#### **OPENING PRAYERFUL HYMN**

"Breathe On Us, Breath of God" (ACS 941) or "O Living Breath of God" (ELW 407)

#### **MATERIALS NEEDED**

- Bibles (NRSV)
- Hymnals (All Creation Sings, Evangelical Lutheran Worship)
- (option 1) A rosary or beading supplies that include:
  - 12" stretchy beading cord or 20" waxed beading thread per person,
  - 12-20 assorted beads per person (have extras, just in case beads roll away or can't be threaded).
  - Cross charms (or a slightly larger wooden bead on which you can draw a small cross with a permanent marker) for each participant
  - Scissors
  - Masking tape
  - Note: 1. Make sure the bead holes are large enough (and complete) so that the cord can easily pass through. 2. Purchase enough supplies for each participant. Or consider purchasing double the supplies needed, so that participants can also make one for a friend.

# Now let us pray

# Session one

Praying with our bodies

BY LIV LARSON ANDREWS

#### INTRODUCTION

Underneath the city of Rome, there are miles of catacombs. Early Christians were buried and sometimes held funeral banquets here. The tomb of Priscilla, a wealthy woman of faith, is adorned with frescoes depicting both her life and stories from the Bible. The central image is of her risen self—body and soul—with her arms raised in prayer. Along the wall, three men in the fiery furnace (see Daniel 3 in your Bible) are depicted, posing in the same way with arms raised in prayer. This same posture of prayer is embodied by many presiding ministers at the Eucharistic table.

As Christians, we look to scripture as the central story of our faith. We can also look to Scripture as a guide for praying—even if we carry some baggage or heavy questions around prayer. For example: Am I doing it "right?" Do I pray enough? Is prayer always with words? We'll explore such questions, as well as ways that the Bible can help us to pray with our bodies and with the body of Earth.

Our ancestors looked to this biblical story for encouragement and to imagine how their own bodies would experience the great mystery of the resurrection. In Daniel 3, three servants held captive for their faith are somehow unharmed by the emperor's furnace. They pray and praise God right from the heart of the flames. Even then, we are not alone. We can always communicate with God. In this session, we will journey with the Apostle Paul, Mary, the Psalms, and more, to learn about embodied practices of prayer.

#### **BODIES MADE FOR PRAYER**

Books by authors such as Bessel van der Kolk (The

Body Keeps the Score) and Resmaa Menakem (My Grandmother's Hands) share research and learnings about the way trauma lives in the body, as well as how healing begins in the body. We also read about the body in 1 Corinthians 12, where the apostle Paul speaks of the human body as a central metaphor about Christian community. And Jesus himself describes the offering of God's own self for our restoration, when he declares: "This is my body, given for you."

The body also keeps the score when it comes to prayer, except this score is one of music, one about the ongoing song of creation inside each of us. Made in God's image, our bodies remind us that we are made for prayer. We are made for fellowship with God and each other through prayer of many kinds—breathing, singing, standing, kneeling, pleading, shouting, and even silent prayers. In this session, we'll explore three bodily practices of prayer that keep the score within and between us. These prayers, which are based in breathing, prayer with beads such as a rosary, and prayers of intercession in different postures, will help us access and experience the music that the Spirit is continually composing within and among us. We are made for prayer—prayer deep in our bodies and prayer among us as the Body of Christ.

# PRAYING AND BREATHING

Read: Romans 8:26

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words."

"What, now, will we do with our breath?" This question, painted on a cardboard sign in the window of a house, called out to my friend as she walked through her neighborhood in the spring of 2020. To stop the spread of COVID-19, much of the world was "shut down"—altering our daily rhythms. Yet our bodies didn't shut down. And our prayers didn't stop. If anything, our prayers often sharpened, lengthened

and deepened. When we couldn't find words to pray, we kept breathing.

But that's just it: some did not keep breathing. We became painfully familiar with how deadly our own breath can be when it carries pathogens in its particles. Suddenly, singing—the music we make with our breath—was risky behavior. And: my friend saw the cardboard sign that read, "What, now, will we do with our breath?" just weeks after the violent death of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement, during which he also spoke about breathing, pleading: "I can't breathe." Groans continue to rise up from our bodies, from the earth, over violence and injustice. The legacy of our grief is compounded as anxiety cranks up, all around us—anxiety that can often cause shortness of breath. We can be literally cut off from our own breath.

Together, as a group, take three cleansing breaths. Notice your body. Give thanks for breathing. Scripture tells us that the prophet Ezekiel was given an image of a vast multitude rising to its feet... but without breath. I can't help but also think of the Apostle Paul who, whether or not he experienced shallow breathing, seems well acquainted with anxiety and fear. Paul also knows about the healing power of the Spirit in our bodies. Let's read parts of Romans 8 and Ezekiel 37 to consider how breath can be a path to—and a form of—prayer. Because the Spirit meets us in our breathing (and our groaning), we can pray with our breath.

# Share aloud or reflect:

 Think about the last time you noticed that you were out of breath or breathing shallowly. What were the circumstances? If you feel comfortable doing so, briefly share what happened with your group.

**Read:** Romans 8:26-27

Read this passage aloud three times. (Or consider asking three different people to each read it once.)

- What kind of help do you seek or desire from the Spirit? What images come to mind when you imagine the Spirit helping you?
- 3. Consider what you, as a child, were taught or learned about the concept of weakness. Were those lessons gendered in any way? Can you remember a time when you were given permission to be weak?
- 4. Write down messages about weakness that you wish to let go of. Or, as a group, compose a prayer of lament about these ideas, releasing them to the Spirit.
- 5. (Optional) Try sitting in a circle together and sighing or groaning for a minute or two. What thoughts or emotions or feelings surface? Open your hands and pray about some of these thoughts, emotions or feelings. After the prayer, pause and listen to your heartbeat.

God searches our hearts. Held in God's love, we can search our hearts as well. Prayers can be faint heartbeats or hopes tucked deeply in the inner caverns of our soul. Sometimes we might be unaware of those prayers within our hearts. When we sit in silence, with others or alone, we can listen to God and let our hearts speak back.

Does the idea of God searching you seem as if this might be a punitive or disciplinary search, akin to a divine patrolling of your heart for purity? Swimming in a patriarchal culture, we can fall into the trap of viewing God as only a standard-holder or disciplinarian. Yet when I was little, I would play joy-filled games of hide-and-seek with my mother. I would pick a hiding spot and eagerly wait for her to find me. Once she did, I would burst into giggles and shriek in delight. What if God's searching, described in Romans 8, is

more like that of a playful parent who seeks communion with their child? Does this change your image of how God's Spirit seeks and intercedes for us?

# **Read:** Ezekiel 37:1-10

Count the number of times breath is referenced in these ten verses. Did you notice that this scene begins with the guidance of the Spirit? Because the word used in the Hebrew Scriptures is "Ruah," meaning both spirit and breath, there is a continual play of meanings in Ezekiel's vision. The Spirit brings Ezekiel into a barren, dry valley. Valleys are often home to streams or other water sources. Not here. This valley is a graveyard. God's people have suffered. Their hope and identity are breathless in this desolate place. God's servant, the prophet, is sent to command breath to enter their bodies once again and bring new life.

My spiritual director once told me, at the beginning of a meeting, "You were shallow breathing when you got here." She didn't say I was out of breath. She noticed my shallow breathing—the opposite of deep breathing. Breathing is a bodily act. It happens both unconsciously (when we are sleeping or running around stressed) and consciously (when we use deep breaths to calm ourselves). We can sync our breathing with others, like a choir does when singing. We can hold our breath. We also experience how our bodies suffer when we do not breathe properly. Breathing is a way that we are wonderfully made, thanks be to God.

Try breathing with intention, while counting a 4-9-6 rhythm. Breathe in to a count of four; hold to a count of nine; and breathe out to a count of six, taking extra care to really push all the air out. What's wild is that we're actually keeping stagnant air inside our lungs when we don't fully exhale! However, if this is a totally new practice, take it slowly. What changes do you notice after several rounds of breathing this way?

Then there's the "ocean" breath, popular with some yoga practitioners for its ability to calm the nerves. Breathe in through your nose. Then breathe out through your mouth or nose, but as you do so, constrict your throat as you would if you were fogging up a mirror. Some say this makes you sound like a baby snoring! Just that added bit of constriction intensifies the breathing and calms you down. Isn't breathing amazing?

#### **Read:** Romans 8:26-27

Read these two verses once more. Remember how breath came into the multitude in Ezekiel's valley, and they stood on their feet? In Romans 8, Paul offers us a reminder that this same Spirit intercedes for the saints. We give thanks that we are both sinner and saint—given permission to be weak and given power to be strong. Between Paul and Ezekiel, we can see a vision of the communion of saints. We, too, are part of this multitude of breathing, Spirit-filled bodies interceding together.

# **PRAYING WITH A ROSARY**

There is no secret handshake. Just take my hand. In their book, *The Way of the Rose*, Clark Strand and Perdita Finn write of their belief that they received this encouraging message from Mary, the mother of Jesus. Strand and Finn present themselves as unlikely practitioners of the rosary, a path into prayer used by Roman Catholics and others.

My midwestern-raised Protestant soul needed this kind of invitation into prayer. Even as a lifelong Lutheran steeped in the theology of grace, I can be easily snared by messages that I just need to pray "more" or "correctly" or even "sincerely." Well, I can barely make a grocery list that's sincere and correct, let alone talk to God "correctly"! Enter the deeply human rosary, which helps people to pray many times a day or simply let the beads slip through their fingers, quieting the mind. Why does it work? In the words of Strand and Finn, "The shallow is the deep" (*The Way of the Rose*, p. 66) No expertise is needed. You simply pray with a rosary, letting God—and Mary—speak to you.

Unlike shallow breathing, the "shallow" here is the deep, simple beauty of the rosary.

# **Read:** Luke 1:39-45

Read the passage aloud three times. (Or consider asking one person to be the narrator and another person to read the words of Elizabeth. In reading this passage, I've wondered: Were Mary and Elizabeth prayer partners in addition to being cousins? How did Mary pray as she walked through the hill country to her cousin's home?

# Share aloud or reflect:

6. What do you wonder about this scene?

Filled with the Holy Spirit (the Spirit is present again!), Elizabeth exclaims a blessing. This blessing forms the first half of a Hail Mary prayer, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus." This blessing, spoken by a woman about another woman, is one of the most famous and frequently spoken prayers in human history.

#### Share aloud or reflect:

7. Have you ever witnessed prayer that takes the form of exclamation? Have you ever prayed that way?

Try speaking aloud Elizabeth's blessing, which comprises the first half of the traditional Roman Catholic "Hail Mary," and is the portion that Martin Luther himself prayed.

- How does it feel to say: "Hail Mary, full of grace. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."
- **Read:** Luke 1:46-56

Elizabeth's blessing flows into Mary's Magnificat—her song of prayer. We get the term Magnificat from the first word of Mary's song of prayer in Latin. It's patterned on the prayer song of another woman, Hannah, (1 Samuel 2) who gives thanks and declares the greatness of God. In the Magnificat, Mary's words are as much proclamation as prayer. Her words are also prophecy, declaring that this is how God will act, again, bringing God's just, loving reign into being through Jesus.

(Optional activity) Use a rosary or make a Magnificat prayer bracelet/bookmark

Using a rosary or a prayer bracelet or a prayer bookmark, say a verse of the Magnificat as you touch each bead. End with "Amen." Repeat as many times as you like. (What would a string of prayer beads based on the Magnificat be like? See Session 1 Leader Guide for the optional DIY prayer bracelet or prayer bookmark activity.)

#### **POSTURES OF PRAYER**

Context matters for prayer. Our surroundings and experiences can shape the ways we listen to and call out to God. For example, let's look at one character in scripture with a truly unique context in which his prayers rose up to God—Jonah. Jonah, a.k.a. God's grumpy servant, chooses to flee from his difficult calling, finds himself storm-tossed at sea, gets thrown overboard, gets swallowed by a giant fish or whale, and then is finally delivered to shore after being spat up by that giant sea creature. We are told: "Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish."

# Share aloud or reflect:

What is the strangest setting in which you have called out to God? What do you remember about this experience? Share with your group or write in a journal. We aren't told much more about Jonah's body or his position as he was praying. We don't know if he was standing, kneeling or lifting up his hands. But his prayer of thanksgiving describes going to the very depths of fear and despair as a physical movement through space. "I went down to the land whose bars closed on me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit," Jonah says in his prayer.

In intercessory prayer, we can take many different postures. In other words, we move our bodies as we bring our intercessions, supplications, thanksgivings, deep desires and innermost needs to God. Moving our bodies can help us bring our prayer intercessions forward. So, with inspiration from the psalms, let's try some different postures for prayer. We can learn from our bodies about how the Spirit moves. We'll read three psalms in a row for embodied intercessory prayer: Psalms 130, 131 and 132.

A friend of mine was once very ill. While visiting him in the hospital, his pastor asked if he would like prayer or to have a scripture read to him. My friend was so debilitated that all he could do was to raise one hand and gesture three numbers: one finger, then three fingers, then a circle meaning zero. He wanted to hear Psalm 130.

# Read: Psalm 130

Read the psalm aloud, taking turns as you read these verses. Remember how Jonah spoke of his life descending to the Pit and how God's presence raised him up to life again? If God kept close watch over sins, the psalmist asks, "Who could stand?"

Held fast in God's mercy, we can stand. We do stand.

#### Share aloud or reflect:

10. When have you or someone you love been in the depths?

Pray Psalm 130 again, this time while moving. Begin seated. Stand up (or if you have mobility issues, raise your hands or gradually raise your voice) at your own pace, while speaking the first two verses out loud.

#### Share aloud or reflect:

11. What changed for you as you experienced this prayer in your body? How does it feel to stand (or raise your hands or voice) while praying?

# Read: Psalm 131 silently

In this age of constant stimulation, Psalm 131 invites us into stillness. Sometimes prayer is vocal and active. But prayer can also be quiet. The psalmist writes: "I still my soul and make it quiet." What does that look like for you? For my part, I dislike being "shushed." I don't think "shushing" is what the psalmist has in mind. Quieting my spirit seems more like pressing pause on the hamster wheel of my constantly spinning thoughts and concerns. It's easy to picture the child who has just finished nursing, who is fully content and at rest.

# Share aloud or reflect:

12. What could it mean that God is a nursing mother and we are at rest on God's body? How does it feel to imagine this?

Now sit with one hand over your heart. Together, softly pray this phrase aloud: "Still my soul and make it quiet." Repeat the phrase several times.

13. If you are doing this study with a group, what does it feel like to share silent prayer? How might your group members help each other embrace the practice of keeping silence as prayer?

14. In what ways might you practice silence as prayer in your daily life?

Psalms 130 and 131 feel like prayers welling up from the soul of the psalmist. But Psalm 132 has a different tone. It tells the story of David searching for a home where the people can worship God in glory. What might that home look like? The Lutheran theology of incarnation teaches us that our own bodies are the dwelling places of God's presence.

#### **Read:** Psalm 132:7-8

Now, let's piece together parts of these psalms, as we move through embodied prayers. Find a place to kneel on cushions, in a worship space with kneelers or on cushions at the communion railing. Kneel together as a group, allowing members who cannot kneel to sit or stand close by. If possible, hold hands (or lay hands on arms or shoulders) and pray this phrase: "Arise, Lord, into your resting place." As you pray, envision God's spirit rising into your bodies.

Now stand together (or sit or stay) near the rail, the kneelers or the cushions. Together, pray Psalm 130 aloud (you can repeat each line after a leader, if this is helpful). When you read verse 2, "O Lord, hear my voice," lift your hands forward or lightly touch your ears. Then take three deep breaths.

Place your hand over your heart and pray Psalm 131. Take three more breaths in silence.

Finally, kneel (or sit or stand, as you are able) together and pray Psalm 132: 7-8 of Psalm 132. At the end, hold hands (or touch arms) and repeat a few words or a phrase from the psalm (i.e., "Your strength"). Let this phrase become music in your body, keeping the score of God's presence and letting it resound within you.

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

As a closing prayer, sing "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" (*ELW* 773) **W** 

# Now let us pray

# Session one

Praying with our bodies

BY LIV LARSON ANDREWS

Welcome to session one of a two-part Bible study focused on prayer and embodiment, a gift of our Christian tradition. Thank you for choosing to facilitate these gatherings. Together, we'll explore praying with our bodies and praying with the Earth

#### **NOTES FOR LEADERS**

Just as catacombs rest under the city of Rome (see www.worldhistory.org/article/1358/an-ancient-city-beneath-rome-visiting-the-catacomb/), many of our deep beliefs about prayer hide deep within us. Before diving into the material, consider setting aside 5 to 10 minutes to let participants share what frustrates or confuses them about prayer. If your gathering is happening in a digital space, invite participants to consider having a tangible item (a rosary, a prayer rock, a pillow, etc.) near them as they experience embodied prayer practices.

People often wonder if prayer changes things. This can be a thorny topic to explore, but we have a strong Lutheran tradition of welcoming questions as a faithful community. If time allows, invite participants to share stories or experiences about whether prayer changes things. Consider reading My Body is Not a Prayer Request (publisher year), Amy Kenny's excellent book about the struggle of entering faith-based spaces as a person with disabilities who is prayed for without her asking for this. Her book is an affirmation that she, as a differently-abled person, is exactly who God has made her to be.

Think about your congregation's practices of prayer. Are prayer requests collected in a regular way that everyone can access? Is confidentiality honored when it is asked for? Who gathers or writes the prayers of intercession for worship? Does something in this study inspire you to try something new to deepen the prayer life of your community?

#### **OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES**

- 1. Sticky Psalms, part 1
- Many people have favorite or well-loved psalms that stick with us. Ask for permission to post in your congregation's narthex a large poster titled STICKY PSALMS. Make the title large enough to read from a distance. Under the title, write: "Share a favorite psalm that sticks with you on your faith journey!"
- On a small table close by, offer passersby: 1-3
  different colors of sticky notes, pens/pencils/
  crayons, a few Bibles for choosing or looking
  up their "Sticky Psalm." Make a simple sign
  with these instructions:
- Add your Sticky Psalm to our STICKY
   PSALMS poster! On a sticky note, write:
   your favorite Psalm, your name, and a prayer
   posture (kneeling, walking, sitting, dancing,
   etc.) you could use to pray this psalm. (For
   example: Psalm 23, Carlos, walking to work.
   Psalm 139, Maddie, making a cradle with
   my hands)."
- 2. Sticky Psalms, part 2
- Ask for 5 to 10 minutes during worship (announcements, children's sermon or another time) to tell congregants that your Bible study group has been studying embodied prayer—how we pray with our bodies as well as our words. Tell members: Raise your hands if you think any of these can be a prayer: Singing? Standing? Kneeling? Dancing? A prayer walk? Lifting hands up to God? (Yes, yes, and yes.) Tell people you are going to read a few verses from one "Sticky Psalm." Ask adults and children to make a gesture of prayer that could go with the verses. Then invite them to share their

- own "Sticky Psalm" on the poster (see #1).
- 3. Write a breath prayer.
- The main character in The Way of the Pilgrim explores "praying without ceasing" by syncing his prayer and his breath. Breathing in, he prays, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," and breathing out, he prays, "Have mercy on me, a sinner." Consider writing your own short breath prayers on index cards.
- 4. Find a labyrinth.
- Use this interactive online map to find a labyrinth near you: labyrinthlocator.org/ world-wide-labyrinth-map/
- Purchase a rosary. Or create your own Magnificat prayer bracelet or bookmark (allow 30-40 minutes).
- Try praying the 10 verses of the Magnificat as you touch 10 Magnificat prayer beads in the bracelet or bookmark described below. (See materials list in Session 1.) You may want to try this first at home to ensure you have more than enough Magnificat beads and spacer beads on the day of the activity. Sometimes individual beads have inconsistent holes or roll away! Plan to have lots of extras, just in case.)

# BRACELET:

Note: Using stretchy beading cord avoids having to buy a special clasp.

- Step 1: Cut a 12" to 15" length of stretchy beading cord. Use masking tape on one end, so beads don't slip off.
- Step 2: Place on a paper plate or tray with raised edges, in the order you'll put them on the string, your 10 Magnificat beads (representing each of the 10 verses). Include any slightly smaller spacer beads in this line-up. The Magnificat beads should all be the same size. Depending on the size of your Magnificat beads, you may need to use slightly smaller or differently colored spacer beads to finish your bracelet.

- Step 3: String your first bead (for the first verse of the Magnificat) onto the cord:
- Step 4: Between (or on either side of the Magnificat beads) you may need to string on the slightly smaller "spacer" beads to keep your verse beads in place.
- Step 5: Finish by tying the ends of the bracelet together, using one or more double or triple knots. Before tying, ensure the bracelet will fit over your wrist comfortably but not tight enough to constrict blood flow.

# PRAYER BOOKMARK:

- Step 1: Cut a 20" long piece of waxed thread or beading cord (not stretchy cord). Cutting your thread on an angle helps it pass more easily through the bead.
- Step 2: Tie a double knot 4.5" from one end. This is "Inner Knot 1."
- Step 3: Starting at the un-knotted end of the 4.5" length, thread on 5 beads that represent verses 46-50 of the Magnificat. Leave at least 1.5" free of beads at the end.
- Step 4: Tie a knot next to the last bead, making sure the knot is as close as possible to the bead. Tie a second knot on top of the first knot. Snip the thread.
- Step 5: Go to the other end of the waxed thread and tie a knot about 6.5" from the end. This is "Inner Knot 2." Be sure the space between the two inner knots is longer than the length of a book's pages.
- Step 6: Thread on 5 beads to represent verses 51-55 of the Magnificat. Leave about 1.5" free of beads at the end.
- Step 7: Tie a knot, as close as possible to the last bead. Tie a second knot on top of the first knot. Cut the thread off near the knot.

# TIPS FOR SHORTENING THIS STUDY

Before you meet in January, consider which prayer practices (breath prayers or prayer postures) your community might connect with or most appreciate. If time is short, focus on those practices.