

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, August 26, 2018.

Scripture: Genesis 3:6-10; Luke 11:1-10. Responsive Reading: Psalm 149:1-5

Hymns: 435 - All Things Bright and Beautiful; 449 - Lord, Listen To Your Children Praying; 625 - Seek Ye First; 671 - I heard the voice of Jesus say

Sermon Title: Refreshed by the evening breeze.

*Genesis 3:6-10 (NRSV)*

*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*

*They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."*

*Psalms 149 – Responsive (NRSV)*

*Praise the LORD! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King. Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory. Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches.*

*Luke 11:1-10 (NIV)*

*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."*

*He said to them, "When you pray, say: "'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.'"*

*Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' "Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.*

*"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."*

Funny that prayer doesn't come naturally to us. Funny that prayer isn't to us like talking with a friend, picking up the phone, sending a bit of e-mail. Talking with a friend is one of the great pleasures of life, as necessary to our internal well-being as food and drink. Picking up the phone and connecting with someone as close as next door or the next car or as far away as the next continent is now as instinctive as leaning across the fence for a chat with the neighbor, is now as indispensable as electricity itself. Nowadays, of course, even sending e-mail, computer to computer, is no longer a cause of wonder, although if you think about how it works it will make your head hurt. Every day, it seems, there are new ways to communicate – Skype, Facetime, Instagram - who knows what's next. So what about prayer? What happened to prayer? We are so good at communication, but it seems as though our prayer lives are on hold, or we can't get a signal, or the network is down.

It's not a new problem, this breakdown in communication between creature and creator. Maybe that is part of what the story of Adam and Eve is getting at, post-apple. You remember the basics - God creates the world, and in the world a garden, and in the garden a man, and with the man a woman, and with them both a serpent, and everyone gathered around the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, with the "Do Not Touch" sign prominently displayed, and the fruit dangling just within reach. They throw caution to the wind, these kids, it's apple pie all around, and away goes paradise, and suddenly the world is not quite so friendly a place, the darkness falling, the serpent hissing with laughter, slithering through the grass. And then we catch a real glimpse of the damage done; hear the story told (Genesis 3:8-10):

*They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."*

And we have been hiding ever since; and pretty good at it we have been, too; we have not only clothed ourselves physically, but we have insulated our spirits and cloaked our souls so effectively that nothing gets in or out. We fill our lives with such distraction that the "*sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze*" is completely drowned out by the clamor of prime-time TV. But still, underneath all that clothing, all that camouflage, something within us yearns to hear again that familiar and one-time welcome sound; as beautiful as any poetry written, so Genesis expresses with longing what we so desperately miss; "*the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.*"

Prayer is, for a moment, amidst the noise and clamor of the world, listening for, and maybe even hearing that sound, "*the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden*

*at the time of the evening breeze.*” Prayer is, for a moment, amidst all our business and responsibility and thousand and one things to distract and do, joining with the Lord God on that walk through the garden. Prayer is, for a moment, amidst the turmoil of all our cares and worries and concerns, worn by the heat of the day; prayer is being refreshed by the evening breeze. Making it all the more sad that we have, somehow, forgotten how to pray.

Then again, so did the disciples. As we heard from our reading this morning, they wanted a few pointers. John the Baptist had taught his followers how to pray, and so now the disciples of Jesus wanted to learn from the one for whom praying was like breathing. And although we are used to hearing the answer Jesus gave, I suspect the disciples were somewhat surprised. Listen again, but, so that we might have a chance of being at least a little bit surprised too, listen to how Eugene Peterson has translated it (Luke 11:1-13):

*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, “Master, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.”*

*So he said, “When you pray, say, ‘Father, Reveal who you are. Set the world right. Keep us alive with three square meals. Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others. Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.’ “*

*Then he said, “Imagine what would happen if you went to a friend in the middle of the night and said, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread. An old friend traveling through just showed up, and I don’t have a thing on hand.’*

*“The friend answers from his bed, ‘Don’t bother me. The door’s locked; my children are all down for the night; I can’t get up to give you anything.’*

*“But let me tell you, even if he won’t get up because he’s a friend, if you stand your ground, knocking and waking all the neighbors, he’ll finally get up and get you whatever you need.*

*“Here’s what I’m saying: Ask and you’ll get; Seek and you’ll find; Knock and the door will open.*

*“Don’t bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This is not a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we’re in. If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn’t think of such a thing - you’re at least decent to your own children. And don’t you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?”*

Wait a minute; that makes sense. And here we all thought that the Bible’s teaching on prayer would be all thees and thous, pie in the sky, head in the clouds stuff. Not at all! Prayer, as far as Jesus is concerned, is the most natural, down to earth thing in the world. It is not a game; it is communication. Honest communication.

And maybe the biggest lesson, and the thing which prevents us from praying, is that prayer needs to be honest. It is no good trying to fool God when praying by putting on an act of extreme piety and devotion, when God knows as well as we do that we are more comfortable with our feet up and a remote control in our hand than we are with our knees down in prayer. God doesn't want our false sanctity. God wants the real you and me, talking. Just talking.

Maybe we find prayer unsatisfactory because we feel we need to present ourselves as something other than we are. We think, somehow, that God would be dissatisfied with us as we are, so we feel obligated to engage in flowery language false piety. But the Psalmist didn't have those problems. The Psalmist came before God with all the faith and doubt, confidence and anxiety, compassion and anger, lust and contrition, joy and despair, that fill our own days and lives, and the Psalmist did so 150 times, or at least we've saved 150 examples of how to come before God honestly expressing all the faith and doubt, confidence and anxiety, compassion and anger, lust and contrition, joy and despair, that fill our own days and lives. Such as the Psalm we read responsively this morning, and upon which our opening prayer was based; we start out happily enough with singing and dancing, and before you know it we are knee deep in vengeance and wrath. Listen to the last bit again: (Psalms 149:4-9):

*For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory. Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches. Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, to execute on them the judgment decreed. This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the LORD!*

One minute, we're praising God. Next minute, we're executing vengeance and wrath. Why the change? Because the Psalmist's joy is wrapped up in the hope that the bad guys are going to get what is coming to them; that justice will someday be done, and the people of God will be vindicated. The Psalmist prays what is on his heart, unfiltered, and that's what prayer is.

Other times the Psalms will be angry, or meditative, or anxious, or peaceful, or thankful, or grudging, or any other of the emotions and conditions common to the human spirit. Again, it is like talking with a friend – a close friend. There are conversations you have with casual acquaintances (How are you, I am fine, how are the kids, oh, not too bad, you know how it is...); and then there are conversations with close friends, lifelong friends, which happen on a different level entirely (Man, getting old isn't easy; what's happening to this world? My boss is driving me crazy. I'm really worried about my kids...). Guess which kind of conversation – which kind of prayer – God would prefer.

Prayer, if it is to be worthwhile and real, needs to be honest. It isn't a contest to appear holier than we actually are. It isn't a bargaining session, or a series of half-hearted trade-offs, our end of which we have no intention of fulfilling anyway. And God knows it. Again, as Jesus says, *"Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This is not a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in."* It isn't meant to be painful or filled with tension. Prayer is communing with our creator; it is a time for spiritual refreshment, for grounding ourselves in the reality of God's love. Or, as Genesis so wonderfully put it, prayer is to be like *"walking with the Lord God in the garden at the time of the evening breeze."* Prayer is – or at least can be - as natural and as necessary as a stroll with a cherished friend.

This morning we have prayed prayers inviting God's presence among us, a presence that is always there. We have prayed prayers of confession and forgiveness for our many faults and frustrations. We have heard the assurance that God forgives, and always will. We prayed prayers of thanksgiving for the countless blessings we enjoy. We prayed again this morning, on behalf of ourselves and of others, that God would act, would heal, would comfort and bless. God hears our prayers, and often times even through us, God answers.

One final thing. I don't know if you noticed, but it was hot this summer. On our vacation, it often seemed as though we were managing to end up in the hottest parts of Canada; in BC, for instance, the temperature hovered in the mid to high 30s during our visit. And that isn't even counting the fires! But in BC, in the early mornings, it was often wonderfully cool. Glenn and Suzanne, with whom we stayed, have a river bubbling through their backyard. I would sit by that river and read some Psalms and say my prayers in the cool of the day. And in the evening, as the heat began to lift and a breeze would blow along the river, I'd be back there again. I was even joined by a deer one evening! It was easy for me to think of that image from Genesis: *"the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze."* And that's where this sermon was born; in a moment of peace, of refreshment, of simple time in the presence of God.

*"...the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze."* Prayer is, for a moment, amidst the noise and clamor of the world, listening for, maybe even hearing that sound. Prayer is, for a moment, amidst all our business and responsibility and thousand and one things to distract and do, joining with the Lord God on that walk through the garden. Prayer is, for a moment, amidst the turmoil of all our cares and worries and concerns, being refreshed by the evening breeze. Don't make the mistake they made in the garden. Come out of hiding. Find a peaceful moment, and lift a prayer – an honest prayer – to the God who made you, who loves you, who gave himself for you. Come for a walk with the Lord God in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. Amen.