once was or to rush into a different future. The contemplative is present to the moment and to what God has to teach and reveal in this moment—not what was nor what will be, but what is. Here. Right now. This is also a prayer for our time. God, let me be fully present to you, to myself, and to all I can learn and be in this moment, in this situation.

Thomas Merton's wisdom, as it often is, is particularly poignant again in this moment. Merton left a busy, active life to enter a monastery three days after Pearl Harbor and died there a month after Richard Nixon was elected President. Those were interesting years. His writing over all those years—sometimes at peace, sometimes tormented—was always from a place of solitude and contemplative prayer has helped countless people navigate their active lives.

Merton writes: "This is what it means to seek God perfectly: . . .to draw all the powers of the soul down from its deepest center to rest in silent expectancy for the coming of God, poised in tranquil and effortless concentration upon the point of my dependence on Him; to gather all that I am, and all that I can possibly suffer or do or be, and abandon them all to God in the resignation of a perfect love and blind faith and pure trust in God, to do His will." (New Seeds, 45-46)

God's will is that all may live, even in death. Jesus came to Mary and Martha's. He went to the tomb and there said "Lazarus come out." And Lazarus came out, brought back to life. Amazing. Most artwork and icons on this story understandably focus on this last part, the raising of Lazarus. Not only is it the dramatic apex of the story in John 11, it would be of any story—that a man buried would emerge from his tomb. It also prefigures Jesus' death and resurrection, and that's looming on everyone's minds now both in the Gospel and as Lent begins to draw us toward the cross.

But some readers of the story have noticed something else. That Jesus can raise in the dead is unusual and amazing, but not out of character for Jesus in the Gospel of John. In John's Gospel, Jesus has command of everything around him—not just water, which he turns to wine, or a few loaves of bread, which he turns to a feast, but also, he has control of intellectual arguments, theological disputes, and his emotions. Jesus, in John's Gospel, is always in control. He even seems to be in control of his own death, saying, "it is finished," and he bows his head and dies.

So, then what stands out here in this story to the artist of the painting we shared this week, and to readers like the insightful preacher Fred Craddock, is after arriving at the scene, and before performing his miracle of raising Lazarus, Jesus weeps. He loses control of his emotions. He is fully present to his grief at the death of his friend, and also the grief suffered by his friends, and in a heart of compassion, to the suffering of all people everywhere who love and lose and suffer. Only an idol is stoic at human suffering or promises immediate resolution to problems. Jesus wept. His tears on that day are for all days; his tears for those people are for all people who suffer. Come, let us weep with him.

Whoever it was in history that came along and decided the verse numbers for Scripture got this one right. Two words, the shortest verse in the Bible: Jesus wept. No explanations, no pronouncements. No theological arguments of the sovereignty of God. No pronouncements about who caused bad things to happen. Fred Craddock writes, "'Jesus wept' is as strong a commentary on 'And the Word became flesh' as can be found."

While we pray for healing, restoration, and relief from the challenges we are facing, let us also be attentive to what this moment has to teach us while we are in it. There will be some joy, and there will be some tears. There is a lot to learn here if we'll just stop and pay attention and look and listen. And be still. Let us be present to this moment.

Through tears that fall and hearts that break and
mountains that must be climbed and valleys that are plunged,
through quiet, lonely hours that become, if given enough time, holy solitude,
through work interruptions by noisy children that remind us what's most important,
through sacrifices that must be made for the good of others,
through decisions that must be made about what we can do without,
through the unlearning of what we've always done that makes space for new learnings for what
is possible,
through the self-less, tireless toil of those who care for the sick and suffering,
everything is teaching everything we need to know about ourselves and about God with us.

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Benediction

May you know the strength of God when your strength is gone.
May you know the presence of God when you feel all alone
May you receive the grace of God when you've decided you have nothing left to offer
May you know the love of God who is with you in this moment just where you are.