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## Asking for More

Psalm 136 | John 3: 11-17

Most of our prayers are modest and polite. Maybe we are conditioned not to ask God for too much, or maybe our prayers sometimes become an exercise in managing expectations. “Lord, give us this day our daily bread...” I hope I’m not asking for too much, now, you hear? “Deliver us from temptation” because we wouldn’t want to offend you. I make light of the Lord’s Prayer because its petitions are so routine and humble, but I think it’s often true that a sober assessment of our situation leads us to ask for less than we really need or for something other than we truly desire. We are told, after all, by both physicians and theologians that God is not a miracle worker. So if the doctor says not to expect a cure, we are not encouraged to pray for healing even if healing is what we wish to experience. Against the advice of these experts, I want you to know that sometimes I pray for healing anyway.

There are less noble occasions, too, when we are confused about what to pray for because our concern for others comes into competition with concern for ourselves. We’ve been told recently to keep our complaints to ourselves concerning rising gas prices because the cost we pay at the pump is nothing compared to the suffering of Ukrainians. Of course there’s no arguing with that kind of reasoning. But you tend to hear it from people who aren’t having too much trouble paying for transportation in the first place. Certainly it’s not only possible but also holy to bring before God the suffering of everyone touched by violence in Ukraine and also the hard choices facing those who work in Chapel Hill but can’t afford to live here, or seniors living on fixed incomes. And when it comes to gas, what should we be praying for in the first place? Lower prices? Or less consumption? And besides, the truth about Ukraine is that it’s just horrible news for the whole world. Death and destruction in Mariupol and Kyiv is just part of the story. Almost three million refugees in Poland. And what about all those poor Russians who either don’t know what’s actually happening in this war or can’t do anything about it. Can we not empathize with Russians who are now ashamed of the actions of their government? We have not always been proud of the actions of our government; only, few of us have ever been driven to exile in Kazakhstan or Istanbul. I’m losing track of all the people we’ve got to pray for now. The outgunned Ukrainian army. The families on trains headed west. The 15,000 activists arrested in Moscow. Our neighbors in Chatham County who can’t pay for gasoline to get to work. Dare we mention that the buildup of NATO forces in Eastern Europe has done nothing to end the Covid-19 pandemic or resolve the climate crisis. Lord in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

This is not a time for praying small prayers. This is a time for asking God to do something. Gracious God, we’re asking for more! Not just for us, but for our neighbors. Not only those nearby, but those also far away. We want assurances for today and also for tomorrow. This is our prayer for healing. This is our prayer for peace.

The wonderful thing about prayer is that it is no place for zero sum thinking. There are no winners and losers in prayer, no hard choices that we have to make. When we turn to God in prayer we put our petitions in God's hands and we entrust our desires to God's purposes. So it's not a matter of budgeting our worries or showing preferences in our petitions. Prayer is the place for us to lift up the deepest and widest desires of our hearts to the God who shares in the suffering that we have witnessed.

Psalm 136 is an example of how we should pray today – with thanksgiving to our almighty and sovereign God, who alone stands over heaven and earth. We should pray in memory of what God has done in the past. No one who opposes the purposes of God will withstand God's power and judgment. Give thanks to our God who is good, who has “a strong hand and an outstretched arm.” Just notice all the powerful verbs in Gafney's translation of the text. Our God has “cut the Red Sea in two.” She has “churned Pharaoh and his army” in the water. She has “walked her people through the wilderness.” The Psalmist asks no small things of God. Move these mountains! Divide these waters! Remember the power of the God to whom we pray.

This God – who created the heavens and the earth, who gave the sun to rule the day and moon to rule the night, who separated the dry land from the waters, who formed humankind from the soil of the earth. Do not doubt God's power when God's purposes are challenged. The Psalm reminds us what became of Pharaoh. We might also remember the story of Goliath, struck down by God's anointed.

This brings me to another ambiguity concerning prayer. Are we not sometimes drawn to pray against evil when it is embodied in other people? How are we to pray for and about those who cause human suffering? What do we say in our prayers about the soldiers who attack civilians? How do we pray for the generals who give the unjust orders? What do we say to God about Vladimir Putin? Scholars call these the imprecatory prayers. They are the harsh and cursing prayers that invoke God's judgment on evil.

They call it the story of David and Goliath. But I think that's misleading, but it's a personal conflict between two soldiers. It's not even a battle between two countries, Israel and Israel's enemies. Goliath represents the forces of evil and death that are opposed to God's creation. Says the young soldier David, emerging from the fold with a stone in one hand and a sling in the other - “Who is this Philistine who comes against our God?”

Let us take these prayers and entrust them to God who is almighty and all powerful. All of these prayers – for the killed and injured, for the suffering and aggrieved. For everyone fleeing and for everyone fighting. For everyone banished and everyone abandoned. For all who are touched by this violence directly and indirectly. We can pray for them all without prejudice or distinction. We can even pray for the enemies of God who have unleashed these dogs. We are all in the hands of the living God. She will move mountains and shake the foundations of our temples and palaces. We are in the hands of the living God - She will come and save God's people and deliver them to freedom. We are in the hands of the Living God – our God who acts in history; our God of strong verbs. She will restore peace and order to Creation as she first fashioned it.

Let us take all of these prayers and leave none of them out. This is the Living God – ask no small things of her. Let us pray – Gracious and loving God, we are asking for more. Amen.