

A Word About Prayer
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A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Psalm 4:1-8

It's been a crazy week. A busy week. An exhausting week.

I'm the breakfast maker at our house. And as I make our eggs and coffee, I watch the news. In just the past five days, I've heard about Syria, and measured responses, and the Mueller investigation, and secret tapes, and pending cabinet nominations, and North Korea, and retiring politicians, and trade wars, and consumer privacy, and trillion dollar deficits, and fired basketball coaches, and even about how Bill Murray has this 1-800 number to call if you want to book him for a job – he doesn't have a publicist. Just leave a message and he'll call you if he's interested.

And the world seems to say: *Ours is a crazy, chaotic, shameful planet, led by leaders without vision or purpose. Don't waste your time praying for God to bring order to all of this nonsense.*

On Tuesday, for my other job, I took a day trip to suburban Miami that included 7am and 7pm flights, too many cups of coffee at Panera, and not even a sniff of a sandy beach or one of Pit Bull's yachts.

And the world seems to say: *You don't need to pray for God's assistance. You just need to buckle down, work harder, use that elbow grease. Gordon Gecko was right: "Lunch is for wimps!"*

On Wednesday, we had our staff meeting here at church, and we considered how to go about accomplishing all of the tasks set before us this season. And just the thought of completing everything on this weekend's docket seemed overwhelming, let alone the month of April.

And the world seems to say: *Don't bother praying. Just start doing. God helps those who help themselves.*

And then during Sardis Academy we heard from Community Link about Charlotte's affordable housing crisis. Did you know that nearly half of the people who live in the Charlotte area are housing-burdened? That means they have to spend more than a third of their income on rent, making it all the more difficult to purchase other things like food, clothing, utilities, transportation, and healthcare. And did you know that the cost of housing continues to grow at a rate much higher than local wages? That means housing is getting harder to find, not easier. And that means that even more people who sit in this room could join Charlotte's housing-burdened in the very near future. And of course we didn't even begin to talk about the effects of the generational poverty and systematic injustices brought on by White Privilege.

And the word seems to say: *I don't see why you think you should pray about it. Talk is cheap, and that's all prayer is.*

On Thursday night, as Jacqueline and I laid in bed reading, she shared a startling statistic from a *New York Times* article: The infant mortality rate for black Americans is double that of white Americans, regardless of income level.

And the world seems to say: *Again, talk is cheap – and that's all your prayer is, too. Don't pray. Do.*

On Friday morning, Mary Allen insisted on wearing her white fleece vest over her pink flamingo romper – I’m not a fashion expert, but even I knew I couldn’t send her out the door like that. But I really don’t have twenty minutes to figure out how to pull that thing off of two flailing arms, and somehow replace it with a jean jacket, and make those tears disappear, and get her into the car seat, and do ALL of this without either a) exhibiting poor parental behavior on my part or b) encouraging and indulging poor behavior on her part. On Friday evening, she insisted that we only read the page with the elephant on it during story time. No turning ahead. Not flipping back. And I have to be honest, it’s not a very compelling elephant. I’m running out of things to notice.

And the world seems to answer: *What good’s a prayer gonna do?*

And my calendar is full: I did manage a mid-week breakfast date with my wife, and a couple of long overdue phone calls with friends and family, but I’ve still got a lawn to mow, a car to wash, and a deacons meeting attend, and please don’t tell Jacqueline that I have yet to call the insurance company about my windshield, or pay my registration fees, or fold the laundry load I left in the dryer on Wednesday night, or remember to downgrade the Costco membership – did you know you have to go in person!?!

And the world seems to answer: *God’s got more important things to worry about. Don’t tell me about prayer.*

It’s been a crazy week. A busy week. An exhausting week.

And I needed to hear today’s Psalm. Not just because my life’s chaotic. It is chaotic. It’s also a really messy kind of wonderful. But everyone’s life is chaotic – everyone here could speak to life’s busy-ness.

I needed to hear today’s Psalm, because it reminds us of the proper way to respond to the world’s chaos: prayer. Prayer is communion, connection, and conversation with God.

There’s an emerging, almost a favorite new empty slogan or statement that’s very popular on social media these days – it may finally be overtaking “I’m spiritual but not religious.” It goes something like this: “You need to do more than pray,” or “Your thoughts and prayers are not helpful,” or “Prayer is not action.” This sentiment has been especially prevalent following mass shootings in Las Vegas and Florida.

I think this sentiment is well-intentioned, but I also think it’s fundamentally wrong. And I think this because such a sentiment implies that prayer is inactive, passive even. It implies that prayer is transactional, or even worse that prayer is removed from reality – a desperate hope, nothing more than a fiction, a flimsy attempt launched upward to the divine with sparse odds of completing its purpose. Prayer is a way to pretend you’re invested, but deny sweat equity, and absolve your guilt or responsibility in corporate sin.

That’s not the kind of prayer I know. And it’s certainly not the kind of prayer the Psalmist knew.

Today’s psalm speaks of shalom. James Limburg writes that Psalm 4 is the first psalm to incorporate the idea of shalom – it’s translated as peace in our text. But shalom isn’t just a lack of conflict or violence. Shalom is a feeling of connectedness and security. Shalom is a baby sleeping in loving arms; it’s that

feeling of a full belly in the company of good friends; it's the utter trust that you are safe: safe to sleep, safe to speak, safe to doubt, safe to be yourself, safe to be a child of God.

Prayer, real, genuine, authentic prayer, creates God's shalom.

I have known God. And so has the Psalmist. And God has widened our paths in narrow spaces. God has soothed our anxiety; God has stayed awake so that we might sleep on those nights when we were parents worrying for our children, or children worrying for our parents. We needed to rest. And we rested in God.

Today, Joe and Mika are telling me the world's falling apart, and apparently Charlotte's part of that crisis, too. And I've got bills to pay, and a family to love, and time to procure on my calendar, and neighbors I really want to help, neighbors I want to tell, "you matter!" But this week, God, my space feels narrow. And so I'll pray. I'll pray with confidence.

Some people are skeptical. Prayer feels too awkward. But this morning, we asked collectively for God's shalom. And think about the power in that. Here, this morning, we sit in a space where people feel safe enough to shout out their individual petitions – they tell us freely how they have been blessed, and they say just as freely what gives them concern.

In prayer, we bring our deepest, most complex, and sometime most vulnerable parts of ourselves to God. And God listens. And God accepts. And God loves our weirdness. Except God doesn't call it weird.

In corporate prayer, we model God's shalom. We seek to love each other, as God loves us. It's a discipline. But can you imagine the fruits of such a discipline? Is the world not better when we hurt when others hurt, and grieve when others grieve, and celebrate when others celebrate? Prayer, when done properly, personalizes the needs of our neighbors. And when we know each other, when we love each other, when care for one another, when we pray for one another, there's nothing passive about it! It's an action!!!

I've been praying this week. I think it makes me a better husband and father and friend and minister. Because when I pray I become attuned to the needs of those around me. God offers me space to find grace in my relationships.

I've been praying this week. There are so many issues in the world. I can't solve everyone of them. I'm not strong enough. I'm not determined enough. But I am humble enough to believe in a power beyond mine. A power that doesn't just work through me but works through others as well.

And this week, I met Floyd, who told me that his organization, Community Link, has been able to secure housing for more than 2,000 people in Charlotte in 2017, and unclaimed tax returns for another 10,000. I met him, because I know Magay, who worships and prays with me, and who happens to serve as a board member of Floyd's organization. And Magay was so passionate about this organization, she inspired Melissa to volunteer her time. And didn't Melissa just pray for us today?

And I prayed for Jacqueline on Thursday night, who I know hit the roto-dial on her cell phone, to call her representatives and advocate for women's rights, especially access to healthcare. And Jacqueline, prayed alongside Jose and Katey and Amanda and Bennett and Maddie Kate and Kathryn and Betty as they marched in the Women's March. Katey's got an app to make it even easier to call legislators; and

Amanda will serve as a chaplain to the women who we see as a statistic; and Betty's gonna be at the clinics to make sure they aren't harassed. And there are dozens of others in this place who teach, or assist, or donate, or pray, or advocate, or find a creative way to love our neighbors.

I prayed for little things this week, too: getting Mary Allen's shoes on, and being good at my job, and finishing my errands. I wasn't asking God to wave a magic wand. I was just taking time to remember that God's got me. Sometimes God's got me because I'm connected to each of you. Sometimes God's got me because only God can. And that's shalom I think.

This morning, I'm grateful for the active prayer of an ancient Psalmist. And this morning, I'm grateful for the active prayer of contemporary psalmists: Sardis Baptist Church.

Eugene Peterson says it like this:

Why is everyone hungry for more? "More, more," they say.

"More, more."

I have God's more-than-enough,

More joy in one ordinary day

Than they get in all their shopping sprees.

At day's end I'm ready for sound sleep,

For you, God, have put my life back together.

(Psalm 4:7-8, *The Message*)

Sardis Baptist Church, this is our prayer: May we live in the enough-ness of God's shalom.

Amen.