

Out of the Depths

Out of the depths I cry to you, O God. O God, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

Why do we pray? Why do *you* pray? Do you pray? I've had people tell me that they don't pray, or that they find it hard to pray, for a variety of reasons. The needs of the world are so great, and our concerns so small, we don't want to bother God with them. Or we've tried prayer, and nothing happened. Or we can't believe a loving God answers some prayers, while others so glaringly go unanswered. Surely prayers arose from the depths of the Holocaust. Surely prayers have risen from battlefields. Surely prayers rise from people who are being hurt, abused, or oppressed. And terrible things continue to happen to people who cry to God from the depths. At the same time, we have all heard stories, and perhaps they are our own stories, of times when prayers were answered in the most remarkable ways.

Why does God seem to answer some prayers and not others? This problem has led many people to question the effectiveness of prayer and even the existence of a just and loving God. How do you solve this puzzle? Do you pray out of confidence that God answers prayer? Do you pray even though you don't really know if God answers prayer? Or have you stopped praying because you find this question too troubling?

Another block to prayer for some of us arises because we have moved beyond any sense of God as what NT scholar Marcus Borg termed "a personlike being," and we find it hard to address prayer to "the Mystery," or the "Something More," or whatever the numinous has come to mean for us.

But we *do* pray. We pray each Sunday as a community, and many of us pray on the days in between. And I suspect that most of us pray when we are in the depths. It's an entirely natural human response to turn to God when bad things happen to us, particularly when those bad things seem to be beyond our control. We may feel a little shame-faced about asking for God's attention "out of the depths," if we haven't paid much attention to God while we were on the heights. But if the psalmists teach us anything, it's that it's okay to call to God from the depths.

In times of great need, when we are at our most vulnerable, we are more open to God's presence in our lives, precisely because our lives *do* feel out of control and we had to admit that we need help—we can't do this any more on our own. When an illness fells us, a partner leaves us, a flood displaces us, divisions in our country frighten us, climate change brings us to despair, our cries rise to God, "O God, hear my voice!" And the humble admission: "God, I need you," creates an opening where God can begin to work in us, to do whatever we *can* do with the reality of our situation and to find the grace to accept what we *can't* do.

So perhaps one of the best reasons to pray is that prayer can be deeply transformative. This is expressed beautifully in the movie *Shadowlands*, which tells the story of C. S. Lewis, Cambridge professor, lay theologian, and author of the well-loved Narnia Chronicles, about his marriage to Joy Gresham. When Joy is ill with cancer, one of Lewis's colleagues asks him if he has tried prayer. Lewis responds: *Prayer? I pray all the time these days. If I stopped praying, I think I'd stop living.*

And God hears your prayers, doesn't He? his friend asks.

That's not why I pray, Harry, Lewis tells him. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.

One scholarly response to the question of why some prayers seem to be answered while others are not, suggests that God won't intervene in any way that overrides our human freedom. As much as God wants to save us from whatever depths we are in, God won't act until God knows that this is what we want, too. Our prayer, our cry, our call for God's assistance, frees God to provide that assistance. According to New Testament scholar, Walter Wink:

... if we ... take the biblical understanding seriously ... we find that [prayer] changes the world and it changes what is possible to God. It creates an island of relative freedom in a world gripped by an unholy necessity. . . An aperture opens in the praying person permitting God to act without violating human freedom. The change in one person thus changes what God can thereby do in that world.

If we take seriously the idea that *an aperture opens in the praying person* that permits God to act, then we also have to take seriously our role in co-creating the world we inhabit. This makes prayer a sacred act in which we have to think carefully about how we pray and what we pray for. The flip phrase, "Be careful what you pray for," becomes very real. Being careful about what we pray for invites us to explore whatever depth we are in to discover if there are ways in which we might need to surrender, or let go, or consider a new perspective, or take some action we have been reluctant to take.

Bringing our mess to God may even help us to be painfully honest with ourselves about whatever part we have played in creating the mess. After asking God to "be attentive to the voice of my supplication," the author of Psalm 130 goes on to say, "If you, O God, should mark iniquities, God, who could stand?" Honesty in prayer, and belief that, as the psalmist says, *there is forgiveness with God*, creates a safe place where we can look unflinchingly at the places where we need to change and grow. As Lewis said, prayer changes us.

Prayer also changes us when we pray for others, as we do every Sunday. Through our prayer requests, we are made aware of the sufferings and sorrows of others. We may also be brought to understand the commonality of pain, and feel less alone in our own pain. Sometimes prayer encourages us to become more actively involved in the lives of those we pray for. We may realize that they need a visit, or a meal, or a ride to a doctor's appointment. We may find ourselves volunteering at a food shelf, or a homeless shelter, or stuffing bags in the Parish House

for the summer lunch program. Or we may become involved in wanting to address larger issues, such as the many systemic injustices that lead to so much suffering in our nation and the world.

The ministry of prayer invites us into a heart-opening life of caring for others, an ever-deepening relationship with God, the reassurance of being knit together with all those, both here and around the world, who also take up the ministry of prayer, and the joy of discovering how much our prayers have meant to someone we have prayed for. I received this story from a friend of mine, who was part of a prayer chain to which I belonged for several years. She wrote:

Last summer a good friend of mine had a stroke and friends and family immediately asked her parish and several parishes in the city where she lives to pray for her. . . She did not recover completely from the stroke, her peripheral vision was lost, but this was much less damage than had been expected at first. She has told me how much it meant to her to know that she was being upheld in prayer by so many people. How each day her hope and courage were bolstered by this knowledge. Recently she went to a potluck at one of the city churches where prayers had been said for her. Most of the people there were strangers and she introduced herself to those at her table. She wept when one said to her, "I know you. I prayed for you." What a gift to know and be known in this way.

My own relationship to prayer goes through seasons. Sometimes my prayer life feels deep and rich, while at others, like the bones in Ezekiel's vision, it is very dry. And I, too, have struggled with the question of answered and unanswered prayer, finding that the explanation about human freedom is helpful but not enough. Instead, I have been strangely comforted by the ending of Job, the biblical story that is a long meditation on the theodicy problem of why bad things happen to good people. At the ending of the book, God speaks to Job out of a whirlwind. God lists the many wonders of the earth and the cosmos and basically says to Job, You have no idea of what I am balancing and holding together.

In awe, Job responds, *I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.* This frees me to also say I simply don't know why prayer sometimes seems to be answered and sometimes not. But I have had enough experience of the transformative power of prayer to say, as Lewis says, that *It changes me*, and that, in praying, I am following the Way of Jesus, for whom prayer was as essential as breathing.

In our gospel reading, Jesus tells his followers *a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.* And the psalmist who began with such a heartfelt lament— *Out of the depths I cry to you, O God. God, hear my voice!*— ends with the equally heartfelt assurance, *hope in God! For with God there is steadfast love, and with God is great power to redeem.* So pray always and do not lose heart.

Amen.

