

Faith Story, Scripture that has Shaped Me, October 29, 2023

When you think of scripture that has shaped you, what scripture comes to your mind? As I thought about this question, my mind kept returning to the words “pray without ceasing.” (1 Thess. 5.17)

This particular scripture over time has confused me. What did Paul mean when he said we should pray without ceasing? It has frustrated me – because, if taken literally, is it even possible? And for a couple of decades now, it has shaped me. Let me explain.

I have struggled with praying over the years. As a child I learned that prayer was talking to God. I learned to pray “please” and “thank you” prayers - “Please give me what I want” - either for myself or for others, and “thank you” – mainly for food at mealtimes.

As I grew older, I expanded my prayers of thanksgiving beyond food and learned about other kinds of prayers - like prayers of praise, prayers of confession, and prayers of lament as well as the importance of praying according to God’s will. But these all seemed to focus on me doing all the talking.

When I learned that prayer could be “listening to God” as well as “talking to God,” more liked a dialogue or conversation between friends, that made sense to me, as I thought that God was probably tired of my monologues. But I wasn’t sure how to listen to God.

God answered this unspoken prayer in many ways over the years. Two examples stand out.

1. Lenten Guided Prayer resources have been a big help in learning different ways to pray and situations to pray in. E.g. praying while I’m doing other things like going for a walk or doing dishes.
2. Tending the Soul training was another huge help. It was life-changing for me. While I was really interested in the course description, I had some big concerns - including the cost, and whether I could physically handle it.

This course became available after I had to quit work, and it took quite a long time to get my disability pension. I had to quite work due to my vestibular issues which resulted in dizziness and a foggy brain, when I wasn’t successful in fighting the triggers due to my brain’s difficulty dealing with mixed messages. I wondered, would there be enough time between sessions, to recharge my tired brain otherwise known as having to lie down or take a nap.

Pastor Barb strongly encouraged me to attend and even offered some financial support from the congregation. I’m so thankful I decided to say “yes” to this opportunity.

After the first evening session, as I was trying to go to sleep, I recall feeling a little sorry for myself, and a little angry at God for my health limitations. God had answered “yes” to prayers for healing of my back in the past, why wouldn’t God heal my vestibular problems now?

For most of my life I had felt called to service - whether it was working for church related service organizations or directly for churches - like when I was hired as Mission Enabler at Mannheim

or secretary here at Bloomingdale. If I couldn't work anymore, what was God calling me to do with my life? That evening, God brought to my mind the words "Pray Without Ceasing." I was not impressed! My angry response was: "Well I can't pray all the time!"

God's loving reply seemed to be the idea that maybe I needed to change my understanding of prayer. And since then, God has continued to do just that. I have chosen to share some of my newer understandings of prayer, using the four categories from the lines of our Hymn of Preparation, Listen to the word that God has spoken.

As I prayerfully considered the first line, Listen to the word that God has spoken, I thought immediately about listening to scripture, God's word. Scripture has come alive for me in new ways, as I am learning to "pray with scripture."

I regret the years I read scripture passages without knowing the context. Often what I read didn't make sense or it confirmed what I thought I knew. Frequently, I didn't remember what I had read, and it didn't comfort or challenge me.

One of the ways I am learning to Pray with Scripture is by using my imagination. When I take the time to learn about context, (I have found the internet helpful) and imagine myself as part of the story - as an onlooker, or one or more of the different characters, scripture comes alive in new ways.

Learning to practice Lectio Divina or "Sacred Reading," like we experienced this morning, when Pauline led us in praying I Thessalonians 5.16-18, has also been a big help in listening to the word that God has spoken and is speaking. I continue to find it amazing how God speaks through scripture in this way. It has even made it possible for me to preach and worship lead - when I am given enough time to prepare.

And a favourite way of listening to the word that God has spoken is Praying With Music or "songs, hymns or spiritual songs" as encouraged by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians.

A chorus I sing frequently when feeling stressed or worried is Phil. 4: 6 & 7.

After I take the time to do what I can to deal with whatever I am worried about; honestly looked at what I really need vs. what I really want; ask God for what I need; and then spend time thanking God for all God has already done; I usually feel the peace promised in the next verse of the scripture.

And the peace of God
Far beyond what we can understand,
will guard your heart,
and your mind in Christ Jesus.

I sometimes change words of hymns to fit the situation. E.g. I have used the hymn "Calm Me Lord" as a prayer of petition for others. When Deb and I were trying to comfort my crying granddaughter we sang: *Calm her Lord, like you calmed the storm, still her Lord, keep her from harm.*

Let all the tumult within her cease, enfold her lord, enfold her in your peace.

And God answered that prayer in the affirmative.

I have also sung "Calm Me Lord" for the Israeli & Hamas decision makers.

Calm them Lord, like you calmed the storm, still them Lord, keep them from doing harm.
Let all the tumult within them cease, enfold them lord, enfold them in your peace.

I also add words to change songs from one kind of prayer to another. E.g., I have changed a prayer of petition, O Lord hear my prayer, to a prayer of thanksgiving by adding the word "you":

O Lord you hear my prayer, O Lord you hear my prayer
When I call, you answer me.
O Lord you hear my prayer, O Lord you hear my prayer
You come and listen to me.

Rev. 3.20 is another verse I put to music. These words were written to a church of well-off people who took pride in their ability to be self-sufficient. I make it personal and sing it to remind myself of three things.

1. how much I need God.
2. that God is constantly trying to get my attention.
3. God is offering a wonderful relationship if I choose to open myself to it.

Listen, listen, I am standing at the door knocking. 2x
If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in. 2x
I will come in to you, and eat with you and you with me. So ... (repeat 1st verse)

A prayer song I frequently have running through my head when I wake up in the morning is based on Psalm 63. This first verse acknowledges my commitment to God, and my desperate desire to experience God.

Oh God, you are my God, and I seek you
My soul thirsts for you, My flesh faints for you
As in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

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Moving on to the second line of our hymn of preparation, Listen to the one who is close at hand. When I prayerfully consider this line, the first thing that comes to my mind is the Holy Spirit nudging me to action. It may be something like praying for someone, contacting someone, or doing an act of kindness.

The Spirit sometimes speaks to me through the books I read. For example, in a novel I was reading, the following comment jumped out to me. "*When one reads, one always has something to think about.*" As I thought about that comment, I felt God encouraging me to continue to read or listen to scripture at the beginning of the day and think about it throughout the day.

Other times when I consider the words "Listen to the one who is close at hand," I think of actual people close to me and how the Spirit can speak through them. e.g. worship leaders, choristers and

preachers or individuals sharing in worship response time, in small group or in one-on-one conversations.

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When I prayerfully listen to the third line, Listen to the voice that began creation, I think of a more recent discovery. While I have had an interest in looking for and identifying wildflowers for many years, it is only recently that I have thought of going deeper and listening to God speak to me through them. I decided to use the example, of the dandelion to illustrate this.

Some days when I notice the dandelion, I see them first as weeds and think of the need to get rid of them. Then I remember that some people see them as beautiful wildflowers that are used for herbal remedies and are valuable sources of food for insects, humans and animals as well as nutrients for a lawn. God has used these observations, to once again, challenge my either/or thinking - e.g. thinking things or individuals are either right or wrong, good or bad.

Instead of thinking this way, I am challenged to see many things as both/and. E.g., All options have both positive and negative implications. There is more than one way to look at a situation or an idea. All people are children of God regardless of their actions. There is more than one way to do something. We don't need to choose between prayer or action. Jesus demonstrated the importance of both prayer and action when he prayed before he acted on numerous occasions.

Other days, when I see dandelions, God leads me to focus on their appearance. When I notice how all the yellow bracts are connected to the centre I am reminded of the importance, of staying connected to God through prayer.

Sometimes when I see dandelions, I am reminded of the biblical story of Daniel and the lion's den, and this chorus runs through my mind:

Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone.
Dare to have a purpose true,
Dare to make it known.

I may think about times God has given me the courage to take a stand even when it was unpopular. Or I might think of a time when I failed to act on my convictions and need to ask God for forgiveness.

I could go on and on with examples of listening to what God is saying to me through different wildflowers. I have done only a little with listening to what God is saying through other aspects of nature e.g., trees, water, sky, birds & animals etc.

And then there are the other senses too like sound, smell, taste and touch. The possibilities of listening to the one who began creation feels endless to me.

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Moving on to the last line of the hymn, Listen even if you don't understand. As I prayerfully consider this line, I feel challenged to continue to pray, even though there are many things about prayer that I don't understand.

The scripture “pray without ceasing”, no longer frustrates me. Rather I see the words “pray without ceasing” as an invitation to become more aware of God’s presence with me and to communicate in silence, with words, thoughts and actions, which will result in my being shaped by God.

In closing, I will leave you with a prayer chant by Joyce Rupp, a favourite devotional writer of mine.

Light my way, O light my way, as I journey in the darkness.

Light my way, O light my way. Gift me with hope for our world.