

### THEME VERSE

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer (Psalm 19:14).*

### OPENING HYMN

“When Long before Time”  
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 861)

### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, we come before you with our voices, aware that you also hear voices of those whom we will never meet, never hear—and perhaps we do not hear them although they are right before us. Grant us your presence here, so that we may add our praise to theirs, add our laments to theirs, add our voices to theirs. May we also hear your voice. We give you thanks that our brokenness is not a barrier to relationship with you. We ask that you remind us of both your higher intentions for us and your promise that no matter what, you love us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

# Let us pray

Session two: The practices of prayer  
BY ANNA MADSEN

Jesus taught us how to pray by way of the Lord’s Prayer. But in Scripture and in the Christian tradition, people of faith have developed a wide variety of ways to come before God. In this session, we’ll look at different reasons and ways to pray, what each might offer and how knowing an array of prayer styles can enrich our devotional life.

### 📖 Read: Psalm 19

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.*

*In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes out like a bridegroom from his  
wedding canopy, and like a strong man  
runs its course with joy.  
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them;  
and nothing is hid from its heat.*

*The law of the Lord is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the Lord are sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the Lord are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is clear,*

*enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the Lord is pure,  
enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true  
and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey,  
and drippings of the honeycomb.*

*Moreover by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.  
But who can detect their errors?  
Clear me from hidden faults.  
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;  
do not let them have dominion over me.  
Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation  
of my heart be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

## INTRODUCTION

Many of us have heard the last verse of Psalm 19 spoken before a pastor preaches in worship: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

In fact, these beloved words originally were not an isolated prayer, but rather the closing of a longer hymn.

The author C.S. Lewis called this hymn, Psalm 19, “the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.”

By majestically weaving images that are typically considered to be opposites (heaven and earth; day and night; silence and voice; the justice and goodness of God and the fear that one falls short of pleasing God), the psalm praises God who speaks through nature and knowledge. It becomes a trifecta-hymn

of praise, dedication and trust. For us, it might even serve as a springboard for venturing into new forms of prayer and seeing prayer as possible in new ways.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PRAY?

📖 **Read:** Psalm 19:14

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation  
of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my  
rock and my redeemer.*

### Share aloud or reflect:

1. Is there a right way to pray?
2. Conversely, is there a *wrong* way to pray?
3. For that matter, what even *counts* as prayer?

When it comes to what it means to pray, even the disciples aren’t clear—or, at least, they aren’t clear about how Jesus understands prayer, and therefore how they, as his followers, should too. In Luke 11, for example, they said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray!”

It’s important to note that Jesus’ disciples asked this question in large part because every rabbi had a distinguishing prayer that revealed not only the rabbi’s agenda, but the rabbi’s understanding of *God’s* agenda.

Then, as now, it seems that in its most basic understanding, prayer is a communication conduit between a person and God.

That’s a basic take.

But prayer can confound even the most faithful of people.

Google helps make the point. A search of “How to pray” gives a person links to countless webpages, even including pages of check-off lists like: “Five Tips to Pray,” “Six Tips to Pray,” and “Nine Tips to Pray.”

(As an aside, I did not take time to see if these tips overlapped from one numbered list to another or if there are a sum total of 20 prayer tips that can be found in just the first page of Google hits!)

As it turns out, some people don't seem to need these tips. For example, my late husband was an excellent pray-er, particularly in public situations. I, on the other hand, was (and am) not, and happily deferred to him. Every. Single. Time. (In return, I promised to help him with his sermon prep, which was not particularly *his* long, strong suit, so it all worked out, professionally *and* personally!)

The closing verse to Psalm 19, which is the foundational text for this Bible study, may come in as a handy occasion for grace and freedom, as we—those of us who pray easily and naturally, and those of us who don't—think through the act of prayer.

It's fair to say that Psalm 19:14 is the culmination not just of this psalm but of the writer's understanding of both God and humanity. In it, the psalmist trusts God enough to come before God with a prayer. Given the era of kingship in which the psalm was written, the act of addressing a ruler, let alone God, was truly courageous, if not audacious.

That isn't to say that the hymn writer felt like a BFF (or "best friend forever") toward God; quite the contrary is true. The last verse expresses nothing but humility before the Creator.

Humility mixed with confidence might be a way of understanding these words and a broad approach to thinking through prayer.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

4. Do you remember being taught to pray? Who taught you? How did this person or people teach you to pray?
5. Do you pray in the same way yet today, or do you pray in a different way? Do you vary your prayer life?

6. Does your notion of who God is affect your style of prayer or when you pray?

#### **PRAYER IS AN ACT OF PRAISE**

📖 **Read:** Psalm 19:1-6

*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*

*Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.*

*There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;*

*yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

*In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,*

*which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.*

*Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.*

The religious groups surrounding the Israelites tended to believe that natural elements were gods: there was the god of the waters (Nammu) who created the sky (An) and the earth (Ki). The gods, then, often took the form of natural elements: sun, sea and earth, for example.

Knowing this, one can read Genesis 1 in a new way: Rather than depicting ancient Israel *worshipping* the sun and the sea and the earth as its neighbors did, this story asserts that God *made* the sun and the sea and the earth.

That's a big difference.

Ancient Israelites didn't worship nature: They worshipped God who *made* nature.

With enough imagination, one can almost hear the writer of Genesis saying to the polytheist at the neighborhood BBQ, "Oh yeah? Well, our God *made* your gods!"

The impact and import of this differing theological take can't be overestimated—and can't be completely unpacked in this session. However, for our purposes, it's clear that in the Israelite tradition, straight from the get-go, creation and all things in it are believed to be *made* by God (as opposed to *being* God).

In the same way, the psalmist begins this psalm by saying that the sky and the earth—*not* God, but *created* by God—relay the wonder of God even beyond human perception.

Even the earth and the sky and the sun, themselves inanimate, cannot contain their gratitude and praise; they are animated by love for God.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. When you feel compelled to praise God, what moves you?
8. Do you find yourself more often praying spontaneously or at a regular time? Why?
9. Does nature inspire you to prayer? Does it inspire you to pray differently than you would in a church or at home?

**PRAYER IS AN ACT OF ORIENTATION**

📖 **Read:** Psalm 19: 7-11

*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;*

*the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;*

*the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.*

*More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.*

*Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

The word "cacophony" comes from a Greek word, *kakophonia*, which means "harsh sound." In English, it still carries that sense, but also the impression of a lot of different sounds that together make for discord.

Often, the moment we open our eyes, our ears—and, I believe, our spirits—we are greeted by cacophony. Tweets, texts, email, Facebook posts, tasks, phone calls—but also guilt, regret and grief, as well as hopes, goals and vocational calls—all clamor for our attention.

The verses of Psalm 19 seem to invite us to still these sounds.

In contrast to everything else that is imperfect, depleting, unsure and unwise; wrong, discouraging, cloudy and obscuring; impure, momentary, false and wicked, you can count on God to orient you to that which is just and worthy of your trust.

All sorts of metaphors can be used to make an analogy. For example, prayer can be a laser beam in a cloud, a loud voice through a din, a locator ping for a lost device.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

10. What are competing claims in your world?

11. How do you find prayer to re-claim your attention, your priorities, yourself?

#### PRAYER IS AN ACT OF TRUST

📖 **Read:** Psalm 19:12

*But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.*

This verse is reminiscent of a passage from Martin Luther's favorite psalm, Psalm 130: "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?"

In both texts, the psalmist comes before God in complete humility.

The author is fully aware that one can neither comprehend one's own sinfulness, nor God's majesty.

Perhaps we can grasp the awe when we imagine being allowed to speak with one whom we admire. I have an image of Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man, all of whom were bold as bold can be...until they found themselves before the Great Oz, when they buckled in fear!

Even so, however, the psalmist engages God.

Perhaps these verses invite us to be reminded of the awe-someness of God.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard writes in *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (Harper & Row, 1982) that it's "madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

In this passage, Dillard tries to invoke something of the psalmist's awe. We have the audacity to come before God. The word "audacity" comes from Latin meaning bold, rash and foolhardy!

True though that might be, still the psalmist (and we) humbly-yet-audaciously come before God in prayer because we trust that even though God *could* smite us, God doesn't.

#### Share aloud or reflect:

12. How does your image of God shape your prayer to God?
13. Do you think that we have become too familiar with God?
14. How does one's prayer change because of the space in which one prays? For example, would you pray differently in a gothic cathedral, a wood-frame church on the prairie, around a campfire, at the table, beside your bed?

#### PRAYER IS AN ACT OF LAMENT

📖 **Read (yes, once again):** Psalm 19:14

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Half of my vocation as a freelance theologian is dedicated to my work at OMG: Center for Theological Conversation. I'm often asked what "OMG" stands for, and when I answer, not all people are pleased!

OMG stands for exactly what it does anyplace else: Oh My God. The thing of it is, that phrase is used all the time in Scripture in very different, yet very holy ways: as praise, as a question, as affirmation and as lament.

After an accident killed my husband and gave my son a brain injury, I "got" lament. I'd *studied* it before, but I finally, experientially, "got" it, just as I suddenly "got" another form of biblical writing called apocalyptic writing. In each of these forms of prayer, people pray to God with grief, with hopelessness, with despair and even with anger.

It's not too often that we find room for such prayer in public worship, but I suspect that it is often expressed in private.

Some might feel as if this form of prayer is an act of un-faith, and even of disrespect toward God.

Others, however, and certainly many biblical writers, felt that such prayer is just the opposite—an act of vibrant, radical faith.

This psalmist doesn't engage in lament, exactly, but nonetheless, the last verse reveals radical trust after an expression not only of praise and humility, but of fear.

It's as if the psalmist says to God, "I come before you aware of my lack of trust and my disbelief. See in that my trust and my belief, for I still come before you."

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

15. Lament prayers tend to be heard in church during Lent. There is no one season, however, for lament. Would you like to see room for lament during other times of the church year in corporate worship?
16. How do you feel about expressing anger and despair toward God? Is it, in your mind, an act of faith or of unfaith?
17. Are there people or places with whom or where you feel more comfortable lamenting? Why?

#### **CONCLUSION**

Just as life is not one-dimensional, neither is prayer. The variety of life's experiences can stir within us different reasons to pray and different ways to pray. In the same vein, one person's favored forms of prayer may not be another person's. Our text gives us a range of experiences of God and reasons for communication with God. It culminates in a final

verse of hope that no matter the reason for prayer or the manner of prayer, God will listen and attend.

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Gracious God, you are with us in all of our moments. In them we experience the range of hope and despair; joy and grief; confusion and clarity; community and loneliness; faithfulness and sinfulness; trust and uncertainty. Give us the confidence to come before you in prayer in trust and transparency, lead us to avenues of connection with you that bring us closer to you and bring us closer to your will for us. In your name we pray. Amen.

#### **CLOSING HYMN**

"Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright" (*ELW* 745)

#### **OPTIONAL CLOSING ACTIVITY**

See leader guide. 🌿

## SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To understand the reasons why we pray; the way we pray; when, where and to whom we pray; and how practices of prayer can enrich our lives.
- To create different objects that may encourage prayer life in a variety of ways.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals
- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- For the optional labyrinth activity in this guide: Crocheted labyrinth designs found online, one yarn skein and one crochet hook for each participant, or (for the fabric labyrinth) sharpies, felt or heavy fabric, heavy yarn, fabric glue, labyrinth designs found online.
- For the optional coloring activity: 1 package of white index cards (unlined), color markers or colorful pencils.
- For the optional prayer stone or incense necklace in this guide: cookie sheet, permanent marker, craft clay (or craft pebbles), small cutters in various sizes (bottle caps, rings, small cookie cutters), rollers with patterns, leather straps, cocktail straws; felt or other heavy fabric, heavy yarn, fabric glue.

# Let us pray

Session two: The practices of prayer

BY ANNA MADSEN

## TOPIC ONE: A LIFE OF CONSTANT PRAYER

📖 **Read:** Psalm 141:2

*Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.*

The senses have been a powerful element of prayer life, across religious belief systems. This well-known passage from various liturgies is taken from Psalm 141.

In congregations where incense is used, some worshipers find that its presence by way of smoke and fragrance saturates the worship space (and the senses) with the inescapable reminder of God's presence. However, it is important to be aware that many people today have fragrance allergies, asthma or other conditions that keep incense from being an option.

Churches often use visual art to create a devotional, calming environment for prayer. This can be seen in the use of stained glass, wall hangings, banners, icons, paintings, sculptures, calligraphy and any number of artistic installations in the worship space. A number of churches also engage the senses with liturgical dance, a walkable prayer labyrinth or other interactive artistic activities.

One cannot be chronically in a state of prayer: Work does need to be done, groceries do have to be bought, clothes do need to be washed, relationships do need intentional time.

However, sometimes a simple reminder of one's constant dependence on God can give us pause for a short prayer of gratitude.

For women in your Bible study group, this study might give an opening for conversation about com-

peting claims on their lives, obstacles to prayer and even guilt about a lack of prayer.

This time together offers opportunity for support, consolation, encouragement, and, of course, prayer for specific needs and concerns. Take that time to pray together as needed—actually praying together is, after all, the most important part of our study.

### TOPIC TWO: PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER

The author Annie Dillard shares in *Holy the Firm* (Harper & Row, 1977) that the pastor at a church she attended shocked the congregation when he stopped in the middle of praying for world leaders, grieving people and those who are oppressed, and “burst out, ‘Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week,’” she said. “...Because of this, I like him very much.”

This passage reveals what many people, even in your group, might feel about prayer. We pray and pray and pray. Yet still the world suffers injustices, still people remain sick or die, still despair exists.

As a leader, realize that this hour might give an opportunity for expression of some justified cynicism about prayer.

There is tension here even about corporate prayer: There is a risk that the Prayers of the People can be a passive “Announcement to the People”—a way of addressing a message to the community rather than to God.

By the same token, God doesn’t act without the involvement of God’s people. God is, in a sense, dependent on our actions to bring about some change. For example, we can pray about poverty, but until unjust laws and systems are changed or people donate money, food and clothing, people will still be poor.

This study might provide an opportunity about how prayer “works.” To what degree is public prayer (or should it be) a way of re-grounding and therefore mobilizing the people of God to do the work of God?

### OPTIONAL CLOSING ACTIVITIES (CHOOSE ONE)

#### Labyrinth

Using a design for a labyrinth online ([gathermagazine.org/fingerlab/](http://gathermagazine.org/fingerlab/)), have participants create their own small labyrinth by either sewing, crocheting or simply cutting out a circle of fabric as big around as your hand, and tracing a pattern on which to glue a complementary shade of yarn.

#### Coloring prayers

Give each participant a plain white index card, colorful markers, pencils and pens. Ask each to write in large letters one or two words of gratitude or supplication to God. Then ask them to color a background around the words, using color markers or pencils. Add stripes, polka-dots, swirls, cross-hatches, etc. Make sure your words are still legible. Place the card where you will see it every day, and let it remind you to pray.

#### Incense necklaces or prayer stones

Ask each participant to roll, cut or form a small piece of baking clay into a shape suitable either for a necklace or a pocket stone. (Note: For necklaces, use a cocktail straw to make a hole in the stone prior to baking.)

Bake designs on a cookie sheet, according to the directions on the package of clay.

After the stone cools, use a permanent marker to write a meaningful message on the stone.

For the necklaces, if participants are not sensitive to fragrances or oils, they can place small drops of essential oils on top of the stone every day or so at home, as a reminder to “let my prayer be counted as incense before you.” 🌿