

At the end of an anonymous conversation – all the vulnerabilities that come with change, mental health crises, and brutal honesty still hanging in the air – they asked me:

“Can you pray a prayer I know?” Can you pray a prayer I know?

Beloved, never underestimate the power of the prayer you know. The power of familiarity. The power of repetition. The power of returning over and over again to the same story. In this culture, people always seem to want the cool new toy, the best new thing, the brand-new story. In this culture, we’re taught that staying with what is tried and true is tired and boring. But when the world around us falls to pieces, people tend to return to what has worked before. We return to what feels solid and sure. We pray the prayers we know.

During the season of Lent, I want us to learn this prayer so that it can become one of those prayers we know: Psalm 130. Every Sunday of Lent, we have whispered it together – repeating it until the words are familiar, the cadence is a well-worn rhythm, the hope, love and power has been pounding with our hearts beats on this pilgrim journey. It can be a prayer we know.

It tells us the story of God’s chosen people. When we see the label “Song of Ascents” we know that poem, that prayer, that song is a part of a collection of psalms. Many scholars believe it was a collection used by pilgrims living outside of the Holy City, part of the diaspora of the children of Israel, coming from far away, asserting their identity, their history and their desire to meet with the LORD where the LORD had chosen to meet with the chosen people. Do you know their story? (Genesis) God calls Abraham, tells him God will make a him a great nation. (Exodus) God hears the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, when they call for relief while enslaved in Egypt. God rescues them. (Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) God gives them laws for loving God and loving your neighbor. (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles) And when they rebel and do not follow those laws, when they call for a king because every other nation has one, when their kings fail and their enemies overtake them – their Holy City is destroyed, and their people are hauled away into exile. Do you know their story? These poems, scholars say, were written for the people in exile. Jerusalem has fallen, her kings have been

dethroned, and her people have been scattered. (Ezra, Nehemiah) Yet, the temple is rebuilt, and still the pilgrims come, singing the songs.

Something happens when you sing the same song with the same people at the same time every year. We know this about Christmas carols, the Happy Birthday song, the national anthem, the songs we hear in specific times in specific places with specific meanings. It is as if revisiting them in this way deepens their meaning every time, sets our minds in a certain mood, sets our hearts in the same direction. These songs the pilgrims sing prepare them to be in the place, to arrive in the Holy City for a time that is wholly set a part.

During Lent, we too have a journey, a pilgrimage to take. We don't all go together to a different city, a different building, or a different time. Instead, we make the place we have been journeying to, that holy space, when we tell the holy story. In the story we tell at the culmination of Lent, more than any other holy story, we meet with God most intentionally, most intimately, every year. During Lent, we are preparing to hear that story, to enter into that space.

And, like the carols of Christmas, the Songs of Ascent help us to prepare. This song of Ascent names the reality that every pilgrim faces: out of the depths I cry to you. The depths of depression, the depths of stress and anxiety, the depths of chaos and war, the depths of poverty and derision, the depths of uncertainty and shame, the depths of doubt and fear, the depths of loneliness and sickness and death. LORD! Hear my voice! The prayer names and claims one the most central beliefs of the Psalter: "The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in Spirit. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." So, when we cry, from wherever we cry, the deepest depths or the highest heights, God hears. Like God heard the cry of Israel enslaved in Egypt, God hears the cry of you, the pilgrims. God's ears are attentive to the voice of our supplications.

We wonder: maybe that shouldn't be the case. Maybe such a holy, good and perfect God should not bother Godself with puny, imperfect, unholy, ungodly people. But if those are the standards by which each of us were judged, none of us would be heard. None of us would be welcome. The Psalmist puts words on this fear: "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?" None of us would be worthy to take this journey. None of us would be worthy to draw closer to God to hear the holy story. All of us would have to give up before we even began. The song names this. We come to the end of the page. But then we turn the page.

“But there is forgiveness with you.” And that’s why we keep walking. There is forgiveness for me, for us, for every wrong thing there is redemption. The Psalmist reminds us of who God is: the One whose love is steadfast, faithful, loyal, never running out. The One whose forgiveness is powerful, and limitless and abundant and ridiculous. God will redeem Israel from all its iniquities. Keep walking. Come up to Jerusalem and meet with this Holy God.

In our context, we like to get places quickly. We like same day shipping, and instant dinners, and sounds to fill up every silence. But the psalmist recognizes that a lot of getting ready comes in the waiting. They repeat it: I wait for the Lord. Next idea? No. Say it again: “my soul waits and in God’s word I hope.” Next idea? No. Say it again: “My soul waits for the Lord.” Next idea? No. Give an example of the same idea: “more than those who watch for the morning.” Move on? NO. Say it again: “more than those who watch for the morning.”

Wait. Wait. Wait. Watch. Watch. This holy space is not something you can rush into. You must prepare yourself. You must hope with eager expectation. You must take every step of the journey and you must walk it slowly. Lent takes a long time. Advent, the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, it goes quickly, too quickly sometimes. This year: all the Sundays of March. Half the Sundays of April. Lent stretches on and on. We still have two weeks to go until Easter. Wait. Wait. Wait. Watch. Watch. Do you believe the best things in life are worth waiting for?

This holy waiting is counter cultural too. Our culture has monetized Jesus’ birthday with Santa Claus merchandise, gifts and decoration, it has monetized Jesus’ resurrection with Easter Bunny stuff, candy eggs, and celebrations, but it hasn’t touched Lent. Lent is counter-cultural. Lent – a time for repentance, crying out from the depths, naming the sins we cannot shake by ourselves, waiting and watching – you can’t squeeze a dollar out of that. You can’t make Lent into another pay check. Our culture teaches us to ignore Lent. It’s not important. Just skip it and let it be Easter already. But, for me? I need it. I need Lent. I need that time to really weep over the brokenness of the world. I need that repetition. I need that saying of the same prayer. I need that waiting and watching. I need that preparation. I need something to set the time a part.

If you’ve seen me during the week during Lent, you’ve seen that I cover my head during this season. Every Sunday is a Minnie Easter during Lent, but during the week, many Christians fast. They give up eating meat, they give up eating sweets, they do something that sets the time

a part. For me, giving up food is tied to ideas of diets and disliking the body God gave me; I can't do fasting for a long period of time without sinking into unhealthy habits. But adding something? I can do that. I add a spiritual practice of prayer, in solidarity with people discriminated against because their religious practices mark them as different, and in obedience to the calling I feel to really set the time apart. For years this has been powerful. I practice this prayer, covered by God's grace, tying my scarf three times in the morning: in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, remembering my baptism. I am beloved. I belong. I'm a child of God. Amen. I do this all during Lent. If it slips, I retie it. An extra reminder. When I sense people staring, I think of how hard the journey is for some and not as much for others, and I pray all the more. This practice is a blessing and burden, but it ALWAYS sets the time apart. And on the days I'm sick of waiting, sick of wearing it, it makes me really, really, ready and eager to arrive at the space we create in which we tell our Holy Story, and feel the freedom of no more head covering. That physical reminder (the absence of a head covering) calls me to extra rejoicing in the season to come. It's weird. But, oh, so often, it's where God meets me.

I bet y'all are pretty ready for Lent to end. The way we are ready for winter to be over, we want spring to begin. The way we are ready for war to stop raging, we want peace to reign. The way we are ready for the darkness to lighten, we want morning to come. We watch for the morning. Watch for the morning. Watch for the morning. We want to stop waiting for it to be Easter.

I hope you do have a longing to hear the story again: to cling to the cross. One hope we have is that, in the light of the cross, all we go through makes sense. It is an emblem of suffering and shame, it is the place where all our depths come to rest. As a symbol of torture and torment, it really shouldn't be a thing we cling to, yet out of the depths that is the cross, we cry, and Christ cries with us. And when it all goes dark, we wait for the morning. We watch for the morning. We hope for the morning. In the bigger story, we see and experience glimpses of the promised dawn. And, in the meantime, in the season of Lent, we prepare to hear the story. We pray the prayer we know. We sing the songs we know. We hope in the LORD! We wait for the LORD! Forgiveness will be found. Redemption will come. Love will win. Cling to the cross.

Amen.