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“Prayer Works?” a Homily on Daniel 6
Sunday, November 27, 2016

So the title of this homily includes a question mark. I intentionally want us to read it like this, “Prayer works?” with the end of your sentence leading you up a mountaintop. It is a question that we want to answer with a resounding yes, but if we’re honest with ourselves that is a difficult question to answer with 100% confidence.

I’ve often joked with people that I agree with them when they say that I have a direct line to God, but that doesn’t mean I’m 100% confident that me putting in a good word with the man upstairs will make everything okay. That puts too much pressure on me to keep God’s attention and I’m not that good. See, I can’t promise that all will be well for the child we just baptized; and I can’t promise that everything we teach in Catechism class and Confirmation will be everything they need to know about faith; now while I’m still hanging my hat on the fact that every couple I’ve married is still married—I’m not willing to bet on that, especially now that I probably just jinxed it! In my profession death is the only guarantee and that isn’t something I want to go around proclaiming.

Having said all that I know prayer works because I’ve seen it and read about it in scripture. Daniel’s story is a great example of the power of prayer—he did it three times a day and it saved him in the lion’s den; Jesus did it and saved all of us from the cross. Paul prayed in the prison while he was singing and the walls crumbled; I bet you have personal stories of how prayer works—a disease overcome, a difficult season turning into a beautiful one or some other example. Prayer works—so why the question mark?

The easy answer is that it keeps me honest. In my profession every prayer isn’t answered. I know that we can rationalize that statement and say that what we want isn’t always what God wants—but that seems harsh and too easy. That answer suggests that we are to pray because we are to please God—it is our offering that keeps God’s attention on us. And that’s not what prayer is. Daniel wasn’t saved because he kept God’s attention.

Prayer works? is my reality check. It reminds me that I’ve prayed at bedsides only to see the person die; that I’ve walked with people as their marriages crumble, hoping that they can rekindle the love that brought them together only to see it end; I’ve seen hopes dashed with the arrival of a letter from a college or a doctor; and I’ve heard of promises unfulfilled from family members and friends—and each time the question mark hangs in the air. Prayer works? (*said in the crescendo voice.*)

But it isn't just a reality check about the tough stuff—it also reminds me that prayer does work. When I ask that question I'm reminded that prayer has guided surgeon's hands and helped couples cope with children and illnesses and all that life can offer. Prayer has supported people as they rebuild their lives after an accident, a job loss or a broken relationship; prayer has guided this church as we've walked down new paths that require hard conversations and potentially big changes. Prayer guides each Session meeting, each Pastoral Nominating Committee conversation and each time the Nominating Committee meets. Prayer guides our worship and those who lead—it guides our sacraments because each time we touch the waters of baptism or break the bread we invite the Holy Spirit amongst us to enliven us. Prayer works. No question mark needed.

Our story for today is a great example. Prayer gives this story shape and substance. Prayer is what keeps Daniel close to God and what ultimately leads to his sure death in the lion's den. Prayer is what sets him apart from the other presidents and satraps—the kings council—and it is what they use to trap him so they can get rid of him. In Daniel's story we get the full range of the phrase, *prayer works?*

If prayer works then it keeps you from the teeth of the lion; but if prayer works then it also is what gets you thrown into the lion's den; if prayer works, it is what keeps you connected to God because you go to an upper room to prayer three times a day; but if prayers works then it can be seen as an act of treason against the rulers of your kingdom.

This is why I use the question mark. Prayer is complicated and made more complicated when we read about it in scripture. It is a means of saving grace as we hear the words of Christ on the cross as he gives his life for us all; it is the means of a binding promise that we don't want to keep as Jezabel learned when he prayed for God to deliver him and his armies and as an act of devotion he'd sacrifice the next person who walked into his house—and that happened to be his daughter. When we look at prayer—really look at it—we see that prayer brings forth the full range of experiences—and when we pray God is revealed.

Saying prayer works? with the emphasis on the question mark is a reminder to reorient myself toward God. Praying is about answers or getting what we want or what we think we need; prayer is a reorientation of our lives—away from ourselves and toward God. Daniel wasn't focused on saving himself, but on praying to God. His act of praying literally reoriented his life because he left the king's chambers to go to his room to pray. He stepped away from the world of the king and into God's world. Reading his story reminds me to ask this question, prayer works?

It reminds me to pray. Not so I can change God, but so I can be changed. It is a process. In this season of Advent join Mary and Joseph as they pray for guidance because they are walking a new path toward parenthood. They don't know what they are getting into and they know that what they are doing is scandalous and life-threatening, but something about it calms them. They know that this is the path they are called to walk. Sure they have angels and archangels talking to them and reminding them they aren't alone—but they still have to walk the steps themselves.

So join that young couple in prayer as we walk with them on the path toward changing the world. Don't pray because it will keep you from stumbling, but pray because it will keep you from falling flat. And join Daniel as he prays. And know that prayer didn't keep Daniel out of the lion's den, but it got him out. Prayer may not save your life, but it will remind you that this isn't the only life we get. It won't help you keep your job, but it'll remind you that there's more to life than a job; and in this holiday season prayer will keep your family tethered around something perfect even when everything is imperfect in your life.

Prayer works? is an invitation. It's an invitation to experience life with God. Daniel's example is meant to be just that—an example of the power of prayer. Daniel's life revolves around God and prayer makes that happen. When the Israelites read this story they were in captivity and exile, wondering if God cared about them—they wondered if God would return them to the Promised Land and Daniel's story rang in their hearts as an invitation to welcome God into their lives.

We may not be in exile or captivity—or we might—the point is that God wishes to be with us as we walk the steps of our lives. The invitation is out there. It is a question; it is also a declarative statement; and it might just be a sentence—whatever it is, prayer works reminds us that God is with us and is going to do everything God can to make that known to us. The birth of a holy child will soon show us how far God will go to be with us and to help us reorient our lives toward God.

May God bless this witness and this congregation. Amen.