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The



GRACE
RICHES of
YOUR

*Living in the Book
of Common Prayer*



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *The Riches of Your Grace* by Julie Lane-Gay

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

MORNING *and* EVENING PRAYER



I'm late yet again.

I pull in behind the police station (where parking is free on Sundays) and race over to our tall, sandstone church. I wish I'd gotten here earlier to hear the musical prelude. The music quiets me, gives my soul a little breathing room. It's worth getting out of the house five minutes earlier but I'm lousy at doing that.

The foyer runs along the back of the sanctuary and Tricia, warm and good-humored, opens the side door and hands me my bulletin. I must look sheepish because she shrugs and smiles in a way that says, "Don't sweat it. You aren't the only one who is late. You got here." Her kindness softens me for worship.

The sanctuary is almost full. Soccer moms, university professors, bartenders, and computer programmers fill the pews. There are shorts and ripped T-shirts and dark suits with neckties. Depending on the season, rain boots, Adidas, and flip-flops abound. Like me, these people can be self-absorbed and high maintenance, but when cancer erupts, kids are arrested, jobs are lost, or spouses cheat, they are right there with you.

There are no wood-hewn beams or stone pillars; no stunning stained-glass windows. It's not the Canterbury Cathedral. The organ is adequate; the piano might be better. The choir is wonderful but there are not a hundred cherubic children in white robes with perfect pitch. With its sturdy tan pews and red carpeting, the sanctuary is comfortable at best. I've come to value its ordinariness; it doesn't inspire awe, but when you track in a bit of mud or a baby cries during the sermon, no one feels like they're ruining anything. It's never a performance.

As I move across a middle row to sit closer to the center, I squeeze the shoulders of our friends Michelle and Ben in the pew in front of me and get acknowledging smiles. It comforts me to find them week after week, year after year. I hope I'm that presence for others.

My jacket barely off, the congregation settles back onto the pews as the organ's last notes of the opening hymn fade. This morning's service is Morning Prayer, and while the prayer book compilers intended the service to be said daily (and many do say it daily), our church is unusual in that we alternate on Sundays, celebrating Holy Communion on the second and fourth Sundays of the month and Morning Prayer on the first and third. It's an oddity I've come to appreciate.

Some people say the services of Morning and Evening Prayer (together called the Daily Office) each day at home. In the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of people at our church gathered online twice a day to say these services together, and they have carried on ever since. They take turns leading and reading the Scriptures. I continue to hear it described as a "lifeline" and a "crucial framework for my day."

The Daily Office has a deep history. Long before Christ, the Jewish people voiced their prayers of praise and sacrifice in the temple at 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.; they knew that their rituals were what taught and formed them.

Some days at home, I say Morning Prayer by myself. Sitting at the kitchen table or my desk, I read it like a script, saying all the parts and prayers aloud. It was awkward till I got used to it, until hearing the words mattered more than the clumsiness. Some days I don't get to all the Scriptures; too often I just read the Psalms.

The Daily Office offers a way to shape our workdays and remind us who we are—created, known, and loved by God, people whose work is prayer. It gives us a way to move closer to Scripture's encouragement to “pray without ceasing.”



Our rector (or head pastor) begins this morning's liturgy with the Opening Sentence, a call to worship that sets the tone for all that we are about to do. He reads, “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘We will go into the house of the LORD’” (Psalm 122:1). It offers a transition from the parking lot to worship, but it also contains an important acknowledgment. Pastor Tim Challies writes,

The Call to Worship is a means of acknowledging that God's people come to church each week weary, dry, and discouraged. They have laboured through another week and need to be reminded of the rest Christ offers their weary souls. They have endured another week of trials, temptations, or persecutions and come thirsty, eager to drink the water of life and to be refreshed by it. They have walked another seven days of their journey as broken, sinful people and need to be reminded of who Christ is and who they are in him. Church is urgent business! Instead of being asked how they are, Christians need to be reminded who they are. Instead of being asked where everyone else is, Christians need to be reminded where Christ is.¹

Chosen according to the church calendar (or Liturgical Year), the Opening Sentences vary by the seasons of Advent, Christmas,

Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. This calendar marks our days and months within the eternal rather than the pragmatic. As poet Malcolm Guite says, the church calendar offers a way of “sacralizing time,”² of shifting us to see Christ’s birth, Baptism, ministry, death, burial, and resurrection both in the past and in our midst.

In the much older versions of the prayer book, the Opening Sentences tended to focus on penitence. Services began with verses such as “I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:18-19). The intent with this emphasis was to start with the bad news of our sin and set us on the path to repentance and to grace, to remind us that from the outset, absolution and grace are always waiting.

After the Opening Sentences, our rector declares the Call to Confession (some prayer books call this the Exhortation). Before we can praise God, hear His Word, or even thank Him, we need God’s grace, we need the reminder that everything in our relationship with Him comes by His grace. The rector reads:

Dearly beloved, the Scriptures teach us to acknowledge our many sins and offenses, not concealing them from our heavenly Father, but confessing them with humble and obedient hearts that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. We ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before Almighty God, but especially when we come together in his presence to give thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to declare his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things which are necessary for our life and our salvation. Therefore, draw near with me to the throne of heavenly grace.³

“Draw near with me” is always a bonus. I’m not the only one who came through the sanctuary’s doors this morning immersed in myself.

Sometimes I make a small, silent addition to the ending of the Exhortation—“Lord, show me mine.” I try to make myself ask, “Lord, where have I sinned? What did I do, and what did I not do? Show me where I need to repent.” God’s answers come more frequently than I would expect and often surprise me—a conversation when I wasn’t really listening, a comment in which I tweaked the truth about myself to impress someone. I have come to find it a great sign of God’s love that He shows me my sin when I ask.

While it once was daunting, naming my sins has become a means of grace, a means to know its riches. Sin explains the mess of the world, thousands of years ago and this morning. We aren’t expected to heal ourselves, only to be humble and ask for God’s help. Phrases such as “our many sins and offenses” (in older prayer books it’s our “manifold sins and wickedness”) and “with a humble and obedient heart” now land on me with relief. “Sins” and “wickedness” are countercultural words, but they bring life-giving freedom. They remind me that we live in a thoroughly fallen world, and they pull me again to seek God’s forgiveness.

Some years ago there was a media outcry in the United Kingdom when, in planning his wedding with Camilla Parker Bowles, Prince Charles insisted on keeping this Exhortation in their ceremony, including the words “manifold sins and wickedness.” People were horrified. Surely in light of his earlier affair with Camilla, the prince ought to eliminate the language once and for all, naming the affair as something other than “sin.”

Charles apparently said that to the contrary, this was the right language for their actions, and the best way to begin his new marriage.⁴



The first time I participated in the service of Morning Prayer, I was visiting to hear a famous preacher. Still happy with the contemporary worship in the church we attended, the set pattern of worship again

felt like work. The service guide filled nine pages with small print. Listening to the pastor's calls and saying the responses, we again seemed to skip some parts and say others. There were hymns and songs at seemingly random times. I worried Morning Prayer would take several hours.

But I also noticed that the scripted dialogue between the pastor and the congregation—the liturgy—was again restful. The service was not about expressing what I was feeling toward God, nor was it about the pastor's entertaining style. The service's words and music and dialogue expressed Christ to me, pouring His love and redemption into each of us. Saying the age-old words that carried such scriptural depth, I felt a relief at not having to conjure up piety or weightiness on my own. There was an intentionality I felt more than understood.

I began to wonder if the contemporary service Craig and I attended was missing something. As Scripture says to us over and over, "Remember!" I was seeing in these scripted prayers and patterns of worship what I frequently skipped over: what God had done in the past and the glorious future ahead.

I was hearing the good news of the gospel not only in the sermon and prayers but in the pattern of the prayers, their content and their sequence. I began to see that the parts of this service were created as a whole. They were steps placed in an order that enabled me to practice behaving like a person who was following Christ, and hopefully over time, with the presence of the Holy Spirit, become like that person from the inside out.

Following the steps of the pattern brought a change in my vantage point, as if I had climbed down an embankment and gotten onto a barge on a big flowing river to experience the land from a new perspective. In this liturgy I was participating in a different narrative of the world, a different telling of its story. Again I sensed the change more than I understood it.



All societies have ways that we “narrate” the world to make sense of it and structure how we live in it. As pastor Eugene Peterson wrote, “We keep sane by telling stories. . . . Stories tell us who we are, tell us what we can do.”⁵ One of the most common stories we tell in Western society might be summarized as “hope in progress,” that with every advance in science and technology, our lives can and will keep getting better. Electric cars, stem cell treatments, finely tuned antidepressants, and personal investing will provide the power and capacity to make our lives easier and happier, even healthier. Rich and poor alike can be healed from cancer and Covid-19. With all the recent advances, children can be better cared for and become better adults.

But as much as I like air travel, antibiotics, and instant messaging, these technologies aren’t solving the deeper problems of our world or our hearts. We aren’t becoming better or happier people, or sadly, better parents.

As Christians, we have been given a different narrative from the one that says science and technology will consistently keep making things better. We don’t get to make up our narrative, or even amend it. It comes to us. The Christian story of the world is God creating, our rebelling, God redeeming in Christ and His coming back to restore all things as they were meant to be. It is both hard to see this story and, once you look carefully, hard to miss it. Our world was created with stunning beauty and brilliance—trees, mountains, whales, dragonflies, and newborn babies show this in abundance, and consistently, but we have messed it all up with our selfishness and greed. God has given us His own Son to redeem us, to save us from the ultimate consequences of what we have done, and He’s committed to one day restoring us and our world.

The great advances can be helpful tools, but they do not save us or even love us; they rarely meet our longings to be known, loved, and cherished, to know God is personally with us, waiting for us.

Philosopher Jamie Smith says that this naming, these liturgies of a different sort, can “carry within them a kind of ultimate orientation. . . . They bend the needle of our hearts.”⁶

Morning Prayer began to bend mine.



Following the Call to Confession Exhortation, our congregation lowers themselves onto the red cushions beneath us. We kneel, acting out our script with our bodies as well as our words. Jackets rustle, rain boots squeak, and heavy soles scuff the floor. There’s a communal thump—a settling that always signals “home” to me. This is what my people sound like. We’re readying ourselves to confess together, to do something we agree we need to do, and that we need to do on our knees. We aren’t here to be entertained, we are here to participate. Together we say:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace, there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. Amen.⁷

If the Call to Confession is strongly worded, the General Confession is more so. There is no “if I have strayed . . . if I have left undone.” We don’t say, “some days there is not always health in us.”

With its steady beat of one-syllable words, the General Confession embodies gravitas. Kneeling, my soul sinks more into what we are doing—confessing how we have hurt God, each other, the planet. The

staccato words—*erred, strayed, lost, sheep, things*—followed by multisyllable verbs—followed, offended—create a rhythm that stays in our minds. The clauses of the General Confession have been quoted in novels, films, Supreme Court decisions, and tweets because these clauses resonate so pointedly, and as we pray them together, the words build the magnitude of what we are doing: confessing our sins to God Almighty. Like poetry, the paradox of the simplicity of the words and the weightiness of the content keeps the deep truths going not just to our intellects but straight to our hearts.

My mind zips around as I say the Confession. Even as I confess, my sin abounds. Some mornings I wonder, “Did I already do something this morning that I have to ask forgiveness for? Wouldn’t confession be better left to Evening Prayer, after I have sinned all day?”

But then I remember. I had an array of very unkind thoughts about a friend who had texted me all night. I was critical of other drivers on my way to church (it was their fault I was late)—all before I got here this morning. Sin starts early.

As we ask God to restore those who are penitent, I try to name not just my sins that have affected the people around me, but my part in the sins that have wounded the world. As priest Noah Van Neil observes, “Individual sin leads to corporate sin. And if we do not confront the sin at the center of our hearts, we will not make much progress on the sins at the center of our society.”⁸

Some versions of the General Confession conclude with the wonderful line, “forgive us, that we might delight in your will and walk in your ways.” God doesn’t give us His grace so that we will buck up and serve, but to delight in His will, in His abundant forgiveness—to enjoy His goodness.

The General Confession is always followed by the Absolution, the proclamation of our complete forgiveness. I always hope the rector will pause after my favorite line, “He pardons and absolves all who truly repent and genuinely believe his holy Gospel” so I can take in

the immediacy a bit more.⁹ We are never left hanging, wondering if we will be forgiven, if He will only forgive our less harmful sins. God is waiting to forgive. The inseparability of the Confession and Absolution is one of the finest ways the prayer book obliterates any sense that we go to church to get beaten into shame. Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren writes:

Confession and absolution must find its way into the small moments of sinfulness in my day. When it does, the gospel—grace itself—seeps into my day, and these moments are transformed. They’re no longer meaningless interruptions, sheer failure and lostness and brokenness. Instead, there are moments of redemption and remembering, moments to grow bit by bit in trusting Jesus’ work on my behalf.¹⁰

Since sometimes I say Morning Prayer by myself, I once asked theologian and Anglican priest J. I. Packer if I could change the wording of the Absolution, the pronouns “we” to “I” and “our” to “my.” I wondered if I could say the Absolution to myself. Was I forgiving myself? He looked at me very intently and answered my last question. “Not only should you say the Absolution, you must. You need to hear the words.” Not being a priest, I pray the words of the more general Absolution: “Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace, that [I] may be cleansed from all [my] sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”¹¹

Just as Confession is always followed by the Absolution, the Absolution is always followed by praise. Just as God stands waiting to forgive in the Absolution, we stand to enjoy and celebrate His loving grace.

Our praise starts with the Invitatory (antiphonal singing some call the Suffrage), a moment to ask God to initiate our praise, to lead us into it. As we sing to God and one another, I know that as I need God to show me my sin, I also need help to praise Him. It doesn’t

come naturally. A member of the choir sings, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit” (how does she hit that high note every time?) and the congregation responds, singing, “As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”

This morning we also express our praise in singing the Venite, Psalm 95. It’s a giant “Come!”—celebrating the magnificence of the Absolution and welcoming the Scripture readings. Its words remind me of the “joy of our salvation,” that we are given this tangible joy together.

Knowing whether to sing the Venite or the Jubilate for the Invitatory was one of the many reasons I was intimidated that first Sunday. How did anyone know? What I eventually learned was that the options in the prayer book were there to be steppingstones, to offer a path to deepen worship, to sink us into God’s year and God’s story. The crucial steppingstones are always Confession, Absolution, Scripture, and Prayer, with praise and sentences of Scripture tying these together. They are there to help us.

Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury who compiled the first Book of Common Prayer in 1542, was not only an esteemed literary scholar but a true pastor. He was a brilliant compiler and choreographer of worship. His heart was with his parishioners. He longed for people to know Christ’s love in all things, and to know personally that we are held in God’s story. He understood that such knowledge did not come easily. We needed steps to get there.

To support us, Cranmer placed the liturgical steppingstones in a progression, a pattern that I sensed in my first visit to the Anglican church but could not name—a progression of sin-grace-faith (others call it guilt-grace-gratitude). Like three movements in a piece of music, after several times through we start to feel the pattern. We begin to anticipate it. We sink into it more fully. In Morning and Evening Prayer we walk through the progression once; in the service

of Holy Communion, twice. In every service, the Exhortation and Confession walk us through our sin. The Absolution and praise pull us into grace and Scripture. The Creed and the Prayers nudge us onward in faith. There is so much more going on in our worship than just the words we are saying.

Having sung God's praise, the congregation sits to hear the Scripture readings. There's another communal "thump" as everyone sits down: a thump that conveys a gladness, that we have completed something hefty. We have confessed to God and been thoroughly forgiven.

This morning an adorable nine-year-old girl with a long blond braid reads the Old Testament passage. She reads the verses as if they are fascinating, when in fact they are a long list of unpronounceable names. The congregation is clearly tempted to applaud when she reaches the end, and she looks up with a small smile. She was not just adorable, she was flawless. Two Sundays ago an elderly gentleman hobbled up the stairs to the lectern, his cane tapping on every step as we held our breath, worrying he might fall. He read the passages with the best of a David Attenborough inflection; I half wanted him to continue on about turtles and ancient forests. Last Sunday a tattooed graduate student read to us, his man-bun neatly pulled back and a big smile on his face. God's Word belongs to all of us.

The Bible readings are taken from a lengthy list found at the very back (or sometimes at the beginning) of the prayer book, organized by Sundays, by weeks of the Liturgical Year. Some versions call it the Lectionary, others call it the Table of Lessons. I used to wonder, "Why a reading from Numbers this week, and Zephaniah last week?" until someone pointed me to the Lectionary and explained its organization. Following these patterns of Scripture readings provides a structure to read through the whole of the Bible in three years (some prayer books also offer a structure to read through it in one year). These readings connect us with Christians around the world. They create a commonality.

We read the Lectionary passages in the company of those in Manhattan and those in Mombasa. Following the Lectionary puts us all on that river barge, seeing the vista of Scripture, of God's great story, together.

In the early months of Covid-19, I discovered the odd bonding of a common language. Walking our border collie, Finlay, I passed the same people walking their dogs almost every day, some of whom I'd seen for close to ten years. We knew each other by appearance and by our collies and poodles and retrievers, but never by name. We rarely did more than nod. But as we were locked down at home, our walks in the park resembled prisoners heading out to the yard, thrilled for fresh air and connection. We started talking. We felt the freedom to ask each other's names. We knew our questions were of the same language—How are you? Holding up okay? Anyone sick yet? We now knew we had something in common besides our dogs.

Reading the Lectionary's common readings has the same effect. We might not know each other, but together we are progressing through the shared language and story of Scripture.



In our church, the readings in Morning Prayer usually begin with the Psalms, their poetic effect settling upon us with their alternating between heartbreak (“Where are you, O Lord, when I need You?”) and reassurance (“You have placed your love upon me”). They are exceptionally humane. The psalm is frequently followed by an Old Testament reading, or this morning in our church, preceded by it. The readings nearly always include a New Testament passage and a reading from one of the four Gospels.

After the readings, we pause to greet one another—a quick hello to those sitting in the same pew. The greeting seems to mark another turning point. In saying good morning to each other, some we know and some we don't, we acknowledge we are doing this odd, counter-cultural process together—we are worshiping God.

Some congregations respond to the Scripture readings with a Canticle, singing the Benedictus or the Te Deum, both sung prayers of praise that highlight the goodness of the Lord and the goodness and gift of His Word. Like the Lectionary readings, these responses remind me that we are rejoicing with a vast range of worshipers—the church across that world.

This praise is followed by the Apostles' Creed, and I am often struck by the many ways the Creed reiterates the praise we have just sung. The Apostles' Creed tells our story, the one we fling or ease ourselves into as people in Christ.

We stand to say it. The Apostles' Creed is my home page—or at least, that's what I want it to be. Instead of living in the domain of world powers, Instagram, and worries about my kids and the planet, saying the Creed situates me in God's foundation and in His certain hope. I am comforted that for nearly two thousand years, millions of saints and sinners, known and unknown, have lived their lives based on the Creed's realities rather than their circumstances.

Out of the corner of my eye I see the Marstons, one row behind me and over to my left. In their early fifties, tall, neatly dressed with carefully combed hair, they stand together. She's an English teacher and he's an engineer. They look composed, but her face gives me clues that all is not easy, and I wonder if that pain comes from marriage or poor health. She says the Creed with her eyes closed, as if she's sinking deep into all that it means to say those words, to choose their ways. I love her earnestness. He says them like he's taking an oath in a courtroom, like he's making a choice that does not come naturally. I value his recognition that the Creed presents you with a decision, one you have to make each week, each morning.

Our congregation seems to have grasped that we need to say the Creed together. We start slowly to get in sync. We listen for each other. We say the sentences carefully because these truths were given, not earned, and because they are life-giving. God could have abandoned

us. Christ could have avoided the cross. The Holy Spirit could have chosen to leave us. But because God is the God of all mercies, none of these things happened, or could happen. This isn't a chant at the end of the huddle. Because the Creed is true, all will be well.

Following the Scriptures and the Creed, we sit for the sermon, most frequently a time of teaching that expounds one of the readings. Some days I listen better than others.

Following the teaching, we kneel to pray for all that is on our hearts and in our minds. It's a rare day that I don't ask God for a lot. We started the morning's service by remembering who Christ is and who we are in Him, and now we bring the specifics of our lives and world to place into His hands. As we have moved from acknowledging our sin to receiving His grace, now we ask—in faith.

We begin with the Lord's Prayer. We kneel (more scuffing and thumps) to pray to our Father, who stays awake while we sleep, who waits for us to pray again, who loved us before the world began. I remind myself as I pray that God is personal. It seems so impossible.

The collects come next. Collects are short prayers that often express what we have heard in the readings, concerns we have in common. They are full of treasured cadences like “who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature,” or “whose property is always to have mercy.”

We conclude with the Collect for Grace:

O LORD our heavenly Father, Almighty and everlasting God, who hast safely brought us to the beginning of this day: Defend us in the same with thy mighty power; and grant that this day we fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger; but that all our doings may be ordered by thy governance, to do always that is righteous in thy sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹²

At the end of these prayers, we are led in the Intercessions by someone from our congregation. Here we pray more specifically—for

the homeless and poor of our cities, for our government leaders, for those in violent conflict or terrible disasters, for those fighting wildfires, for medical staff in remote countries, for the people of Ukraine, for those who are sick in our own congregation. We end with a time of silence in which we ask for God's care for our own concerns. Today it's my son who's struggling to get a decent job, my aging mother, a meeting Monday morning that is apt to be contentious, my husband's hip pain that's keeping him from cycling.

Concluding our prayer time, we end with a giant thank-you in the Great Thanksgiving. It's the quintessential omnibus prayer.

ALMIGHTY God, Father of all mercies, We thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks For all thy goodness and loving-kindness, To us and to all people. We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; But above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; For the means of grace, And for the hope of glory. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, That our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, And that we show forth thy praise, Not only with our lips, but in our lives; By giving up ourselves to thy service, And by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, To whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.¹³

I love the seven “alls” (as one poet describes them, “all the alls”)—they expand within me as we say them—*all* goodness, *all* people, *all* blessings, *all* mercies, *all* days.

At its core, we are saying thanks for our salvation in Christ, for loving us so much, “for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ.” It's a prayer that embodies its substance.

Literary scholar Alan Jacobs writes, “For many who have felt themselves at the mercy of chaotic forces from within or without, the style of the prayer book has healing powers. It provides equitable balance when we ourselves have none.”¹⁴

I think of Jacobs’s words when people ask me about the repetition in using the prayer book. I know that I learn through repetition, and this has gotten truer as I get older. To repeat something to myself is often the beginning of internalizing it, for good and for ill.

When one of our sons was twelve or thirteen, he complained because he wanted to go to a church with more spontaneity. Why did our church have to be so formal, to say fancy words over and over? One of the things I remember him saying was, “I could be shaped by any old words I say week after week; it wouldn’t matter if it was a beer commercial!”

I thought a lot about this. I tried reciting a few beer commercials several days in a row. “You only go around once in this life, so you have to grab for all the gusto you can get”¹⁵ and “Head for the mountains”¹⁶ were two I experimented on. “If you’ve got the time, we’ve got the beer”¹⁷ didn’t do much. What I eventually figured out was that for words to stay with you, to shape you, they need resonance, to get traction in our tender hearts—and beer commercials don’t reach that standard. The prayer book, so deeply saturated with Scripture, does.

The Prayer of Thanksgiving is followed by the short prayer of Saint John Chrysostom, and then the blessing, my favorite of which is from Saint Paul’s letter to the Philippians, “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

Our worship service ends with more music, usually a hymn and postlude. In the music we are given the chance to tuck ourselves into the goodness and truths of our worship, a sustenance for the week ahead.

At the very close, after we are sure the last notes of the postlude have truly ended, there is a fun sort of mayhem—shuffling and grabbing of coats but also a move toward coffee (and hopefully doughnuts) in the big common room behind the sanctuary. Kids who were in Sunday school find their parents and race off again to snacks. We chat, introduce ourselves more fully to someone near us we don't know, get a hug from a friend. The tone at the end is so different than at the beginning. As Tim Challies hoped, in the Call to Worship “we have been reminded who we really are, reminded who Christ is.”



I had only participated in the service of Evening Prayer once or twice, but as Covid-19 clamped down on us in March 2020, Evening Prayer changed our lives as well.

Two of our kids had decided to come back to Vancouver, one from Los Angeles and one from Montreal. They were both isolated and lonely. Craig and I tossed them the keys to our second car at the airport so they could quarantine at our house for two weeks, and we headed to our small cottage in the islands to wait them out. Within the next ten days, as the world changed, our doctor said to us, “Stay put. Don't leave the island; don't go anywhere. The kids are together in your house. They're fine.”

Old friends just up the driveway were also staying put. In our isolation, the four of us began to have Evening Prayer on our deck. Every night, rain or shine, at 5:00 p.m. we'd finish whatever we were doing, shut down our laptops, and grab our jackets (and occasionally our blankets). Our friends would arrive and we'd debrief about the day, share global and local news, and then begin to pray.

To say that Evening Prayer was a lifeline would be an understatement. Our friends were often the only people we saw in a day or a week. We took turns reading the psalm, Old Testament, and New Testament passages aloud and saying the liturgy together.

Usually the four of us sang a hymn. “I Feel the Winds of God Today” was our favorite, and remembering our happy but off-key voices singing to the waves crashing in the Salish Sea—“If cast on shores of selfish ease, or pleasure I should be, O let me feel your freshening breeze, and I’ll put back to sea”¹⁸—cheers me still. It makes me teary too.

Saying Evening Prayer so regularly gave us all a new adventure and a road home. Its words tethered us to each other, to hope for the days ahead, to Christ. For nearly twelve weeks, this liturgy was our perch.

Evening Prayer differs slightly from Morning Prayer in content but not structure. It is intended to be said as evening begins, ideally right before dinner, and it follows the same progression of sin-grace-faith, moving from the Opening Sentences to General Confession and Absolution to Scripture readings and the Creed; collects to closing blessing. It, too, is a dialogue with God. If you are in a church setting, there are wonderful sung pieces interspersed that suit the closing of the daytime hours. Evening Prayer is shorter than Morning Prayer, and it reflects the vulnerability of the darkness ahead (and in our case, the pandemic around us). It asks, “by your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.” We entreat the Lord that “your holy angels may lead us in paths of peace and goodwill.”¹⁹

Created long before there was electricity to keep us at work and up later at night, Evening Prayer shifts us to face our vulnerability, our need to rest in Christ. While in Morning prayer we pray for the vulnerability of the day and possible dangers ahead, in Evening Prayer we focus on God’s protection, on His holding us secure. We say the words of Psalm 139, “‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,’ then shall my night be turned to day. Even the darkness is not dark to you, and the night is as clear as the day; the darkness and the light to you are both alike” (Psalm 139:10-11).

We confess, we are forgiven, we hear His Word, we ask for His care upon our lives, we give thanks. We walk the steps through a less

obvious but far more accurate and hopeful story of our world and our lives. Darkness remains and so does our vulnerability, but lightened and reminded of God's strength and unswerving presence, we are ready to rest in the assurances of Evening Prayer.

It was and is a lovely way to end the day.

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