

[BLANK] [PRAYER] Good morning. And it is a good morning, isn't it? Who would have thought that we could finally get to cool, crisp Fall weather. What a blessing it is to be in New England this time of year. It reminds me that, today, weather has not been a blessing lately to so many people, in our nation, and beyond. [FLORIDA] In places like Mexico City, Florida, whole neighborhoods have been leveled, where hurricanes have never done much damage in the past. [HAITI] In the island nation of Haiti, Hurricane Michael has leveled areas that had never fully recovered from the earthquake and mudslide damages from several years ago. [UMCOR] I urge you to donate something - anything - to our United Methodist Committee on Relief to help begin and to continue healing from such disasters. [BLANK]

And, of course, I encourage you to pray for the people affected by these storms. I encourage you to pray, knowing that, honestly, prayer is not the strongest of habits for many people. [SIGN] When Hurricanes Harvey and Maria were destroying homes and lives last year, I held a special prayer service at this church. To be honest, almost no one came. It was on short notice, as happens often for events like this, and I was still very new to this community, then, so I wasn't expecting a huge turnout. But it really did make me think: Do people really believe in prayer? Or do we say, "You're in my prayers" as a convenient phrase, but avoid bringing our concerns before God? [BLANK]

Do you pray? No, let me put it this way: do you really pray? Do you bring your joys and concerns to the God who made you, the God who died for you, the God who wants to enter your life? Do you pray, knowing that, sometimes, we need to make space for God to really enter the conversation? Do you pray to God like you phone or text your best friends, your spouse, your parents, your kids? Do you hang on God's answers to your prayers like you hang on for answers from them on your phone?

Don't worry, this is not a quiz that you have to turn in. All of us fail this test a good amount of the time, because life is busy. Life is complicated. We are living our own lives, focused on our own story, not God's story. At least, until, things change, and we have to figure out where our story fits in to a new story that surrounds us. Think of the people in Mexico City, Florida, and Haiti, who are sitting, right now, in the middle of enormous, unexpected change. When we have to see where our lives fit in to a changing world, when we can't avoid adapting to change, our relationship to the God, through prayer, can be the sure and steady guide to answers that we might not even be asking for in the middle of life's most difficult changes.

Do you remember last week's readings from the Bible story of Job? Job seemed to have all the answers to life. A great family, great wealth, great health, lots of respect, and he was devoted to God. But some of God's angels weren't sure if Job could hold on to his love for God, in the middle of life-changing catastrophes.

And so, a loving God allowed Job to be tested by these angels. God didn't want Job to be hurt, but God knew that there was something that Job had to learn about loving God in the middle of painful changes. There are things that we can learn only by talking to God when we least want to talk to God, as Jesus showed us when God's very

own self suffered on the cross. And in those moments, we learn how God helps us to change, and to grow, in ways that we might have never imagined were possible.

[DIAGRAM] The psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross came up with a model for how people deal with painful change. She saw that first we tend to go through a period of shock and denial when we experience a painful change. As we begin to get in touch with the reality of the change, we begin to sense one of our most basic emotions - anger. As we sort through our emotions, we begin to try to bargain our way into a sense of wholeness again. Often, though, there is nothing to bargain over, like when a loved one has died, or a hurricane that has leveled our home. As we realize we can't bargain our way out of a painful change, depression might set in for a while. This is when we need to be careful to get good care to help us to heal, and to grow. Eventually, over time, we begin to accept the truth of the change, and to accept how we must move forward.

Of course, often, life, and how we respond to life, looks a lot more like this: [MESSY ARROWS] As they say, life happens. And our lives are so often a jumble of different things pulling us in different directions. And yet, in the middle of this jumble, Christian discipleship is there to remind us that God's answers come to us in prayers most often, and most powerfully, when we search out God's guidance in our lives devotedly, and constantly. [BLANK]

Job had to endure very painful changes in his life. He lost his family, his wealth, his health. Nothing was the same, and nothing was good. Job sat quietly for several days, as his friends sat with him. Eventually his friends offered Job reasons why God would allow these things to happen to him. But Job rejected his friends' reasons, and shared his anger with God. He was angry that he had been a good person, and yet God did not prevent the bad things that happened to him. His prayers seem to have gone unanswered. This week in Job's story, he was trying to bargain with God - he wanted to prove his innocence to God, like pleading his case to a judge in a courtroom! When Job saw that God would not respond to his prayer to prove himself, he got depressed. He felt lost. And yet, he was still devoted to God, talking, and waiting for answers.

Perhaps we give up on prayer so easily, sometimes, because we don't want to experience the frustration and emptiness that Job felt. We don't want to face the possible sense of aloneness, and rejection, that the courage to pray opens up. We get afraid that God is not ever going to listen, or that we can never listen carefully enough for the answers. This can stop us from asking God for what we want and what we need. And that, of course, would be the most foolish thing of all.

God always wants to hear our prayers. God wants to answer our prayers. But not all of our prayers are meant to be answered the way that we expect them to be answered, in the middle of life's changes. Life exists, because God made change possible. [BIG BANG] God's first words spoken in the Bible are, "Let there be light." Everything was dark, and, then, things changed, more, and more, until life itself came into being. Life exists, because change is possible. Prayer keeps us talking with the one who brought us to life in love through change, so that we can be our most alive selves through changes.

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Any prayer is a good prayer, in the sense that a prayer starts a conversation with God. But remember that prayer IS a conversation - not a fast-food order. Prayer is an ongoing conversation with God, the author of all change, change that we need God's love to accept and to understand, love that helps us to hear God's responses in our conversation. Job was angry. Job was depressed. But Job kept praying. Job hadn't given up on the conversation. And neither should we. Because what we think is God's silence in the middle of change just might be the time to listen for answers to questions we never even asked.

When our son Christopher was about to be born, June-Ann was scheduled for a Cesarean delivery on a Saturday. We were living in New Jersey at the time. June-Ann dropped me off at the train station to go to work in New York City on that Friday morning. We joked with one another, "Wouldn't it be funny if the baby decided to come today?" At lunchtime, I went to a church near my office to worship and pray. On the way back, to my complete surprise, an angel of God spoke to me and said, "Call your wife." I rushed to my office, and called her, She was in hard labor, and confused. By God's grace, I heard God guiding me in an enormous, unexpected change, and got home as quickly as I could to drive June-Ann to the hospital, where Christopher was born, safely.

Why do prayers sometimes seem to go unanswered? Because God has important things to tell us in the middle of life's changes, and those messages are not always going to stop changes, or the need for us to change. Sometimes, God's answers are staring us right in the face, waiting for us to listen to God. And, sometimes, God is waiting for us to listen to God, so that we can become the answer to God's prayers, one day at a time; one person at a time; one storm at a time; one change at a time.

Keep praying. Make your conversation with God part of your life. And then, listen, always, for unexpected, loving answers, in the middle of life's changes. Amen.