

An Invitation to Prayer

Second Sunday after Epiphany – January 18, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Psalm 34:4-8

- ⁴I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
⁵Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
⁶This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
⁷The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
⁸O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.

Psalm 63:1-8 (NRSV)

- ¹O God, you are my God, 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.
²So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
³Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
⁴So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
⁵My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
⁶when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
⁷for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
⁸My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

*This week, we begin a six-week series on prayer: A
Life of Prayer. Why do we pray? What is prayer?
Does God answer our prayers? We'll consider these
questions and more as we seek to make prayer a
priority in our living.*

Why pray?

Why pray? The reason is simple. We pray because our heart seeks its true home and its true home is the heart of God.¹ God longs for our presence. After Adam and Eve made their fateful decision to turn away from God, God came to the garden, calling for Adam, seeking

A Call to Prayer 2004

Rev. Robert Hasley has issued a call to prayer, urging us all to make prayer a priority in our living. This won't happen overnight. Even mature Christians will acknowledge the considerable challenges in building a life of prayer. Nonetheless, we, as a church family, begin here. We begin now.

Today is the first in a six-week series on prayer. You will be able to participate in the preparation of these sermons! Next week, January 25, there will be blank cards in the bulletins. We would like you to tell us what questions you have about prayer. You can write your question on the card and drop them in the offering plates next Sunday or a later Sunday. Robert will incorporate some of these questions into his sermons in this series. We also plan to have a future sermon series on prayer that is specifically focused on answering some of your questions. If you would like to send in a question by e-mail, please send it to:

prayer@standrewumc.org

We won't be responding to the questions individually, but we will be able to incorporate some of your questions into the sermons and the background studies.

Also, during this series, the text boxes in these studies will be devoted to classic prayers that have been written over the last two thousand years! One way we learn to pray is by praying prayers written by others. Indeed, this practice can help to ensure that our own prayers do not become too "me-focused." I suggest that you try finding a quiet place and reading these prayers aloud, allowing your heart to join with the heart of the prayer's writer. We are a community of faith that encompasses not only Christians living now, but all the Christians who have come before us. Hear the prayers of fellow Christians who have sought to open their hearts to God.

¹This beautiful phrase, "the heart's true home," is from Richard Foster's book, *Prayer*. This book is a touching and challenging presentation of prayer and will be my book recommendation for February. It is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

him. In much the same way, God invites each of us to come to him, to come home, to return to the way of life for which we were made. Our hearts hear God's call, but we've turned so far away from God that the call is somehow muffled. It is a little like hearing a phone ring, but being unsure where the ring is coming from, much less who is on the other end of the line. We might search all over the house and yet never look in the right place.

During the sermon series *Finding Joy*, I referred to a recent New York Times article, "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness."² The article tells of researchers whose studies have concluded that we think we know what will make us happy - but we don't. This was one of the 10 most e-mailed articles on the *Times* website in all of 2003! I'm sure that people were drawn to the article because it speaks to the human condition. We have restless, yearning hearts that seek peace and joy. We spend much of our life looking one place after another for something that will make us happy or joyful or content. But, in truth, our restless hearts will only find their rest in God.

Coming home

Writing thousands of years ago, the psalmists expressed our hearts' seeking after God, "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you. . . My soul clings to you . . . happy are those who take refuge in him. . . in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy" (from today's psalms). The heart of the psalmists' prayer, indeed all prayer, is a loving relationship . . . between God and me . . . between God and you . . . between God and all those who seek their "heart's true home."

Foster uses familiar, yet powerful, imagery to describe this home. "We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity . . . he invites us into the bedroom of his rest . . . where we are known and are known to the fullest. . . . The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer."³

You may not be in the habit of using the Daily Bible Readings on the third page of these studies, but I urge you to make time this week. Each daily reading this week is a psalm, for there is no

The Peace Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is error, truth;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

This well-known prayer first appeared about a century ago. Though it was certainly not written by St. Francis of Assisi, it has long been associated with him and reflects well the simple faith and life to which Francis called the people of his day and our own.

better place than the Psalter to begin our journey toward a life of prayer. Over the centuries, most Christians have learned to pray by praying the psalms. You might find it easier to see the psalms as prayers, even to pray them yourself, if you read them in a paraphrase such as Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. He has scrubbed away some of the polish and politeness that characterizes translations like the NRSV, enabling us to feel the emotion and the honesty of the psalmists. There is nothing "fancy" about the Hebrew language of the psalms and there need be nothing "fancy" about the language of our prayers. There is no secret to prayer; there is no insider vocabulary. We don't have to dress up our words. All God asks is that we be honest with him, as honest as we possibly can be. We ask no less of every important relationship we have in life.

²The article is by Jon Gertner and was in the *NY Times* on September 7, 2003. It is available at the *Times* website, though for a small fee.

³from the introduction to Foster's book, *Prayer*, p. 1-2.

Daily Bible Readings

(Other prayer-centered passages from the Psalms)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 16 “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy.”</p>	<p>Day 2 Psalm 23 “I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”</p>
<p>Day 3 Psalm 91 “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.”</p>	<p>Day 4 Psalm 128 “Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways.” [To ‘fear’ God is to recognize that this is his world and entrust our lives to him.]</p>
<p>Day 5 Psalm 107 “Consider the steadfast love of the LORD.”</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are You Part of a Sunday Morning Class?

Sunday School classes have always been a vital part of United Methodism. At St. Andrew we offer a wide variety of adult classes on Sunday morning. There are nearly twenty different classes! Whether you are looking for a discussion-oriented class that focuses on the Bible or a class that emphasizes parenting or even a lecture-oriented class, there is something for you! Information on the classes is available at the information counter in the Narthex and also on-line at

www.standrewumc.org.

Please visit one next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. *What do you hunger for in life?* You might make a list. How would this list compare to the list you would have drawn up earlier in your life? How might this list compare to the list you imagine you'll make later in your life? Our appetites change as we get older. The hunger gets deeper. It can no longer be satisfied by a new dress or a new game. What hungers do you see in others? Is there any evidence, any sense, that this hunger is spiritual? *How does a spiritual hunger differ from a physical or emotional hunger?* It seems odd to think that we should ever desire hunger, but in your own life . . . do you hunger for God? If you don't hunger for God it can only be because your hunger has been satisfied or you've yet to experience the joy of a deep desire for God. *How might we go about becoming hungry for God?*
2. Rev. Hasley is starting us, a community of faith, on a journey toward lives of prayer so that we might be a praying congregation, or as Dallas Willard puts it, "a community of prayerful love." *When people start talking about "prayer lives" what do you think they mean? What do you mean?* Make a list of all the words and phrases that you associate with "prayer life." Now, make a list of five adjectives that describe your own prayer life. How, if at all, has your prayer life changed over the last two years? *Do you even want a stronger "prayer life"?* Why or why not? What difference do you think prayer will make in your own life? In the life of St. Andrew? *How large a commitment are you, are we, willing to make to this prayer initiative?*