

Sermon Text for December 18, 2016

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 121, Romans 1:8-15

“Pray with hope”

Here we find ourselves exactly a week before Christmas and we are reading a Scripture from Romans. Why? What is our theme for Advent and what have we been focusing on? I have been so encouraged by the feedback that I've gotten from you. Last week especially you told me about a major life decision you had to make over this week and that you said that you learned to turn it to God, that it was to be less about us and more about you, and you are getting your answers in emails, in encounters from random people. You are telling me how God is answering your prayers because we are getting out of the way and allowing God to take over. It has nothing to do with Advent, but it has everything to do with prayer. Advent is about being ready for the coming of Jesus our Savior. How can we be ready if we don't communicate with our creator, with our God, with the one who loves us unconditionally. So, welcome to this last Sunday in Advent.

How was it to spend a week in prayer without asking God for a single thing and just recognizing that we are the clay in the hands of the potter. I hope you learned something. I know I did. I turned this past week over to the Lord because last week was such a rush and so encouraging for the life of the church. Then, this week not only did Rutters present us with the check for \$1000 for our food bank but two other businesses, The Creamery and Sugar on Top called and said that they wanted to bless some families for Christmas and did I know any who might need a little extra blessing. Yes, by the way, I do. I love being at the hub of social ministry here in Strasburg. I love it, it is what we are called to do and it makes me so, so excited.

There is something to be said for being excited about something, but not being really sure that it is going to happen. I'll never forget when we were in Florida and we had 5 chickens and they hadn't started to lay eggs yet. Bethany was holding our chicken Rosie out in the yard and she must have squeezed her too hard because she laid her first egg. There is something for kids in hearing over and over again that something is going to happen but until it actually happens, until you have physical concrete proof you don't really believe it.

How exciting it is when something we hope for, something we have desired, something we have prayed for, something more important than a hen laying an egg, actually happens and we see God at work in our lives. How exciting. Scripture tells us ask and you shall receive. How many of you have ever had a prayer that you felt was not answered? Come on, every person here if you have ever prayed should be raising their hands. There are prayers that we pray that we feel have not been answered. How do we explain that? Today we are going to see what Scripture has to say about that.

Four sermons on prayer just is not enough, it only scratches the surface. I would love to go through phrase by phrase of the Lord's prayer. I would love to talk to you about the differences between prayers of adoration and confession and lament. My God, my God why have you forsaken me, I will praise you with the timbrel and the lyre. Our lifeline to God, prayer is so important to maintain and it is so important to understand how we can increase its importance in our life. Calvin has given us 4 rules to an effective prayer life. Find the time and the place, pray for what you need, pray with confidence in God not yourself, and finally today pray with a certain hope of obtaining what you request. Know that God will answer your prayer. Paul had this hope so lets read in Romans his take on this issue.

Bernard Shaw in his play Saint Joan of Arc has a scene where this famous young French woman martyr is questioned by her critics and she insists that she hears voices that come from God. One of her accusers says disdainfully that they are voices that come from your imagination. Whereupon she replied, I know, that is how God speaks to me. That is one confident response to a criticism that is often leveled at prayer. Isn't prayer just self-help therapy where you are doing it just for your own good. It really has no impact on a soul except upon yourself. It is all just a by-product of our imagination.

There are times when we wonder if our prayers have any effect at all. Times when tragedies occur. A friend of mine who was an elder at church where I once served tragically lost his son and he came to me one day and said Bob, I no longer believe in the God you do. I know God exists, I know God loves me and is gentle and kind, but God is powerless in the face of death. It is the only explanation I have because an Almighty God would have answered my prayer. I couldn't convince him otherwise. There are times when we wonder if God is listening and if God is, why doesn't God answer? We often

find ourselves like Sisyphus of Camus shaking an angry fist at God.

James tells us in 1:5-8, If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind, for the doubter being double-minded and unstable in every way must not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Scripture commands us to pray without doubting, with confidence even though our lives are filled with events and circumstances that produce doubts.

Jesus knew this reality in which we live. In Luke 18:1-8 he tells his disciples a parable so that, as Scripture states, they would understand the importance of prayer and not lose heart. He knew that it is human nature in our time of prayer to lose heart, to doubt when we pray and we don't feel like we are getting an answer, certainly an answer that we wanted to receive.

As modern day disciples we are called not to lose heart but rather to pray with confidence. Listen to these Scriptures and take heart. John 15:7: If you abide in me and my words abide in you ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you. John 14:13-14: I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. I John 5:14, and this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. Matthew 7:7, Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door shall be opened. Do need to go on? I could, I John 3, Matthew 21:22, Matthew 18:19, Mark 11:20-25. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain be taken up and thrown into the sea, and if you do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Calvin tells us to pray with a certain confidence, not a timidity but with the knowledge that what you are praying for is God's will, not your own and God is already working his plan to fulfill and answer that prayer. One of my favorite examples of this is when the Israelites get ready to cross into the promised land, this land that God has promised to them for generations. But the people still doubted they were not able to trust in God completely. Listen to what God tells Joshua in 3:7-17.

Where were the priests in the middle of this Scripture? Where were the spiritual leaders, the Eli's of that nation? They were in the middle of the Jordan. They literally had to step into hot water in order to ascertain whether God's Word was going to hold or not. So often we want to hear God's answer on this side of the Jordan, before we have to cross it. Nobody wants to step into the Jordan river that runs chilly and cold especially when you have no guarantee that God is going to do what God has promised. But God says no, you step first into that water, you take a chance, I may not come to you when you first step in the water, in fact you may have to be completely in the middle of the Jordan, the water may even rise over your head. But I will deliver you, I will lead you into the promised land. Where does your help come? It comes from the Lord, he will not let your foot be moved.

We aren't used to operating that way especially when we pray. Send me a sign is one of our favorite prayers. Instead of Lord, I am taking the path that you have shown me to take, now clear the waters in front of me. Talk about confidence, a certain confidence that God will respond. Do you believe when you pray that it makes a difference in history? I do, I've seen too many providential coincidences to believe otherwise and I believe what Scripture tells me.

With prayer if we don't get an answer right away our first reaction is that it doesn't work or that God doesn't answer our prayers instead of asking ourselves if we are praying with a certain confidence. Brothers and sisters believe the good news of the Gospel and pray with the confidence that is reflected in Scripture and be certain that God will answer your prayer. Amen.