

Pray Without Ceasing ZCC 4/5/2015

1 Samuel 12:19-24; Psalm 47; John 17:20-26; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20

I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them through your name which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are. 12 While I was with them in the world, I kept them in your name. Those whom you have given me I have kept. None of them is lost, except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. 13 But now I come to you, and I say these things in the world, that they may have my joy made full in themselves. 14 I have given them your word. The world hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 15 I pray not that you would take them from the world, but that you would keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world even as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in your truth. Your word is truth. ☆ 18 As you sent me into the world, even so I have sent them into the world. 19 For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. 20 Not for these only do I pray, but for those also who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that you sent me.

This may, at first blush, seem like an odd passage for Easter, but if you remember, I have been looking at the events more than the story. In this passage, we see one of the last things Jesus did was pray for his disciples.

Saint Paul calls us to be the kind of people who pray without ceasing. The world is a scary place. If you watched the extensive coverage of the attacks happening all over the world by ISIS, you know this is true.

The scriptures we will use today will verify the fearfulness of living in fallen creation and the fact that God knows of our struggles and is working to make us stronger and safer day by day.

There have long been wars and conflicts around the world and those will continue to the very end. In any country which values freedom and liberty and justice for themselves as well as others—there will always be conflicts and loss of lives as those people seek that freedom.

For the people of God, there will always be persecution of one kind or another.

You and I, the people of God have both a privileged and a responsibility to seek God's will and to seek his face. We will not always get it right. Sometimes we have and will find ourselves at odds with God as we seek to be comfortable with what we see in our world around us.

In 1 Samuel 12:19-24, the people realize that they have gone against God's will by asking for a king.

All the people said to Samuel, "Pray for your servants to Yahweh your God, that we not die; for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for a king." Samuel said to the people, "Don't be afraid. You have indeed done all this evil; yet don't turn away from following Yahweh, but serve Yahweh with all your heart. Don't turn away to go after vain things which can't profit or deliver, for they are vain. For Yahweh will not forsake his people for his great name's sake, because it has pleased Yahweh to make you a people for himself. Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against Yahweh in ceasing to pray for you: but I will instruct you in the good and the right way. Only fear Yahweh, and serve him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you. But if you keep doing evil, you will be consumed, both you and your king."

They wanted a king. Everyone else had kings. Just as we tend to do today, the people believed they needed to have what every one else had to survive in a dangerous world.

They did not realize that they already had the one thing all the other nations lacked: the love and mercy of God. How tender a scene is the one just read in which Samuel, who had argued forcefully with the people NOT to get a king, now reassures them that as long as they will serve the Lord with all their heart and not chase after vain things, the Lord will not abandon them despite their foolish decision to "keep up with the Joneses" by choosing a king.

God hears prayer.

Then, in John's Gospel—the passage I read earlier—from the Farewell Discourse at the Last Supper, the last thing Jesus does before going to his death and resurrection is to pray for the Disciples. And not for them only, but for all who believe in him "through their word."

That is, the last thing Jesus does is pray for us. He prays that we might remember that God loves us as much as God loves Jesus, God's only son.

Jesus prays this prayer because he knows the Disciples live in a dangerous place. And that the life of the church will be a life lived facing dangerous and scary situations. Again, living in this fallen creation is the same as living in a spiritual (and sometimes physical) war-zone.

Everything fits together when you pair this Gospel prayer of Jesus with the last fervent prayer petition of all of scripture in the Revelation of John.

From The Revelation of John, chapter 22: "Behold, I come quickly. My reward is with me, to repay to each man according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Blessed are those who do his commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter in by the gates into the city. I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify these things to you for the assemblies. I am the root and the offspring of David; the Bright and Morning Star." The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" He who hears, let him say, "Come!" He who is thirsty, let him come. He who desires, let him take the water of life freely. I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book, if anyone adds to them, may God add to him the plagues which are written in this book. He who testifies these things says, "Yes, I come quickly."

These final words of Scripture from Revelation, in which Jesus assures us that he is coming soon, and will repay every one for what we have done for the life of God's kingdom.

Those words are also addressed to a people of God who find themselves in moments of great tribulation at the hands of the Roman Empire.

These final words are meant to convey tremendous hope; hope sufficient to sustain us through to that time of God's consummation of all in all, that end of time, when we and the whole world will be swamped by gifts of love from a loving God who promises, all the way back to the time of Saul, to stay with us, even when we go against God's will and desire for us.

Christians, you and I were birthed in a miracle when we came into this world. We were birthed in an even more awesome miracle when we were re-born or born into the kingdom of God. We were birthed in miracle and are headed for an eternal life with God.

In the mean time, we are here. The events in the daily news give evidence of just how scary the world can be.

The events reported in the news and our own experiences should be enough to remind us of the tremendous price paid periodically—even recently—with the lives of our fellow countrymen and women to sustain some sense of justice and peace in this world, a world fallen from the grace of God.

We will see military parades this summer—Memorial Day and Independence day. There is a strong contrast between the wrinkles and halting steps of those who gave of themselves in wars of years gone by and those who are more-or-less new recruits. Each of them will also represent those who did not survive and who live on in our memories.

Each generation of Americans faces its own challenges to freedom and justice. This latest generation certainly faces these challenges in a new world and in a situation no one has ever seen before.

In the face of all that went on before in all that is going on now, Samuel, Jesus, and John of Patmos all offer prayers. Prayers of hope and strength to survive the battles of this world. Prayers and visions of victory and ultimate unity with God in Christ, all in all, Alpha and Omega.

Alpha and Omega—the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The alphabet from which all words can be made to describe all things and every one in creation: the beginning and the end.

"I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they all may be one."

It is a remarkable world we have been given. It is a remarkable prayer Jesus prays.

On the good days and the bad, in war and peace, when life soars and when death threatens—we are to remember that one of the very last things Jesus did was pray for us. He is praying for us still. He is the one person in all of history who we know prays without ceasing.

We need to remember that just as importantly as we need to remember those faithful who in the days gone by ventured much for the liberties and for the Gospel we now enjoy—as they say, “nothing ventured, nothing gained...” and as we sit here today, celebrating their lives and celebrating God’s love for us, it is—in part—because they ventured from their homes and their lives.

Because of their commitment and their selflessness, we can worship the one who imparts true liberty, true peace, and total freedom from the shackles of death.

Just as certainly as John the great Dreamer of Patmos reminds us and calls us to do, we are to pray to him who prays for us—praying for his return and for our reunion with him.

If we can remember no other verse of Scripture, we are to remember the last prayer petition of the entire Bible: “Come, Lord Jesus!”

We need him to come and be with us as we sort through the good days and the bad days. We need him to come through us in all that we say and all that we do so that, as he prays, others might believe through our word.

Come, Lord Jesus, that we might be closer to God, closer to others and closer even to our selves.

That we might know that the love of God made flesh and blood in Jesus is a sign for us to know how much God loves us all. And how much God loves our neighbors: those who are different from us, those who are alien and strangers to us.

Thou hast loved them even as thou hast loved me! Come, Lord Jesus and let me know that love and freely give that love to others.

In Psalm 47, it says, “Clap your hands, all you peoples, shout to God with a cry of Joy! Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises will all your skill!”

Celebrate God’s love. Pray without ceasing.

Those who can live and sing and dance this truth have nothing to fear, no matter how dangerous and scary a place this might be. Because the day is coming, and now is, says the Lord, when all the nations will know the glory and love of God.

As we pray for Jesus’ return, even now he prays for us.

We serve a risen Savior—one who prayed for us in the past and who continues to pray for us even now. As we celebrate the lives and the deaths of those who selflessly sought to preserve our lives and our way of life—let’s also seek the face and the direction and the protection of the one who came to this world to preserve the eternal lives and the eternal liberty of those who call on him.

Revelation 22:17, 20: “And the Spirit and the Bride, say Come. And he that thirsts, let him come and take the water of life freely.” “He who testifies to these things says, Yes: I come quickly.” To which the people of God say, “Amen: come quickly, Lord Jesus.”