

“The Pause that Refreshes”  
Easter 7a  
John 17:1-11

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In Jesus' Name.

Both John and Luke hit the pause button today. In Luke's book of Acts the disciples have witnessed Jesus' ascension into heaven. Think of all the opportunities for special effects if we were making this into a movie. They returned to the room where they were staying to await the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit. For this outpouring the movie maker once again would turn to the special effects unit. What an opportunity: rustling wind picking up speed, dancing tongues of fire, the expressions on the disciples' faces. But in between, not much happened. Luke tells us, “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” The film maker would cover those ten days in a fifteen second sweep.

In the gospel reading things are much the same. There was a great deal of hub-bub as Jesus knelt to wash his disciples' feet. Remember how Peter recoiled when Jesus came to him. There is a story here. Soon Jesus led the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where the action resumed with a detachment of temple police, torches, clubs and other weapons, a betrayal, a severed ear, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. In between the foot washing and the action in Gethsemane Garden comes a pause in which Jesus turned to prayer. It's a long prayer. We know what happens during long prayers. At first their minds wandered. Then they fell asleep. The pause is where you lose people.

What took place in both of these pauses was prayer. There are some times, some interim times, an interlude, in which all you can do is pray. That's all we can do. It doesn't sound like much, does it? It always is a last resort. We'd much rather be doing something about it. But there are times when you cannot.

- You kiss your loved one at the doorway to the operating room and then you go and sit. All you can do is pray.
- You've sent out a thousand resumes, made a thousand phone inquiries, networked your network until people cringe when they see you or hear your voice on the phone. All you can do is pray.
- The couple went faithfully to marriage counseling. They talked to their pastor. There was no other love interest undermining the marriage. They wanted to take their marriage vows seriously. But each day filled with tears. In a situation like that all you can do is pray.
- Parents we raise our children to stand on their own, be independent and good people. But when we launch them out the front door they get beyond our reach and then all we can do is pray.
- From the second reading we learn of the suffering people were going through because of their faith. Peter told them, "Humble yourselves. Cast all anxiety on God. Discipline yourselves. Keep alert." Peter fleshed it out a bit but in essence what he was saying was, "When faced with the power of empire all you can do is pray."

What good is prayer? Some see the benefit in the doing of it. Empirical research shows prayer or meditation calms anxieties, lowers our heart rates, and makes us heal faster after surgery. There does not have to be a god on the other end of our meditation. It is its own reward. The composer Stephen Sondheim said in a New York Times interview that he did not believe in God but he did believe in faith. We see there often are benefits in self-deception.

We address our prayers to God. We believe God is on the receiving end. However, on the other side of the same coin as that described before are those who monetize prayer. By this I mean they think with an ample reserve of faith and a large account of good works on deposit

with God their prayers are more likely to be granted. Jesus did say on occasion, “Your faith has made you well.” He did advise us to “store up treasure in heaven.” What is treasure for if not to be drawn on in times of need? Those so inclined are more likely to keep accounts with God, tallying up the prayers answered. The problem here is not that our prayers are curved in on ourselves. That is a problem on its own. The problem here is that we locate the power of prayer within us. God is the genie in the bottle whom we manipulate to grant our wishes.

However, do we really think we are going to change God’s mind on something. Maybe the best we can hope for is that God will change something about us. In Luther’s Small Catechism he says that when we pray “Thy kingdom come; thy will be done,” we know that “God’s kingdom comes indeed without our asking for it, but we ask in this prayer that it may come also to us.” We know “The good and gracious will of God is surely done without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may be done also among us.” In one of our often-sung hymns we ask God to “bend our minds to your control.” One thing God does through our prayer is to align our wills with God’s will. Such prayer is a precursor to our actions of living godly lives. Through prayer God enlists us as harbingers of God’s kingdom and doers of his will. Prayer puts us in sync with God. Prayer keeps the channels of communication open.

All this is well and good. Through prayer God works on us. But do our prayers work on God? That is the question that has long troubled me. To consider it I think we have to enter into the pause between Good Friday and Easter morning. We linger there as we do at the Easter vigil, listening to those wonderful stories in the Old Testament from which we learn there is hope for dry bones and slaves. We learn the empire can build a golden statue of the king and throw its opponents into a fiery furnace and still not win. We pause in that time between Good Friday and Easter because something is happening beneath the surface. Jesus assumed our humanity. He

took upon himself our sin. He embraced our death. He did so in order to redeem us. He rose from the grave. He has taken us to himself so that we also will rise to be like him in glory. In the meantime we live in him. We are joined to him by baptism. We live in him by faith. That has direct bearing on our praying.

Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson writes about prayer. He says “to pray to the God of the gospel is to enter into the life lived between the Father and the Son in their Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> He says, “We pray as one with the Son.” Here at last is prayer as the pause that refreshes. “Our prayer belongs to the Son’s part in the mutual knowing and willing of the Father, Son and Spirit. Our prayer is not just addressed to divine providence.” That would be like bouncing a tennis ball against the garage door. It might put some marks on the door but it is not going to move it. God’s providence has to do with the inner workings of God: the life lived between God the Father and God the Son in the Holy Spirit. Jenson says as we pray as one with the son, we actually enter into that life. Our point of entry is Jesus. “When we pray as one with the Son our prayer is not just addressed to divine providence; it participates in it. Why should we bother to tell God what we think should happen? Because our doing so occurs within the triune act of knowing and choosing what will happen.”<sup>2</sup>

This puts a whole new spin on the saying, “All we can do is pray.” This refreshing pause transforms the saying from meaning “the minimum we can do is pray and we know it doesn’t amount to much,” to “the greatest thing we can do is pray.”

When we kiss our loved one at the door to the operating room, hit the send button containing resume 1000, mourn a failing marriage, launch our children out of the nest, face

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “Speech to, for, and about the Triune God: Name and Narrative,” *Seeking New Directions for Lutheranism*, ed. Carl Braaten (Delhi, NY: ALPB Books, 2010), 114.

<sup>2</sup> Jenson, 120.

prejudice because of our faith, all we can do is pray as one with the Son and so participate in the divine knowing and willing of the triune God. What responsibility, what power we have as we live in Jesus our risen Lord.