

PRAYER: AN INVITATION TO MEET JESUS
by Rev. Susan Morrison

Transfiguration Sunday
February 26, 2006

Mark 9:2-10

²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And there Jesus was transfigured before them, ³and the clothes that Jesus wore became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶Peter did not know what he was saying, so overcome were they all with awe. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Beloved, my Own; listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about what they had seen, until the Promised One had risen from the dead.

* * * * *

Today’s gospel lesson offers us a glimpse of the final epiphany of the Epiphany season. In the words of commentator Susan Andrews “What began as a cosmic star over Bethlehem ends as a shining face on a mountaintop.”

The transfiguration itself is characterized by light – the brilliant, dazzling light of God’s glory. The experience is not only a segway into Lent, it is also a foreshadowing of the Resurrection where God’s light shines forth once again in the Risen Christ. Jesus even alludes to this when he warns Peter, James and John to tell no one of this experience until the promised one has risen from the dead.

This is one of those Sundays where we are invited into a realm of awe and mystery; it is more about poetry than prose; it is about encountering the holy through prayer and time apart with God.

So, instead of unpacking the significance of Elijah, the great prophet, and Moses, the great giver of the Law showing up on the mountain top with Jesus, I would like to use this time to invite us into the practice of prayer – a practice that is an invitation to meet Jesus.

On this Sunday before Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent, I can think of nothing more appropriate than to ponder the practice of prayer. Jesus models the importance of this practice in this morning’s gospel lesson. He goes apart to pray. He goes way far away, even as far away as a mountain, to pray, so as to have personal, uncluttered, private space and time to pray. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had instructed his followers to pray. “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray” suggests Jesus. later in scripture St. Paul instructs the early Christians to pray constantly. “Pray all the time, asking for what you need, praying in the Spirit on every possible occasion,” teaches St. Paul.

Surely Jesus himself, when using the psalms as his prayerbook, would have prayed the 63rd psalm.

God, you are my God, I am seeking you, my soul is thirsting for you, my flesh is longing for you... Your love is better than life itself, my lips will recite your praise; all my life I will bless you, in your name lift up my hands.

As we anticipate the Lenten season, I hope that each of you will make a commitment to daily prayer. It means finding both a regular time and space for prayer. Find a time each day to set aside for 10 or 15 minutes for reading scripture and offering your prayers to God and listening in your heart for what it is God desires for you. And also find a space that becomes your prayer space – a place to sit that is comfortable and perhaps with a candle or picture or some sacred object nearby – whatever it takes to make your prayer space holy for you.

Have you received your Lenten Devotional Guide in the mail? This guide, prepared for you by the staff and members of this congregation, is itself an invitation to prayer during the days and weeks of Lent. Each week there is a theme – a practice that invites you into a closer relationship with God and each day there is a suggested scripture lesson which relates to that practice. My hope is that throughout Lent we will be in solidarity with one another as we read our Devotional Guide and pray for one another and for this church throughout Lent.

This morning I would like to invite you to discover a breath prayer that will be your prayer throughout the days of Lent. I have been sharing the notion and practice of the breath prayer with a number of you in these past few months, especially with those who have had surgery or have been facing major crisis in your lives. And as I have observed the transformative power of the breath prayer, I have decided to take these few moments and share it with all of you.

The breath prayer is a short prayer of petition and praise. I will be eternally grateful to Ron Delbane, who many years ago, was the facilitator at a Clergy Spiritual Life Retreat and taught those who were at the retreat about the breath prayer. It has become a lifeline to God for me. I want to share that lifeline with you.

We breathe unceasingly and each breath supports life. Each breath renews our whole physical system. The breath prayer accompanies each breath and is a way for us to develop our ability to pray unceasingly. As we breathe and say our breath prayer, God's love and life supports and renews us.

Historically, the breath prayer rose out of the Psalms. Repeated phrases are actually short prayers which remind us of the whole psalm. For instance, when we say, "The Lord is my shepherd" we are reminded of the whole of the 23rd psalm. When Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he intended the whole of Psalm 22 to be understood. Within the Christian tradition of the East there is a breath prayer called the Jesus Prayer which goes: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer harkens back to the 6th century. Many have adapted this prayer and shortened it to be "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy" or even simply "Jesus, mercy." So the concept of the breath prayer is not new; but the breath prayer needs to be re-newed in our contemporary world.

How do I discover my breath prayer, you are wondering? One of the beautiful things about the breath prayer is that it is yours and yours alone. Let me help you discover your very own breath prayer.

Put aside whatever may be in your lap. Put aside the lists that you're making in your head of things to do. Put aside any distractions for the moment and recall these words from Psalm 46. "Be still and know that I am God."

Now imagine that God is calling you by name and asking "_____, what do you want? What is it that you most need from me?"

Answer God simply and directly. Above all, be honest. What is it that you most need from God. Use only one or two words like understanding, love, courage, hope, healing, forgiveness, blessing, patience, light.

Again, what is it that you most need from God? This becomes your petition.

Now, remember, a breath prayer is a prayer both of petition and praise. The praise comes from naming God, praying your favorite way of naming God.

So, the second question is how do you call on God? Do you call God, Father? or Mother? or do you pray to Jesus? or to the Holy One? In this quiet moment, decide on how you will address God.

Now you are going to combine your petition to God and your naming of God into a breath prayer. On your intake breath, you ask God for what you need. Heal me.. or Give me courage... or Fill me with hope.... or Bless me...or Comfort me... Put your request into a short phrase. Remember, it can only be as long as the breath that you inhale. Now, when you exhale, name God. And in that naming of God, know that you are giving God praise and thanks for giving you what you most need and also know that you can give to this Awesome God whatever it is that separates you from the fullness of God's love. Give to God your worries, your fears, your anxieties, your deepest regrets as you exhale God's name.

So now, let's practice your breath prayer. Breathe in what you most need from God. Say the words silently as you draw in your breath. Breathe out God's holy name and know that you are giving God praise for giving you what you most need while also taking your burdens from you. Breathe in. Breathe out. "Lead me into health, Father... Let me be still, Lord Jesus....Bless me, dear God....Have mercy, Holy One....Hold me in love, Mother God....Show me the way, Creator God...Encourage me, Holy Spirit...Fill me, O God. Breathe in and be filled. Breathe out and be emptied and freed of anything that interferes with what you need from God.

Keep praying your breath prayer. Find the right words to express what you most need from God and how you want to call on God. Once you have found the right words, do not change them. Use them as a mantra, a refrain.

Feel yourself growing calm and centered in God's love. Breathe in. Breathe out. Use the same words every time. The breath prayer becomes your connection with God, here, now. The breath prayer is a reminder that God is with you in your every moment, in your every breath. In the next few moments of silence, practice your breath prayer. (Pause for a time of silence.) Amen.

Let me encourage you to give your breath prayer a chance. Maybe you need to think about what you want to pray. Try out different petitions, different ways to name God until you find the right combination for you. Once you put your petition and your calling on God into a rhythmic prayer that matches your breath, use it for a day or two, rearranging the words until they are personal and comfortable for you. By Wednesday – Ash Wednesday- begin to use your breath prayer unchanged for the days and weeks of Lent.

When do you use your breath prayer? I suggest that you say it as often as possible, in many places, under all circumstances. Practice it during your prayer time. Maybe you can begin and end your time of using your Lenten Devotional Guide with your breath prayer. Use it while running, jogging, swimming. Use it while washing dishes, making beds, getting dressed, going to sleep. Use it while driving, waiting in line. Say it before you answer the phone or every time you cross a threshold or every time you look at your watch. Like any new habit, you have to find ways to do it. Whatever helps you establish the habit is worthwhile.

I can guarantee that the breath prayer will transform your relationship with God. And although you might not have a mountain top experience similar to that of Peter, James and John, **you will become a bearer of Christ's light in this world.**

I pray that each of you will use your breath prayer throughout Lent this year. And I encourage you to share your breath prayer with a friend, or a partner or spouse. Talk with one another about your experiences with your breath prayer – how the prayer has changed your life, your relationship with God. But most of all, pray. Let this Lent be a time to renew your relationship with God. Return to God with all your heart. That will be my prayer for you throughout the Lenten season. So be it. Amen and Amen.