

# AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH

## ***The Practice of Being Present to God: Prayer***

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
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### **1 Samuel 1:4-20**

*On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"*

*After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.*

*They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord."*

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***"Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord."***

I Samuel 1:9

I have longed maintained that the best things in life are the easiest to corrupt. And in matters religious, nowhere is this more apparent than in the matter of prayer. It is, after all, the most common and universal behavior of people of faith.

It is a little daunting to speak about the practice of prayer in just a few minutes. Prayer is a subject about which countless books have been written. Some of the wisest, most spirit-filled people who ever lived have been preoccupied with the importance of the practice of prayer. And most of the important religious figures in history have all been sustained by prayer as by breathing.

I find our reading from the Hebrews scriptures today a fascinating passage, but there is much that it suggests, or implies, about prayer that bothers me. So first, I want to talk about a couple of things that I believe prayer is NOT.

I do NOT think prayer is a transaction, a deal, a negotiation with God – and an essentially selfish one at that. It is not an activity whereby we go to God asking – sometimes demanding – that we

be given what we want (and admittedly sometimes need) as if the whole world revolved about us and we get mad and angry and deeply disappointed with God when we don't get it.

Hannah seems to model prayer in this way:

*[Hannah] was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."*

So much of how prayer is imagined and practiced by us is shaped by this notion of prayer as a transaction.

I also do NOT think that prayer is magic, as in some hocus pocus, as in some formulaic curse or blessing that causes God to act. Prayer is not some magic wand that we can wave to move mountains, however we find them, to kick some butt as necessary, to heal disease, to reverse aging or to make you rich (maybe even win the lottery!). And yet our story today has the feel of magic to me:

*Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord."*

Just reading those words I can hear it now: "See Pastor Mike! All you've got to do is pray and have faith, and voila, what you pray for, just like Hannah's pray for a son, will come to pass!"

Prayer as a magic wand does sound exciting and it does have its appeal, but the truth is that prayer just doesn't seem to work that way. And it is unfortunate that we hold on to prayer like some childhood habit, like a Santa Claus or a tooth fairy, where a conspiracy of silence prevails about something we have all outgrown but can't give up.

And yet, in spite of all my fussing with this text, I do think Hannah did something powerful and prayerful and wonderful: *"After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord."*

This is prayer: "Hannah presented herself to God." And it is in the presence of God, in presenting ourselves to God in prayer, that our requests and intercessions make any sense at all. It is in the presence of God that we discern whether our requests have been answered or not. So often we make our requests and seek our answers from God but we fail to present ourselves before God's Holy Presence. To request and seek answers from God without a willingness to linger in God's presence might be called "drive by" petitions, but prayer it is not. And I think this lobbing of requests to God, and our demand for answers, tend to reflect our self-centeredness and are a sure sign of the narcissism of our day where everything, including the spiritual life, is all about me and *my* wants and *my* needs. But prayer is an intentional lingering in God's presence, providing the space and time for our requests, and the answers we seek, to take on new meaning and deeper understanding at the core of our being and in our larger context beyond ourselves in the world.

Prayer *is* our yearning toward God. Prayer *is* an emptying of oneself that paradoxically replenishes oneself. Prayer is being receptive to the presence of God. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that

Prayer is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing. When I am fully alert to whatever or whoever is right in front of me; when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive; when I am able to give myself wholly to the moment I am in, then I am in prayer. Prayer is happening, and it is not necessarily

something that I am doing. God is happening, and I am lucky enough to know that I am in The Midst.

What we are told is that God is made present through prayer, and that it is God's Presence that is a power and comfort that is impossible to describe. Perhaps this is what it means to say that "prayer works." We do not measure it in terms of changed outcomes, but in terms of changed attitudes, and changed perspectives, and changed ways of being in the world, and in our own being.

However, we tend to want results. We want answers from prayer, but we do not know how to measure the results that seem to matter most to God – deeper love, amazing grace, profound peace, courageous surrender, simple trust and renewed commitment to do what we can to bring God to life in our life, and "on earth."

If we continue to pray childishly "give me, give me, give me," -- if we assume that we know whether or not God has "answered" our prayers – if we do all of this apart from a deep awareness and a centering in God's abiding presence -- then we are sure to guarantee that as we grow older we will give up prayer altogether. If we use prayer to only ask for things, instead of to seek ways of being in the world, then we will measure the effectiveness of prayer by whether or not we are given what we ask for, even though we have no idea sometimes what it is that we really need.

I would like to see prayer restored to its rightful place as a communion with God and with God's presence alive and well in our lives and in the life of the world. Prayer our energizing and transforming connection with the Spirit and with the world.

The French mystic Simone Weil is right in saying: "Absolute unmixed attention is prayer." To pray is to move into the depths without any consideration for how long we can tread water. When we pray we are tapping into our source of strength and our ultimate security and are lured to the way of life even when we cannot fathom the reasons why life is sometimes so painful. Prayer is not about asking for special favors, but for favoring a way of being in the world. In that sense, it is truly our salvation.

Ultimately prayer moves us in the direction of God, not away from God; and the closer we get to God – the more we are changed unaware. You see, prayer changes us: changes our requests and the answers we seek; changes how we understand our purpose and place in the world.

I also trust that prayer changes the world. To pray is the change the way the world is. Marjorie Suchocki, a great contemporary theologian, says that prayer adds something to the world that God can work with. And because prayer is added to the world, the possibility of what can be changes. As we pray, we change the world by changing ourselves in our deepest orientation. And with that change, we alter the total situation with which God works. Prayer makes possible the transforming power of God. Praying itself is part of the process by which Grace becomes operative in the world.

So we offer our prayers when we gather in community "in the presence and power of God." And, in that "presence" we say, "We share your prayer" not because we believe something magical will happen; not because we have recited a formula, or rubbed the toe of a statue, or intoned the name of a saint, but because prayer, if it is honest and real, makes us more receptive and vulnerable in our humanity to the pain and struggle of our friends and neighbors. Or, as Kenneth Leech says, "The best preparation for life of prayer is to become more intensely human." Thus, our sharing of prayer "in the presence and power of God" enlarges the possibility of God's Goodness and Grace in the world. The pray-er becomes a participating point of the entry and expansion of Grace, so much so, that Augustine said: "Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not."

In the end, prayer is no small thing. Prayer is to our spirit what food is to our body.

I love how Barbara Brown Taylor wraps up her chapter on prayer:

Since I am a failure at prayer, I keep an altar in my room. It is really an old vanity made of rosewood, with fancy scrollwork around the oval mirror and a small stack of drawers on either side. At worst, I think of it as a piece of furniture that I offer God as a substitute for my prayers. At best, I think of it as a portal that stays open whether I go through it or not. I keep some icons on it, and a lot of candles. When people ask me to pray for them, I write their names on slips of paper and put them in a small brass box that sits in front of two paintings, one of Jesus and one of his mother. Although Mary is looking lovingly in her son's direction, she occupies her own space, which I like.

Mary is more like me than her son is, after all. Both of her parents were human. She was born and died in the usual ways. What was unusual about her was her reliability. No matter what life pitched at her, Mary did not duck. She endured a difficult pregnancy to bear a singular child, whom she loved reliably through all the years of his controversial life. When her son was cut down, she was there. When it came time to prepare his body, she was there. When he was not in his tomb, she was there. As much as I hate to presume on her reliability, I know she will remember the people whose names I have placed in the brass box, even when I forget.

Most nights the altar just sits there, holding all of those pictures, wicks, and names. Then comes a night when I am in deep need, deep fear, deep thanks, or deep want – either for myself or for someone I love – and I light every candle on the altar. Some are tall and thin. Others are short and squat. Some smell like vanilla and others like sandarac balsam. Some were gifts. I bought others for myself. Lighting them all generally requires at least ten kitchen matches, and even then I burn myself getting to the last of them. When I am through, I sit back on my heels and try to take it all in. The mirror behind the candles doubles their glow. The icons catch the light, pitching it back and forth. I can see my reflection through the flames, though only dimly, since the mirror is an old one that has lost much of its shine.

Prayer overtakes me there. I am utterly swamped by the presence of the Holy. I would bend my head to the ground if I could take my eyes off the beauty. As it is, I do not even know for sure if I am breathing. The altar is giving me more life than I know how to ask for. I can no longer tell the difference between need, fear, thanks, and want. In this light, I see how they are all facets of the same sparkler. I see how they are all faces of the same love. This answer to my prayer is so far beyond my doing that I cannot find the words to forswear my own input.

All I did was light the candles.  
Did God find me or did I find God?  
*Hush.*  
The time for words is past.