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1 Samuel 28:13-14, NRSV.

¹³ The king said to her, "Have no fear; what do you see?" The woman said to Saul, "I see a divine being coming up out of the ground." ¹⁴ He said to her, "What is his appearance?" She said, "An old man is coming up; he is wrapped in a robe." So Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance.

Stick With God: *The Witch of Endor.*

One of the most intriguing stories in the Bible is in 1 Samuel. King Saul was the first king of Israel. But due to his moral corruption, God has chosen young David to replace him. Saul has been trying to hunt down and kill David, viewing him as a threat to Saul's dynasty. The Prophet Samuel has told Saul that indeed, God has torn the kingdom away from Saul and handed it to David. There is a long-standing hatred on Saul's part: ever since the boy David killed the Philistine champion Goliath and David became exalted by the Chosen People, Saul has been filled with jealousy. The Prophet Samuel has since died. Although Israel is not yet a single, integrated nation, as it will be under David, Saul is trying to gather all the Israelites together to fight the Philistines. Saul is under great duress, with his reign as king threatened, a mighty, vicious enemy attacking, and his forces deeply

vulnerable. But God has turned his back on Saul and in desperation, Saul chooses a path away from God. This is what we are told:

⁵ When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. ⁶ When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, not by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. ⁷ Then Saul said to his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, so that I may go to her and inquire of her." His servants said to him, "There is a medium at Endor."

The word "Urim" refers to sacred objects used by high priests to communicate with God, often referring to casting lots. So, when Saul is confronted with the massive Philistine army, God does not come to his aid, not with words, not by sacred lots, not in Saul's dreams, and not by the words of any living Prophet. Saul asks for a medium, or we might say a witch, from a town called Endor to see him. Saul, knowing that what he is doing is wrong, disguises himself and meets with the witch. Saul tells the witch that he wants to talk to a special person, but does not name him. She makes this person appear, and it turns out to be Samuel.

With this, she realizes that she has been talking to Saul, and we read this:

¹² When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"

One reason she is stunned is because Saul had previously outlawed any form of witchery, or the use of sorcerers. Indeed, Saul is not simply seeking council outside of God: he is being a hypocrite by breaking one of his own royal orders.

The witch is afraid that she could get into trouble for making the Prophet Samuel appear before Saul himself. Perhaps this is a trick, she is thinking, to trap her.

¹⁵ Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" Saul answered, "I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams; so I have summoned you to tell me what I should do." ¹⁶ Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? ¹⁷ The LORD has done to you just as he spoke by me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbor, David. ¹⁸ Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD, and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you today. ¹⁹ Moreover the LORD will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; the LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines."

Here is a passage from the New Testament, from Acts, Chapter 19. This also tells us that it is against God's will to turn to magical things, that there is no other other-worldly realm than God's world. We read about Paul curing the sick in Ephesus, which will become the new center of Christianity after Rome destroys Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 A.D. Seven sons of a Jewish high priest try to cast out an evil spirit by mimicking Jesus' words, as if they were simply some sort of magical incantation and not dependent on the will of Jesus. They have no true faith. They have no relationship with God. The words are empty. The result is that the possessed man, whom we know today was probably simply a mentally ill man who needed to be cured of an illness, beats them all up and chases them away. The result is that more people come to know Jesus and God:

¹¹ God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, ¹² so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them. ¹³ Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” ¹⁴ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵ But the evil spirit said to them in reply, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” ¹⁶ Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. ¹⁷ When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised. ¹⁸ Also many of those who became believers confessed and disclosed their practices. ¹⁹ A number of those who practiced magic collected their books and burned them publicly; when the value of these books was calculated, it was found to come to fifty thousand silver coins. ²⁰ So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

The important distinction is that Paul is curing people under the authority of God.

The Prophets in the Old Testament, along with one Prophetess, Deborah, perform miracles, but again, they are acting as the voice and will of God. The traditional Jewish and Christian teaching is that humans, on their own, cannot perform miracles and any attempt at doing so is an attempt to be like God. We notice, as is often the case in the Bible, someone acting against the will of God ends up serving God by causing people to give up the useless practice of magic incantation and instead embracing the teachings of Jesus – and putting their trust in God.

These passages, along with several other similar stories in the Bible, seem abstract and not real to us today. But we get the idea. Stick with God. Even if God doesn't seem to be talking to you, even if your faith doesn't seem in the

moment to be paying off by giving you security and joy, be patient, trust God, perhaps work a little harder at communicating with God, and remember that God does not buffer us from pain, sickness, loss, and loneliness. This doesn't feel real, but we know the lesson is that magical incantations, people who claim to have special gifts, and fake Prophets are not an easier alternative to a deep, sustained, determined trust in God. These "magical" stories in the Bible don't connect with us on a personal level, because we don't do magic. They are symbolic, intangible. But if we look at this from the perspective of ancient people, things are different. In the Greco-Roman world, in the cultures surrounding the Israelites, and among Jewish people during the earthly life of Jesus, the belief in magic was widespread and deeply embedded in the daily lives of people. They didn't have a notion of modern science, and so they couldn't separate the mysteries of the natural world from the supernatural. Magic and sorcery were seen as ways of manipulating the unseen world. They carried amulets, memorized protective spells, and learned curses to defeat enemies. They would write messages on tablets and toss them into wells and deep waters to reach the underworld. This is why Jesus is accused of using demonic forces multiple times, as in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus cures a blind and mute man, only to have the Pharisees say of Jesus, *"It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons."*

Recently, I found the door to the chapel at the hospital closed, and I went to open it so that people would know that it was available. But I found a woman inside, sitting in a chair, a Bible in her lap, praying out loud in a soft voice. She was young, around 30. She saw me, and without pausing in her prayer, nodded at me and gave me a smile. I backed out of the room. The part of her prayer that I heard struck me. She said something like, *“I come to you because I love my father, not because I need him.”* I talked to her later when she knocked on the chaplains’ office after she was done praying. I apologized for interrupting her. She told me it didn’t matter, then she gave me the room number for her father and asked me to please go pray with him later. He was quite ill, but things looked positive. I told her that I was intrigued by what I overheard in her prayer. We started talking, and she explained to me that it had always been important to her to keep her heart pure when she prays, to never come to God for herself. She said that of course God knew that she desperately wanted for her father to live because she did count on him in her life. But she did her best to keep the focus on the person she was praying for and not on herself. We will call her Andrea.

“I come to you because I love my father, not because I need him.”

Compare Andrea’s prayer to the prayer in Psalm 109. It is attributed to David, but it is unlikely he personally wrote it. Our pseudo-David cries out to God because

an enemy has surrounded him with “*hatred*” in response to David’s “*love*” and that enemy is “*speaking against*” him “*with lying tongues*”. David prays:

- ⁶ *Appoint a wicked man against him;
let an accuser stand at his right hand.*
- ⁷ *When he is tried, let him come forth guilty;
let his prayer be counted as sin!*
- ⁸ *May his days be few;
may another take his office!*
- ⁹ *May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow!*
- ¹⁰ *May his children wander about and beg,
seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit!*
- ¹¹ *May the creditor seize all that he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!*
- ¹² *Let there be none to extend kindness to him,
nor any to pity his fatherless children!*

David envisions a courtroom controlled by God, with a “*wicked man*” presenting the case against David’s enemy and with this person being found guilty. David calls for total ruin for this person, including God ignoring this man’s prayer, God cutting the man’s life short, God forcing his children to beg for food and live on the street, God having all his assets confiscated, and God seeing to it that no one shows any pity for his destitute children. How many of us would pray in this brutal way? This prayer, besides it being a selfish, is a cruel call to torture an enemy and his family. This prayer is quite reminiscent of magical curses or hexes that were cast in the ancient world. In this Hebrew adaptation of a magical practice, the psalmist is asking for God’s help in casting an evil spell. It is bizarre.

This gives us a better idea of why there was such a repeated, dramatic call against magic, against sorcery in the Old Testament. They were trying to make a major change in spiritual practices. They were engineering an evolution from ritualistic, magical spell casting, whereby the words themselves were supposed to empower the speaker, to acts of true prayer where all the power is in the hands of God and the human is merely the humble supplicant. This gives us a much better understanding of the true motivation behind this passage from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew where Jesus is teaching us how to pray:

⁷ *“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

⁹ *“Pray then in this way:*

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.*

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come.*

*Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*

¹¹ *Give us this day our daily bread.*

¹² *And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

¹³ *And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.*

¹⁴ *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

Jesus starts out by saying *“do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.”* Jesus is saying that

Gentiles, and he means pagans, believe that they can make something happen simply by spouting magical phrases, that their words alone will get the job done, that the power is within them because they are energized with magical words. Then Jesus says, *“Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* Jesus says that it’s not the words that have power. It’s not us who have the power. But when we come before God with humility, God, who already knows what we’re going to pray for, will respond to what is in our heart, to our humility, to our sincere attempt to connect with God. When the passage gets into the body of the Lord’s Prayer, we begin with a statement of submission to God:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
10 Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*

This is a modest, humble starting point as we connect with God: just give us what we need each day to survive. Then we ask to be protected from evil. Jesus ends by reminding us that if we want to be forgiven, we cannot achieve this with magical words; rather, we earn this forgiveness by being forgiving.

Getting back to Andrea, we had a long talk about prayer, and I found her to be one of the most sincere and genuine people of prayer that I have ever met. She told me that prayer had always been a part of her life, that her father had

been instrumental in teaching her to present herself to God. When Andrea was little, they would read the Bible together. It was the first book where she ever learned to read words on her own. Not a child's book, not a picture or story book, but the adult Bible. Dad told her that life would be very difficult at times, and that she needed to learn to turn to God. He told her that God could read her mind, that God didn't need her to say what she wanted. The best prayer, Andrea said, was one where she laid her concerns at the feet of God, because God wants honesty. Dad said to offer God your trust in the outcome and to ask for peace and comfort. Her father did leave the hospital, and he went home to continue the long process of healing. He would be surrounded by people who loved him.

As the Israelites moved from a multi-god world, where gods were human-like, competed with each other, did not always have the best interests of humans in mind, and succumbed to anger, vengeance, and envy, to a world where there was one loving, omniscient God, they learned to pray and not conjure. Although there are remnants of magical practices in the Hebrew Scriptures, a beautiful place to study praying is in the Psalms. Scholars have categorized them, and the categories alone tell us a lot about what it means to turn to God with full trust, rather than trying to manipulate God into doing our will. There are 1) psalms of *lament*, where we lay our pain at the feet of God and submit to his will; 2) psalms

of *praise* where we celebrate God's power, mercy, and kindness; 3) psalms of *thanksgiving*, where we offer our joyous gratitude after God has guided us through darkness; 4) psalms of *trust* where we simply tell God that no matter what, we do fully trust him; 5) psalms of *wisdom*, where we commit ourselves to living a life of wisdom and morality; and 6) psalms that are called *imprecatory*, where we implore God to suppress evil and guide all people to living by God's will. There are two other sorts of psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures, ones that can be hard to map onto our cultural practices today. One of them is 7) psalms of *prophecy*, where the psalmist would typically celebrate the reign of the family of David and his role as a worldly savior and prophet of his people; but today, we could view a prayer of prophecy as an opportunity to celebrate the arrival of Jesus into this world and into our lives. The other is 8) psalms of *ascension* that Israelites would sing as they made the uphill trip into Jerusalem to celebrate a major festival like Passover; we can offer a prayer of ascension as we open our hearts entering church on Sunday and build our faith and our faith community.

We need to stick with God as our creator and Lord. Prayers are not magical incantations that empower us to bend God to our will. Our focus is on putting our full trust in God. We don't always make ourselves the center of our prayers. We lay our hearts open and seek the spiritual health of ourselves and others.