

## Pastor Roy's sermon from March 31, 2019

We sometimes think of the time of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament as a time in which the people of God were distant from God—a legalistic time in which sacrifices were God's design for mercy. But much of the Bible written before Jesus speaks instead of a simple invitation to trust God's grace and wisdom and live into the fullness of that life. Sacrifices helped show the way to mercy, helped the people to *imagine* grace, to be assured of God's *love* and *blessing*.

For example, take the Psalms. Many of the Psalms were written during the time of the exile in which there was no sacrifices, no temple—it had been destroyed and the Jews lived in a foreign land. The exile led the Jews to trust and learn that God was merciful even without the sacrifices in the temple. Without the temple they focused on education about faith which focused on prayer with the One God who created and redeems in mercy. They told and recast the stories of faith, of wisdom, of grief, of deep trust in difficult times.

Most importantly, the Psalms make clear that the relationship between God and the Jews is intimate. Every prayer, every emotion matters. Nothing is to be ignored or denied. Without sacrifices, God is still near to them. God is present in their thoughts and emotions—the prayer of the heart.

The exile began to set them free from limiting God's presence to one place, even one land. By the time the temple is rebuilt and enlarged at the time of Christ, some are again becoming distracted by a god who is in one place, rather than prayerfully, within. There is something about large, beautiful buildings that distract us from God's very personal, close presence and mercy. Of course, Jesus sees value in the temple for teaching and people gathering, but he warns against its dangers, too. He invites his people to directly experience God as in the Psalms. The Psalms are painfully, embarrassingly honest prayer. The kind of prayer we need for a real faith.

The Psalmist in Psalm 32 prays, "Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord. Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin. Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble; when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them. . . You are my hiding place; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance" . . . *you* surround *me* with shouts of deliverance!

Here is a God who cares about me and will never abandon me. This is a gut level trust in God who is hidden, in creation, in the way things are. This is far more than what we can understand. This is more than a concept in my head. It is Emmanuel, God with us. Period. And Emmanuel, God with us can only be known in prayer. All of our theological ideas of who God is and how God works. . .become real and are humbled in prayer. Faith results when our thoughts and feelings are pulled together in relationship with the God who meets us in prayer. Prayer which at times is silent and at times full of things to say.

Preaching is a humble experience. Anybody's best attempt to honor God with words is pale indeed compared to the experience of prayer in which we wait for God, with God, in God.

As I have repeated, prayer and concepts do not save us. God saves us—all of us, without fail because God is love. Love never fails.

But the **joy** of being saved is found in God with us in Christ, in Prayer, in peace, in sharing with those around us. If you know joy, you are praying. If you want joy, you must pray.

Jesus knew the freedom of directly relating to God. During his life, prayer set him free to live in the presence of God so that he was free from human rules, expectations, exploitations, and fears. He was free to live with compassion and mercy for the least as well as the powerful. Prayer set him free.

Prayer sets us free from our tendency to see people as good or bad, to see ourselves as deserving or undeserving and rather simply as beloved children of God. Children never earn their parent's love, nor do we earn God's love. The prodigal does everything in his power to distance himself from his father, and the only thing that matter in the end. . .is that he has returned.

We return each day, in prayer. As each of us is able to do, sometimes planned, sometimes on the fly. Prayer is relating to the Spirit of God with total honesty, without fear, because God is love. That's all that matters.

Keep praying, this Lent, keep praying as you are able, that is the discipline of Lent and the whole Christian life. Conversation and silence before God. Amen.