

Pray Without Ceasing
Psalm 51, Matthew 6:5-8
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Crestview Presbyterian Church
February 17, 2010 Ash Wednesday

Given the snow and all the other things going on, I didn't get a chance to get out to pick up the movie, "Bruce Almighty." If you never saw the movie- one of Jim Carrey's funniest, a fellow named Bruce Nolan and God- played by Morgan Freeman- switch places for a bit. One of the memorable scenes comes when Bruce suddenly realizes that he's receiving millions of messages that only he can hear... folks asking for help, for healing, for direction, for whatever. Of course, in good movie manner, he also hears the prayers of his girlfriend who's praying about him. The point I wanted to make is that the air is full of prayers, all around us.

Some might think that sort of fanciful movie- or preacher-talk, but I wonder. I remember a time when I sat with the children on the steps one Sunday, and asked them what they could hear. We sat there silently for a bit, and one little guy said with a shrug... "nothing!" That's when I pulled a portable radio out from my robe and turned it on... and of course, there was music and words and lots and lots of things that had been there all around us- all the time. And, so there is right now.

This Lenten season, I'd like to ask you to pay special attention to that. Please don't walk about with an earpiece in your ear; there too much of that happening already. Instead, I'd like to ask you to consider walking around with a particular phrase in your mind that comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:17 that simply says, "pray continually" - or "constantly" as some older versions of the Bible put it. Some people give up something

for Lent... chocolate, or the internet, or some bad habit... and use that sacrificial act as a way of remembering God's sacrificial love leading to Christ's death on the cross. There's nothing wrong with that- I've often done that myself- but this year, I'd like to ask that you pick up something for Lent... and for the next forty day, it's the practice of daily prayer.

Jesus provides some thought about that, and we find it in the Sermon on the Mount- Matthew 6:5-8. (read scripture) If we're not careful, our words can ascend like so much confused garbage- sort of like we've spamming heaven with a zillion irrelevant e-mails. I thought of that when I read about a scene that talk show host Phil Donahue- he's sort of a pre-Oprah's Oprah... about scene that he missed getting when he was a news reporter.

He was covering a mine disaster, and it was late at night. The ground was covered with snow and the rescue teams were at work. Worried and anxious relatives waited silently at the mouth of the mine, gathered around the feeble heat of a smudge pot. Then, someone began to sing, "What a friend we have in Jesus/ All our sins and griefs to bear!/ What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!" Then the local minister gave a simple and heartfelt prayer. The whole thing was so beautiful and aesthetically moving that Donahue reports that it gave him goose bumps. His only trouble was that it was so cold that his camera wasn't working right. Finally, he got it warmed up by holding it next to his own body. Then he went over to the preacher and asked him to go through his prayer again.

He explained that he was the only television reporter there, and that he represented 260 stations. If he could just go through his prayer again, several people would thus be able to hear it. But the minister refused. He just couldn't do it; he's already prayed to God,

and to do it again would be wrong- even if it was for CBS News. A year or so later, Donahue got it... the man wasn't willing to showboat for Jesus, and wasn't willing to sell a piece of his soul for TV- not even, praise God, for national TV!

That brought home the truth of Jesus' words about going into your closet, and praying to our Father, who is unseen. The next forty days of prayer isn't meant to become a merit badge that you sew onto our church clothes, or a flashing neon light of how spiritual you are... it's something between you and God. When you do that- you can drill down into your soul and let God touch you where it counts. There are a lot of ways you can do that, but most of them need to begin with a bit of soul-cleaning.

There was king once who happened to see a beautiful woman bathing in her rooftop bath. He had to have her, and so had her brought to the palace where he had his way with her- and she become pregnant. But she was married and her soldier husband was away- and he didn't want the matter revealed. It was no problem, though for the king to arrange for the man's furlough back home so that he might sleep with his wife so that all might think the baby his. The soldier chose not to sleep in his bed in honor of his fighting men still out in the field, and after few nights- returned to join them. Frustrated, the king ordered his general to set the man up... put him up front where the fighting was thickest, and then withdraw; the loyal soldier Uriah quickly became a battle casualty, and the king welcomed beautiful Bathsheba into his palace. Lust, adultery, deception, murder... not a pleasant list, is it?

God didn't think so, and one of the prophets- Nathan- got the message. He was sent to King David, and told a story about a rich man who desired a neighbor's pet lamb and took it for his own flocks without fairly compensating the original owner. Outraged,

King David ordered that the rich man be punished... and the prophet said, "That man, O King, is you." The story can be found in 2 Samuel 11, and it's a most intriguing story at several levels.

For our purposes tonight- payer- I want to point you to the prayer David prayed after being confronted with his sin... we find it in Psalm 51, which the choir will be singing in just a few minutes. I suggest that you have a Bible open in your laps as they sing, and let the words and the music wash over you. We all have those secret elements in our lives that are vulnerable to being challenged by a prophet, and each one of us has our own confession to make... David was inconsolable until he had the sense of God's forgiveness... how about you? Are you not only sorry for your sin, but determined to live a more righteous life? Tonight offers you a chance to get right with God... to take advantage of Christ's death on the cross that paid the price for your sin... to confess it privately to God and get it off your chest. Tonight's marking of your forehead with ash is meant to symbolize not only your ashes-to-ashes and dust-to-dust sin- but also your determination to repent and walk with the Lord. I invite you to ponder that deeply as we move through our worship time.

Let me conclude with where I began... the unheard sound in the air. This Lenten season- as we approach Easter- we'll be focusing on the Lord's Prayer... those words that follow immediately Jesus' teachings about praying privately. Every day- many times each day- continually or constantly, 2 Thessalonians 5 tells us... pray the Lord's Prayer to God by yourself. Don't make a big deal about it- just say it to the Lord over and over. Let the words roll around in your mouth, and in your heart; ponder each phrase and consider every single word. As you drive your car, as you eat your breakfast, when you go to bed,

before lunch, over and over... live with the Lord's Prayer so that it becomes part of your living, part of the noise of your life- as constantly as you breathe in and breathe out.

Jeff LaPrete put together this little video for you to reflect on...listen to the everyday noise of the world- traffic noise, cell phones, hammering, sawing wood... and through it... the Lord's Prayer. I invite you to join with your church family in praying that prayer... privately, between you and God.