

PRAY AND LISTEN

There will be three devotionals published per week on Thursdays, meant to be read on Friday, Monday, and Wednesday. They will also be posted on the church website, firstchurchgrandhaven.com.

A Prayer from the Valley

Devotional Prayer for Friday by Paige Deur

Dear God,

These past few weeks have felt so heavy.

Lord, there are no perfect words. And I thank you that I don't need to have my words strung together perfectly to approach you.

Lately the brokenness and injustice of our world have felt so palpable. This week, I've found my heart echoing Habakkuk's prayer to you:

"How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?

Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.

Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."

Yet, in reading through the rest of Habakkuk's prayers and your responses to his cries for help, I am reminded that we can always trust that You are still moving and working out Your will. For as we look back and remember, we can be confident in Your faithfulness even when things seem to be falling apart.

In the face of the injustices the Israelites faced under Assyrian forces and an uncertain future, You explained to Habakkuk that You were raising up the Babylonians, "a ruthless and impetuous people," to overtake Judah. In his prayers, we see that Habakkuk then turned to the past, reflecting on Your character, calling for You to revive Your work in those days. Habakkuk reflected on how You rescued Your people by bringing plagues to Egypt, how You parted the Red Sea, paused the sun in the sky, and stopped the flowing waters of the Jordan.

And as he turned his thoughts toward these things, we can see that his perspective shifted.

Thank you for being a God that listens to our complaints and laments. For allowing us to express our doubts and fears and questions to You. And for the ways you redirect us back so that we can experience peace and confidence because you are who you say that you are. You are faithful and you are good. You are just and you are merciful and you are loving. We can build our lives on that because you are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. You are the one thing that is unchanging. We can trust in your divine providence, even when things seem to be falling apart and disease and injustice run rampant.

In Habakkuk's story, the Babylonians did come. And, after the Babylonians would come the Persians, the Greeks, and eventually the Romans. And it was under these empires that the conditions were primed for the rapid spread of the Gospel including the universal Greek language and the extensive Roman road network.

While Habakkuk never got to see the long term effect of this conquest, exile, and pain inflicted under Babylonian rule, we can look back now and see Your hand in it all.

Lord, as we look at the injustices of this world, and when we feel tempted to despair, bestow on us the same confidence that allowed Habakkuk to exclaim,

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there is no fruit on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though the flocks disappear from the pen and there are no herds in the stalls, yet I will celebrate in the Lord; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation! The Lord my Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like those of a deer and enables me to walk on mountain heights.”

Lord, I praise you for the good news that we aren't meant to carry the burdens of this world alone. That you never meant for our world to remain broken. That you are constantly working to bring restoration and renewal. Thank you for allowing us to take part in this process, for giving us the opportunity to bring Kingdom to Earth in the daily surrendering of our wills for Yours.

I praise you that the Kingdom is a present reality for those who are alive in Christ. And, we have the opportunity to expand Your reign on this earth, to invite others in, and to extend the message of salvation to the corners of the earth.

Right now, we face a battle between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God, but there will be a day when good triumphs over evil.

In the meantime, you have given us the opportunity to bring new life—to proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release prisoners from the darkness (Isaiah 61).

Lord, I pray that your Church lives out your calling in Micah 6:8 to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with You. That you would give us the confidence and strength that we need each day to carry out your will.

Lord, I pray that you give us the strength we need to tread on the heights, as we grow weary of looking at injustice. Give us the confidence and patience of the Psalmist in Psalm 27 as he sings:

*“I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.”*

I pray specifically for those in prison today who feel isolated in their grief over the injustices that they are acutely aware of. I pray that your justice and mercy would flood our criminal justice system. That you would bring restoration and renewal to a system that has been corrupted by the consequences of sin.

But first, Lord, help us to humbly sit still at your feet—to listen. To surrender our will and our agenda for yours. As we cry out to you, lamenting over injustice, help us to be still and know that you are God, that you will fight for us just as you did for the Israelites when you parted the Red Sea and held the sun in the sky.

As we burn with righteous anger over injustice, let us first sit at your feet in stillness to discern where you would have us go and what you would have us do.

In the words of Psalm 139, “Search me, [search us,] God, and know [our] heart[s]; test [us] and know [our] anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in [us], and lead [us] in the way everlasting.”

Lord, I pray that your Holy Spirit would convict us of our own sins of omission and commission when it comes to injustice in this world. That you would heal our hearts, open our eyes, and show us how to demonstrate your love that we might participate in bringing Your Kingdom to earth. Lead us in the path of repentance and transformation and renewal.

Lord, speak to us today. Fill our minds with reminders of your goodness and faithfulness. Fill us with the strength and confidence we need to carry out your will. Speak to us and through us.

Season our conversations and reflections with grace and humility.

Amen.

Response: Carve out 10-15 minutes to sit in silence. Listen to what the Lord has to say to you today. Often, we can get so caught up in our days that we forget to reflect and sit still. Just sit and allow God room to speak. Ask him to speak to you and through you today.

Songs: *O Come to the Altar* by Elevation Worship
Hills and Valleys by Tauren Wells

Signs

Devotional for Monday by Art Tuls

Read: Meditate on your favorite Psalm

For many Christians, the stories of miracles in the Bible are favorites. As a boy I loved the stories in Daniel about the den of lions and the fiery furnace. I can also easily imagine the laughter and celebrations after a lame man walked and a blind man could see, and the woman with a bleeding disorder was healed and could finally go home! And go to church, too, finally. The stories of miracles are so uplifting!

When I became a Bible teacher, I heard many questions. Some were asked year after year. Questions about heaven, about death, about God, and about miracles, too. One common question about miracles was “Why aren’t there miracles today like there were in Bible times?” Good conversation often followed this question. Topics like scientific assumptions, and the assumption that miracles are rare today. Are they?

Understanding the miracle stories in the Bible is important. I learned in my graduate classes that the best way into understanding miracles in the Bible is to see them as signs. Signs of God’s grace, maybe, or signs that Jesus really is the Messiah, signs that Jesus is Lord of all, signs that the Kingdom of God is here. In fact, all miracles are signs pointing to something about the King and his kingdom.

It is also true, of course, that miracles still happen. And not just the sort many cite, like a glorious sunset or a blooming daffodil, but healings and unlikely surprising blessings of all sorts. Often these are told by missionaries, but it is not rare to hear about doctors unable to explain the recovery of a patient, or a prodigal child, written off by most, now repentant and ready for reconciliation. A miracle.

But getting back to the signs. We are surrounded by signs of God’s presence, His provision, His creativity, His wisdom, and more. These signs surround us, but maybe we don’t notice them. Maybe we don’t notice because these signs are rather commonplace. I was reminded of this recently when my brother forwarded this poem to me:

But You Thought You Knew What a Sign Looked Like by Rosemary Trommer

The parking space beside the store when you
were late. The man who showed up just in time
to hold the door when you were juggling five
big packages. The spider plant that grew—
though you forgot to water it. The new
nest in the tree outside your window. Chime
of distant church bells when you’re lonely. Rhyme
of friendship. Apples. Sky a trove of blue.
And who’s to say these miracles are less
significant than burning bushes, loaves

and fishes, steps on water. We are blessed
by marvels wearing ordinary clothes—
how easily we're fooled by simple dress—
Oranges. Water. Leaves. Bread. Crows.

Now I would not use the word *miracle* for these things, but Rosemary thinks they are miracles in "ordinary clothes." Maybe she's right! I encourage you to make your own list of signs of God's presence, his grace, his blessings. (Don't forget the ordinary ones). Deep gratitude could be the result.

An Open Ear

Devotional for Wednesday by Pastor Tom Pettinga

Read: Isaiah 30:18-21

I was sitting on the deck when she flew into the back yard. Mother Robin hopped in a zig zag pattern across the grass. Each time she stopped, her head would cock to the side, listening for a second. Listening for what? For a worm for her hatchlings, of course! What a miracle from the Creator! No matter the noise of city traffic or a lawnmower two doors away or even other bird song, this robin can detect the slightest rustle of a worm moving through the soil beneath her feet!

For some of us, the last couple months have provided extra quiet time. Time to spend in Bible reading and prayer. But hopefully, also, time to get *quiet* and turn our ear for the still voice of Jesus. It takes becoming quiet and that's a chore for many of us. We're addicted to noise, sound, background music. Quiet is seen as either boring or a sign of wasted time, not being productive, active. But I know that the only times I have heard God's voice, it came when I shut off everything else and really listened. When I literally shut up.

I believe Jesus is speaking to us during this unique time. He is surely sovereign in all that is happening. And he is speaking through it, telling us, through his Word and Spirit, about our world, about his church, about ourselves. And if we'll listen, he'll give us guidance, direction.

In Isaiah, God describes the judgment he brought on his people. He calls it adversity and affliction sent from him. (I think we're going through some of that right now, aren't we!?) He also describes the judgment he would bring against their oppressors, those who afflicted his chosen people. (I hope he gives the virus a good lickin' soon!) But right in the middle of those two descriptions, he tells his children that he's waiting for their prayers. Waiting to hear them call out to him. Waiting also to speak to them, to whisper in their ears, their hearts.

In the middle of all the fear and disruption of a virus, in the din of righteous calls for justice, in the chaos of opportunistic destruction, in the middle of it all . . . Jesus is calling, speaking to you, his child. He longs to be gracious to you. He waits for your cries. He loves you very much.

So, the questions. Do I believe him when he promises that he is speaking, directing, that he is in control of all of this - for my good? Have I been disciplining myself to get quiet, to be still? Are my ears cocked to the side, listening for the rustling, for his voice, his direction day by day, moment by moment? If I am listening, my ears will hear a voice. He said so.

Dear Jesus, quiet my heart and mind right now. Command your "ephphatha," your "be opened" to my deaf ears. I seek your face and your voice. Please speak and help me listen. Show me your way, I pray. Amen.