

## **Homily – Doggedness in Prayer**

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If you could be a character from the Bible which one would you want to be? Now, you can't be Jesus, so what other person would you want to be from the Bible?

Given where I am in my own spiritual journey, I would choose to be King David. David gets a lot of things wrong, and some of it is terribly wrong, like his murder of Uriah and his taking of Bathsheba. However, David also gets some things wonderfully right. In our depiction of King David in the Bible, he is always in relationship with God. And, as the traditional author of the Psalms, David is persistently praying with God. King David gets it right in that he keeps his relationship with God at the center of his life.

That is why I want to be King David. I want to have God at the center of my life and even when I mess up, I want to be talking to God about it. I want to incorporate God into all the highs and lows and even into the mundane parts of life. I hope I can be like David and persist in conversation with God over long periods of time. I would like to listen for God, talk with God and dedicate my work to God.

Now, at times in my life I have been pretty good about praying, and at other times my prayer life has been rather sparse. This year I have been working at prayer that uses no words. Meditation, contemplation, and just being present are all great ways to listen for God. In the busyness of life listening for God is something we often forget to do. How do you listen for God? Do you do enough listening?

But, today I want to talk about prayer with words. More specifically, I want to talk about intercessory prayer. I think we are all familiar with this type of prayer. We are called to tell God what is on our hearts. Now, I have noticed that some are reluctant to pray for themselves because it seems too self-centered. When I was a chaplain at Stanford Hospital, I was frequently with ill patients who didn't want to pray for healing because they had been taught not to pray for their own needs or desires. It was wonderful to see the relief when I gave someone permission to pray for him or herself.

God I would like to be healed.

God please take the pain away.

God please protect my children and grandchildren.

God, where are you leading? God show me what to do.

Or, here is a prayer that is very relevant to us in the twenty-first century. God, can we ever learn to stop killing one another. Is there anything we can do to bring peace to this earth? That's a prayer that makes me sigh with fatigue and frustration.

So, how do you talk with God? Do you take your own desires and petitions to God? Do you interact and wrestle with God in your own daily life?

Sometimes we go through our busy day, and we don't include God. Sometimes we forget to include God and sometimes we push God away. However, when we push God away, then we miss the most special moments of life.

Today's Old Testament reading from the first book of Samuel is about Hannah's persistence in prayer when the answer seemed to be no, no, no. I should point out that Hannah is one of the few female characters in the Bible whose spiritual struggle gets center stage — at least briefly. Her encounter with God is one of the few in Scripture that features a woman seeking out the divine on her own terms, and at her own initiative. And her response to God's intervention is one of the few prophetic utterances we hear from a woman in the Bible.

Today's Old Testament text tells us that Hannah perseveres in her life of faith. Year after pain-filled year, she "goes up to the house of the Lord" and participates in her family's worship. Year after year, she endures Peninnah's taunting. Year after year, she forgives Elkanah's well-intentioned but unhelpful platitudes. Year after year, she weeps, rages, fears, and wonders. But year after year, she keeps talking to God.

And, just as Hannah was dogged in praying to God, we are called to keep on talking with God. Even when we don't get the answer we want, we are called to maintain faith and keep God at the center of our lives. This means we must avoid the trap that says God doesn't care or God isn't listening.

Now, I am convinced that God answers every prayer. God answers all of our prayers either with a "yes", a "no", or a "wait." Let me repeat that. God answers every single one of our prayers and the answer can be a "yes", a "no" or the answer can be "not yet".

When God answers "yes" to intercessory prayer it is wonderful and I hope you have many of these. It is easy to keep going back to God with intercessory prayers, when the answer is "yes." Think of all the "yes's" you have gotten throughout your life. There are a lot of them.

On the other hand, I don't like it when God answers my prayers with a "wait" and I certainly don't like the "no's". But, how do I tell whether my prayer is being answered by a "wait" or a "no". Many of you know through your own experience that it is hard to tell the difference. You pray to God and then God answers in a vague way. What are we to do with this? How are we to tell the difference between a "wait" and a "no"? And, what are we to do when we get one of these answers?

Perhaps you have asked for the healing of a loved one and this doesn't happen.

When God answers a prayer with a "wait" or a "no" we are disappointed. We are angry. We wonder whether God is even listening.

God, are you out there? God, do you care about me?

Sometimes we are so unhappy that we push God away entirely and stop talking to God. God is always present with us, and never stops walking with us, but sometimes we stop wrestling with God.

We may walk away from God when the long-term illness of a loved one results in death.

We may push God away when we continue to see God's church do nasty things.

We may reject God when we see yet another war or armed conflict.

Will things ever get better? How long must we keep on praying?

Theologian, Fred Craddock, quotes an elderly black minister who summarized persistence in prayer in one sentence. "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is." Let me say that again, in response to decades and even centuries, of prayer on the struggle to improve human rights, an elderly black minister said "until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is."

Prayer does not provide instant answers. God is not a vending machine in which you insert enough money to get out the answer you want.

We are called to keep wrestling with God on the tough things we have in our lives and in our world. Some think prayer is easy, but it is not. Prayer is hard work. Like Hannah we must continue to boldly make our case with God. We must stay in relationship with God. And, there are a couple of things that you will notice with

long-term intercessory prayer. First, it shapes you. Like water spilling over a rock, over time your prayers will shape and sometimes even shift your heart's desire. Second, with long-term prayer you may see a call to action. Perhaps you are being called to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in a way that you did not see before. And finally, you may see ways that God is working, ways that you didn't expect. You may see answers to which you were previously blind.

Prayer comes in a multitude of forms, and intercession is just one type of prayer. Two thousand years ago the universe was changed forever by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Jesus our prayers to God are brought to fulfillment. Through Jesus our relationship with God has been remade. And, in the name of Jesus we pray to a God who is always with us.

I am aware that some of you are going through some tough stuff, or maybe it is your loved ones. We all know our world is going through some tough stuff. May the Holy Spirit sustain you as you walk the long journey of life in the presence of God. Like King David and Hannah the mother of Samuel, may you pray boldly and persistently. And, may you keep talking with God.