

# “A Listening God”

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Covid 14

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## ***Psalm 86: 1-10 NRSV A Prayer of David.***

*Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.  
Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in  
you. You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord,  
for to you do I cry all day long. Gladden the soul of your servant,  
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and  
forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.  
Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.  
In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.  
There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works  
like yours. All the nations you have made shall come  
and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.  
For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.*

Prayer is my topic, but prayer is a big topic. So I want to talk about the psalmist's prayer in Psalm 86 – a prayer of supplication – and talk about the Psalmist's stance toward this kind of prayer. This is one of a minority of Psalms that is personal. So many of the Psalms are about God's people or the nation. But this Psalm is about the Psalmist, about me, about you, personally. And in these Covid times of isolation, these times of social unrest, frustration, and unrest; this is an appropriate times to reflect on personal prayer.

- If God knows everything, why do we need to tell God anything?
- Was God unaware of the Psalmist's plight? Is God unaware of ours?
- Or is God disinterested in the Psalmist's trouble and must be moved to act? Is God disinterested in our troubles unless we can move God to interest?
- Is God capricious – acting on a whim?
- Is God so in need of our attention that God only acts when we earnestly give God our attention?
- Does God only act for people who put in the effort to pray? Does God's response depend on the measure of our faith? Does God hear

the prayer of a doubting Thomas, a denying Peter, a betraying Judas?

- There's a word, 'theurgy'. It has Greek roots that means "making God work." Is prayer like this, like a magic spell that triggers God's powers especially if we pray hard and rightly enough with enough faith?

So much of what may be commonly understood about praying makes God look erratic, narcissistic, distant, or able to be manipulated. And while God being God and therefore needs no defense from me, I thought this Psalm gives us an opportunity to reflect on this kind of prayer and praying.

I think God knows our plight, knows our needs, knows even our wants. I don't experience God as whimsical, as needing something from me before God will act, or as being able to be manipulated by the strength or urgency of my prayers combined with those of others.

I am moved by the ideas of liberation theology, and the example of God-in-Jesus the Christ – that God weeps with us.

We have heard, in these times of social unrest, that the first principle in empathy is listening. And we have heard from the leaders of Black Lives Matter that the first principle for being allies is to listen.

Being followers of the Way of Love mandates us to Empathetic Listening and Alliancing Listening. And this kind of listening is hard work. We so often want to interject our seemingly similar experiences. Or our curiosity leads us to interrupt the narrative to ask for details. Or to argue or critique. Or our mind wanders to other things. Or we want to give advice or explain what we know. It's hard work to fully listen in order to hear.

But not for God.

Having given the gift of listening to someone who has experienced major loss, we have probably all heard grieving people tell the same stories repeatedly. But even if God knows our situation, and we have prayed it many times over, God is the perfect listener. God sits with us, in us, hears us – hears what we won't say, can't say, don't even know what to say – and listens, and weeps with us.

Karl Rahner, in a book I no longer have access to, raised the question. He said something like, "God, I pray and pray, I pour out my heart. But you never say anything. Do you not have any words, any answers, any advice?" And then Rahner changes the mood. "Or is it that my whole life is a prayer, my life a spoken prayer, and you listen to my entire prayer, my whole life, before you say your words."

God is a great listener.

The apostle wrote that for now we see through a cloudy glass, but then we will see face to face. In other words, now we look but cannot see, but then we will look and see. Maybe for now we speak and listen but do not hear, but then we will listen and hear.

The Psalmist knew God's love and goodness, knew that God's being is unique in the perfection of these characteristics of Love and Goodness, and the Psalmist fully trusted in that love and goodness. And so why pray?

There is a thing called linguistic determination, and the upshot of it is that language, spoken or written, has a way of shaping our thinking. We can know, intellectually, as an article of faith that God is love, loves us all, even me, even you, that we can trust God and live in that trust. But saying it, articulating it, putting it into words, shapes us. Praying it as if it were true, transforms us.

John Wesley asked how he could know that God accepts him, and was told to keep preaching God's acceptance until he truly understood it. And one day he did understand it! Pouring out our hearts to God – we call it spoken prayer or prayerful journaling – pouring out our hearts to God molds our hearts, our minds, our spirits, and souls, to truly live in the trust that God is good, loves us, is goodness itself, is love itself, and listens with an empathy and compassion of such depth as only God could do. No wonder the Christ is called "The Word." The Word of Love, like the theory of linguistic determinism, shapes us.

To pray at all, to pray real hard, to tell God how we feel, what we need, what we want, as theoretically unnecessary as it may seem, gives our Heavenly Parent a chance to hear and relate and share our humanity. No wonder God came as one of us, and chooses to dwell in us. God wants to share our humanity, I think. It gives God pleasure, like a father sharing in the experience of his children, but not so that God will be moved to do something, for God already knows what will be and become. God, the One who set existence into existence, who contains all that is and still more, that God wants us. So like a loving parent, God listens.

It all comes to our living trust in God's perfect love. It comes to a trust so deep that we know God hears us even when we say nothing and yet hears our every moment of living as a prayer. A trust that deep ... and that yet prays. Prays because God truly listens. Cares. Weeps. And loves us with a transformative Love, so that nothing in all this existence is more powerful than the empowerment of that Love.

I want that kind of real, deep trust. I want the kind of full trust the Psalmist had. I want to be able to fully trust empowering Love.

When I was in high school, I attended an all Black school, and by the end of high school I thought I knew something about Black lives and racism. But as time went on, I learned more – through seminars, workshops, exercises, and talks. I especially remember a day spent with the Rev'd Anthony Bailey, a Black United Church of Canada minister, where I had an awakening to the true depth of system racism in us. Think about, for example, the expression, "A black sheep of the family." Think about what that sounds like to a Black person. And that's one example of thousands. And even if I spent my remaining days listening to Black lives, I still would not fully understand the complexity, difficulties, frustrations, and righteous anger of Black lives. But God does, because God listens as only God can listen. And hears.

And I want to be the kind of listener God is. For those who despair at the isolation, I want to be an empathetic listener. And in Black Lives Matter, I want to be an ally that first truly listens.

And I thank you for listening.