
Make Me to Know

Psalm 25

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, February 18, 2018,
by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

Earlier this week, we started a journey together. This journey is called Lent. If you weren't aware of the beginning of this journey before you entered the service today, I suspect the 10 minutes of procession and confession of the great litany might have tipped you off. On Wednesday of this week, many folks came to this Chapel and to churches around the world to be marked again with the cross of ashes, to be reminded of their own mortality, and to be called to repentance as they journey with Jesus to the cross. We have entered this season of Lent looking to be made more like Jesus, even as we recognize our own sinfulness, our own brokenness, our own hurts and fears and distrusts and pain. In this season, many of us adopt fasts—from particular foods or Facebook or other forms of folly—or we add practices—like Lenten book studies or daily scripture reading or increased times of prayer. And we do all of these as means of turning from our regular rhythms, patterns, and ways of being in order to turn toward encountering Jesus and more faithfully following him. This Wednesday, we turned our faces toward Jesus even as we look toward the cross—that terrible reminder that we could not receive Jesus without killing him.

This Wednesday we turned toward something else, too. News reports interrupted midday television as word of yet another school shooting spread. More tragic deaths. More terrified children. A particular image is seared into my mind from Wednesday. It is a picture of a mother tightly holding her child, as an ashen cross marked her forehead. When the pastor or priest marked that mother's forehead speaking those too familiar words, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return, repent and believe the good news," I doubt either of them could have imagined the terror of the day or that 17 people from that mother's child's school would come to know the fragility of these mortal bodies and the seeming finality of death so soon. Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Of course, these deaths and this terrible event have stirred the typical debates about gun control, mental health, public safety, the role of politicians and policy makers, just to name a few. This event has driven us to Facebook and Twitter to express heartache and hurt and rage and to share the poetry and art and well-written prose of those who say what we are stumbling to find the words to say ourselves. Ultimately, we share what we believe with such certainty will solve the problems that lead to mass shootings or other horrific acts of violence—solutions that make us take sides with one set of people or another. And I, probably like many of you, have been caught up in the all-too-familiar tendency to turn to what I know, to trust in my own understandings, to lean on the things that make me feel safe—even safe knowing that my wife and son spend every day of the week in a school building.

And with all of this swirling in my mind, I remembered that I have been reading Psalm 25 over the last few weeks, as I've looked to this Sunday to preach. And it occurred to me that the Psalmist has given us a prayer that speaks to us in this moment marked by ashes and mass shooting. The Psalmist invites us into a posture of prayer that can form us in the ways of the Lord as we progress on our journey with Jesus.

Psalm 25 begins, "To you, O LORD I lift up my soul. O my God in you I trust." The Psalmist looks to the Lord in prayer with a posture of worshipful surrender and self-offering trust. The Psalmist is saying, to you—Adonai, LORD—the one who is the creator and our covenantal God, I offer myself. The language the Psalmist uses here for "soul" evokes memories of creation. You remember the story from Genesis 2, when the LORD God formed humankind out of the dust of the ground. God breathed the breath of life into the dusty nostrils of the man, and he became a living being—a soul. This image of humanity is one of an open-throated-being, waiting to be inspired by the life of God and a being who expires in return to God. It is the image of humanity dependent on the Creator for life and trusting God's provision, protection, and presence. It is an image of a being that is vulnerable, too able to be killed and returned to dust, but a being that waits and hopes in the Lord. "To you O Lord, I lift up my whole being. O my God, in you I trust." The Psalmist offers us a posture of prayer oriented

toward the God of life and toward the prayerful work of lifting and offering that life—all of ourselves—back to the Lord.

This posture may not come easily for us. I know it does not come easily for me. We have been trained in the ways of self-reliance, self-assurance, and independence. If you are like me, you know all too well the deep tendency to trust in the ways that are familiar, ways of your own making, your own power, your own finances, your own resources. Through experience and education, through family systems and sales pitches, we've been conditioned to place deep trust in things other than God. So we spend the season of Lent trying to counter these ways of ours. We give up habits and practices or we take them on to remember that God is the one on whom our life depends. In ways that are great and small, we try to enter the posture of the Psalmist's prayer: "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O My God, in you I trust."

In addition to turning in trust to the Lord, Psalm 25 offers a posture of prayer that invites humble recognition of sinfulness, brokenness, guilt, and desperation. Throughout the prayer, the Psalmist acknowledges again and again the desperation of his situation and the need for God's presence, forgiveness, and intervention. Verse 2: "Do not let me be put to shame, do not let my enemies exalt over me." Verse 7: "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions." Verse 11: "For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great." And again in verses 15-18: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress. Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive my sins." Can't you sense the struggle and desperation? Though the witness of the Scriptures does not say that every trouble or calamity or hardship that comes is a result of personal sin or failings, the Psalmist recognizes in this prayer that his sins, his guilt, his wrongdoing, following his own ways has led to affliction and trouble.

Maybe Lent is a season for you to adopt this posture of humble prayer. Maybe it is a season to recognize how your own ways are causing hardship and trouble. Maybe there is an invitation for you to see how your ways of being in relationships, your ways of thinking about yourself, your ways of coping with stress, your ways of pursuing success, your ways of seeking pleasure, your ways of dealing with pain—how any of your ways—are harming you and preventing you from being who God has made you to be? Perhaps your prayer today can be, "O Lord, Make me to know, experience, see, and understand my ways that lead away from you and to my destruction." Lent is just the time for such a walk in humility and for such a posture of prayer.

Thankfully, even as the Psalmist recognizes his own distress, his own trouble, and his own harmful ways, he remembers the God to whom his prayer is addressed. In this intimate conversation of prayer, the Psalmist says to the Lord: "You are the God of my salvation, for you I wait all day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old... According to your steadfast love remember me; for your goodness sake, O Lord." In this prayer, the Psalmist calls to his mind and to God's the wilderness wanderings of God's people. The resonances of God's covenantal presence with the people in the desert journey to the Promised Land cannot be missed here. Maybe you remember the story from Exodus 32-34, when God's people were worn out from their waiting and wandering. They decided that they were ready to turn to their own ways and to the gods of their own making. While Moses was up on the mountain communing with God and receiving the stone tablets on which God's commandments were written, the people had Aaron make gods of gold to which they would make sacrifices and offerings. To make a long story short, that didn't go well, and God's anger burned hot against the people's sins. But through the process of the people turning from God, and God remaining faithful to the people in spite of their sin, the Lord made this proclamation: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness..." The Psalmist calls on God to remember God's loving kindness and mercy—those characteristics which have been the ways of the LORD from the beginning. When the Psalmist remembers his own sin, he asks God to remember who God is first. "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; According to your steadfast love—according to your faithful compassion that never fails— remember me." Maybe the invitation of Lent—the posture of prayer for this season for you—is not primarily one of asking God to make you to see your ways rightly. Perhaps you are all too familiar with your own failings and sins, and

you know how your life is a mess because of them. Maybe your brokenness is the only thing that is ever before you. I wonder then if the prayer for you is this: “Make me to know you, Lord. Make me to intimately experience you, the God who is trustworthy and true. Make me to know you, Lord, in your goodness that can see me beyond my misguided ways. Make me to know you, O Lord, in your steadfast love and mercy. Make me to experience you as the God of my salvation, the God for whom I wait and in whom I hope. Make me to know you.” If your intimate prayers and conversations with the Lord are shrouded by shame and marked most by memories of your own mistakes, take this lesson from the Psalmist: remember God’s grace and mercy, displayed from of old, even as you seek forgiveness and freedom.

In knowing himself and knowing the Lord, the Psalmist asks to be led and instructed in God’s ways. The Psalmist prays, “Make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truths and teach me.” In a seeming break from his conversation with God, the Psalmist later reflects, “Good and upright is the Lord, therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in justice, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness... Who are they that fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose.” This desire to know, experience, learn, and live in the ways of the Lord, is a defining marker of the posture of prayer inhabited by the Psalmist. The Psalmist acknowledges his need to be led in the Lord’s ways of living, being, and doing—ways that are not like his ways, paths that are not his typical paths, modes of being that are shaped by the goodness, justice, mercy, and steadfast love of the Lord.

Like the Psalmist’s prayer, the Lenten season is all about surrendering our ways in order to learn the way of Jesus and to travel the road of Christ’s love. I wonder if today you find yourself seeking to know more fully and deeply the ways, paths, and truth of God. Perhaps you’re setting aside your self-critical attitudes to embrace God’s love for you by adding practices of self-care to your routine. Perhaps you are turning off Facebook, in order to spend time learning God’s ways through fellowship with your Christian sisters and brothers. Perhaps you’ve given up your readymade solutions to the latest horrific act of violence, and are seeking a way not simply defined by the political right or left but instead by the ways of the Lord for the good of all people. Maybe you’ve given up chocolate or whatever it is you turn to when you’re stressed, in order to seek Christ’s consolation that meets your deepest needs instead of masking them. Let me encourage you in these intentional Lenten practices to make your prayer this: “In all these efforts, O Lord, make me to intimately experience your ways; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me.”

Psalm 25 offers us a prayer that challenges our tendency to turn to the ways we know instead of to turn to the God who knows us and who invites us into God’s ways. This season we are called to give up our hold on what we know and to be led into the knowledge of God and God’s ways. As I close I want to consider with you one particular bodily posture of prayer that is especially fitting for the invitation of this psalm and the season of Lent. In this posture, you find your way to your knees, bow your head, and close your eyes. By assuming this posture, you are embodying humility, making yourself close to the dirt of the ground. By assuming this posture, you are making yourself defenseless—not ready to stand quickly or move out of harm’s way. The vulnerable part of your neck is exposed to the One before whom you bow, and your eyes are closed in trust. In a tangible way, you are offering your life in this bodily act. You are surrendering your ways of self-preservation and self-protection. In a sense you are lifting up your soul—your whole being (body and spirit)—waiting and hoping the Lord will be mindful of the Lord’s mercy and steadfast love. You are waiting and hoping the Lord will see you in the light of these instead of in the light of your sin and transgression. This posture of prayer is the posture of Lent. And whether it is a posture you are able to assume physically or not, it can be the posture of your heart, mind, and spirit. And so now, I invite you to join me and take this posture in whatever way you are physically able. With our heads and hearts, our knees and our spirits bowed before the Lord, let us pray:

Make us to know your ways, O Lord. Make us to know the road, the way of living and being, that path that is life with you, through Jesus. Make us to know You, o Lord, the one who instructs sinners in your way. Make us to know you with our hearts and minds and bodies, with our whole being, and in knowing you, enable us to walk in your paths for the glory of your name. Amen.