

Teach Us To Pray
[Matthew 6:7-15; 19-21](#)
February 3, 2019
Rev. Abigail Henderson

Today's reading always reminds me of a time in my life in which I fervently prayed as I had never prayed before.

It was a Friday in late October 2006, and I was a student at Harvard Divinity School. The weather was strangely balmy in Boston. High 50s. Humid. I wasn't even wearing a jacket when I left around noon to make the four-hour trip north to Burlington, Vermont, to spend the weekend with my mother. I was driving an old, humble Toyota Corolla that I still referred to as my father's car, even though the title was in my name and he'd been gone about eight months.

This drive up I-89, part of the Eisenhower Interstate System, was so familiar that I went on autopilot. I didn't really take in my surroundings as I crossed from New Hampshire into the high country of central Vermont; I'd driven past those forests and hills and rest stops so many times, and I had other things on my mind: academic deadlines, personal dramas, and the grief of my father's death, always heavy on my shoulders like a yoke.

Then I hit the Green Mountains, and, to my utter shock, a freak snowstorm hit me. I've never experienced anything like it since. There was a pause before the storm—the sky turned a strange color, as if in twilight—and a sprinkling of snowflakes. And then my car was completely consumed by a whiteout blizzard.

I couldn't see anything. I knew, from memory, that the road ahead of me curved and carved its way through the mountains. I knew that, in some places, there was nothing beyond the guardrail but a drop. As far as I could tell, there were no other cars nearby.

Stopping did not feel like a good option. So I kept going at about ten miles an hour, following the glow of my own headlights and the merest suggestion of the road. I reached for my cell phone and called my mom to tell her what was happening.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Oh, sure!" I lied. "It's not so bad. I just have to take it slow."

I knew I needed to stay calm, and my psyche went to a place that honestly surprised me a little. I began reciting the Lord's Prayer. I used the version I grew up with:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

I said that prayer over and over again. I said it quickly. I said it slowly. Loudly. Quietly. I sung it. I whispered it. Over and over again, until the words lost their meaning and became mere sounds. I filled up my whole reality with that prayer so that there was no room for anything else.

I'm not exactly sure how long I drove in this state. It felt like forever; it probably wasn't more than half an hour. The heavy snow continued, but eventually I made it through the whiteout. The headlights of other cars appeared ahead and behind me, like fellow pilgrims. They oriented me to the road. Hours later, I made it safely to my mother's house, where—incidentally—there was not a drop of snow on the ground.

Now, someone might hear that story and interpret it this way: that I put myself into God's hands when I said: *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done*, and that God answered my prayers and brought me safely through the storm.

And I was OK that day, but I'm reluctant to give God credit for that. Luck and caution seem like more likely candidates. Many of us resist the image of an interventionist God because it just breaks down when we start to think about it, when we put it under the weight of random human suffering. It's hard to keep faith in a God that would shepherd *one* soul through a snowstorm, yet abandons *countless* others every day. It just doesn't make good sense—theologically or emotionally.

Even the Puritans, those staunch believers in God's great plan for the world, struggled here. For example, the Reverend Cotton Mather preached that his colonial flock should contentedly *resign* themselves to God's intractable will—even when their children died in infancy, a very common occurrence in that era. But Mather's private writings reveal that he “wrestled with the God of Jacob” when his own children were sick—bargaining, *pleading*, hoping against hope for their survival.

It's human to hope—or fear—that a higher authority is at work in our lives, that if we could just do or say the *right thing*, everything will be all right. But many of us have been stung early on, when God just failed to cooperate, when things didn't work out in a way that was fair or just or kind. So we chuck the idea that prayer “gets results”—guaranteeing safety, saving lives—if we ever had that idea in the first place.

So then why do we, as a church, pray “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,” Sunday after Sunday?

For me, the answer has everything to do with the *next* line of the prayer that Jesus taught to us: “Thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*”

Here's the thing about the biblical notion of heaven. It's *not* a pretty place in the clouds where everybody gets wings and plays the harp. It's not even a *safe* place, if we understand safety in terms of undisrupted security and ease.

According to our tradition, the arrival of heaven on earth, the coming of the Kingdom of God, heralds a revolution: the radical transformation of our world, the destruction of human institutions of power, the resurrection of the dead, and the reversal of hierarchies: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,” Jesus says in Luke 14:11.

In other words, “heaven” is the end of life—that is, life-as-we-know-it. The narrator of Revelation describes heaven on earth as God dwelling among the people, wiping every single tear from their eyes.

Are you ready for this kind of reality? I’d like to think I am, but it also sounds a little scary!

When I pray for this new world, what exactly am I asking for? What am I willing to forsake to help bring about its arrival? What changes would I welcome? What changes would I resist?

I say the Prayer of Jesus, even when it scares me, because its words are written on my heart. They are *comforting*, even though they are not *comfortable*. That’s the power of ancient language and rituals and traditions, passed down through generations: we know these words—in different translations, different versions, but in essence, *these words*—we know they have served others in the past, that they have borne pain and strife like ours. These words are *sturdy*. They are *bracing*.

I say the Prayer of Jesus because, by saying it out loud and in a community of faith, we get a chance to practice some important things together.

We practice giving ourselves over to a spirit of radical trust in the loving purposes of God—not in the sense that God is micro-managing every detail of our lives, but in the sense that this prayer is about God’s yearnings, not ours. When we pray, “Let thy will be done,” we’re practicing syncing up hearts with God’s heart.

We practice letting go of the trappings of safety and privilege, and putting our faith in something else.

We practice hoping in things yet unseen—things beyond our imagination.

We practice getting lost in the snowstorm.

We practice breathing through those times when everything is terribly wrong—yet somehow still all right.

We practice. And sometimes, we experience sighs too deep for words.

Practice does not make perfect. Instead, we might find ourselves groaning with labor pains, struggling to give birth to a faith that is *real*, and grounded, and honest about what we face in this world.

When Jesus gave his disciples this prayer, he offered a language to describe this combination of hope and fear that comes with loving God. For Jesus believed that heaven and earth were always on a collision course. He preached that we are always on the verge of profound transformation, if we could just allow it to happen. “The Kingdom of God is among *you*,” he said. *Among you*.

Perhaps this is all just a really long way of saying, “For where your treasure is, *there* your heart will be also.”

Maybe Jesus taught us this prayer because he knew we'd need something to hold on to, something more enduring than our stuff, something that could both provoke us *and* steady us at the exact same time. It's a paradox, like so much of faith. But remember this: the prayer of Jesus is not the *end* of prayer, but the beginning.

So let us pray.

Amen.