

What's Missing: A New Year's Call to Prayer  
Isaiah 56:1-8; Mark 11:15-19

The Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love are fulfilled in the arrival of Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God. He is fully God and fully man – God takes on human flesh, Creator as creature, born of virgin, wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in manger. He is worshiped and adored by citizens of heaven and earth alike. He is the embodiment of every promise of hope, peace, joy, and love God ever makes to man come into the world. **But Cornerstone, how do these Advent graces get into us? How do they become our daily experience?**

We are no strangers to trouble, difficulty, anxiety, and uncertainty, but how can we, today and in this coming year, be people of certain hope, sustaining peace, unspeakable joy, and abounding love? We have been a people of the Word, studying and touching the heart of God in the Scripture. We have been a people of fellowship, encouraging and sustaining one another in the life of faith through meaningful relationships. We have been a people of faithful worship and generous service. What more is there that might help us be a people of more certain hope, more sustaining peace, more unspeakable joy, and more abounding love? **What might be missing among us that would greatly benefit to us, to the glory of God in our families and community, to the mission of the gospel and the church in 2021?**

As I have felt and pondered the question of what might be missing in my own walk with the Lord, one word recurs: **prayer**. It is not that I don't pray, nor that I think you don't ever pray. What comes to mind is depth of prayer, maturity of prayer, focus of prayer, continuity and consistency of prayer, prayer that lifts earth to heaven, prayer that brings heaven to earth. I think of prayer as an expression of the depth and wonder of our own love for Christ. I'm thinking of the kind of prayer that satisfies the soul, guides the mind, directs the will, frees the spirit, conquers sin, nurtures holiness, transforms the heart, and wins the world. I think of Spirit-filled, Christ-exalting, Bible-indulgent, God-honoring communication and fellowship with the Holy One that fills the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.

I don't believe that I need to take the time, this morning, to go into detail about what prayer is. We probably don't need to rehearse the warnings that fill the word about the consequences of prayerlessness or dwell long on Jesus' teaching that His disciples ought always to pray and not give up. You have heard those sermons before. And it is likely that the truths in those messages produces in you, as it does in me, a deep longing for something more, something possible, something worth pursuing and gaining from God.

We read a moment ago from **Isaiah 56:1-8** and **Mark 11:15-19**. In both of those passages God describes His dwelling, His house on earth, as "a house of prayer for all the nations." In the **Isaiah** passage we find that God has thrown open the doors of His dwelling not only to Israel, His people of choice and promise, but to the Gentile nations of the world, and even to those who are specifically excluded from temple worship by the Law. Eunuchs were not to even be found on the temple grounds regardless of their devotion. But God reverses that exclusion when He informs Israel, again, that His intent is to welcome all the people of this world into fellowship with Him.

As I said, He throws open the doors of grace and mercy and forgiveness and belonging and invites even the least of these to enter and find an unrestricted relationship with Him. His house is not just a place where a select few gather to pray for the inhabitants of the nations. It is a place where the nations may come, where we are all welcome to come and pray and fellowship with God in person.

In **1 Corinthians 3** Paul teaches the church that they are, together, the temple of God, the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. Later in **chapter 6** he personalizes that same message by teaching them that they are also individually a temple of the Spirit. In **2 Corinthians** Paul writes,

**2 Corinthians 6:16 (ESV)** <sup>16</sup> *What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

In **Ephesians** Paul writes,

**Ephesians 2:19-21 (ESV)** <sup>19</sup> *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,* <sup>20</sup> *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,* <sup>21</sup> *in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.*

You probably see where this is going, don't you. Together with all the saints of God throughout the world, but also with one another right here where we are, we are the temple, the dwelling place of God on earth, we are God's house. **We are the place God expects to be a house of prayer for all the nations.**

The question we are pressing to answer is this, **how do we become what God expects of us? How do we become a house of prayer? How do we gain what is missing?** Let me offer you three **commitments** that will get us started on the journey to becoming a house of prayer.

- Secure the relationship.
- Don't be afraid to get “schooled.”
- Make the journey inclusive.

Let's take each **commitment** one at a time.

**To become a house of prayer, first we need to secure the relationship.**

August 4, 2021, should the Lord tarry, will be on a Wednesday and it will be my 31<sup>st</sup> wedding anniversary. Some days it seems like just yesterday we were walking up the aisle of Tabernacle Church of Norfolk, hand in hand, Linda in her wedding gown with her veil streaming from the lace hat she was wearing, walking (or floating) toward the bright windows of the foyer that faced Granby St, toward the reception hall, toward our future together as husband and wife. It was a

beautiful day and a beautiful moment, but the wedding was nothing compared to what it took to get to the wedding. Before I could ever take Linda Fregeau as my wife, I had to secure the relationship, and that took some work.

You see I had to run the gauntlet. I had to pass a series of challenges. First, I had to get her to go out with me. But after that, after we had been dating a bit, and our relationship began to develop, well, Linda wanted to be sure. She had already turned down four other proposals. First I had to pass the colleague test, then the mentor test, then the pastor test. I came through all those with flying colors, but then there was the mom test. Linda's mother was her best friend and Linda trusted her mom's spiritual discernment implicitly. If mom did not approve our relationship was over with no hope of resurrection.

Thirty one years later you know I passed that test as well, but the point is this, **if we are going fulfill God's plan that we be His house, a house of prayer, individually or corporately, then we must first secure the relationship with Him! How do we do that?**

We start with faith. **Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)** provides a critical piece of information about any relationship with God:

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

Faith is the portal through which we enter the house of God, through which we become a place of His dwelling. We must believe that God is, that He exists, that He has a will and a plan for our lives and for our church that includes prayer. We must know by faith that if we seek Him we will find Him, that if we pray He will hear.

To faith we add love. Jesus directed a letter to the church at Ephesus in **Revelation 2**. His message was simple: return to your foremost, premier love. Jesus, of course, meant undistracted love for Himself and all that He loves. So to faith we add love, which we learned last week is supplied to us through the presence and work of the Holy spirit.

To faith and love we add obedience. James writes

**James 1:22 (ESV)** <sup>22</sup> *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

Faithfulness, the goal of every true believer and disciple of Christ, is the sum of faith and obedience. Faith, love, and obedience do not buy a relationship with God; it is not a transaction, but they are the effort we put forward to secure or establish our relationship with God.

And just to be thorough, it doesn't hurt once in a while to check the pulse of the relationship. Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Make your calling and election sure. These are inspired admonitions that remind us not to take the condition of our relationship with God for granted.

So, before we do anything else to become the house of prayer God expects us to be, let us first make sure we have secured or established our relationship with Him through faith, love, and obedience. Nothing will stand in the way of successful prayer like faithlessness, lovelessness, and disobedience. Our first commitment is to secure the relationship.

**Second, to become a house of prayer, we should not be afraid to get “schooled.”** Some spiritual abilities must be learned, even requiring work over time.

The disciples came to Jesus with an unusual request. They were all sons of Israel. They were members of God’s covenant people. That means, at the very least, they had all been through covenant basic training. They had studied Torah and learned the prayers related to worship that would have been required of all young Jewish boys and men. They knew how to pray, yet they approach Jesus one day and say, “Rabbi, teach us to pray.”

I believe they had seen and heard Jesus praying, praying out of His heart and His relationship with the Father, and they wanted something from Jesus, something Jesus had that they did not have. They wanted to pray like Jesus. They weren’t looking for a method as much as they were looking for the heart Jesus has for the Father. So they asked Him to teach them to pray.

Jesus does not dismiss or rebuke them. He takes their request seriously. He teaches them to pray. The model prayer He offered them, the one we call the Lord’s Prayer, is more than just a model. It is a prayer designed to get to the heart, both the heart of the one praying and the heart of the matter of prayer.

When Jesus responds to the disciples’ request, he affirms that we who are the house of God can learn to pray with the heart of God. In fact, Christ’s gracious response to their interest suggests that it was an appropriate question for them to ask. He welcomed the opportunity to take them more deeply into this relationship of faith with the Father. **We can learn to pray and God is pleased to teach us.**

Want to learn how to pray in the house of prayer? Here are three ideas you can pursue. First, read the prayers in the Bible. Read Psalms, read Jesus’ prayers, read Paul’s prayers. See how they are worded, what they include, how they are phrased and how God answers, positively or negatively. Jonah prays and God’s response teaches the prophet a lesson He didn’t expect. Jesus prayed for forgiveness upon those who crucified Him and because God continues to answer that prayer you are listening to these words today. Study the prayers included in the Bible.

You can also read the prayers of theologically astute, doctrinally sound, Spirit-filled believers. As you leave this morning you will find paperback copies of “The Valley of Vision,” a book of Puritan prayers that I took our opening prayer from this morning. There is one copy per family. You could take a book like this and read it every day, or in many situations, or however it appeals to you to use. When I find my heart is too heavy for words, or that the words I have don’t seem adequate, I will sometimes turn to the words these faithful servants used and offer them to God as my own. They usually lead to the kind of praying my heart really wants to do.

By the way, as in any good educational methodology, if you want to get the most out of the lessons you are studying, you should put into practice what you discover. I spent three years studying French in college. I only remember what I practiced. There's nothing wrong with taking something you've learned in prayer or about prayer and repeating it to God until it becomes anchored in your soul. I promise, He will never get tired of hearing you practice!

**Finally, to become a house of prayer, I think we need to make the journey inclusive.** What I mean is that the effort we make to become individually and corporately a house of prayer ought to include all of life. For me, that includes **using more of the time I suddenly have free to increased time spent in quality, personal prayer.** I used to complain I was too busy, I didn't have enough time to pray like I wanted to. Now, I don't think this lockdown or pandemic is my fault, but suddenly, I have a lot more time! So do you, so put it to use. Include more time for prayer in your personal life.

We should also add our family into the mix, if we haven't already. **Add in time spent in prayer together as a family.** As you learn to pray, teach your kids by praying together with them. Teach your spouse, not just by telling them what you are learning, but by drawing them into the experience with you. Pray together. And yes, I do mean out loud. If there is any other human being on the face of the planet whom you would talk to in front of your spouse or children, then there is absolutely no reason you can't talk to God in front of them as well. And, I would go on to say, God is the one Person you should be most willing to talk to with and in front of your family because He is the only One who can prepare their hearts for a relationship with Him.

And as long as we are adding time and people to this journey to become the house of prayer God expects of us, we should resume concerted, corporate, congregational prayer. It may be in the same room or it may be online via Zoom or some other broadcast, but Cornerstone, we need to pray together. If together we are the house of God, then only together can we really be God's house of prayer for all the nations in 2021. **Let's work together to find a day and a time and a method when we can gather together once again and devote ourselves to prayer.**

There is a promise God makes in the Old Testament book of 2 Chronicles. He makes the promise to King Solomon after Solomon completes the building of the temple. God appears to Solomon in the night, after the temple dedication ceremony, and God says to Solomon,

**2 Chronicles 7:13-14 (ESV) <sup>13</sup> When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, <sup>14</sup> if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.**

God already commits to the relationship and response anticipated when His house is a house of prayer for all the nations. God, through Christ, makes a way not only for us to enter a relationship with Him, but to flourish in that relationship through prayer. So, Cornerstone, let's move forward together this year, through faith in Christ and submission to the Spirit, and let us, according to the Word and promise of God, become, individually and corporately, a house of prayer for all the nations.