

- I. Advanced Organizer
- A. *Start inviting Joanna to lead grounding...Joanna leads*
- B. As I've been working on the teaching this week, I thought that rather than start with an anecdote or story that introduces the topic, today a **different kind of experience would be helpful**, for reasons that may become more clear as we get into things. Thanks to Jo for leading us so beautifully.
- C. As I've named a few times recently, one of the core emphases for Haven this year is **growing in spiritual connection**. So as part of that emphasis, we're continuing our series on prayer called "Dialogue with the Divine". In this series **we're looking at a few different characters** that appear in the Bible and seeing what we might learn from them and their experiences praying.
- D. Prayer, at its very essence, is **communication between ourselves and God**. It's the way we speak and are spoken to. The person we're going to look at this week had a very robust communication channel with the Divine. The Hebrew Bible includes a wealth of poetic prayers that are attributed to them. Here are just a few excerpts -
1. ***"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
3 he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake."*** - Psalm 23:1-3, NRSVUE
  2. ***"O God, you are my God; I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."*** - Psalm 63: 1, NRSVUE
  3. And from a darker place, when they were encountering great strife they prayed words that would be quoted by Jesus himself.  
***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?  
2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night but find no rest."*** - Psalm 22: 1-2, NRSVUE
  4. The author of all of these words of course is a leader who loomed large in the history and lore of the people of Israel and whose legacy the early church understood to be fulfilled by Jesus: **the shepherd turned King named David**. David, the Son of Jesse, the one who is referred to both by the prophet Samuel and later the Apostle Paul, as a "**man after God's own heart**".
- II. What might we have to learn from this man after God's heart; this prolific songwriter whose words and melodies make up nearly half of the prayers and songs recorded in the book of Psalms? Today, in addition to some of these psalms, I want to look at **one incident from the life of David**, and see what we might glean from him about what dialogue with the Divine can look like, particularly expressed through what I'll call "the creative prayer".
- A. First, some background to David and our story -
1. **David grew up during the reign of King Saul**, Israel's first monarch. Saul was king for about 40 years, and although he'd been appointed by God, for most of his reign Saul didn't seek God's input as he ran the country. In fact, his choices to ignore God dishonored and angered the Divine, so God told the prophet Samuel to anoint the person who would eventually replace Saul on the throne. **The Spirit sent the prophet to an**

**unlikely place to anoint an unlikely person:** David, the youngest son of a humble Jew named Jesse, a mere shepherd boy.

2. **And thus begins the adventure of David.** In a few short years he undergoes a dramatic transformation from a musician and a caretaker of sheep to commander of the king's army, and son in law to King Saul himself. David gains the favor of both God and the people of Israel, and Saul, consumed with jealousy and hatred, sets out to have him killed. David flees for his life and despite the fact that the king is trying to kill him, David keeps the people's support, so when Saul and his son are both killed in battle, the political leadership of the country is given to David, just as Samuel had prophesied years before that it would be.
3. **We're going to look at a story that takes place shortly after David becomes king.** Now the last piece of set-up for this has to do with an object called the **Ark of the Covenant**. Now the Ark, in addition to being a prop in an Indiana Jones movie, was a very important religious item, which would have been a few hundred years old by the time of David. It originated from the time that Moses received the law at Mount Sinai, and it housed the tablets that Moses got from God with the 10 Commandments. Basically, for the Israelites, the Ark of the Covenant represented in a tangible way the power and presence of God in the world. **It was the central place where Yahweh's presence could be experienced on earth.**
4. But by the time David became king, the ark had lost its place of prominence in the life of Israel. Saul basically ignored it, not feeling the need to consult God in the way that he ran God's nation. When David becomes king, he believes **it's time that the ark is reclaimed and restored to a central place** in the life and religious practice of his people. So he decides that he wants to bring the ark to Jerusalem, the new capital he's establishing, the City of David, where he lives. This is where we pick up the story in 2 Samuel 6, starting with verse 12.

B. ***12b So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. 13 When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. 14 Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, 15 while he and the entire house of Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets. 16 As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul (also BTW, David's wife) watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart.***

***17 They brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD. 18 After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD Almighty. 19 Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes.***

***20 When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"***

**21 David said to Michal, “It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD’s people Israel—I will celebrate before the LORD. 22 I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor.”**

**23 And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death.**

C. (Unpacking the story)

1. So this story is set in the **middle of a HUGE party**, in which the whole nation of Israel is engaged. Let’s take a moment just to imagine what the scene would have been like. I picture, like in a film, a wide angle shot from the sky, in which you see throngs of people lining the roads. It’s a **wild, raucous, celebratory mob**. There’s color, and laughter; music and dancing. A huge parade is winding up the hill leading to Jerusalem. Hundreds of singers are belting out praises. Trumpets are blasting. Cymbals are crashing. Food and wine flow in abundance. It’s the party of the era.
2. And **in the midst of the thousands of people gathered we find our character, King David**. What does this incident point to about his way of connecting with God? What does his creative prayer look like?

D. The first thing I notice about David’s prayer is that it’s expressive. **David’s creative prayer is expressive.**

1. David cares about expressing what’s in his heart. He wants to communicate freely to the Divine all that is within him. He holds nothing back. He uses his God-given creativity to creatively bring his full self forward into his communication with God.
2. We don’t just see this here - it’s **apparent throughout his 73 psalms**. There are the ones of praise and thanksgiving, where David attributes his successes and victories to the blessing and provision of the Divine. This expression of gratitude and celebration is at the heart of this whole parade. David has organized this festival to express his feelings about the miraculous journey he’s been on. The God of the universe he used to write loves songs to in the fields sent a prophet to his home and chose him, the youngest of eight for anointing. He saw God deliver the giant Philistine Goliath into his hands with one stone from his boyish slingshot. He saw Yahweh bring him to roles of leadership, and protect him as he was pursued by Saul. And when he was crowned King of Israel, **he knew it was only because this God had deemed it so**. He is celebrating, he is worshiping fully to express his thanks and praise for the one who has been with him for the whole wild ride.
3. And David **doesn’t just express his heart to the Divine when things feel good**. A number of his psalms are laments like the one which began, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” **David is not afraid to be honest with God**; to speak exactly what’s on his heart, even when it’s not particularly refined.
4. When David is angry, he prays in anger for vengeance on those he perceives as enemies:
  - a) **"May his days be few;  
may another seize his position.  
9 May his children be orphans  
and his wife a widow.  
10 May his children wander about and beg;  
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.  
11 May the creditor seize all that he has;**

***may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.***

***12 May there be no one to do him a kindness***

***nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.”*** - Psalm 109: 8-12, NRSVUE

b) Like wow. Dude. Chill. That prayer is harsh, and I don't think it's included in our sacred text because that particular sentiment reflects the heart of the Divine. It stands in stark contrast to Jesus' instruction to love your enemies and pray for, not curse, the ones who persecute you. I think David's prayer is important though because **it's honest**. His sentiment is a very human one, and he doesn't hold even this back from God. He prays fully from wherever he's at. And perhaps because he's so expressive and open-hearted with the Divine, it means he can not only celebrate the victories or lament the struggles, he can also fully bring forward sorrow and contrition, when he realizes he's messed up.

5. Consider the words he is thought to have composed after he's called out for perhaps his greatest screw up - having an affair with a married woman and killing off her husband to cover it up. Once he recognizes the gravity of what he's done he confesses to the Divine:

a) ***“Have mercy on me, O God,***

***according to your steadfast love;***

***according to your abundant mercy,***

***blot out my transgressions.***

***2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,***

***and cleanse me from my sin...***

***6 You desire truth in the inward being;***

***therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.***

***7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;***

***wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”*** - Psalm 51:1-2, 6-7, NRSVUE

6. The way David expresses himself in prayer is a reminder to all of us that **the Divine cares about the deepest longings and movements of our hearts**. His attitude in prayer, his commitment to bringing his whole self is an invitation to all of us - not to feel the need to clean ourselves up or sanitize our communication with God, but to speak from wherever we're at with whatever we have to say.

E. The second thing I notice in our story about the creative way David prays is that it's embodied. **David's prayer is embodied.**

1. David's not just communicating with the Divine here in his mind, or with his mouth. This is **full body experience**. He is dancing. And we're not talking a cute little choreographed bop. He is all in - shouting, and swaying and leaping with everything he has.

2. And it's not just the movement. **Even the way he is clothed is an intentional embodiment of his orientation to God** on this day. You see despite what his wife seems to be alluding to, David is not naked here. He's dressed, just not in the way you might assume a monarch would dress in a public spectacle. If anyone saw the coronation of King Charles in the UK - that was a show, right? The crown jewels were front and center - lavish robes and gold lined carriages adorned the day. But that's not what David is doing here.

3. When David got dressed that morning, he was not thinking about which royal cloak fit him the best or would look the most impressive. He was thinking about **how could he, as leader of the nation, best serve and honor Israel's God**. And making a rare and interesting choice, he decided that the most appropriate role for him to play that day was **that of a priest**. Typically only those from the tribe of Levi served in this role. They were

the ones to wear a linen ephod. They were the ones to make sacrifices. But David understands that if he is to lead God's people in a way that is truly honoring to God, it means spiritually as well as politically. And so he leads the people in worship, clothed in a priestly garment, making sacrifices on their behalf, singing, dancing, leaping. He embodies the divine generosity giving gifts to his whole kingdom - what logistics were required to supply thousands of people with a loaf of bread, a cake of dates, and a cake of raisins? All of this is an embodied expression of thanksgiving and praise. All of this is a part of his creative prayer.

4. David's full-bodied participation reminds us that **prayer is bigger than something we do quietly in our heads**. Sometimes quieting everything, sitting in silence is the appropriate physical practice to connect with the Divine. But sometimes something more active is needed. Sometimes something more like what Joanna facilitated at the beginning is how we can best express our hearts and open up that channel of communication. That can look a number of different ways and often does.
  - a) A number of you participated in a **survey recently on prayer and spiritual practices**. And from that survey I learned that we have folks here who do engage spiritually in a number of different embodied ways. Of those who took the survey, more than half said they currently pray while walking, hiking, and being in nature. A third said journaling was a part of their regular prayer life. One person said prayer through movement was a helpful way they pray. When we broadened out from an emphasis on "prayer" specifically to spiritual practices there were even more examples of embodied practices - folks recognizing that they connect with the Divine through yoga, through dance. Nearly half of our respondents said creative expression is a spiritual practice of theirs - writing, drawing, painting or crafting. And when it comes to hospitality and generosity, like David distributing food to his whole kingdom - the majority of our folks are regularly practicing acts of service for others, hospitality - hosting folks in their home or sharing a meal with them as well as financial generosity.
  - b) When done with intentionality and openness to the Divine presence I think **all of these practices can be a part of living into a more embodied prayer life**.
  - c) There are also good reasons that in many traditions and throughout the Bible prayer includes **kneeling, sometimes facedown on the ground**, a physical expression of humility before God. Other times we're encouraged to **stand and lift our hands in worship**. For me this is also an expression of full openness to and welcome of the Divine presence - an offering of my own self to God and to the loving presence and purposes of the Divine in my life.
  - d) None of these are magic formulas and when we engage any of these practices out of a sense of duty I think they can lose their meaning, but I encourage all of us to take a cue from David and perhaps one another and consider **how we might live into greater embodiment in our prayer lives and our spiritual connection in general**. Today in addition to the quilt crafting many of us are doing, you'll also find paper, markers, modeling clay on the back tables and I encourage you to consider using any of them during worship, or getting up and moving your body whether standing, dancing, kneeling. You can hang in the back of the room if that feels more comfortable. Whatever helps you honor that God made us as whole people with bodies and the Divine desires to connect with all of who we are.
- F. Finally, that brings me to the last thing about David's creative prayer our story highlights. **David's creative prayer is first and foremost for the Divine.**

1. **Not everyone appreciates David's way of worshipping.** His wife Michal is not a fan. She grew up the daughter of a king and now she's the wife of the king. Royal decorum is likely all she has been concerned with. David is not acting the part she thinks a King should play. His clothing is so inappropriate in her estimation he might as well be naked. It is, as the text says, "undignified".
2. But David makes clear **he's not trying to impress Michal or anyone else for that matter.** That's not who his prayer is for. "It was before the Lord", he tells her. Yahweh is ultimately the one to whom David's creative prayer is addressed. That doesn't mean that no one else can appreciate it. David's doing this in a crowd. He is leading the crowd in worship. He wants those young slave girls his wife is taunting him about to see him worshipping. There's a reason his songs endure thousands of years later. They're an excellent source still for all of us of language to help express our hearts to God as we pray along to them. But ultimately, that's not why he wrote them. The audience is first and foremost the Divine.
3. We may not have a spouse or other family member as critical as Michal in our life, actively taunting our spirituality and the ways we try to creatively express it. But I think if we're honest, we're familiar with that **sarcastic accusing voice she uses, because we hear it most harshly in our own head.**
4. In the popular book *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron, the author describes the voice each of us has in our own minds picking apart our actions and loudly critiquing our ideas. **She calls this voice the "inner critic"**. Our inner critic can make cutting remarks like Michal. It asks "who do you think you are?". It might call us an imposter. It compares us to others and tells us how much better they are doing whatever it is we're attempting. And while our inner critic is in a sense trying to protect us, it wants to keep us safe, to help us save face, it ultimately works against us because it also keeps us from experimenting, from expressing ourselves, from embodying our connection to others, to ourselves, or to God. If we want to unleash our creativity, if we want to engage in creative prayer, we need to acknowledge our inner critics and also make a choice not to give them all the power. We need to remember that they are not the ultimate audience. Michal is not David's ultimate audience. His creative prayer is first and foremost for the Divine. Our creative prayer can be too.
5. This story includes **a warning for the parts of us that lean too far into critique of one another or ourselves.** This passage ends with an ominous sentence. "And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death." The implication here is that as a result of Michal's response to David's worship, she became a childless woman. Now the narrator doesn't tell us how this happened. It could be that it was something biological, it could have been something spiritual. It could have been that this encounter with David was so negative that David chose to never be intimate with her again. The end effect is the same. Because of her behavior here, Michal has no children to the day of her death. And for Michal, this consequence that she suffers is much bigger than her never having the opportunity to be a mother, as tragic as that might be. The biggest consequence for Michal is that **her attitude, her contempt for God, excludes her from being a part of the redemptive work that God is doing in her world.**
6. In the following chapter of 2nd Samuel, God responds to David's overtures of affection. **He makes a covenant with David**, an eternal promise, that he will, through David, establish a kingly line. As part of this covenant, God assures David that the reign of the line of David will be established forever. In this promise, we hear the echo of familiar words, and in hindsight, remember hundreds of years later one important way in which this promise was ultimately fulfilled. We remember the voice of the angel, speaking to a young

virgin girl about the child she will bear, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." **Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of God's covenant with David.**

7. David's heart for God expressed through creative prayer enables David to join and play a crucial role in God's amazing plan to bring life to the world. But Michal's heart for herself keeps her from being a part of this plan. She will not give birth to the great, great, great, great grandfather of Jesus. She will watch another woman do that.
8. Friends, as we grow in cultivating our own creative prayer connection to God, that's expressive and embodied, I hope we too can tune out the voice of the haters - whether that voice comes externally, or from within our own self. It does not speak truth and it does not ultimately connect us with God. **The Divine wants to bless our creativity.** Our Creator made us creative in the image of God. May we, like David, embrace that gift and express our hearts in prayer through it. Amen.