

With Christ in the School of Prayer

(2) THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 11:1-4, 9-14

“Hallowed be Thy name...”

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley
at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

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In these first weeks of the new year, we will be reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer that Jesus gave to us as a way to draw close to God. Today is the second message in this series. Last week we began with this remarkably personal, intimate address of God, *“Our Father...”* When we try to pray, we are to envision God as *present WITH us*, close at hand.

Then Jesus goes on to say, *“But pray like this: ‘Father, hallowed be Thy name...’”* Jesus was aware, in His own prayer life and in what He was passing on to us, that we need to know God *close by*, but we also need to know God *high up...the God who is (as the Psalms say) “mighty to save.”*

In years past, when I would get anxious, I would walk five blocks from our house down to Lake Michigan, just north of Chicago, and stand by the shore as the waves lapped up onto the beach. I would look up at the vastness of the skies, and on a clear night see the stars spread forth in all their splendor, like so many jewels against a velvet canopy. On special nights, I would see a full moon rising, shimmering across the waters. Often would come to mind the French Breton *“Fisherman’s Prayer.”* Do you know it?

Thy sea, O God, so great; my boat so small;
It cannot be that any happy fate will me befall
Except as Thy goodness opens paths for me
Through the consuming vastness of the sea.

And in that moment of awe and wonder, before the greatness of God, I could feel something in me relax, let go, and there was...peace.

Long ago, a prophet named Isaiah was called to herald the coming of a Messiah, a Savior, who would one day come and lift us out of the quicksand of our sin, and plant our feet on a more solid Rock. That prophet was destined to be the one to give us those ringing phrases we now sing, *“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; the government shall be on His shoulder, ...and His name shall be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...’”*

But Isaiah’s ministry did not begin with such joyful song. Isaiah’s ministry began as he wrestled with his own anxiety and broodings over the future of his people. Isaiah was a priest serving in the Temple. There one day, he was doing what priests do in the Temple, a routine worship service with the scriptures, the sacrifices, the incense, the songs...all the while brooding, brooding, brooding...what to do? What to do? In this very personal account of his calling, Isaiah tells us it was *“In the year that King Uzziah died...”* Uzziah reigned a long time, probably the only king Isaiah had known. What’s more, he was a good king. If you know anything about Old Testament history, you know that a good king was hard to find. And the few good ones usually had rotten sons. So this was a major crisis for the nation, and for Isaiah personally. It was *“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord!”*

Oh, if only the ancient Hebrew had punctuation! But if it did, we could be sure there would be exclamation points here, *“In the year King Uzziah died...I SAW THE LORD!!!...He was seated on His throne! It seemed His robe filled the whole Temple!...And there were these angels, these heavenly beings flying around with an extra set of wings,”*—to fly, and cover their eyes, so great was the glory of God!...and it seemed the very foundations shook beneath my feet! He was having a vision, you see. His eyes were opened to the greatness of God. That’s what prayer does...so we pray *“Hallowed be Thy name!”*

And in the awe of that moment, he brought his anxiety to the Lord. *“O Lord, I am lost!”* You are so great; and I am so small; You are so holy, and I so unclean! *“Thy sea, O God, so great; my boat so small! It cannot be that any happy fate will me befall, save Thy goodness, Thy holiness, greatness opens paths for me, Through the consuming vastness of the seas!”* Then Isaiah was able to let go, to trust, to say, *“Here I am, Lord; send me.”*

Centuries later, when Isaiah’s prophecies were being fulfilled, that “Wonderful Counselor,” that “Prince of Peace” was praying. It must have been an awesome experience just to see Jesus in prayer. And one of the disciples came to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray like that; teach us to pray as you pray!” And the Wonderful Counselor said to them, *“When you pray, say ‘Our Father...Hallowed be thy name!’* Hallowed...Holy be Thy name...Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty! Hallowed be Thy name.

So already, you see, Jesus has given us a way to *know God*. For God is as close as a Father, and as mighty as Savior. This is what prayer does: it plugs us in to the Source; it connects us with the Living God; it helps us to know Him, not so much in doctrine, as in *experience*. There is a Presence. And there is an Awe.

Thy winds so great, O God, so slight my sail.

How could I curb and bit them on the long and salty trail

Unless Thy love were mightier than the wrath

of all the tempests that beset my path.

Now translating this teaching into our own struggle to pray, let me suggest that Jesus gave us this prayer not so much for the *words*, as for a *pattern* to use in our prayers. Or, as came out of the Theology on Tap discussion last Monday evening, “Jesus was not teaching so much the *what* to pray, but the *how* to pray.” The attitude, the structure, the flow. So Jesus says, “Start close in: ‘*Our Father*’; and then lift up your eyes: *Hallowed be Your name!*”

So in closing, let me suggest how helpful the Bible is to jump start our prayers...in just this simple way. Does anyone here have trouble with the wandering mind when you try to pray? You sit down, try to be still for the purpose of prayer, and all of a sudden your mind goes everywhere!--grocery lists, fixer upper ideas for the house, problem solving at work, the NFL playoffs, whatever! What’s more, when you try to reign in your thoughts, you don’t have the words, you hardly know what to say.

So next time this happens, just stop, open your Bible to a Psalm. Maybe one of the Psalms used in worship the previous Sunday, or one of your favorite Psalms—Psalm 23 “*The Lord is my shepherd...*”; Psalm 121 “*I will lift up mine eyes to the hills; from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth*”; Psalm 139 “*You have searched me and known me, O God...*”; Psalm 46 “*You are a refuge and a strength to me, O God...*”; Psalm 63 “*Be still and know that I am God...*” Let the words of the Psalms lift up your eyes, ...and lift up your hearts. Let the Psalms jump start your “*Hallowed by Thy name...*”

And then, as you begin to relax into the greatness of Almighty God, just turn over to one of the Gospels and read your half-chapter. Watch how “the Word (the majesty, the greatness of God) became flesh...,” Let that brief episode in the life of Jesus set the agenda for your prayers.

Wandering mind? Write out a prayer for your day, just a one liner...it will keep you focused; and it comes right out of the life and teaching of Jesus. Then, in just those 10 minutes of Psalm and Gospel, your entire perspective toward the day has changed. Because the fact is, when we are unplugged from the Source, when God is small in our lives, our problems loom large. But when we get plugged in to the Source, and see God as huge, guess what...our problems seem to shrink down to size. And in that simple beginning, you have built your day upon the Rock, before it even begins...so when the storm comes, and the winds blow, and the rains fall to beat against your house, you can stand firm, because you are planted on the Rock! (See Matthew 7:24-27.)

Let us pray: Our Father, may Your name be hallowed; may Your name be honored this week—in our lives, in our work, in our worship. Amen.