

Masked man

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A woman brought a small book to our church a couple of years ago. She put it on the wooden table in our worship room, right beside the guest book and the orders of worship. Inside the cover she wrote, "Prayers and Thoughts of Covenant People." She left a pencil beside the book but provided no instructions. She never mentioned the book publicly, so neither did I. Occasionally someone notices the book and is inspired to write in it, expressing whatever happens to be on her mind or in her heart. Over time it has become something like a cross between a diary and book of common prayers.

God be with my brother-in-law in this, his time of great sorrow.

(a child's handwriting) Thank you God for my life. Maddie

Bougainvillea update—cuttings rooted

Thank you, dear God, for all the small ways you make yourself known to small people like me.

Help me let go of the right things. Amen.

(a child's handwriting) Dear God, help the poor. Help others need you. Everybody is in pain. They need you. Please help us. p.s. Amen

Dear God, be with our grieving nation. We were searching for truth. Does that count as searching for you?

Trees Lay Down

Brown Earth Opens To The Sky

A Building Rises

Help me God. You know why I write this.

If it is dark, it really doesn't help to know that light is on the other side of the door. But it is a blessed relief if just one person opens the door a crack for you. Turn the knob.

Flipping through our prayer book is like being on a spiritual archeological dig. We are excavating the layers of our community soul. Sometimes I recognize the handwriting and can guess at what was going on in a friend's life at that time. But mostly I have no idea what these prayers meant. I have no idea, for instance, what the bougainvillea prayer was about. It must have been important to someone who enjoys the earth and watching things grow.

What comes to your mind when you think about prayer? Do you think of someone on her knees, eyes squeezed shut, lips moving and hands clasped tightly together? Do you think of the beautiful and carefully written prayers we hear in church on Sunday mornings? Do you think of children kneeling by their beds with their parents or maybe of the desperate prayers in the family room outside the Intensive Care Unit?

When you think about prayer, do you think of a single act and a set of words cobbled together and offered to the heavens? Or do all the prayers run together in your mind?

I am coming to think of prayer as time and layers that run backward and downward through the enmeshed stories of our lives. I hear many voices at once, calling, crying, screaming, laughing and bargaining. I can brush lightly at the prayers I find embedded in the layers of my relationships, but those prayers can no longer stand alone. They have become ancient sounds and single notes in a lifelong symphony of desire and hope.

The little book on our table shows me that prayer has become more life than event, more music than words, more desire than obligation. I don't remember why we felt afraid. I don't remember which prayers were answered. I don't even remember what we mean when we speak of answered prayers.

If you asked me about prayer, I would lay my hand on our book. I would tell you to look backward and downward through its pages. This is who we are and where we have been. Everything, even our grief and sorrow, has been cast like seeds upon the good earth of faith. Nothing is too small or too great for prayer.

Prayer has taken root in our lives, like bougainvilleas.