

The First Sunday in Lent
March 6, 2022; Year C
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

In the parish that I served before this one, it was the practice for the Rector to sing the Great Litany at the beginning of the service. Now I was just the Assistant Rector, so I was off the hook until the Rector was called to another parish, and we got an Interim Rector. The week before Lent he looked at me and said, “Well I hope you are up to it, because nobody wants to hear me sing that whole thing.”

After that service one of our most faithful parishioners came up to me and said, “You know, the Great Litany almost prevented my marriage.” When I asked her how that was, she told me that when she and her husband had been dating for a while and saw it was getting serious, they decided that they had better visit each other’s churches. Who was going to win? The Episcopalians or the Presbyterians? She told me that her first Sunday at her beloved’s Episcopal Church was the first Sunday in Lent, and she was appalled by the length and the language of the Great Litany. It took her a long time to try us again. I think of her every year at this time and thank God that she gave the Episcopal Church a second chance!

Every Ash Wednesday, our choir rehearses the Great Litany, and I get to rehearse with them. [I truly missed this last year, and I am very grateful that we got to sing it again today.] And we do have some good laughs about the archaic language. It does seem that we have prayed for absolutely everything that there is to pray about in the whole world, doesn’t it? I did a little research on the form that we used this morning. The Great Litany was the first prayer that the English Church translated out of Latin and into the language of the people. It was first prayed in English in 1544, specifically for the intention of King Henry VIII who at the time was at war in Scotland and France.

Since 1544, the Great Litany has gone through many revisions—that’s right, what we prayed this morning is in UPDATED language! The Great Litany in English was preceded by more than a thousand years of sung and spoken litanies in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Litanies were sometimes sung in procession. Sometimes the rule was to kneel and sometimes to stand. And there were specific days set apart for the use of the Litany. Sometimes they were appointed in times of war. Sometimes the world was beset by plague and pestilence. Sound familiar? It wasn’t until our current *Book of Common Prayer*, approved in 1979, that the faithful were given the option to stand, kneel, or go in procession—and that the Litany was indicated as especially appropriate in Lent.

I don’t know if this liturgical history is interesting to anyone who is not truly a church geek. But I do have a point: the people of God love to pray. Oh, we protest that we are not sure how to pray, but we love to hear our own voices. And we don’t want any of our particular concerns or worries to escape God’s attention—we like to list them all, to make sure that we haven’t missed anything.

This morning, we are so privileged to meet together! However we define where we are in the ongoing pandemic, we are grateful that the hospitals are not overflowing with COVID patients. We can literally breathe a little easier, even if we are still cautiously

wearing masks when we cannot socially distance. And for the first Sunday in a long time, the temperatures are above freezing! And most of all, we are not at war. I am calling it a privilege, because of course, this is not true for all of God's children on this first Sunday in Lent. And our hearts go out to those battling disease in and out of hospitals, and those who are suffering under the ravages of climate disaster. And most of all on this day, our hearts go out to those in Ukraine and all of the other places in the world where armed conflict is killing innocents.

And so we pray. And we pray for every single circumstance of humanity we can think of. We pray for ourselves and we pray for others. We pray, trusting that God is God and we are not. And we pray in gratitude that we can be together and offer our thoughts and prayers beyond ourselves. I suggest that even if our feet hurt, and even if your rector goes flat, it is a privilege that we may pray together.

Jesus went out into the wilderness to pray. To be more precise—the Spirit led him into the wilderness. He did not have the privilege of a beautiful building. He gave up protection from the wilderness and proximity to a meal. Jesus' Great Litany lasted for 40 days and 40 nights—which is where we get the tradition of a Lenten season of 6 weeks. But Jesus paid attention to the Spirit's urging him to prayer. And Jesus paid attention to his human inclination to pray.

And what happened when it was over? Well, Jesus did not get an Easter feast. And he did not get a certificate for good attendance. No, following the 40 days of prayer, Jesus got a personal visit from the devil. He was tempted by the 3 things that we just spent all that time praying against.

Jesus was beset by the world, the flesh, and the devil. Jesus met a personal adversary who tempted him with visions of the known world, with comfort for his body, and with lies about who loved him more. The little story that we have in our Gospel today is so short that we might make the mistake of thinking that it was easy for Jesus—easy to pray and starve for weeks—easy to turn aside the temptation of the devil.

Jesus did stand fast against the temptation, but not because it was easy. He stood fast precisely because of those 40 days of prayer. Jesus prayed so hard and so long that he was famished and exhausted. But he was also completely clear about who he was and how deeply God cherished him. Because that is the thing about prayer. Although we love the sound of our own voices, and although we strain and struggle to be sure that we leave nothing out of our long list of prayers, the truth is that we do not pray to change God.

We pray because prayer changes us. Naming before God our desires for ourselves and others helps to pull us out of ourselves. Our prayers help us to focus on the needs and desires of all whom God loves. Our prayers help us to stand up and to take on the work of sharing God's love. And that is how the world will change from the nightmare it so often is to the dream that God has for us.