

March 5, 2017
First Sunday in Lent

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“God Revealed”

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*God beneath you, God in front of you, God behind you,
God above you, God within you.
~St. Patrick*

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Psalm 139:1–18

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me. ² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³ You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. ⁵ You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. ⁹ If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, ¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. ¹¹ If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night', ¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. ¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

Luke 11:1–13

¹ He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' ² He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.' ⁵ And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." ⁷ And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. ⁹ 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

“God Revealed”
Psalms 139:1–18, Luke 11:1–13

Some years ago, Ed Bradley interviewed a family on 60 Minutes. The family consisted of a religiously devout mother in her thirties, an almost painfully shy father, and their ten-year-old daughter who was confined to a wheelchair by spina bifida. Each year of their child’s life, the family made a pilgrimage to Lourdes in France, a place renowned for the physical healing that has occurred there.

Bradley was giving the family a bit of hard time; clearly, he found them gullible and impressionable. At one point he turned to the girl and asked her, “When you pray, what do you pray for?” Without hesitation, she answered, “I pray that my father won’t be so shy. It makes him terribly lonely.” That stopped Bradley for a moment, but he quickly recovered and forged ahead, questioning the family’s priorities and their wisdom, suggesting that it was a bit ridiculous to pay thousands of dollars each year to go to Lourdes when they still had no miracle to show for it. But the mother, looking at her beloved daughter, simply answered, “Oh, Mr. Bradley, don’t you get it? We already have our miracle.”¹

What do you think Ed Bradley expected that family to pray for? What would we expect such a family to pray for? Was their prayer answered, even if the answer was that the whole family had an unshakeable faith and that a young girl who could have so easily focused only on her debilitating physical condition, instead had the deep love and insight to pray, not for herself, but for her father? Was not the miracle here a family *praying the way they live*—with **faith** and **hope** and **love**—*and living the way they pray? We live as we pray.*

Which begs the question for all of us: how and when and why do we pray? What do we pray for? What do we expect to happen when we pray? What does it look like to have our prayers answered? Maybe it is a comfort to know that these questions which we find so difficult to answer were questions Jesus’ followers struggled with too.

¹ from the book *Operating Instructions* by Anne Lamott, as retold by the Rev. Mark Ramsey in his sermon “Belonging,” published in *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, p. 20.

In Luke chapter 11, the disciples have been watching Jesus with a growing sense of excitement and amazement. They have seen Jesus teach, heal, cast out demons, and calm raging storms. But the disciples have also observed that Jesus is a man of prayer. Before meals. After them. At night. First thing in the morning. In the middle of the day. Clearly Jesus knows something about prayer, and the disciples could only hope that he might share his knowledge with them. And so they ask, throwing in a little peer pressure for good measure: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

For once, Jesus gives them a simple, straightforward answer: "When you pray, say this:"

"Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sin,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."

What a relief it must have been to the disciples to finally get clear instructions from Jesus. And, compared to what faithful Jews were used to when it came to prayer, this prayer was a piece of cake. At that time, Jews prayed three times a day, at sunrise, at 3 pm, and at sunset. They prayed, not sitting down, but standing up, to demonstrate reverence toward God. The prayers consisted of a series of the same eighteen prayers, always said in Hebrew, no matter the native language of the person praying.

So this prayer Jesus offered his disciples was a breath of fresh air. Short, easy to remember, and in their own language! But just when the disciples thought Jesus had offered them something they could get their heads around, something they could easily understand and share with others, they discovered, as they began to pray this prayer, that it was far from simple. And no part of this prayer is more complicated, more challenging to get our minds around, than the very first phrase: "***Father, hallowed be your name.***" Or, as we typically pray it: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name." In this very sentence resides the **central paradox** of the Christian faith, that our God *came to be one of us* in an intimate, personal way in Jesus *and* that same God is *the very essence of holiness, of otherness*.

This prayer Jesus offers his followers does nothing to solve the mystery of faith; instead it reveals that God is more mysterious than we ever imagined. To our question of whether God is our intimate, loving parent or a deity entirely removed from us, residing in some heavenly realm, Jesus simply answers: “yes.”

The word paradox literally means *beyond thinking* or *beyond believing*. A paradox is a statement that at first seems completely contradictory but upon further reflection contains a kernel of truth. The theologian Soren Kierkegaard believed that faith itself is a paradox, since faith is believing in something we cannot see or prove. If we live as we pray, and we pray the prayer Jesus taught us as Jesus taught it, then we live into this paradox that God is both our Father—our intimate, personal, loving God—“who art in heaven”—*and* God is completely removed, completely other, completely holy.

In his updated translation of the Bible called *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates the opening phrase of the Lord’s prayer this way: “Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are.” “Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are.” And indeed, the closer we look at these opening words, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name” the more we find that in them Jesus *reveals* something about the nature of God. Like us, the disciples really wanted answers to the questions when, how, and what should we pray? Instead Jesus gives them an answer focused on *who*.² *To whom* do we pray?

The word “father” was not a new way to refer to God. But the word Jesus used for “father” was not the classical Hebrew word that showed up in daily prayers. Jesus chose a word from the Aramaic language, the native language of his disciples. He’s telling them to address God in their own language, with words that had deep, personal meaning for them. And the word Jesus used was *abba*, an Aramaic word for father.

The author Ken Bailey was once teaching the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic to a group of women in the Lebanese mountains. He described *abba* as an Aramaic word used two thousand years ago, and when he did he noticed that the class began to get restless. Finally he stopped and asked the women if they had any comments. One woman raised her hand and said, “Dr. Bailey, *abba* is the very first word we teach our children.”³

² David Lose, commentary on Luke 11:1-13 on [workingpreacher.com](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=719), July 25, 2010.
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=719

³ Bailey, Ken, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. InterVarsity Press, 2008, p. 97.

Abba is a word with deep significance and meaning in the Middle East. It is used to address a superior and to show respect, but it also indicates a profoundly personal relationship between the one speaking and the one being called *abba*. This is the word Jesus told his disciples to use when praying to God, not to suggest that God is a man or that God can be best understood through our earthly parents, but to show that God's name is as elemental to us as the first word we learn to speak, that God is the first to care for us and provide for us, that God knows us and loves us completely.

When I was in seminary, I once attended a church with a few of my classmates. This church had no pews and no organ. The music was praise songs accompanied by a band with guitars and drummers and lead singers on microphones. Although that worship experience touched all of us deeply, one of my classmates took issue with the lyrics to the songs. "They make it seem like God is our best friend. Something about that just doesn't seem right."

It is possible to take comfortable familiarity with God to extremes when we think of God *only* as our Father, our *abba*. We live as we pray, and if we only pray *abba*, father, then we risk becoming too focused on the God who reaches out to us and who longs to establish a personal relationship with each of us, forgetting that this God is also *entirely other*, that God is **holy** in ways we can never be.

To help us understand and correctly use this word *abba* for God, Jesus then tells us we are to affirm God's holiness, God's otherness. "Our Father, who art in heaven, *hallowed be thy name*." This phrase reminds us that the God who created and loves and provides for us cannot be reduced to something we can carry in our pocket and pull out when we have need. The God of the universe is truly beyond our comprehension, and we affirm this in the Lord's prayer.

Of course, it's also possible to take the holiness of God to extremes. Martin Luther, a monk in the 16th century, felt the Roman Catholic Church had done just that. At that time, the Bible and all church services were in Latin, not in the language of the people, and salvation was mediated by priests, who were considered closer to God than lay people.

One of the many significant acts of the Protestant Reformation was that Luther translated the Bible into the language of the people and argued for the priesthood of *all* believers rather than a hierarchy of human holiness. Luther acknowledged the awesome holiness of God, but he also helped Christians recognize that God as the loving Creator of *all* people, longs to be in relationship with us all. By giving us this intimate way to address our Creator who is wholly other, Jesus reminds us that prayer is all about relationship, which is why he starts by telling us to address God by name. Prayer is about a relationship with God who is closer to us than our very breath and, at the very same time, utterly other, utterly holy. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*

So, is God our intimate, loving parent or is God so holy that God is entirely removed from us? with the first sentence of this prayer, Jesus answers, “Yes.”

Yes, when you pray, come to God with expectant hope that God hears and responds.

Yes, in your prayers be open and vulnerable with the one who created you, knows you, and loves you completely.

Yes, pray not just in a way that is transactional, but *relational*.

For in prayer, relationship is created and nurtured when we reveal ourselves to God with all of our doubts and contradictions and open ourselves to God – the paradoxical one who is profoundly intimate and wholly other – when we open ourselves to God being revealed to us.

Amen.