

More
than
Words

Living What We Pray
A Lenten Journey from Sacredise.com

More than Words

A Lenten Journey

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Johannesburg



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A Lenten Journey

The season of Lent is designed to be a journey of transformation. As Jesus entered the wilderness for a time of soul-searching, testing, and preparation for ministry, so we enter a metaphorical wilderness to learn to live according to his values and priorities. Prayer was a significant feature of Jesus' life, and so we assume that he spent much of his retreat in prayer. And that's why it is appropriate to use this season to explore in greater depth the prayer that Jesus taught soon after he had come out of the wilderness.

But in this time of global pandemic, we have learned that prayer needs to change. And in this Lenten Series, *More Than Words*, we will be challenged not just to say more prayers or say better prayers, but to live what we pray. Done well, this journey can transform prayer from something we say to something we become. In each chapter we explore one line of the Lord's Prayer, seek to understand its meaning, and then learn to put our prayer into practice in our daily lives. My hope is that this will not only transform our prayer lives, but that it will transform us to be people who embody the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed.

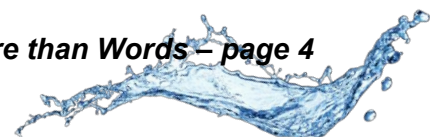
FOR WORSHIP

The journey in *More Than Words* can be used for online video worship, or for 'in-person' worship gatherings. It includes gathering meditations, prayers, readings, sermon starters, response meditations, guidelines for carrying the worship into daily living, and a specially crafted Table Liturgy which can be used on any Sunday that the Eucharist is celebrated.

FOR SMALL GROUPS

More Than Words can also provide guidelines for small group study. The best way to engage small groups on this journey is to encourage them to share together in the worship of the community, taking notes in the sermons, and recording any thoughts, questions, or experiences that arise. Then, in the small group meeting, these personal observations can be shared.

The preparing, responding, and integrating practices can all be repeated in the small group, to create a framework for the worship that repeats what has happened on Sunday. This repetition ensures that the weekly worship is integrated more deeply into the lives of the worshippers. When the sermon is discussed in the group, the following questions can be a helpful guide:



1. *What stood out for you in this week's reading, and in the message that was preached? Why do you think this particularly caught your attention?*
2. *What does this 'word' mean to you for your spiritual walk in the next week, month, and year?*
3. *How are you working to integrate this 'word' into your daily living?*

FOR PERSONAL DEVOTION

The best devotional practice is inseparably connected with both corporate worship and small group reflection. Instead of following a completely different resource, or having to wade through even more words, it is more effective for us to return to the words that we have already heard and received in our communal worship and reflect more deeply on them. And then we can engage with what we are learning practically by repeating the response practices from our Sunday worship, and by being intentional about integrating our learning into our lives in practical ways through the integration practices that are offered at the close of each week's worship. This is the approach that is embraced in this resource.

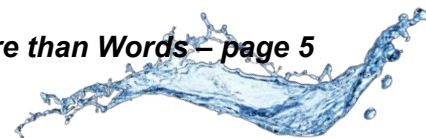
In order to facilitate this devotional approach in your congregation, I recommend that you give people some way to remember the message they have heard in the preaching—by encouraging them to take their own notes, or by handing out pre-printed summary notes. In addition, it can be helpful to ensure that the response and integration practices are available for easy reference so that people can engage with them during the week. This can either be included in the handouts, or people can be invited to write the practices down before they leave the worship.

Alternatively, social media can also be used to engage people more deeply with these practices in their own time, and video or audio recordings of the sermon can be included as well.

I hope that *More Than Words* will be a meaningful journey for you and your community. And that it will lead you into a deeper experience of prayer. In this time in history we desperately need a transformation in our understanding and practice of prayer, and this resource is offered as one small step toward that revolution. As you move through the Lord's Prayer each week, I hope that *More Than Words* will empower you to learn to live what you pray. Because that one shift can make a huge difference to your life and to the people for whom you pray.

Grace

John



Oh God...

Chapter One: Ash Wednesday



PREPARING

Call to Worship:

Lent is traditionally a time in which we open ourselves to be transformed. Since prayer is also about being changed, it is appropriate to bring the Lord's Prayer and the Lenten journey together. In each week we will make time to prepare ourselves for the process ahead in our time of spiritual practice. The focus of this preparation time will be a reflection on how well we have integrated the learnings from the previous week. But since this is the first week in this series we will begin with a more general reflection.

Begin with a time of grounding and becoming still. It may be helpful to encourage everyone to close their eyes and deepen their breathing. Then invite them to think about the kind of person they want to be or become. Encourage them to think about what may be standing in the way of them being that person, and what may be contributing to moving them closer to becoming what they aspire to.

Praying:

When you were preparing for your work of ministry,
when you needed to decide who you were going to be,
you went into the wilderness to pray, Jesus.
And now, as we seek to become more like you,



we go into this season of Lent,
our metaphorical wilderness,
and we ask you to teach us to pray.

Forgive us that we so often use prayer as a shopping list,
and you as an ATM;
Forgive us that we have allowed ourselves to believe
that just speaking words is enough;
And forgive us that we so often fail
to allow our prayers to change us.

***We thank you for your grace
that never gives up on us,
for your love
that fills us and transforms us,
and for your presence
that empowers us to live what we pray.***

Amen.

LISTENING

Hearing the Sacred Text:

Matthew 6:6-7

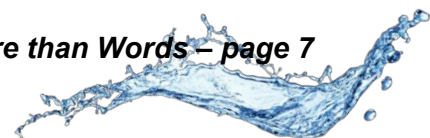
But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

When you pray, don't pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they'll be heard. Don't be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask.

Sermon Starter:

"I am now clear of COVID. Thank you for your prayers." I read this message from a friend on Facebook the other day and found myself wondering again about prayer. My friend seemed to be crediting his return to health to the prayers that his faith community had offered on his behalf. But how many of the over two million people who have died from the Coronavirus were also praying? How many had 'prayer warriors' across the world pleading with God for healing which never came?

If the global pandemic of the last year has not challenged how we think about prayer then we haven't been paying attention. Traditionally, prayer is defined as 'talking to God'. For most believers, this takes the form of asking God to intervene in their lives in some way. Recently a South African faith leader called for one



million people to gather and pray for our nation. The idea was that God would have to respond when so many people came together in prayer. Yet I couldn't help but wonder why a gathering of a million people would be of more interest to God than the millions of prayers that surely get offered daily by people across our country. COVID-19 has shown us that our traditional views of prayer are inadequate for the complexity of our world. If we see God as a Supreme Being sitting outside of the world in some distant heaven, swooping in to intervene if enough people ask with enough passion, then we will struggle to make sense of the pandemic. But there has to be a better way to think of prayer.

Jesus And Prayer

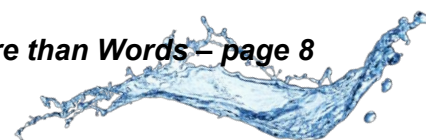
Jesus often sought solitude to pray. The first significant time in the Gospels was at the start of his ministry when he fasted and prayed in the desert for 40 days. We're never told what the content of his prayers were. I think that's a gift. But shortly after returning from his retreat and beginning his work, Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Matthew includes Jesus' core teaching on prayer in the middle of his famous 'Sermon on the Mount'—which is his summary of Jesus' message.

In this short discourse we discover that for Jesus prayer is not about words. He rejects the practice of babbling long prayers to get God's attention. He shows that it's not about getting the words right. It's not about *saying* prayers at all. For Jesus, prayer is about how we live. Prayer is about what we become.

A New Kind Of Prayer

The specific prayer that Jesus taught his followers, which we now know as the Lord's Prayer, was not meant to be a set of words that we repeat ad nauseam. Rather it is a framework to guide our prayer. It was common for rabbis in Jesus' day to give their disciples a short prayer structure which they could expand in their own way. But Jesus' prayer is also a way of training our hearts, minds, and wills to think, connect, and act in new ways—ways that align with the compassionate, interconnected, and generous way of living that Jesus taught and lived.

Lent is traditionally seen as a time of journeying with Jesus through the wilderness. There couldn't be a more appropriate metaphor for the global crisis we are facing. What better way could there be to navigate this journey than to learn from Jesus a new way to pray? We need a prayer practice that makes much more sense in this era. One in which we do not beg God to swoop in from outside of the world to intervene. But one in which we experience the Divine Spirit constantly at work in our world and our lives. One in which the prayers we say are simply training and motivation for the prayers we live. And that is what this series is about.



Building Your Practice This Lent

We will begin with the prayer that Jesus taught, taking one line at a time and exploring what Jesus' words mean and what his intention may have been. And then we will carry the prayer into our week in two ways. Firstly, we will use it as a springboard for our own prayer practice—the time when we meditate, say prayers, and open to God's presence and Spirit. Secondly, we will seek to live out the meaning of that line in the normal routines of our daily lives.

For now I invite you to spend this week immersing yourself in the prayer. Pray it often. Use different translations of the prayer from different Bible versions. Pray it fast or slowly. Take it one line at a time and spend time in silence in between. But allow the prayer to sink into your soul.

RESPONDING

Since this is Ash Wednesday, and as a way to symbolically enter the wilderness in this Lenten season, it is appropriate to share in the traditional Ash Wednesday ritual.

Usually this would be done with ash, but for the purposes of this practice we will use dust. If this ritual is shared via online, video-based worship, then each participant can arrange for their own dust, mix it with a little water, and have it ready to apply to their forehead. If this ritual is shared in an 'in-person' worship gathering, then the dust can be prepared beforehand. Ashes may be used, but if it is, then care should be taken to mix the ashes with oil and not with water which can cause burning of the skin.

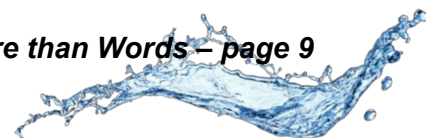
In a moment of silence, everyone prepares themselves for this ritual. The following prayer can be used as part of this preparation:

The wilderness is a place of dust,
a place where we remember our mortality,
a place where we are transformed,
so that our lives become more than just the dust of our flesh.

***May this dust, symbolic of the wilderness
through which we travel this Lent,
help us to be mindful of the way of Christ,
and to commit to living what we pray.***

Amen.

The dust is then applied to the forehead. Those gathered via video can apply the dust to their own foreheads, or family members can do so for one another. In 'in-person' worship, it would probably be best to have small containers with dust given to each person so that there is no physical touch happening. At the appointed time, each person can apply the dust to their own forehead as all say the following words together:



*I am made of dust.
My body comes from dust and it will return to dust.
But within in me is the Divine Spirit,
a treasure within this jar of clay,
and so I am more than dust,
and I am a carrier of God's love and presence
in my world.
Amen.*

INTEGRATING

Practice Through The Next Few Days:

Since this Lenten journey is focussed on prayer, the best way to integrate the spiritual practice of today is to create a special personal space for prayer, solitude, and reflection through this season. It may be good to bring together symbols, images, and objects in an altar that represents the wilderness. Creating this space and your altar can be the work of this week.

Sending Words:

Go now, to pray
and to live what you pray,
in Christ's name.
Amen.

