

These days, I do truly feel like I need armor against the world.... Don't you? Each day there is news about the horrors taking place in Afghanistan, the earthquake in Haiti, the fires burning in the west and north, including one close to where I used to live in California, the CoVid numbers climbing again, the floods and drought, the stories of how we are intolerant to one another. I wish my armor were thick enough to stop each of these headlines and stories and incidences feeling like a stab to my heart. I wish there were armor thick enough to stop the pain of the world from hurting.

Rev. Andy Stanley wrote this recently:

"Sometimes I just want it to stop. Talk of COVID, war, climate change. I lose my way. I become convinced that this "new normal" is real life. Then I meet an 87-year-old who talks of living through polio, diphtheria, Vietnam protests and yet is still enchanted with life.

He seemed surprised when I said that this year must be especially challenging for him. "No," he said slowly, looking me straight in the eyes. "I learned a long time ago to not see the world through the printed headlines, I see the world through the people that surround me. I see the world with the realization that we love big. I see the world through the eyes of prayer.

Therefore, I just choose to write my own headlines:

"Husband loves wife today." "Family drops everything to come to Grandma's bedside." He patted my hand. "Old man makes new friend."

His words collide with my worries, freeing them from the tether I had been holding tight. They float away. I am left with a renewed spirit and a new way to write my own headlines.”

So this passage from Ephesians feels too true right now.... The headlines screaming out at us. And while I dislike the imagery of battle and war and violence and armies, I do see and feel the energies around us that are trying to destroy, the tyrants that are out for their own interests, the energies that are within me and each of us that steal hope from our hearts, that make us step back from love and new headlines.

And then I continued to read the scripture and felt more reassured. For the armor Paul is speaking of is truth, righteousness, feet clad to proclaim peace, faith, the word of God and prayer. And we could add writing our own headlines. We know that in doing this we don't stop the pain the of the world around us, but we see it with eyes cast on God rather than despair and hate. It can help us pay attention to what is right in front of us so we can begin with what we can change, rather than getting overwhelmed by it all.

Especially when we heed the last part of this passage: Pray always. Pray in the Spirit. Pray about everything in every way you know how! And keeping all this in mind, pray on behalf of God's people. Keep on praying feverishly.

And so, for the next few weeks, we are going to put on our armor by exploring and experiencing different forms of prayer, beginning with praying the Psalms.

Most of you know I am a monk with a Benedictine Methodist monastery, St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery. As with Benedictine monks around the world, we follow the Rule of St. Benedict, written over 1,500 years ago, but still applicable to life today. The center of the rule is around *ora et labora*.... Prayer and work, although Benedict often says that the true work of the monk is prayer. Benedict set aside 7 times of prayer for each day and laid a plan for what to pray in each, mostly using the psalms. The idea is to pray each psalm at least once a week.... Although the 'good monks' would be able to pray each of the 150 psalms every day!

Why the Psalms though?

These were the prayers that Jesus prayed each day, and the Jewish people for centuries before him prayed these words. Jesus probably knew them all by heart, and they lived in him in a way that made them accessible to him when he most needed them. During his last week alone, he drew on many of the psalms as words of comfort, from Psalm 118 as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey saying, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God!" To singing psalms at the last supper to crying out the words from psalm 22 "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

to using psalm 31 with his last breath, saying, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Psalms also contain every emotion known to humans. They express lament, despair, hope, trust, joy, grief, anger and more. They help us know what it is to be human, to have feelings, and to know that these emotions are a part of life, not only our own journey but a way of connecting us to everyone else.

Psalms are often a conversation between the speaker and God. They can help us cultivate a relationship with God. For example, psalm 46 begins with describing God as our refuge and shelter, an ever present help in times of trouble, and then switches to God speaking, saying, “Be still and know that I am God.”

At the beginning of my time with the monastery I struggled with some of the psalms though for at times, they are not easy to read. Some of them seemed too full of vengeance and God’s punishing people. One, Psalm 136, repeats the line, ‘For God’s steadfast love endures forever,’ in between acts of horror God has done, such as “The first born of the Egyptians God slew.... For God’s steadfast love endures forever.” Hmmm. Yet, again, a symbol of humanness, for how many of us wish ill upon our enemies while good for ourselves! Some are very hopeless. And while some were easy to say often, what was the purpose of saying the same

psalms over and over when there is so much else in the Bible we could use. Yet I showed up for prayers when I could, and soon fell into the rhythm of praying them in community.

In brick and mortar monasteries the psalms are recited in choirs.... Usually the monks are split into two choirs and go back and forth reading or chanting the stanzas. But we are a dispersed monastery with people from all over the country calling in to pray. Anything done in unison is a disaster with time lags on phones and not being able to take verbal cues from one another. So we recite a stanza individually in alphabetical order, looking for the common breath to weave us together, the heartbeat to beat as one. Each line spoken slowly with a pause in between, each voice trying to match the pace. This both shows humility, that a person is willing to set aside their normal pace of speaking, and an honoring of community, looking for the common rhythm between members. At the end of each Psalm there is a minute long pause to allow the psalm to settle in to you in a deeper way. The slower pace truly shows a setting aside of the rush of the day to be with God, and allows the words and phrases to begin to take hold in your heart.... There are now many psalms that live within me in a way I never thought possible. Not because I studied them or tried to learn them, but because I have heard them over and over so much that they have now become a part of me, ready to surface when I most need a word

of reassurance or comfort. When new people join, they sometimes find it stilted until they feel their way into the breath, until they listen to the heartbeat of our community.

So, I invite you to take a breath and listen as I recite today's psalm....

Close your eyes if that is comfortable, and feel your way into the heartbeat of the words, the lines, the stanzas, and allow God to fill you with these Words. There will be a pause at the end to let the words settle.:

How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O God of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of my God;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may lay her young,  
at your altars, O God of hosts,  
my Sovereign and my God.  
Happy are those who live in your house,  
ever singing your praise.

Happy are those whose strength is in you,  
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.  
As they go through the valley of Baca  
they make it a place of springs;  
the early rain also covers it with pools.  
They go from strength to strength;  
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

O God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
give ear, O God of Jacob!  
Behold our shield, O God;

look on the face of your anointed.

For a day in your courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere.  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than live in the tents of wickedness.  
For our God is a sun and shield;  
bestowing favor and honor.  
No good thing does God withhold  
from those who walk uprightly.  
O God of hosts,  
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

What happened as you listened to these words? How did it feel to step into  
God's presence in this way?

Not everyone finds this way of praying with the psalms helpful.... For some  
it is too many words that get in the way of hearing and feeling God, for  
others, the slow pace is too hard. But try it for yourself and see what  
happens! Of course, the psalms can be prayed in many other ways too.  
You can just take one line and repeat it, you can do a shrinking reading....

Maybe the most popular version of this is

Be still and know I am God

Be still and know I am

Be still and know

Be still

Be.

And psalms appear in many of the hymns we sing, and in many of the more contemporary Christian songs that are around. Charles and John Wesley based many of their hymns on the psalms, including hymns like Praise the Lord who reigns above, O For a heart to praise my God, and I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath.

So as you heed Paul's words from Ephesians today, Pray always. Pray in the Spirit. Pray about everything in every way you know how! And keeping all this in mind, pray on behalf of God's people. Keep on praying feverishly.

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Pray using the psalms. Pray using these words that Jesus held deep in his heart. Sing the psalms with joy, allowing them to begin to live in you in a new way. Maybe by just saying your favorite psalm each day, or even just a line or two from it. If you have an emotion arise, look for a psalm that meets that emotion. Find a hymn or a contemporary song that uses a psalm and listen to that. Paint an image from a psalm or embroider it on something. Pray with the psalms and use them as part of your armor against the pain of the world, giving you strength, reminding you of your humanity while drawing you closer to God, allowing you to write your own headlines about the hope and love you see in the world alongside the hard things.