

I've been thinking a lot about prayer this summer. Our readings for the last few weeks have had things to say with how we communicate with God. And life itself has had me thinking about what we do with our prayers and how it is that God responds. The news of last weekend was painful to watch and difficult to listen to. We pray and think about those people who lost their lives and those people who are grieving, not just from those communities but far and wide.¹

I went to a Ministerial Alliance meeting this month and we talked about what we could do in our community to help all of us to have a sense of how we could help to make life different, so these things won't happen. And we prayed together. And I wondered what would happen with our prayers.

Our national church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was in session this week² and I watched lots of it online. Prayers were said and prayers were given. They were powerful prayers. Prayers for justice. Prayers for those who are hungry. Prayer for those whose needs go unmet and prayers that we would respond to all of that.

There have been prayers for friends and family who are in need and who are in pain.

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On my laptop at home, there is an electronic sticky note on the screen, and it's been there for months. It says, "the red woman and her prayers for fire. What do you do when your faith fails you? What do you do when you think your god is not listening?" And then it says, "I will not leave you orphaned."

It's been months since I wrote it. I was watching *Game of Thrones*, so if you are a fan you might recognize the reference to the character Melisandre, also known as the Red Woman or the Red Priestess, partly because she has bright red hair and dresses in a lot of red. She is rather mysterious and also a rather disturbing character through much of the story. She serves her god known as the Lord of Light, but her actions are often dark and sinister. She can manipulate both shadow and fire. But it is fire that she most often uses as a weapon against her enemies.

In season six of *Game of Thrones*, Melisandre left the story line, but as the series ended, the Red Woman returned. If you didn't watch or you didn't pay attention to all the fuss, there was this huge battle between living people and the White Walkers, who are wights. They are the walking dead and they seem impossible to defeat. Normal weapons have no power against them, but the good guys knew that fire is one way to stop them.

¹ This sermon was preached after the mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio the weekend of August 4-2019.

² The ELCA Churchwide Assembly is held every three years.

When Melisandre returns to the story, she offers her help to the heroes. She can change their metal weapons into burning torches and so they are hopeful that those burning torches held by hundreds of soldiers might stop this army that seems unstoppable. And yet, as good a trick as it is, it isn't enough to stop the hordes that continue to march upon the castle. When one gets knocked down it seems like there's another one right behind it.

The heroes have managed to dig a trench around the castle which they plan to set fire to keep the wights from killing them all. And these creatures are terrifying. Awful. To make things worse, they are fighting during a horrible snowstorm and things have not gone well. The trench is unlit, and it seems as if all hope is lost. Queen Danaerys was supposed to fly over the castle on her dragon, set the trench on fire, and all would be well. But the storm has prevented her from getting the signal from the castle. And then Melisandre exits the castle grounds and makes her way to the trench.

She confidently puts her hands on the wooden trenches and starts to utter her spell. And nothing happens. The fire doesn't come, and you can see the surprise on her face, which quickly change to doubt and fear.

What do you do when your faith fails you?

She continues to speak the words, over and over. And things get really tense. The White Walkers keep coming and coming. They're getting nearer and nearer. And you can see the anxiety in Melisandre's face. She keeps saying these prayers again and again. Her posture is as stiff as a rail and it's awful! She's their last chance and everybody knows it.

What do you do when it seems that your god isn't listening?

Then at the last moment, the trenches light and the living have a bit more time to defend the castle and their lives.

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What should we do when we don't feel certain about our faith? When praying is difficult and questions go unanswered? What so striking to me about that particular scene was the look on her face of surprise that her prayers weren't being answered and her god was not serving her in the way that he had always done in the past.

What do we do when praying is difficult and questions go unanswered?

In the chunk of scripture between last week and this, Jesus stopped what he was doing and said to the disciples, "Don't worry about your life, about what you're going to eat or what you're going to wear. Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

"If you can't do something as little as that, why do you keep worrying about all the rest of it. Don't get yourself in a panic about what you are to eat and what you are to drink. God is going to take good care of you.

"Don't be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. God is delighted to give you the best that he has."³

³ Luke 12:22-32, paraphrase HR-S

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Jesus called his friends to think about the birds in the air who don't have a job, don't have a salary – and yet they manage to eat every day. Or the wildflowers in the field. They don't sew or weave or even shop for new clothing and yet they are dressed in beauty every day. Jesus said, if God is going to do such good work for birds and flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow, don't you think God will take care of you? *Have no fear little flock.*

Sometimes that's all we seem to remember of that verse. We leave off what I think is the important part which says, *it is God's pleasure, to give you the kingdom.* Jesus followed that up by calling his followers to not get invested in a lot of material possessions. Share what you have with the poor. Invest yourself in joyfully giving of the gifts that you have. And he says, be ready for action, because you don't know when God will need you. You don't know when Christ will return. So be ready for anything.

Which doesn't mean life will be easy.

It almost guarantees that there will be times when life is tough and in fact, it is. We know it is. There are things about our lives that are painful and hard and difficult. If it isn't what's going on in our households, it's our neighborhood, our community, our country, our world. There are difficult things happening every day.

Circumstances may come about that knock you off your feet and make you wonder if God is really listening to your voice. And your faith may feel shaken. But Jesus never promised an easy life. What he did promise is that the Holy Spirit would be with us. Always. That no matter what happens, God will always love us and not leave us or orphan us.

God will not abandon us.

Jesus PROMISED that the Father wants us to have good things. God wants us to be fed and nourished and sheltered. God wants that for all his children, which means that we have a job to do- to help and make sure that those things happen. God depending upon us, to care for each other. But most importantly God wants us to remember that he has promised to give us the kingdom and what better promise could there be? When my life here is done, the kingdom of God will be mine. I will be surrounded by God's love and God's wonder. What more glorious promise could we need?

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I believe that prayer works but I don't think it always works the way that we want it to. When we yell at God, when we beg God, when we lie awake crying ourselves to sleep thinking, *where are you God? Are you even listening to me?* And we wonder where God is and everything in us is saying *Please God, this is what I need. This is what I want. This is what's important.* (And those prayers are so often not said not for us but for other people) When you have that anguished feeling that there is nothing else, I can do but pray – in all of those moments, God is with us. Sharing in our anguish and pain. And the message is always the same ***Do not be afraid.*** Believe in me. Believe in my promises. Promises like these...

God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.⁴

Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.⁵

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.⁶

Though the mountains be shaken, and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.⁷

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.⁸

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.⁹

The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?¹⁰

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.¹¹

We have not a book of promises. We have a library full of promises from God that comes to us in God’s word saying *Don’t be afraid, I am with you. I will carry you. I will strengthen you.*

These are not shallow promises. They are not like the promises we made to each other when we were kids or the ones we made our kids as parents. These are strong and true and unbroken promises.

We can be shallow beings and we forget. We forget what we have promised, and we forget what God has promised to us. But we need to remember that when we come to God with our prayers, our God is with us and our faith in God’s word is warranted.

Our prayers never go unheard. And there is always an answer. It might not be the answer that we were looking for but there is always an answer.

I am with you. You are mine. You are not alone. You are not orphaned. I promise you. It is my good pleasure, God says, that the kingdom is and was and will be yours.

Now and forever. Amen

⁴ Isaiah 40:29

⁵ Isaiah 40:31

⁶ Isaiah 41:10

⁷ Isaiah 54:10

⁸ Joshua 1:9

⁹ Psalm 23:4

¹⁰ Psalm 27:1

¹¹ John 3:16