

Epiphany 3, Year B, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Do you remember
when you first learned
to pray?
For most of us
it was when we were little children.
Perhaps we were taught
kneeling by our beds,
or at the dinner table,
or in Sunday School.

I can't remember
exactly how it went in our house,
but I have a vague recollection
that it as a bedtime routine.
Read a story,
then have a bible story,
and then pray.
Is there something today
that you would like to thank God for?
Is there someone
who you would like to pray.
And I probably had the same sort of litany
as most children:
Dear God,
thank you for ice-cream tonight. Please bless Mommy and Daddy and (reluctantly) my brother,
Misty (that was my dog) and Bobby (my bird),
and Kylie and Tina (my friends)
and then anything else I could think of.
Sometimes I might add in
a prayer that I would get the birthday present I wanted,
and my brother always prayed for parking spaces - and got them!
Most of us
still have some kind of litany,
people we pray for, things we give thanks for,
day by day, week by week,
a list of pleases and thank yous for God.
And for many of us
that is the foundation
of our relationship with God.

But as we grow, both in years and in faith,
as life grows more complex,
our prayer grows as well -
or at least it should.

It's like any relationship.
When our children are little,
it's fine
when most of their communication with us
is about fulfilling their needs.
That urgent cry of a hungry baby,
that simple sign for more,
that toddler refrain,
"I want..."
But pleases and thank you
are only a small part of our relationships.
What makes them grow
is time spent together,
thoughts and feelings shared,
our minds and hearts
connecting.

And the same is true
of our relationships with God.
Eventually the pleases and thank yous
are not enough.

We yearn for a deeper connection
with God.

And that's where the psalms
are so helpful.
Because they give us a window
into that sort of deep
and intimate
connection with God.
A connection
where we open ourselves to God
with all of our hearts and minds and souls and strength.

And that's the power
of today's psalm.

For God alone my soul in silence waits;
 from him comes my salvation.
 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
 my stronghold, so that I shall not be greatly shaken.

Here is the picture of someone
 who has a deep trust in God.
 And not just that the psalmist has a deep trust,
 but that God can be trusted.
 God is like a rock.
 Strong. Firm. Immovable.
 Something you can build a foundation on.

It's something the psalmist repeats
 again and again.
 In verse seven, and eight, and fourteen.

For God alone my soul in silence waits;
 truly, my hope is in him.
 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
 my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken.
 In God is my safety and my honor;
 God is my strong rock and my refuge.
 Put your trust in him always, O people,
 pour out your hearts before him, for God is our refuge.
 Steadfast love is yours, O Lord,

God is a rock.

And yet, in spite of that statement of confidence,
 that sureness
 of the security
 the psalmist finds in God,
 there is a hint
 that not all is well.
 In fact
 more than a hint.

How long will you assail me to crush me,
 all of you together,
 as if you were a leaning fence, a toppling wall?
 They seek only to bring me down from my place of honor;

lies are their chief delight.
 They bless with their lips,
 but in their hearts they curse.
 Those of high degree are but a fleeting breath,
 even those of low estate cannot be trusted.
 On the scales they are lighter than a breath,
 all of them together.
 Put no trust in extortion;
 in robbery take no empty pride;
 though wealth increase, set not your heart upon it.

The psalmist is struggling. He's been attacked,
 abused,
 he's feeling isolated.
 and for all that he has confidence
 that God is his rock and fortress,
 one who will keep him safe,
 there's a piece of him
 that wonders.
 It's almost like
 there's a gap
 between what he knows in his head
 and what he feels
 in his heart.

He's trying, reaching
 for God,
 waiting for God
 to answer him.
 And wondering
 if God will ever respond.

It reminds me of Jesus' prayer
 the night before he died
 as he waited and prayed
 in the garden of Gethsemane.
 Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but
 what you want.'
 And the next day on the cross,
 "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

It's the prayer
 that wells up from deep within us,

reaching for God
hoping
that God will speak to us
in the middle
of our struggles.

And this prayer
offers us a model for that,
a prayer we can pray
along with the psalmist
that takes our hearts and minds
into the heart and mind of God
especially when things are difficult.

And especially in those times
when it feels like God is silent.
When God is silent,
we wait.
We wait, and we hope.

And here I need to digress for a moment.
The last couple of weeks,
we've thought about some difficult things in our sermons,
things that we often keep secret,
alcoholism, racism.
And today is another one.

All of us
have dark times in our lives,
times when life feels difficult
and we can't quite see our way ahead.
But those feelings are usually short-lived
and pass within a couple of days.

That's where this prayer lives.

But for some of us, those feelings don't just go away by themselves. They continue, and they interfere with daily life.
That's depression.

This morning
I read an article in the magazine, Christianity Today,
called "What love can't fix."

It was someone's story
of his father's battle with depression.

He writes:

“Clinical depression is horrible. It's not a mood. It's not what you feel when a lot of bad things happen and you get sad. That's a normal, rational response. But clinical depression interferes with the brain's ability to have normal, rational responses. It creates a chemical imbalance in the brain, and it starts translating what actually happens in the world into what it wants you to think, which is that you are unloved, unlovable, and unworthy.”

And all the prayer
and all the love in the world
won't fix it.
Because those feelings
aren't rooted in reality;
they are rooted in something in your brain, something
gone askew.

Yes, we can reach out to God in prayer if we are depressed.
But we also need for it to be treated,
with medication and therapy,
both of which
are remarkably effective.

Some of you know
that I live with depression.
I am very thankful for the medication that has made such a difference in my life,
and for the support network I have,
including my doctor and therapist,
who are there when I need them.

In today's bulletin,
there is an insert about depression.
Please, if this sounds like you or someone close to you,
reach out for help.
It may make the all difference.
I am thankful to the friend
who a decade ago
did that for me.

That said,
this psalm
is a prayer for all of us.
A prayer for those times

when we are struggling,
and a prayer
for when things are good.

Because it's a prayer
of deep connectedness
with God,
a prayer where we open ourselves to God
with all of our hearts and minds and souls and strength.

For God alone my soul in silence waits;
from him comes my salvation.
He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my stronghold, so that I shall not be greatly shaken.