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The Reverend Margie Baker

Epiphany 2, Year B

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I've been thinking a lot about prayer in the past few weeks. It is quite literally a part of my job to think about prayer, I know. It is the work of *all* people of faith to pray, and as an ordained person, it's especially important. But over the last few weeks, prayer has been on my mind, and whether it is a sufficient response to the world around us.

Last week I shared my prayers with the parish in light of what happened at the Capitol. I framed prayer as the proper Christian response. I prayed for children, for those who were shocked by the riot, for those who weren't shocked, for those who were still hurting from the results of the election. I prayed for forgiveness of my own role in the increasing divisiveness of our country. I prayed for God to heal us.

Many will say prayer is not enough, that "thoughts and prayers" do nothing, are the easy way out of dealing with the hard work of rebuilding trust between those who disagree, the easy way out of dealing with centuries of racism and oppression, centuries of inequity. They will say that action, not prayer, is necessary.

But here's the thing: that is a false dichotomy. Those who say prayer is not enough are absolutely correct. And those whose only response is prayer do not, I fear, even know what prayer is. But those who act without prayer miss the mark as much as those who pray without action. The question isn't, as a Christian do I respond with prayer or action. Rather, it's a question of order, of sequence. What comes first, the action or the prayer? I called us to prayer last week not as a panacea but as a first step in discerning how to move forward, how to respond to tragedy, terror, and division.

You see, prayer is much, much more than telling God what we would like to have happen. It is *certainly* more than empty words thrown at the pain and grief in the world. Prayer is a relationship with God, an intimate relationship built on honesty and a growing ability to listen.

Our prayers in church are one type of prayer, a sort of connective tissue that binds the church catholic—that is, the universal church, the body of Christ—into one body, with Jesus Christ the head and chief cornerstone. When we say the Lord's Prayer every week, even if it's from couches and desks and maybe even cars, we join with angels and archangels, with the communion of the saints, and with Christians all over the world as we pray, as we ask for God's will to be done here on earth. But praying together is only

one part of the praying life. We also pray alone, in our beds or on our way to work or school, around the dinner table or in between meetings or patients. Those prayers might be well-loved words— hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; Bless us O Lord, and these thy gifts; for God alone my soul in silence waits— or they might be beautifully messy ad hoc prayers of the *God help me* or *thank you, Lord* variety.

All of those prayers, no matter how earnest, no matter how true, are only half of one's prayer life, because prayer is a relationship. Offering a prayer to God isn't where prayer *ends* but where prayer *begins*. And as with any relationship, we do not control what happens next.

The story we hear today from 1 Samuel illustrates this well. It's one of my very favorite call stories, and that is saying something, because I *love* call stories. I love hearing how God calls the prophets. Samuel's is especially fun because at first the boy doesn't know who is speaking. Samuel has been living and working with Eli since he was weaned, so since the age of three. Eli is Samuel's closest human contact, a father to him in practice if not in fact. And so when God calls to Samuel in the night, Samuel is delightfully, energetically misguided. He is ready! He hears that he is being called and runs to Eli, who sends him back to bed a few times before Eli figures out what must be going on. Samuel hears God's voice again, and says just the right thing: "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Samuel begins his relationship with God by eager listening. He is ready to hear and to act. I often wonder about the prophets, if God knew they were special and so called them, or if their responding to God's call marked them as special. Either way, Samuel hears God's call in the night and responds simply: "Speak, Lord, I'm listening."

If we take prayer as a relationship, we will listen more than we speak. The effect of speaking too much in a human relationship is clear. We've all had (or been) the friend or coworker who talks without ever listening, who shares without inviting the other to share. Such relationships struggle to grow, and there's no real intimacy. I think the same thing can happen with our relationship with God. If all we ever do is speak, without bothering to be silent and wait, what we really have is a diary, not a relationship with the one who made us and loves us and invites us to love. I've heard relationships described as *dynamic listening*. What a lovely definition, and what a perfect goal for our prayer life.

If we seek relationship with God, then we speak, honestly and often; but we *also* listen, actively and attentively. The speaking is our gift, our offering of the truth of ourselves, maybe even the parts that we don't share with others. In prayer we are free to tell the truth in ways that are scary, because you know what? God knows us, and God loves us anyway. A favorite seminary professor once preached, "we have

got to stop acting like God doesn't know *exactly* who we are."¹ This *being known* can be frightening. But as today's psalm says, God *knows* us. "Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You trace my journeys and my resting-places and are acquainted with all my ways."² What a gift. God knows us thoroughly, and God loves us completely. In prayer, we get to bask in the loving embrace of the one who knit us together and knows us completely. And in that sort of prayer, in the relationship of prayer, we are transformed.

To catch a glimpse of God, a moment of utter peace, a sense of belonging, a light in the darkness, is to yearn for *more* of God, to yearn to want what God wants, to be who we are called to be. Because in spite of it all, God loves us and wants us to love God and neighbor. The way we love God is through prayer, through relationship with the one who created the stars and the sun and the earth and even us. The way we love others— because let's be honest, loving others is extremely difficult, if not impossible— is by conforming our lives more and more closely to God. We do that through prayer. I know I can't love my enemies without God's help. I know I can't cast out fear without God's help. And so I pray. I spend time with God. Not as much as I should, but I try. And I am never left feeling that my time was ill spent.

Prayer is enough, if we let prayer change us. Prayer is enough, if we listen to God, to the still, small voice within, that calls us to act, that transforms us little by little. Because *this* sort of prayer leads us to action. Fed by a rich, loving, honest prayer life, we are led back into the mess of the world, confident that we can play a small but important role in God's healing of the world. This sort of action comes from discernment, the quiet, long term work of being open to God's response to our fears, hopes, and longings. As William A. Barry puts it in his wonderful book *Paying Attention to God*, "God's own Spirit dwelling in our hearts gently, and sometimes forcefully, impels us to desire what God desires, to intend what God intends."³ *To desire what God desires, to intend what God intends*. When through prayer our longings conform more and more closely to God's longings, it becomes easier to align our actions as well. My own study of Scripture, my own prayer life, tells me that God desires love and harmony, which are only possible through justice and reconciliation. Again and again, the prophets tell us that God wants justice, mercy, and love; for justice to roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. I cannot fix everything. I am overwhelmed by the brokenness of the world. But I believe that if I give myself to God in prayer, that God will guide me to the small work I *can* do, and will help me to do it.

Our national struggle is not over. There are threats of violence at state capitols today, there are threats of violence on inauguration day. Then there are the continued threats of economic disparity, racial disparity,

¹ JFW

² Psalm 139:1-2

³ 59

poverty, oppression, division, and isolation. So when I invite you to pray, I hope you hear in that invitation the great work that it truly is. Foster that relationship with God, and pray without ceasing. Pay attention to the God who made you, and loves you, and will not leave you in the dark valley. Listen intently for the ways God may be calling you to respond to the pain you see in yourself, or your community, or the country. And then trust that God will equip you to do what you are called to do. Speak, Lord, I'm listening. AMEN.