

May 3, 2020

*“Help, Thanks, Wow!”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

2 Chronicles 20 (Selected verses)

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As I was thinking about today’s sermon, I recalled one that I gave a couple of years ago that was based on a book by Anne Lamott entitled, *The Three Essential Prayers... Help, Thanks, Wow*. So simple, yet so profound, don't you think? Help, Thanks, Wow! And, given what we’re going through right now, I think it’s important to review and even expand on those three essential prayers. Because they embody, in just three little words that are sooo easy to remember, the basics of what prayer is all about: “Help, Thanks, and Wow.” But, they also embody much more. Like the amount of faith and trust in God that we really have. Like the level of love for God that we have. In fact, I think those three little words – help, thanks and wow, actually embody the way we should be thinking and conducting our very lives. Especially as we face the day to day challenges and changes we are experiencing during this time of the pandemic. So let's look again at these three essential prayers.

Well obviously the “Help” prayer is huge. Because, well, don’t we all need help sometimes? And it’s human nature, that when we feel helpless, we reach out to God for help. But you see, the problem is that in those times of trouble or need, we often come to God looking for his help in the completely wrong manner. We plead with God, or even demand from God an answer, our answer. Instead of just seeking God, who IS the answer. You see, the most important thing to remember about the “Help” prayer is that you first need to focus on God and not your issue. Because if you start with the Almighty, recognizing his power, his faithfulness, his compassion, then you can be assured he will ultimately either take you through your obstacle or maybe even remove it entirely. That's why I chose today's Scripture reading. Because King Jehoshaphat found himself in a crisis, face-to-face with trouble. A huge army was marching towards Jerusalem and his scouting reports didn't hold out much hope for him or his people. The consequences were going to be devastating. So, the Scripture tells us, Jehoshaphat went to the Lord for help. You see, Jehoshaphat didn’t look at his trouble, he looked through his trouble to God. Faced with an overwhelming crisis the king turned to the One who's never overwhelmed. And he lifts up a beautiful prayer of help that focuses first and foremost on God, acknowledging his greatness. Listen to what he said: “O Lord, you rule over all the kingdoms and nations. You are powerful and mighty; no one can stand against you. Whatever our calamity, we cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us. We are powerless against this menace that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you for help.” What incredible faith and trust this shows King Jehoshaphat had in God to take him through his crisis.

And the same should hold true for us. As we try to overcome the troubles in our own lives, like this virus, our prayers should begin by going to God first and foremost. It's heartbreaking that so many in our nation don't know the Lord and don't pray, but we certainly can. We can say for them and us, "Lord, you are the God who is all powerful. We know you are in charge. Hear us as we cry out in the midst of this pandemic. We admit we are powerless over this situation, yet we wish it to be resolved. We do not know what to do but our eyes are on you, looking for help." And now consider this – look at what happened after Jehoshaphat prayed his prayer. The Spirit of the Lord came down and said, "Do not be afraid! The battle is not yours, but God's. Do not be afraid or discouraged." And when go to God, we hear that same thing – "do not be afraid or discouraged." For you see, when we seek God first, we receive a power greater than ourselves, and greater than the challenges this world throws upon us. We receive the power of God through Jesus Christ who said, "Take heart, for I have overcome the world."

Now the second essential prayer is "Thanks." "Thanks." Why? Well, as I just said, when troubles come our way, it's our human nature to turn to God and look for his help. But, when it comes to his blessings, the opposite is very often true. His blessings are apt to make us turn elsewhere. Let me repeat that again: our troubles make us turn to God, his blessings are apt to make us turn elsewhere. And we've all probably turned elsewhere at one time or another, becoming inwardly focused, self-centered, even egotistical, or prideful. And the result is that we take so many of our blessings for granted. Yet thanks and gratitude for our blessings are a central message of the Bible. And shouldn't we want to give thanks to the One who has given us all things, everything, including our very lives? You see, gratitude keeps us humble and puts things in their proper perspective. Author Lamott puts it a lot more grittily. She says, "Gratitude, true thankfulness, makes me stop from becoming a jerk." And I like Pastor J. Ellsworth Kalas, who is much more pragmatic: "I am grateful for sunshine, because I've known the rain. I am grateful for friendship because I've experienced loneliness. I am grateful for laughter because of the many tears I've cried. I am grateful for my family because I know the emptiness of being on my own. I am grateful for each and every day I'm alive because I have seen death. I am grateful for all that I have because I realize I have enough." And I'm going to add my own: "I am grateful for living on Cape Cod where this virus is a relatively minor threat as compared to so many other places in our country. I am grateful that only one person in our church has caught this virus, and that she is on the road to recovery. I am grateful, that based on those I've spoken to, and I'm trying to reach out to all of you, that for the time being, we are all doing reasonably well emotionally. And I am

grateful for those generous parishioners who have given extra to my discretionary fund, so that I have been able to help those in need.” Yes, the second essential prayer is “Thanks.” Because giving thanks acknowledges God as the supreme giver of every good gift, and it says that we love him.

And the final essential prayer, is “Wow.” Now “Wow” is not so much a prayer as it is a rousing statement of affirmation. Like, we've all been given the gift of another day – Wow, God! In the midst of all the confusion and fear surrounding us with this pandemic, beautiful flowers are blooming, leaves are coming out, birds are singing – Wow! And there's more. Let me ask, have you ever experienced an unaccountable little nagging in the back of your mind that just wouldn't let you go? And you followed that urging, that nudging, doing what you could, and you found out it was a God-incident. A person had prayed, and suddenly you were in the right place at the right time to answer that prayer – Wow! Lord, you made that happen. Or, you followed that urging and something serendipitous happened to you, and in that moment you felt God's direct intervention and presence in your life. Wow! Or, perhaps you experienced a miracle. A healing that took place, a relationship restored, clarity for a decision, a special blessing was bestowed. Wow! Yes, I think we've all had our “Wow” moments, but during this Easter season we need to reflect on the greatest “Wow” of all time. And that is Almighty God's unconditional love for us by sending us his Son, Christ Jesus. Wow! And then Jesus' great sacrifice for you and me on the cross, assuring us the forgiveness of our sins. Wow! And then his triumphal resurrection from the dead, assuring us that we too now have the promise of eternal life in heaven. Wow! There's so much more... the Holy Spirit within us, our baptism as a child of God, God's unmerited and amazing grace given freely upon us. And today we celebrate Holy Communion, that encompasses all of this. For it where Jesus invites us to his table saying, “Remember me.” “Remember, that I am here in Galilee, in Falmouth, in your daily lives, offering you myself, to give you the strength, the guidance, the help you need to get through this life.” Wow! Wow! And amen!