

“What do we do with unanswered prayers?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

So, I heard this great story the other day. There was this preacher living out West, who, one Sunday, decided he was going to skip worship and head to the hills to do some bear hunting. As he turned the corner on a particularly steep part of the trail, he looked up to discover that he was nose-to-nose with a grizzly. Unfortunately, as he fumbled for his rifle, he lost his footing, the ground gave way, and he tumbled down the hillside. He landed hard on a rock, losing sight of his rifle and breaking both his legs.

The good news was that he was alive. The bad news was that the bear was charging toward him. The preacher looked up at the heavens and prayed aloud, “Oh Lord, I’m so sorry for skipping worship today to come out here and hunt. Please forgive me and grant me just one wish... Please make a Christian out of that bear. Please, Lord!” And you know what? Miracles do happen. Because at that very instant, the bear skidded to a halt, fell to its knees, clasped its paws together and began to pray aloud right at the preacher’s feet. “Dear Lord, bless this food I am about to receive... in Jesus’ name... Amen.”

There are two lessons here. One: don’t skip church. Two: prayers aren’t always answered the way we intended.

In fact, sometimes they don’t seem to be answered at all.

We plead with God to heal a loved one, to save our marriage, to give us guidance. But after all that prayer, our loved one still dies. Our relationship still ends. Our future remains unclear. We wait, and we wait, and still no help.

The brilliant poet and author Sylvia Plath, who struggled with depression and eventually took her own life, once said, “I talk to God but the sky is empty.”

In a time of exile and suffering, the prophet Isaiah looked up at that same sky and begged God to tear open the heavens and come down. We heard his prayer today—how he longed to hear God’s voice as he once did. How he just needed to know that God was up there and was going to rescue his people.

Skip forward a few hundred years, and Jesus describes a people staring up at that same sky, praying and waiting for an answer, as the sun darkens, and the stars fall from heaven. Jesus predicts that the temple will be destroyed again. Jerusalem will burn. And all the hope they felt with Jesus’ birth will come crashing around them as they see him hanging on that cross.

The same sky that offered a star to guide shepherds and magi will turn dark, as Jesus throws himself on the ground in prayer and begs God to take this suffering from him.

Do you think Mary was praying that night also, begging God to save her son, as I begged God to save mine? Do you think she got down on her knees, and offered anything, everything, to see her son spared? Do you not think her screams climbed the heavens, scouring the skies for another star? And do you not know the ocean of pain that ripped open, as she watched that star fall, fall, fall?

Perhaps you think this would be a better question for Lent or Good Friday, but Advent isn't just a time of getting ready for Christmas. It is a time when all of our hurts, all of our longings, all of our prayers, are turned over to God, in the hope that God will answer, that Christ will be born, that the star will rise again on the horizon.

In our passage today, Jesus doesn't explain why we suffer. So I'm not going to try either. Other sermons have, and will, address that topic. Today, our focus, like Jesus', is on this single question: What do we do with seemingly unanswered prayers? How do we go on living, go on believing, in the face of what can seem like God's deafening silence?

Maybe we should just accept these unanswered prayers as part of God's plan. Maybe we should believe that this *is* God's answer. There's something to be said for that, but there's a problem: that's not what Jesus says in this text. Jesus doesn't counsel acceptance; he doesn't ask us to pretend like we understand. In fact, Jesus is quite clear that no one can anticipate when or how God will reveal God's self.

When God seems absent, there's only one thing to do, Jesus says: Keep watch. God *is* going to show up, but not in a way that you expect. So you've got to watch closely and keep on praying.

We're not supposed to lie down and accept the dark. We're supposed to rage like Job, to pray without ceasing, to watch without blinking. Over and over again, Jesus tells his disciples that the only way not to lose heart is to pray always, to cry to God day and night (Luke 18:1, 7). He tells the story of a widow who keeps bothering a judge until he finally grants her justice. He tells the story of a friend who knocks at midnight, pounds and pounds until his knuckles are bloody and his voice hoarse, until finally his friend comes down to help him (Luke 11:5-13).

We do not know the time when God will come into our lives. We do not know the manner either. It may not carry the drama of Isaiah's plea. It may be quieter, like a sleeping babe in a manger. If we do not keep awake, if we give up and cease with our praying, with our watching, we may miss it—we may fail to see God's advent.

I almost missed it, until an angel opened my eyes.

Three months after my sons Ezra and Leo died, I shared my story with men at Auburn Correctional Facility during a worship retreat led by Paul and Kim Dungey. The following day, one older gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down next to me.

He said, “Last night, I prayed, and I prayed, and I prayed. And God told me something that I want to share with you. If it’s alright. I know right now you’re in this pit. And it’s dark. And it’s all you can see. But if you can, I want you to look up for a moment, just peer out of that pit for a second, and look around you. See the men all around, here in this prison, which really is just another kind of pit. Look hard. A lot of these guys didn’t have a dad—not in the way it counted, at least. There’s not one of them who wouldn’t have given everything to have had a father like you. And I’m thinking maybe you would give everything to have a child like them. And there are a lot of children out there, like us. So, maybe, you might consider adoption. Maybe you’re looking at your child right now—you just don’t know it.”

To be clear, he wasn’t asking me to be anyone’s savior. He wasn’t unaware of the systemic forces of poverty, racism, and mass incarceration that had paved the path to prison. He wasn’t trying to fix my grief or explain it away. He was just a man asking me to see him. To see him real. And maybe not just him. But God also. A God who maybe was going to save *me*.

It didn’t mean that all my prayers were suddenly answered. In this life, there’s no getting Ezra or Leo back. But it did mean that there was a ladder out of that pit. That I didn’t have to be stuck with God’s silence forever. Jenna and I looked, and we found each other, and we found our way to start the adoption process, and we found a way to live again.

We looked, just as Mary looked. She looked on Golgotha, where they hurt her boy, and she looked on that hill where they buried him. She looked in the tomb, and it was empty. Her child wasn’t where she expected. He never had been. No one had ever expected the Messiah to show up in a barn, born to an unwed teenage mother. And no one had ever expected to find him hanging from a cross.

Do you remember what the young man in the white robe said to Mary that Easter day? He said, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.... But go and say to his disciples and to Peter: ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee: there you will see him, as he told you’ ” (Mark 16:6-7).

There, you will see him, the man says, not in the temple, not in the tomb, not in the sky, not in all the things you expected life to be, God to be. But he is risen. And he is on his way this Advent. God is coming. And so we pray, even without answers; we keep watch, because we never know when God’s going to show up where we least expect. **Amen.**