

Monday, March 20 – Luke 11:5-13

⁵ And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹ “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Points of Interest:

- We’re hopping out of order for a day here. Week Four will take us into the life and teaching of Jesus, while we’ll spend the rest of this week in the ancient Hebrew prayer book of Psalms. Today, though, we take a detour through Jesus’ teaching on prayer to check in and see how our faith experiment is going thus far.
- Jesus describes an unusual, but not impossible, dilemma of daily life in his culture. Guests show up from out of town, and hospitality code demands welcoming them in and feeding them. But you’re out of food, no bakers are open for business, and everyone has locked their houses and gone to bed. If you trouble your neighbor, they’re going to tell you to bug off, but if you pester them long enough, you’ll get your bread.
- Fair enough, but then Jesus says this is what prayer is like. Pester God long enough, and you’ll get what you need. What do we make of this rather unflattering view of God, and the fact that this doesn’t always pan out in our experience? Well, it seems that this story is less about God and more about us. When Jesus talks about what God’s like, he shifts the analogy from sleepy neighbor to generous parent. God’s excited to give great gifts to his kids, and he finds it pleasurable – not annoying – for us to pester him about our wants and needs.
- As for the implied guarantee that we’ll always get what we want, Jesus also clarifies by the end that what God most likes to give God’s kids is the Holy Spirit. God’s especially excited to give his kids connection and an experience of God’s goodness. The greatest gift of God is God. So, in the end, I read this story as inviting us to pester God with our wants and needs and to metaphorically root around in the refrigerator of God’s house. Engage with God in prayer, try to listen, keep an eye out for what God might be doing in our circumstances. We’ll always get something good as we ask, seek, and knock, whether it’s the thing we were first looking for or not.

Prayer for our six – Ask God to give each of your six a positive experience of having their needs met, whether they're asking God for them at the moment or not.

Spiritual Exercise – Let's take a few minutes to ask ourselves how our 40-day faith experiment is going thus far.

What have you been asking God to do for you?

Has anything changed so far in response to this prayer – either in the thing you're asking for, or in you as the asker?

What has been your experience of asking, searching, and knocking? Are you enjoying the process? Do you want to give up and go home hungry? Are your knuckles getting tired, so to speak, from banging on the door?

Do you have any desire to change what you are asking for, or to change how it is you are asking in this season?

Are you in any way experiencing the gift of the Holy Spirit?

Since this week will be all about an invitation to relate to God exactly as we are today, take a moment to express to God whatever thanks or impatience or frustration or hope you feel at the moment.

Close by asking yourself what you would like to do with Jesus' invitation to continue to ask, search, and knock.

Tuesday, March 21 – Psalm 88

A Song. A Psalm of the Korahites. To the leader: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

¹ O Lord, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,

² let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.

³ For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.

⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,

⁵ like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,

like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.

⁶ You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.

⁷ Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah*

⁸ You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow.

Every day I call on you, O Lord;
I spread out my hands to you.

¹⁰ Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise you? *Selah*

¹¹ Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

¹² Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

¹³ But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.

¹⁴ O Lord, why do you cast me off?
Why do you hide your face from me?

¹⁵ Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.

¹⁷ They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.

¹⁸You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.

Points of Interest:

- Many of the Psalms begin with short inscriptions regarding authorship, situation, or musical notation. Not all the meanings are known to us today. Here the author is Heman, who is mentioned briefly in a couple of other spots in the Bible for both his wisdom and his musical abilities. He also had many musician children. I just like his name, so we can say that one of the Bible's prayer songs was written by He-man!
- This is a bleak prayer, you may have noticed. It begins in desperation and ends with darkness.
- Ancient Jews didn't have a clear notion of an afterlife, but many believed the spirits of the dead lived in a Hades-like underworld named Sheol – not a happy place. This author's life circumstances are so painful and hopeless they feel like death has arrived before its time.
- "Selah" is likely a word for a musical interlude or meditative pause. So the author lays out the basic circumstance of hopeless difficulty so menacing it's like being overwhelmed by a wave. After a pause, he jumps right back into it, remembering that he also has no friends that empathize with him and want to be with him in his difficulty.
- After a second pause, the psalmist turns to God and wonders just where God is right now and what God is doing. The psalmist has no immediate answers to these questions. Best as he can tell, it feels like God is the source of his problems or is ignoring him entirely, abandoning him to his difficulty.
- A note on God's role in suffering: this isn't saying that God causes our problems and suffering. This is one person feeling that way and having the emotional and spiritual freedom to blame God. Whatever role God's Spirit played in helping humans write and compile the Bible, sentiments like these weren't cleaned up or edited out. We're given permission to pray authentically, whatever we are going through and whatever we have to say to God on any given day.
- These psalms of complaint are formally known as psalms of lament – naming anger, frustration, and hardship to God and asking God to act. Many end with remembering or hoping for God's goodness, but this one ends blaming God and saying, "All I've got right now is darkness."

Prayer for your Six – Pray for any of your six who are going through hard times, whether those circumstances are known to you or not. Pray they would find friendship, hope, and connection to God in the midst of their difficulties.

Spiritual Exercise – This week, after each Psalm, we're going to practice a simplified version of the Jesuit examen: examining our own life and thoughts and feelings, and connecting with God over what we find there. Today, examine three to five aspects of your life that discourage you. Make a short list. Choose one to talk with God about, saying whatever comes to mind. When you're done, ask God if God has anything to reveal to you, and pause for a moment of silence while you listen.

Wednesday, March 22 – Psalm 103

Of David.

- ¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
- ² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
- ³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
- ⁴ who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
- ⁵ who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- ⁶ The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.
- ⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
- ⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- ⁹ He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
- ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- ¹¹ For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- ¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
- ¹³ As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
- ¹⁴ For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.
- ¹⁵ As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
- ¹⁶ for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
- ¹⁷ But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
- ¹⁸ to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.

¹⁹The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.

²⁰Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.

²¹Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers that do his will.

²²Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.

Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Points of Interest:

- Today we move from despondence to gratitude. This is connecting with God in perspective taking.
- The psalms were compiled over centuries and only later were some attributed to specific authors. But for simplicity's sake, we'll call this poet David – the famously great king of a united Israel.
- David compels his inner being to remember good things about God and praise God for them – it's not entirely intuitive or natural but seems a good thing to do.
- The repeated note to self here is to bless God. To bless is to speak words that are both good and true – it's praising, celebrating, and thanking, all rolled into one.
- So many qualities of God are remembered and appreciated that we won't list or elucidate them all. Do you have any favorites? I love the promise of redemption, even while on the way to the Pit. God can bring good out of every bad situation, no matter how foreboding. I also love the line about God renewing our youth like the eagles'. This isn't magical, fountain of youth thinking, but the gift of energy and vigor as needed, whether physical or mental or emotional.
- This psalm is tied to old covenant spirituality – God's love reserved for those in God's tribe who properly respect and obey God and to their descendants. Almost immediately after this statement is a hint of the new covenant spirituality to come, when David proclaims that God's kingdom extends over all people. Jesus' new covenant spirituality is an invitation to all the peoples of the earth to know and love God, and be filled with God's Spirit, enjoying the same God-soaked experience that David did.

Prayer for your Six – Pray that your six would practice gratitude today and experience the perspective taking and joy that a life of gratitude shapes.

Spiritual Exercise – This week, after each Psalm, we're practicing a simplified version of the Jesuit examen: examining our own life and thoughts and feelings, and connecting with God over what we find there. Today, examine three to five ways you have experienced the goodness or help of God in your life, whether you recognized it as from God at the time or not. Choose one or more of these experiences to thank God for. When you're done, ask God if God has anything else to reveal to you, and pause for a moment of silence while you listen.

Thursday, March 23 – Psalm 131

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

¹O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;

I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.

²But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

³O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and forevermore.

Points of Interest:

- Today's psalm is a song for pilgrimage, sung while walking up the hilly road on annual journeys to the temple in Jerusalem. It doesn't have the usual road trip, zippy vibe, through. It's more like a lullaby, perhaps something travelers would sing before settling down to sleep at the end of a long day of travel.
- The first two verses address God by personal name. When you see LORD, in small caps in English translations of the Old Testament, you're usually seeing a formal translation of the Hebrew Yahweh, the Hebrew name for the God of Israel that dates back to Moses' vision of the burning bush. It's related to the Hebrew verb "to be," and means something like "I am who I am," or "I will be what I will be." In a word, you might say Indescribable or Indefinable. Out of fear of disrespecting the name of God, Jews over time used this name less and less, but would sort of talk around God's name. The English translation, LORD, is another way of doing this.
- Speaking on intimate terms to Yahweh, the pilgrim lowers rather than raises her gaze. There are heart-racing realities in life, wondrous sites, big and complicated problems. Our pilgrim deliberately diverts her attention from things she doesn't understand or might cause her anxiety. Instead, she takes a deep breath and turns her attention to what she knows about God – that God is good.
- This calm and quiet leads to contentment. The image here is how a child can sit in its mother's arms after weaning. Before weaning, the child near its mother's breast thinks, "I want, I want. Get me more milk." After weaning, the child can simply be – content and satisfied.
- The psalmist takes a moment at the end of the poem to address her fellow pilgrims and whole people of Israel. Interestingly, she calls the place of contentment to which she has arrived hope. Perhaps this is an invitation – Be satisfied. Or perhaps it is a promise – turn to God, and you will be satisfied.
- This invitation and promise is available now and bankable in perpetuity. Calm, quiet, satisfied, hope, forever.

Prayer for your city and country – Some commentators have argued that some measure of our national and international turmoil and contentious discourse is fueled by the anxiety that rapid change produces. What could the meditative practice of contentment in individuals do for whole communities and nations? Pray for an increase in hope and satisfaction in God in as big a patch of this world as your imagination can contain today.

Spiritual Exercise – This week, after each Psalm, we're practicing a simplified version of the Jesuit examen: examining our own life and thoughts and feelings, and connecting with God over what we find there. Today, examine three to five ways you are content. Practice the deliberate simplicity of turning your attention away from other things and only focusing on those sources of contentment for a few moments. Thank God for satisfying you. When you're done, ask God if God has anything else to reveal to you, and pause for a moment of silence while you listen.

Friday, March 24 – Psalm 137

- ¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
- ² On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
- ³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
- ⁴ How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?
- ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
- ⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.
- ⁷ Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem’s fall,
how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!”
- ⁸ O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
- ⁹ Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

Points of Interest:

- This psalm contains some of the more famous poetry of the Bible, not for how it ends but how it begins. It’s a song and a poem about song and poetry. Like movies about Hollywood, art about art is a big hit with artists. So this psalm has been set to music many times.
- I suggest reading the psalm in three stanzas, each a mini-section of three verses.
- Picture the scene of first three verses. Hundreds of miles from home, living as exiles in Babylon, a few Jews lean their instruments against nearby trees, sit down by the riverside, and together weep for their lost home, dashed hopes, and displaced lives. Along come a couple of Babylonians who mock them, telling them to sing one of their zippy songs about their so-called great God.

- As with all oppressed people, direct engagement and violent resistance aren't wise options in the moment. Likely the musicians politely decline the request to perform and grit their teeth in anger. In the middle three verses, they direct their rage inward, swearing loyalty to their homeland and vowing to not become comfortable amongst their captors.
- In the final three verses, they express their rage-fueled prayer, that God would bring vengeance on their enemies. They ask God to remember each taunt, each word and act of violence against them. And they bless the people who will enact God's revenge. They pronounce luck and good fortune against whoever will bring their enemies harm and smash the skulls of their enemies' children!
- This is jarring material to read in your Bible, is it not? How can we pray along with these words? Well, before we make them our own, we can start by recognizing that the Bible is sympathetic to all voices, and maybe especially to the voice of the disempowered. It may be the first work of history, for instance, that doesn't simply tell the story of the victors. Over and over again, the Bible encourages all people to hear the voice of the marginalized, to listen and take seriously the lament of the disempowered. So there's that.
- Beyond this, there are at least two ways we can embrace the spirituality of these psalms of violent rage, while still trying to honor Jesus' ethic of love for enemy. One is to spiritualize the enemy, taking a cue from one of Jesus' first century followers who famously said that the most important human battles are never ultimately against human enemies. So we can pray defeat on the spiritual evil behind human wickedness and oppression.

Another way to embrace these prayers is to honor the spiritual and psychological freedom they endorse. The psalms, for the most part, speak from the perspective of people, not God. So God is not planning to bash our enemies' children's heads against rocks, but God isn't offended if that's the prayer we have in our hearts today.

Rather than censor our language or clean up our act before talking to God, the Bible invites us to sing whatever song we have today. We're invited to engage with God with whatever we've got. Disengagement, not unbecoming thoughts and language, will pull us away from God and from God's goodness to us.

Prayer for your city – Pray for the powerless in your city, for people on the losing ends of economic scarcity, domestic disputes, bullying, racism, or violence. Pray that as God hears the voices of the less powerful, that he will honor their rights and humanity and achieve justice on their behalf.

Spiritual Exercise – This week, after each Psalm, we're practicing a simplified version of the Jesuit examen: examining our own life and thoughts and feelings, and connecting with God over what we find there. Today, examine three to five ways you have been wronged, or have been harmed by others. Choose one or more of these experiences and express your frustrations to God. When you're done, ask God if God has anything else to reveal to you, and pause for a moment of silence while you listen.

Saturday, March 25 – Psalm 146

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

² I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³ Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴ When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.

⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

Points of Interest:

- Today we return to the jubilation we saw in Wednesday's tour through Psalm 103. Rather than recalling the personal benefits we can experience from God, this poem invites us to reset our perspective on way things work in the world, particularly in times of injustice. God is doing more than we might first see, the psalmist says.
- First off, the poet says that people are all going to die. Even powerful people don't accomplish most of their plans and cannot either help or threaten people as much as they claim they can. The psalmist considers this morbid thought to be good news: human power is limited in a way that divine power is not.

- While princes are making their plans and charting their wicked ways, where is God? God is feeding the hungry, releasing prisoners, helping the blind see. God is protecting immigrants and people with few rights and resources in the world. That's where God is, and that's what God will keep doing, the same God whose power will increase over time, never decrease.
- To the powerless, the invitation is to celebrate this God who has their back. To the powerful and the not especially powerful or powerless, there's maybe an invitation to align our priorities with a greater and better power.
- To all of us, there seems to be a dare here to trust that God is present in human history, both when that seems evident to us and when it does not. (After all, there are orphans and widows and hungry and more in this poem. Life can be hard.) Praise is the hope-filled, joyful trust that a world full of power imbalances and hardship is still God-soaked.

Prayer for your six – Praise God for creating, loving, and helping each of your six. Bring each of them by name and face before your imagination, and tell God (however much you can believe this to be true!) that you love that God made them and is present to help them.

Spiritual Exercise – This week, after each Psalm, we're practicing a simplified version of the Jesuit examen: examining our own life and thoughts and feelings, and connecting with God over what we find there. Today, examine three to five ways you see God as present on the earth. Choose one or more of these and praise God for God's presence and help and goodness. When you're done, ask God if God has anything else to reveal to you, and pause for a moment of silence while you listen.

Another way into this same exercise would be to examine three to five injustices you see on the earth, to choose one, and to ask God to show you how God is present and to be praised even in this situation.

Sunday, March 26 – *Selah* (Review)

Taking our cue from the Psalms' interlude moments of rest and meditation, we are introducing a new rhythm into the Bible guide from now until the end of the 40 Days. Each Sunday, we won't introduce a new passage but will pause for reflection and review.

One way you can use this pause is for catch up. If you missed a day or more of the guide this week, you can look at one other day's passage and enjoy it out of sequence.

A second way you can use this pause is to review one of the passages you especially enjoyed or that especially troubled you. Read it and the points of interest a second time, asking God to teach you something new and illumine something God would like you to notice. Try the spiritual exercise again and see where it takes you.

A final way you can use this pause is to touch base on the 40 Days of Faith experiment as a whole. Consider these prompts to do so.

1. How has it gone praying every day for God to do something for you? Has anything changed in your prayer, or in answer to your prayer?

2. What has it been like to pray for your six? Consider re-writing the six names below, or re-committing to prayer for six local people who seem to not be experiencing much from God. Have you seen anything happen – either in you or in their lives – in response to your prayers? Is there anything you would like to say to any of them?

3. How have you experienced God's goodness so far? Have you learned anything about God, or seen any ways in which you live in a God-soaked world? Have you noticed anything that helps you engage with God's presence with you?

Take a few minutes of silence with these questions, and see where they take you today. Close your time by thanking God for anything you notice, learn, or experience.