

Making the Road: *Walking through Lent*

WEEK 3: WALKING IN PRAYER

written by TERI MCDOWELL OTT

Sunday, March 20 ☞ Romans 8:26

This Lent, we make the road by walking prayerfully and mindfully, attentive to every step that brings us closer to Christ.

Congregations often assume that prayer comes easy for pastoral leaders, but everyone struggles with this spiritual practice, and it's important to find a prayer practice that works for you. We can seek the Spirit through *Lectio Divina* or Centering Prayer. We can practice breath prayer, walking prayer, or wind our way through a labyrinth, feeling that God is with us in our journey. For years, I practiced a version of fixed-hour prayer, praying in the morning, at noon, and before bed. Writing, though, is my favorite spiritual practice and the one I always return to when struggling for inspiration. Free-writing in response to Scripture (or writing a devotional series such as this) is my surest path to epiphanies.

Essentially, prayer is the practice of attending to the ways God's Spirit moves and communicates with us. Sometimes this happens through words; other times, as our passage from Romans highlights, the Spirit must intercede for us with "sighs" or, as this Greek word can also be translated, "groans," when our words are too shallow and limited.

Simone Weil wrote beautifully about attention as a contemplative practice through which we are deeply rewarded and by which we can be transformed. In her book, *Gravity and Grace*, Weil writes, "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. ... If we turn our mind toward the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself." Or, as adrienne maree brown puts it, "What we pay attention to grows." This Lent, let us turn our minds to what is good and what is God, let us grow in prayer through an intentional practice of attention.

Holy God, we do not know how to pray as we ought. Thank you for your Spirit's intercession and this Lenten opportunity to grow in prayer. Amen.

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Monday, March 21 ☞ Luke 11:1-4

When my husband leads worship and it comes time to recite the Lord's Prayer, he backs away from the microphone. With no one voice dominating, our voices are a collective hum. I love this sound, the recitation of prayer in community. I love that my children know this prayer by heart from growing up in a pew. I love that I can invite people to pray with me at a graveside or beside a hospital bed and it comes readily to our lips. When Jesus gave his disciples this prayer, he gave it to all who seek communion with him and with each other as the one body of Christ.

Jesus, thank you for teaching us to pray and for gifting us with a prayer we can all learn and carry in our hearts. Amen.

Tuesday, March 22 ☞ Proverbs 1:7

The Hebrew word for "fear" in this passage conveys a mixture of fear and awe, a feeling experienced in the presence of something our minds cannot fathom. I know many scientists who are people of faith. They, perhaps better than others, are acutely aware of the limits of their knowledge. Scientific discoveries continually stretch these limits, but there remains an infinite boundary between what we know and what we don't. The appropriate prayer for mortals as we approach that boundary is one of awe and reverence. We don't know what we don't know. God does.

We are humbled, Awesome God, by all that is you and all we do not know of you. May we be wise in approaching you in fear and reverence. Amen.

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Wednesday, March 23 ☞ Psalm 6:6

The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is believed to be the Western Wall of the Second Temple of Jerusalem. Jews and other pilgrims pray – and often wail – before the wall, slipping petitions written on paper into its cracks. The divine presence, it is believed, never departs from this Wailing Wall.

God's name comes to our lips when we are suffering. Our prayers of lamentation, our wailings, serve us better than ignoring or avoiding our emotions. God is our compassionate listener and receiver of our pain. God weeps with us in our grief and suffers as we suffer. Do not be afraid to wail.

Loving God, you are here for us in our pain. Thank you for sitting with us and holding our grief as your own. Amen.

Thursday, March 24 ☞ Psalm 100:1-2

I embarrass my teenagers by singing loudly in church. But my noise brings God and me joy. I've missed singing hymns in community during COVID-19. The blending of our voices (even those that are out of tune) is a prayer practice we do in unity as the Body of Christ and a tradition from our ancestors in the faith.

The melodies of our church hymns stay with me long after worship has concluded. I find myself humming, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness," on the drive home, cleaning the lunch dishes, and working through Sunday afternoon chores. The joy of being with God lingers long after worship is over.

God of life's melodies, we worship you with gladness and sing to you with joy. Amen.

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Friday, March 25 ✠ James 5:16

“I’m sorry.” “I made a mistake.” “I was wrong.” “Please forgive me.”

These are simple confessions but powerful in their ability to heal and restore relationships. Unacknowledged shame or hurt festers and spreads, damaging the wrongdoer as well as the injured one. Nothing could be more poisonous to a relationship than an unwillingness to admit when we are wrong. The same is true of our relationship with God. Our prayers of confession should honestly acknowledge how we have sinned or fallen short. God freely and graciously forgives, but without this honest acknowledgment our confession lacks its power to heal and restore.

Merciful God, we have sinned and fallen short of your expectations for us. Forgive us, again, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, March 26 ✠ Psalm 22:1

“Why, God?” “Why have you forsaken me?” “Why are you so far from me?” “Why won’t you help me?”

Throughout the Scriptures, people pray their questions to God. Maybe we won’t get an answer. Maybe we will. But the assurance that we can question God, that even Jesus asked, “Why?” on the cross, gives me peace. God receives our questions without flinching, without turning away, without judgment. Even without receiving an answer, articulating what we don’t understand can serve as a cathartic, healthy release, surrendering what we can’t know, to what we can — that God hears us and receives us.

Loving God, thank you for hearing and receiving our questions, no matter whether we can hear and receive their answers. Amen.