

Blessed Wrestlers

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

What is prayer? The simplest definition of prayer is “addressing a deity”. At its most basic form, prayer is merely remembering God IS and then choosing to address God. We are all faced with endless experiences each day, good and bad, which make themselves immediately seen and felt by us. Prayer is merely bringing God into those experiences. That can be easier said than done, which has a lot to do with HOW we think about God. Most significantly, where do we believe God is?

We are taught that God is everywhere, but that is an opaque answer that isn't always very useful. It's especially unhelpful when we've been waiting decades for something that still seems impossible, or when the diagnosis comes in, or we're in grief. Perhaps it is more helpful to contextualize God's everywhere-ness into two different particular places. First, God is with us. God is Emmanuel, closer to us than we can imagine, seeing and experiencing our greatest joys and deepest sorrows because the Spirit of God is within us, living with and through us. There is nothing we can say to surprise God; there is nothing we can express that God does not feel as deeply as we do. Second, God is farther away than we can begin to imagine. We exist within time, locked to this earth by gravity, unable to see what comes next, living out our existence sequentially. If the timeline of human history begins here and ends here, God is here, seeing it all at the same time, understanding which dominoes must fall in which order, identifying synchronicities, making meaning with all the information at once, instead of watching it unfold linearly. God is both further from us and nearer than we can conceive.

Remembering that we are locked within time, while God exists within it and outside of it can be essential for our prayer lives. So much of prayer is about our realignment with the reality of what exists beyond our limited vision. We are consumed and often controlled by

the circumstances of our lives, the state of the world around us, our relationships, and the challenges of living in human bodies attached to a world dictated by entropy. So today we will consider the two reasons we pray. We pray to reclaim an awareness of God, and we pray because God is our help; God is not limited by the things that limit us.

Jesus tells today's parable for these two reasons. Luke says he taught his disciples about their need to always pray (be aware of God), and not to lose heart (God is our help). That phrase "to lose heart" is often translated "discouraged" but the more ancient meaning of this phrase is "to become colorless". Can you relate? Have you ever found yourself so worn out or sad that the color has drained away, and everything feels gray and lifeless? Jesus doesn't want us to experience that type of discouragement. He tells this parable to make the point that God is nothing like the unjust judge who only responds when he becomes exhausted with petitioners' requests. But as many times as we hear this parable, somehow, we still come away thinking our responsibility in prayer is to wear God down with our tenacity. That is not the point of this parable. God's heart is impacted by our circumstances before we ever utter a word of joy or sorrow. God loves us and is with us, feeling our experiences through us. We don't have to bang against the door to be heard. If our circumstances are not changing, it isn't because God has failed to hear or because God's heart is cold.

But that is how it feels to us. So, we bang harder, and our hearts drain of color because we feel ignored and abandoned, like God doesn't understand or care. Which is why, when I say we pray to reclaim an awareness of God, it's about more than our present idea of God. Awareness of God is looking for who God truly is, not just as we think based on how we're feeling at the time. God is not transactional. Friends, we brought nothing into this world, everything we have is a result of God's blessing. We cannot offer anything to God that doesn't belong to God already. We can't strongarm God to alter our circumstances. God may choose to alter things in this world because we ask, but it isn't because we say the right prayer in the right way the right number of times. God cannot be bought by our

sacrifices; God needs nothing from us. God loves us. God wants to walk with us through the challenges of life, not be bought off so we can go back to having the life we want apart from God.

Hang with me through the depressing part of this message. I don't know if any of you missed junior high science class, but the second law of thermodynamics says that everything goes from order to disorder, and that is not something humanity can escape. After our mid-twenties, our bodies begin deteriorating. None of us are getting out of this thing alive. And I'm really sorry for everyone who wants to read Psalm 121 literally, but if we stand out in the sun too long, we will in fact get sunburned. Our lives are not about avoiding the realities of living in human bodies on a physical earth. Our lives are about knowing and experiencing the reality of a God who walks with us through physical decay so we can illustrate spiritual resurrection. As Christians, we seek awareness of God so that our physical circumstances are always viewed through the lens of our greater, spiritual reality. Our help comes from the Lord, the maker of all this stuff. God's more invested in our physical reality than we are. God made it. One day God will reclaim and perfect it physically. For now, Jesus wants us to know God enough so that we can trust the nearness of that love and stay close to it, especially when entropy happens.

To show us what prayer looks like, and offer us good news, is the story of Jacob. In case we still view Jacob through the lens of the Sunday School hero, let us recall the scoundrel who is our dear ancestor. Jacob's entire life was built around deceit. He stole his brother, Esau's birthright and then tricked his father into giving him the blessing of the firstborn instead of Esau. Today we find Jacob traveling back through his homeland after deceiving and then secretly fleeing from his father-in-law. He was no model citizen. In this story, Jacob is terrified of facing Esau again for the first time in 20 years.

God had told Jacob to return to Canaan, and doing so meant facing his brother again. But Esau had become wealthy and prosperous and could have destroyed Jacob and his family.

Jacob trusted God enough to obey, but he was still scheming, separating his family and possessions into separate groups to appear stronger to Essau before their reunion. The night before their meeting, Jacob was a wreck. And what did Jacob need? An awareness of God's presence and that God is his help.

Jacob was finally alone, and, in that space, God became tangible. Emmanuel, God with us, came to Jacob in human form and wrestled with him. Jacob had been wrestling with God his whole life, so God gave him a human form to feel in his hands, to solidify his awareness of God's presence with him. Eventually, God wanted to stop the match, but Jacob wouldn't stop until he got what he wanted, God's blessing. God gave him the blessing and told Jacob he had won. He renamed Jacob, Israel, the one who wrestles with God. It was an affirmation, not a condemnation. The second part of the blessing was counterintuitive. God damaged Jacob's hip, stealing his strength, so that he would remember that human powerfulness keeps us anxiously looking to our own inadequate resources, whereas God's strength is our true help. Jacob would go on to father twelve sons who would become the twelve tribes of Israel. And for the rest of his life, he would have the daily reminder of the presence of God through his constant limp. Jacob is our spiritual ancestor. We learn from him that prayer is wrestling with God and to be a God-wrestler is to be blessed, and to limp.

In Paul's letter to Timothy, he urges Timothy to CONTINUE in faith, later he says to "be persistent". Prayer is determinedly, continually, reclaiming our awareness of God. As long as we are praying, we are directing ourselves towards God who is our help, so that, regardless of our circumstances, we don't lose our color.

May we be a people who wrestle with God, who trust God's love, insist on God's blessing, and claim our weakness as the entrance point for God's strength.