
Praying Our Way Through Troubled Times

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
Epiphany 2 - Year B**

It's been a hard year. Both 2020, and now 2021. Already! There are the public events with which we're all too familiar, as well as our personal experiences with grief, illness, loneliness, insecurity, broken hearts and relationships. It's a troubling, anxious time, and that anxiety can manifest—*has* manifested—itsself in so many unhelpful, downright hurtful ways. My guess is that you are as sad, confused, and weary as I am.

And yet here we are, coming together however we can, searching for a good word—for something that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life can hold onto. And here I am, hoping to speak into this moment, as I'm still sorting out so much myself. So I'm leaning on what I *do* know: God is here. With us. With me, with you, with us and with them, however you define that. God is with this church and this country. And God is good.

How do I know that? Because the Bible tells me so! It's right here, in our psalm today! Psalm 139 is a prayer I've leaned on in good times and bad. In peace and in turmoil. When I've doubted God's presence and when I've felt assured of it. This psalm speaks into and contains all of that.

And it reminds us that the people of God have been here before, and they held onto God and prayed their way through. That is what we're doing today.

The lectionary gives us two excerpts from Psalm 139, but I'd like us to consider the whole psalm, because it's a great resource and a helpful model of prayer in troubled times. It begins, "*Lord, you have searched me out and known me,*" and goes on to offer a beautiful assurance of the creator God's knowledge and steadfast presence. It's quite comforting, isn't it? We all want to be seen, known, and attended to!

But it's also unsettling! Wait, you're acquainted with *all* my ways? Not a word is on my tongue before you know it altogether? Uh oh! That means you heard what I had to say, alone in my car, to that rude driver yesterday. You discern my thoughts from afar? Does that include what was running through my head during that meeting? Double uh-oh! What must you think of me?

Perhaps that's why the psalm goes on to say next, "*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, or make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take wing with the dawn or dwell at the ends of the sea, even there, your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*"

We cannot escape God's presence. And that is a comfort, and that is a challenge. That means that there is nowhere, no way, to hide. That you can't outrun your problems, you can't outrun yourself, you can't outrun God's judgment... or God's love. So you might as well hunker down where you are, and face what you need to, right here.

In light of that intimate knowledge, it's quite something that the psalmist can go on to claim in the next breath, "*You yourself created me, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made!*" Wow. Take a moment and let that sink in. *You* are fearfully and wonderfully made. There is good deep within you; that which is deepest within you is of God, and it is good.

In fact, I believe it's this--God's intimate knowing *and* blessing—that makes the next part of the prayer possible,

the part that's almost never read aloud in church: "*O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—those who speak of you maliciously and lift themselves up against you for evil. Do I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.*" Ouch! No wonder the lectionary leaves this out. It's uncomfortable. It's embarrassing. It's, well, it's not nice!

But it's also true. Don't we all have thoughts and feelings—and prayers--like this sometimes?

It might seem that such sentiments have no place the prayer of good and proper Christians. But they do. If prayer is being fully in the presence of God (and I believe it is!), and offering our whole selves to God, then that includes the parts of ourselves that we don't understand, or don't like. That includes our conflicting values and loyalties. Our darker thoughts and emotions. Our anger, fear, shame, envy, grief, powerlessness.... That includes the stories and experiences, the parts of our history and community, that embarrass or confound us.

Because here's the thing: they're there anyway. We are saints, yes, and we are sinners, too. They are there anyway, and they have more power over us when we pretend they're not. They can seep out—in an explosion on the people closest to us after a day of pretending everything is ok. In acts and thoughts of violence against others or ourselves. In all kinds of self-defense mechanisms and cover-up schemes that separate us from God and others. They are there anyway, and the less conscious, or the more ashamed, we are of them, the more they may be manipulated and cause harm.

Now, I'm not advocating spilling out your emotions and thoughts all over other people, in a "this-is-me, take-it-or-leave-it" kind of way. Or in a way that makes you feel better but leaves someone else holding your mess for you. No, I'm talking about *offering*--entrusting, surrendering it all in a trusting, faithful relationship. The difference here is the presence and love of a divine other, whose judgment is true and merciful. And who knows you already and holds and leads you. Who desires healing for you and for others, and will not abandon you to your darker impulses.

That enables another difference: your own posture of trust, humility, and curiosity, instead of self-justification. Look at what the psalmist prays, right after naming this hatred. "*Search me, O God, and know my heart. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*" The psalmist is seeking protection, guidance, truth, self-awareness, confessing, in so many words, "This is here, too, this hatred. And I don't know what to do with it. Deliver me from evil without, and evil within."

This is the posture we assume in prayer: we offer all of ourselves for transformation and healing—and for communion—in the presence of one who knows us already intimately *and* calls us good.

And that changes everything. As Howard Thurman says, it makes you free at your center. It changes our relationship to those confusing, embarrassing, or tragic parts of our stories. There's no need to hide or rationalize or defend them, because God knows and inhabits them and is at work in them--in us through them, and in them through us. God is shaping them, and us, into vessels of God's light and love. Our job is pay attention and cooperate.

It changes our relationship to others, too. This weekend, we remember and celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, whose centering in God was the source of his vision, and *real experience*, of beloved community. As he was able to claim that he was a beloved child of God who *also* had work to do, he could claim that for others, too: black and white, oppressed and oppressor, alike. And he could strive for change in a way that respected the dignity of all people and interrupted the cycle of violence. King's assurance of God's presence, with him and in this world, anchored him amid the changes and chances of his life and time, *and* freed and empowered him for courageous action.

Yes, prayer changes things. It changes us, it changes our relationships, it changes our world. So let us pray. Let us pray for the sake of healing and transformation. Let us show up as honestly and openly as we can and offer what is truest and deepest in ourselves: our longing for meaning and purpose, for love and belonging, for safety and peace and justice for all people. And let us listen, beneath all the noise, for what is truest and deepest in others, even our enemies. Let us listen for the hurts and hopes and longings beneath all the assumptions, opinions, and differences. Let us hold onto God, who holds us, together. Let us receive God's healing ourselves and, from there, be agents of God's healing for the world.