

July 19, 2020 The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Teaching Sermon: Morning Prayer/Liturgy
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Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

Satisfy Us in the Morning with Your Steadfast Love, O Lord

The Confirmation class missed their lock in this year. It was supposed to be in March. This year was the Bible year in Confirmation class, so our lock in would have been focused on the book of Acts.

In Confirmation class we alternate between a Bible year and a Catechism year. During the Catechism year, the Confirmation lock in is based on prayer. During that lock in the students are taught about prayer methods and given prayer tools, over the course of the 22 hours that we are together. But I think that probably the best way to learn to pray is to pray, so, during that lock in we also pray the entire daily office, the entire schedule of daily prayers that have been a part of the Christian tradition since its early centuries.

At the beginning of the lock in the kids are given a folder with the prayer services in it to use throughout the lock in and then, about every three hours, we stop whatever we're doing to go into the sanctuary for a prayer service.

For every prayer service, one of the kids is put in charge of watching the clock and ringing the bell in Kask Hall when it is time for prayers.

Another kid is in charge of lighting the candles in the Sanctuary. Another one is in charge of leading the prayer service. We stop for prayers 8 times during the day and night including the 3:00 a.m. prayer hour, known as Lauds. I usually pray that one alone, since lights out is at 12:30, but two years ago, two kids did join me.

Every year when I explain to the kids what we're going to be doing for the lock in, I always feel like I get a few shocked looks. "We're going to be praying all day? And all night?!"

There's always a little bit of awkwardness when the lock in starts, and we gather in the Sanctuary for our first prayer service, 6:00 p.m., evening prayer, also

known as Vespers. But as the day progresses, it starts to feel more and more natural. The bell would ring, we all would grab our prayer books, and file into the Sanctuary, to pray ancient words at ancient times, to listen to scripture, to sing hymns, to remember our baptisms, to remember the saints and our ancestors in faith.

It was a Thursday night, March 12th, when I got that call that schools in Norwood were going to be shut down for three weeks, effective immediately.

I started texting other pastors in the area, asking them what they were going to do in their churches. Then I started texting the Executive Committee about what they thought we should do. We decided that we should close our doors too, at least for a few weeks, until things calmed down.

(If you were here in person, I would be expecting ironic chuckles at that line. Of course, if you were here in person, I wouldn't have had to say it.)

That first week, I didn't have a plan. I just emailed out a sermon and prayers. But after that, the next week, a few people started to ask me, what were we going to do to have worship services during a time of lock down. I just didn't know. This falls into the category of things they don't teach you in seminary and also of things that 18 years of being a pastor hadn't taught me either.

Thank goodness a congregation is not just one person and there were some at Emmanuel who did have an idea about what we could do.

They popped a camera on my computer and a headset on my head, set up an account for Emmanuel, and all of a sudden, Zoom church was born.

Of course, it took a little bit more than that. Thank goodness again, that Gabby had an idea of how she could make beautiful music for Zoom worship.

And thank goodness for a resilient congregation, that, by and large, figured out how to connect with Zoom by computer, by tablet, by cell phone, by landline.

And thank goodness that in that week of scrambling and near panic, I remembered those Confirmation lock ins, those resources of our faith, the prayers

of the church, the prayers of the people of God that have gone forward in times of plenty and peace, and in times of panic and crisis, for millennia.

Since praying seemed to be the best thing that we could do in a time when we were locked down and our world was in crisis, I decided that would be what we would do. We would pray morning prayer on Sundays and join with the saints who have gone before us in seeking, celebrating, experiencing, and naming the presence of God in all times and in all places.

But all of this time when we have been praying Morning Prayer, I have wanted to share a bit more about this prayer service, ancient to the church, but somewhat new to this congregation; why we do what we do, why we say what we say in this service of worship and prayer.

First of all, Morning Prayer also goes by the name, Matins, which is an Old English translation of the Latin word, *Matutinus* which means, pertaining to or occurring in the morning.

Praying in the morning has been a practice of religious people throughout the history of humanity. It was a practice of the Jewish people that was carried over by the apostles into Christianity. Morning prayers came to be associated with the resurrection of Christ and with the coming of the Holy Spirit, both events that occurred in the morning.

Peter, in his Pentecost sermon is kind enough to tell us exactly what time it was. In Acts 2:15, after the apostles were accused by some in the crowd of babbling because they were drunk, Peter said, “Indeed, these are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.”

So, Christians, throughout history have gathered to pray at what is called in the ancient way of keeping time, the third hour, and they prayed using certain words, for certain reasons.

There are two traditional beginnings to Morning prayer, called the invitatory. The invitatory functions as an invitation to prayer. They both come from the Psalms,

and we have used them both since we started praying Morning Prayer as our Sunday morning worship service.

During Lent we prayed this one from Psalm 51:15:

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

You might remember that Psalm 51 is also the Psalm that we read on Ash Wednesday.

Right now, we're using this invitational from Psalm 90:14

*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

These invitatories followed by a statement of praise of the Holy Trinity:

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now,
and will be forever. Amen.*

or

*Praise to the blest and holy Trinity, one God,
who gives us life, salvation and resurrection!*

A focus of daily prayer is the Psalms, because the book of Psalms is known as the prayer book of the Bible. In some Christian traditions to this day, people who follow daily prayer read through the entire book of Psalms, 150 Psalms every two months.

We include two Psalms in our weekly prayer services. You might have noticed that we've read the same Psalm every week since we've been following morning prayer. That Psalm is Psalm 95 and it is an assigned Psalm for Morning Prayer. Psalm 95 is known as the Venite. Venite means "come"

and the first word of the Venite Psalm is “Come”.

Come let us sing to the Lord;

let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation.

Like the invitatory, the Venite invites us to start our day with praise and with prayer to God, celebrating God’s presence in our lives and in our world.

The other Psalm that we read is the assigned Psalm from the lectionary, the Psalm chosen to go with the readings for the day.

If we were really going at this hard core, we might read two or three more Psalms, but because this is our Sunday service and because we’re Lutherans, we sing hymns and hear a sermon instead of reading more Psalms.

The rest of our readings feels a little bit more like what we’re used to at a Sunday service, an Old Testament reading, a New Testament reading, and a gospel reading, followed by a sermon and a hymn.

But then we head a different direction again, with something that we call the Gospel Canticle. During many Morning prayer services, this would be chanted or sung, but we speak it.

Canticles are hymns of praise with lyrics taken entirely from Scripture. The canticles that we would be most familiar with are the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, and the Nunc Dimittis, the Song of Simeon.

We know the Magnificat because of our familiarity with the Christmas story. This is the beginning of the Magnificat:

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me and holy is his name.”
(Luke 1:46-49)

The Magnificat is also the canticle that is assigned for Evening prayer, so we read that canticle every year during our Wednesday evening Lenten services.

We might be familiar with the Nunc Dimittis, because it is sometimes used as a post communion canticle and it is spoken at funerals as well.

It is the words that Simeon, an old man, who had spent life waiting for the messiah, speaks after seeing the infant Jesus in the Temple:

Lord, now you let your servant go in peace, your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people. A light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)

The Nunc Dimittis and the Magnificat make up two of the three Evangelical Canticles, which means canticles taken from the gospel of Luke.

The third is the canticle that we've been saying every week since we've been worshiping on Zoom. It is the *Benedictus*, also known as the Song of Zechariah. Zechariah is the father of John the Baptist and the words that we share during our Morning prayer services as the gospel canticle are the words that he spoke over his newborn son, after naming him John and getting his voice back.

If you're unfamiliar with this story, it's a good one, found in the first chapter of the gospel of Luke.

It is likely that this canticle was chosen for Morning Prayer because of the words it contains, words of hope and promise, words of the dawning of salvation,

*In the tender compassion of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us.*

These are words to remember when you're waking up to a new day, that God is at work, with mercy, with compassion, with promise, with peace, with hope for those who dwell under the shadow of death.

The primary work of Morning prayer is to read scripture, to hear the yearnings of God's people throughout the centuries, to remember how God heard and answered their prayers, to hear how God was a part of people's lives from the beginning, to praise God for the ways that God has been there for the people of the past, and then to pray, to lift up our own needs and concerns before God, trusting that as God answered prayers in the past, as people experienced God's presence in the past, we will see God at work in our time, in our place, that we will have cause to open our mouths and proclaim God's praise, because God's words, God's promises do not return empty.

When we pray morning prayer together, we are joining together with Christians across time who have prayed these words.

They have prayed them in times of grief and in times of joy. They have prayed them in times of famine and in times of plenty. They have prayed them in times of war and in times of peace. They have prayed them in times of plague and in times of health.

In praying them, the ancient Psalms, they have joined in the prayers of the Jewish people. In praying them, they have joined the prayers of the earliest Christians.

And now we pray them. In a time of worry, in a time of fear, in a time when we have had to realize that we don't know what the future will hold, we have joined in these ancient prayers. We have joined in these ancient Psalms.

We have joined the unbroken prayer of God's people, recognizing that whether times are hard or times are easy, God is worthy of praise.

Recognizing that our hope cannot be in the things of this world. Recognizing that no matter what, God is with us, to give us hope, to give us peace, to comfort us, to inspire us, to give us courage for the road ahead,

And so, we gather, and so we sing, and so we come before God's presence with thanksgiving. And so, we pray. Amen.