

Romans 8:26-27

New Revised Standard Version

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

What a week! Who knew when we planned the Ash Wednesday prayer walk that the temperature would be below freezing! Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent, the season of reflection and preparation before the celebration of Easter. There are forty days in Lent that remind us of when Jesus withdrew to the desert for forty days at the beginning of his ministry. Lent is a dark season when we see Jesus move toward his own death. It is a time for us to turn our face to the suffering of the world.

Lent is an opportunity for us to take a deep breath and ground ourselves in God. This year for Lent I am learning from author Kate Bowler's daily email and daily video on Instagram. Kate says that Lent tells us the truth about the way things really are and have always been. The world is capable of incredible beauty, but it can also be filled with so much suffering. She says sometimes things are awful and we need each other to orient ourselves toward the light, to hunt for hope, to speak realistically, and to make our way slowly through. We need each other as we hunt for hope and make our way through.<sup>1</sup>

During these forty days I encourage you to use the Lent weekly activities that we created here at Greenland Hills. You can access them online through our website. During Lent people will often fast or deny themselves something. It can be chocolate or sweets, caffeine, or social media. We are continuing to fast from our normal way of doing things. We have all been fasting from so much that is good these past twelve months. In person church, potluck lunches, game nights, concerts are just a few examples. We are tired of being in this wilderness. We have had a year of masks, social distancing, and forced innovations that have left us tired and longing for redemption and freedom. We don't usually celebrate during Lent, we bury our hallelujahs, and we look with hope toward the resurrection.

Over and over again this year we have been in new situations. We have heard the word "unprecedented" an unprecedented number of times! Our lives have been significantly changed in the past year. What do we do when we don't know what to do? During these difficult times, it has become crucial for us to rely on our spiritual practices to help center ourselves in God. During these forty days, I invite us to explore the various ways that we can experience and practice prayer, scripture, fasting, confession, worship and silence in our daily lives. Those spiritual practices help connect us with God, and it can help us to experience God in new ways.

This first week of Lent we focus on prayer. If you received a Lent activity bag, there was a prayer hand charm that can help you focus on prayer this week. If you would like to receive a Lent activity bag, please email me at [ksmith@greenlandhills.org](mailto:ksmith@greenlandhills.org) and let me know. The activities for this week include spending five minutes in the morning or evening praying or just being still with God. Prayer is the breath of Christian life.

Our scripture from Romans gives us a window into Paul. He says that he doesn't pray as he ought to, but the Holy Spirit intercedes. When Paul doesn't have words to pray, the Holy Spirit gives him sighs too deep for words. When life weighs us down, God comes to us even when we are hiding. God wants to hear our story and help restore us to life as it is meant to be.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://katebowler.com/lent/>

The word believe comes from the Latin *cordo* which means heart. Believing isn't about giving our mental assent to. Believing is about giving our heart to. When we pray, we give our heart to God, to something bigger than ourselves. We give our heart to hope, and love, and peace. Prayer quiets us and helps us feel the peace that God gives. Prayer helps me to feel God's Spirit with me, making prayer out of my wordless sighs and aching groans.

Writer Sarah Bessey says it is in prayer that she encounters the wild and inclusive, beautiful and welcoming, abundant love of God without filter or measure, without condition or boundary.<sup>2</sup> Breathing is prayer. Listening to the sound of flowing water is prayer. Listening to the wind blowing through trees is prayer. Watching birds at the bird feeder is prayer. Sitting and being still to listen and to see God's goodness is prayer. Lent is this set apart time to grow in our relationship with God. Prayer is an open and honest conversation with God when we bring to God all of the burdens of guilt and shame that we would rather God not see. Scripture tells us that God helps us in our weakness. We need God's help to fully love ourselves, to love ourselves as much as God loves us. Lent is this set apart time to allow us to grow in our relationship with God.

How can we learn a rhythm of prayer during these forty days to help us connect to God? I pray while I wash the dishes. It is a time of meditation and quiet for me because everyone in my house scatters when it is dish washing time! I pray when I am driving the car. Prayer for me is a conversation with God about what is on my heart. So I talk and I listen to God and I feel God's Spirit clothing me with peace. Prayer is the breath of Christian life. Sometimes when we pray, we get stuck on saying the right words, but prayer is conversation. Prayer is listening in the silence and sharing with God what is on your heart.

I have to admit something to you. We used to be really good at family meals. Most nights for dinner, we would sit down at the kitchen table, hold hands, and pray together. Then, the pandemic happened, and we started family movie nights. We would take our food to the couch and eat while we watched. We stopped praying together as a family, and I miss it. I know that prayer is a spiritual discipline, and the more I exercise it, the stronger and healthier it will become. Prayer is something that everyone can do, but it helps when it is a regular practice. This Lent, I want to get back to those family meals where we gathered in prayer together as a family. The Lent activities from our Lent activity bag will help us.

Lent isn't about getting it right but about developing our prayer life as a discipline. The word discipline comes from the same root as disciple – meaning pupil or learner. As a follower of Jesus Christ, we learn spiritual practices like prayer that help shape our lives following God's example. The more we practice, the more prayer becomes second nature to us, as natural as breathing. The Holy Spirit is the breath of life and prayer is spiritual breathing.

The Romans passage for today tells us when we don't know what to say or how to pray, the Holy Spirit helps us to pray. When we are in tune with the Spirit, the Spirit is hearing our heart and our faith, not just our words. Prayer is not just a thing we do, but how we communicate with God. When we don't have words, we can pray in song, in the written word, or in tears. Prayer is about listening to God. One of my favorite passages in scripture is from 1 Kings when Elijah goes to the mountain because God is about to pass by. A great wind passes by, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces. But God was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake but God was not in the earthquake. Then a fire, but God was not in the fire. Then, a sound of sheer silence. Elijah covers his face and hears God ask, "What are you

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<sup>2</sup> Bessey, Sarah. *A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal*

doing here, Elijah?”<sup>3</sup> I want God to be in the exciting stuff, in the great wind or the earthquake or the fire, but God is in the silence.

I want prayer to be an ongoing conversation between me and God. When I'm washing the dishes and praying, I imagine God's presence right there with me, hugging me, reminding me that God is always with me. How can you make daily space in your life for prayer and listening to God? Have you heard of the Jesus Prayer? It is also known as simply The Prayer and is believed to have started with the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers in the Egyptian desert in the 400s. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." It reminds me of a Taize song that we sing here at Greenland Hills. Or pray the morning prayer of thanksgiving each day, "New every morning is your love, great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world. Stir up in us desire to serve you, to live peacefully with our neighbors, and to devote each day to your son, our savior, Jesus Christ the Lord."

I hope that over these next forty days we will all develop a routine for prayer. I hope prayer will become a faithful habit that helps us grow in our spiritual lives. Lent is the perfect time to commit or recommit to a spiritual discipline. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 19:11-13