

Leader: The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

Congregation: The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Leader: One thing I asked of the Lord. That will I seek after:

Congregation: To live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

Leader: To behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple.

Congregation: For He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble; He will conceal me under the cover of His tent; He will set me high on a rock.

Leader: Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! "Come," my heart says, "seek His face!"

Congregation: Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

1. ***"Jesus es mi luz!"*** So it says on the little silver cross the little Mexican shop owner sold me 20 years ago, giving me an unasked for discount because I was her first customer of the day, that I still wear on a chain around my neck. ***"Jesus es mi luz!"***

What a joy it is to claim Jesus as our light and our salvation. The Psalmist understood that, even before Jesus was born:

Leader: The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

Congregation: The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

And, from the language used, we can tell that the Psalmist was not merely sitting around, dreaming good theological thoughts set to meter, for poetry. The Psalmist is drawing upon personal experience of times when he had indeed been in difficult places and had come to know the Lord as his redemption, the cause for hope, the ground of promise for his life. And ...

And he also knew that the Lord is the ONE constant source of BEAUTY.

I've been listening (even again) to a fascinating conversation that public broadcasting host Krista Tippett had with John Polkinghorne. Polkinghorne was one of the leading physicists on the cutting edge of quantum physics, who at mid-life went back to school to receive the education for ordination as a priest in the Church of England. He

sees how science and religion are not enemies at all, but partners for the search for truth in life. And **the one characteristic – besides Truth – that is common to both fields (religion and science) is BEAUTY.**

One thing I asked of the Lord. That will I seek after:
To live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.
To behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple.

In the midst of your **worst day**, or in the middle of your **most hectic day**, it is **amazing what a difference it makes** if you take 30 seconds and repeat the first verse of Psalm 27, like we began our worship:

Leader: The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

Congregation: The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Leader: One thing I asked of the Lord. That will I seek after:

Congregation: To live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

Leader: To behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple.

Or ... it might even be a thing of more beauty if you sang it:

Choir sings: The Lord is my light; the Lord is my light. The Lord is my salvation. Whom shall I fear? Whom shall I fear? The Lord, the Lord is my light!

ONE THING I have asked of the Lord. THAT will I seek after. It may indeed be a frustration for some folks in present day leadership of our Conference who are always asking for a “Plan of Action,” a “Ministry Action Plan” when I simply list **THIS** as my Ministry Action Plan at Saint Marks. **One Thing asked. One Thing sought: to live in the House of the Lord; to look for God’s Beauty; to inquire in God’s Temple.**

2. But there are some days when we simply are not able to do this. There are some days when we cannot pray. (And make no mistake about it. That **IS** what it is to

live in the House of the Lord, to look for God's Beauty, and to inquire in God's Temple: it IS PRAYER.

And there are some days when we cannot do it.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin – in his classic little book “The Gift of Peace” (which should be read by every professing Christian at least 2 or 3 times) described it like this:

I spent only one night in the intensive care unit [after the extended pancreatic cancer surgery.] They brought me back to my own room, where I experienced the discomforts one normally encounters after going through extensive surgery. I wanted to pray, but the physical discomfort was overwhelming. I remember saying to friends who visited me, 'Pray while you're well, because if you wait until you're sick you might not be able to do it.' They looked at me, astonished, and I said, 'I'm in so much discomfort that I can't focus on prayer. My faith is still present. There is nothing wrong with my faith, but in terms of prayer, I'm just too preoccupied with the pain. I'm going to remember that I must pray while I'm well!'

Since then prayer has been more important to me than ever before. I have savored those moments when my physical pain subsides, and my mind, body, and spirit can focus on the Lord. It is important to remember that prayer is a vital part of our lives as Christians, as believers. But there are so many obstacles to praying with all our hearts and minds. The daily events of life seem to get in the way. And when we are sick, everything changes. I find myself telling priests and parishioners more and more to develop a strong prayer life in their best moments so that they can be sustained in their weaker moments.

There are times when we simply are not able to pray. We ought prepare our lives for those moments by building up a reservoir of prayer. It's good if we can **hear the echoes** of that prayer **singing from the reservoir of our soul**:

Choir sings: In the times of trouble, He will shelter me. He will keep me safe in His holy temple. I will shout with joy! I will sing His praise! I will shout with joy! I will sing His praise!

3. But there are other times when we **CAN** actually go through the **motions** and **movements** and **sounds** of prayer, but it just doesn't seem to get anywhere –

those times when it seems like hollow words from our mouth or soul, simply bounce off the ceiling back into our face with an empty echo.

I came across a good description of how such a thing often occurs:

Carrie's story illustrates how the dark night can unfold. Since her baptism in high school, Carrie has participated actively in the church. She has led singing, taught Sunday school, served on committees and volunteered in the congregation's ministry to homeless people. For many years, her inner life of prayer has been equally active. Typically she has prayed for 15 minutes before going to work and 10 minutes before going to bed. In the morning she read from the Bible, then praised God, interceded for her friends and petitioned for herself. Before bedtime, she reviewed the events of her day, confessed the sins she committed and thanked God for the graces she encountered. This pattern of prayer nourished Carrie for years and kept her connected to God.

But then Carrie felt like she had walked into a desert. During prayer she had a hard time finding words, and when they finally came, the words floated into empty space, as if God had fled the universe. Hoping that the sense of God's presence would come back if she prayed longer, she doubled the length of her prayers, but it didn't work. God seemed to have abandoned her.

Her work at the church also became dissatisfying. Song leading felt coldly mechanical rather than attuned to the Holy Spirit. While teaching her class, the life seemed to have gone out of the Bible. Working with women at the homeless shelter, once a joy, was now drudgery. She felt spiritually flat, bereft and restless. Yearning for God, she sometimes sat in her bedroom and cried. "What's wrong with me? Why, God, have you forsaken me?"

It's not something we talk about very often. We're afraid to, I suspect. In one Doctor of Ministry study I read that in a survey taken of [160 people in one congregation](#) and of [169 credentialed pastors in one conference](#): **FORTY (40%) PERCENT** of the laity in the congregation and **FIFTY-NINE (59%) PERCENT** of the clergy all admitted to having experienced this time of feeling like God is Absent.ⁱ Recent disclosures of her journals reveal that even Mother Teresa suffered from this.

The **Psalmist understood**:

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! "Come," my heart says, "seek His face!"

Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not cast me off,
do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

This is time when **Prayer just won't cut it**. These are times when we can't pray, and we're **NOT** talking about the *popular news media fodder*: some government run nursing home, some instances from a public school, or a visit by Glenn Beck to the Kennedy Center.

No, I'm **NOT** talking about the stuff that people like to go preach an editorial or carry a protest sign.

I'm talking about those deep, deep, dark times when it seems like it doesn't matter how much or how hard we pray, we still end up with:

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! "Come," my heart says, "seek His face!"

Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not cast me off,
do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

Time prohibits a thorough discussion of all the **awful** and **wonderful** aspects of these **dark nights of the soul**. ONE THING I share about it now.

The Epistle Lesson said that

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words

And that is true. AND let me add one more note to that: **SOMETIMES WE – THE ORDINARY FOLKS OF THE CHURCH – DO THE VERY WORK OF THE SPIRIT, WHEN WE PRAY FOR THOSE IN CIRCUMSTANCES WHOSE PRAYERS SIMPLY AREN'T WORKING.**

There are times when we pray a collective prayer about things that – if you are honest – you have said to yourself: *That's not what's going on in my life. Why am I praying for that as if it is something going on in my life?*

No, it is NOT. But we are praying for people who ARE going through that, but who can't pray. **We are doing the very work of the Holy Spirit.** *Nothing is more important that those prayers we pray that are not our situation, but are the circumstance of someone else.*

Choir sings: The Lord is my light; the Lord is my light. The Lord is my salvation. Whom shall I fear? Whom shall I fear? The Lord, the Lord is my light!

We pray for circumstances not our own, knowing that they are the circumstances of others who cannot pray, so that **when the time comes that we cannot pray,** *we will know that someone is praying in the power of the Holy Spirit for us.*

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: **AMEN.**

ⁱ http://www.themenonite.org/issues/11-3/articles/When_you_cant_pray