

411 | Holy Grounds | Reframing Prayer After a Faith Transition

Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Brittany Mangelson 00:33

Hello, everyone, welcome to another episode of Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson and today we are going to be bringing you a conversation as part of our Holy Grounds series, which is all about spiritual practices. Our guest today is not new to the podcast by any means. I'm here with my dear friend, Nancy Ross, and we are going to be talking about prayer after a faith transition. So, Nancy, like I said, you're not new to the podcast, but why don't you just give our listeners just a brief overview of who you are?

Nancy Ross 01:07

Hello, thank you for inviting me. I am a former Mormon, and I live in southern Utah, and I pastor the Southern Utah Emerging Congregation. And, yeah, I'm a professor. I'm a professor in my day job, and yeah, that's, that's who I am.

Brittany Mangelson 01:29

Awesome. I'm really excited to have this conversation. And I think that it's going to be more of a conversation, not necessarily a traditional interview because we, this is a topic that we are both figuring out. We've both been on our own journeys with for several years. And the request for this episode actually came from someone who is also transitioning out of the LDS tradition. So, our framework is largely going to focus on that, and our specific experience. We can only speak to our experience.

Nancy Ross 02:02

Indeed.

Brittany Mangelson 02:02

But I do think that there's a lot of overlap when it comes to prayer and the type of God that, you know, blesses or takes away, based on faith, and you mingle in the prosperity gospel, and a God that can stop bad things from happening if you have enough faith. So, although we are going to be speaking from our historical context, I do think that there is enough broad overlap that hopefully, it will be relatable to a lot of different people. So, let's just dive right in: prayer.

Nancy Ross 02:37

Yeah, so you know, and I feel like what I'm about to say from my own story is like a really common story that I've heard from a lot of people, which is that, you know, I used to pray really regularly. That was very much a part of my, like, every day, multiple times a day, spiritual practice. And as I didn't, at the time, I probably didn't know that I was getting ready to leave Mormonism, but, you know, I experimented with, like, praying to Heavenly Mother or, you know, using some different God language, and trying to find some more connection. But I also just got to a point in my faith transition, where I didn't know what prayer meant anymore, because of those things that you just mentioned, right? Like, I didn't believe that God would make a special intervention in my life just

because I asked for something. I didn't believe that my own worthiness could impact God's willingness to intervene on my behalf, and I wasn't sure what that really meant, or I also, you know, wasn't really sure where I was with God, and who God was, right? And so, all these things can make prayer so difficult, right? Like, I wasn't really sure who God was, or I was sure who I didn't want God to continue, in my life, to continue to be who God had been previously, wasn't really sure about where I was in some transitioning idea of God, and wasn't quite sure how this God, new God, new idea of God worked in my life. So then, what does prayer mean? You know, and it was this real existential crisis. You know, and sometimes I would just find myself wanting to pray anyway, but then feeling kind of ashamed and being like, but what does it even mean? You know, and yeah, I mean, what was your experience with prayer? Was that similar was that different, Brittany?

Brittany Mangelson 04:40

Yeah, it was really similar. So, I've said on the podcast before that, in Mormonism, the context that I grew up in, there's an actual primary song that tells you how to pray. You know, "I begin by saying, Dear Heavenly Father, I thank Him for blessings each day, then humbly I asked for the things that I need, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen." And those are the lyrics to the song. And so, there's, a formula, and there's a lot of social taboo, if you even do, you know, like, if you ask for things before you express gratitude, and, you know, there's also this understanding that if you are asking for something, but you're not doing everything you can to appease that God, you know, you have to earn your blessings. And so, if you ask for something, and you know you're not worthy of it, that's kind of like a double whammy of, you know, like, withholding of blessings, right? And so, it creates this really, for me, it created this really uncomfortable power dynamic between God and myself. And I felt in some ways, if I was living my best life, not in like a, "Woo, living my best life," but like, living my best Mormon life, I could somehow control God, because I could almost force God in this corner to give me blessings. Like, it sounds weird, but there was a sense of control there, like, I had control, which also meant that if something bad happened to me, then I could have controlled it by doing better things. So, that meant that, like, there was guilt, because I didn't live up to this expectation, so I lost control, which creates just a really, really weird relationship with yourself and with God. So,

Nancy Ross 06:29

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 06:30

After my faith transition, I had no idea what to do with prayer, and there's a lot of interesting dynamics, you know, with pronouns with God, and what is God's gender? And what is God's actual physical make up, if God has a physical make up? And so, the image of God changed a lot, and then also, the theology behind prayer changed, and when I say changed, I mean it basically just crumbled, and I didn't know what to do from there.

Nancy Ross 06:58

No, absolutely. I just want to go back to a point that you made just a moment ago, which I think is really important here, which is that with this worldview that you were operating in, that I was operating in, right, it's like God, where God made everything happen, or in the world, like, and the ultimate source of that making things happen was God, so, and within that framework, we interpret all the good things in our lives came from God, and the bad things came from God as well, right? And so, it was really up to us to be worthy enough, and to then always be in communication with God through prayer to, like, try and control that process, which was really stressful, because often, you know, bad things might happen in our lives, and then you, you're left trying to figure

out, well, what did I do, right? Like, what are, what did I do? Like, how did I, how did I cause this thing? And the right, the part of you, like, I don't think we probably would have described it in that way, exactly in that way, in our lives, but right, like that, that was, that was, you know, very much reflective of a Mormon worldview, which was that, you know, God really was in charge in a very powerful way, and it was up to us to always be trying to, like, appease God.

Brittany Mangelson 08:21

Yeah.

Nancy Ross 08:21

Somehow. So

Brittany Mangelson 08:22

It's super stressful.

Nancy Ross 08:24

Super stressful, right? Right, right, because this isn't a God who, like, hands out love and grace, like, super easily. This is a God who needs to be addressed with super formal language, you know, and needs to be prayed to in a very particular way. So then, so, that was part of our problem, like, our problem was this, like, need for constant interaction with God because God was, like, a huge controlling figure in our lives. Um, why, which sounds terrible, like, on this end of things, but what felt good about that, in that moment for you? Like, within that framework, within that worldview, what felt comforting?

Brittany Mangelson 09:09

So, I think that there is some sense of comfort and certainty in a God that you can control or at least there's the potential to control. And I think until something terrible happens to you, if you're just, kind of, going through the motions and living through life, and I'm talking, like, tragic things, when I think when tragic things happen to people, that mental process of, like, "Oh, I can control God by always remaining worthy," definitely gets disrupted. But if you haven't had that happen, it can seem, it's like the prosperity gospel, and if things are going well, then you feel like you're in control and that, you know, there's there is some level of comfort there, because I do think humanity wants to have control. We want to be able to have a formula that, you know, one plus one equals two. So, if I do this and do this, this will be the outcome. And if I live worthy, and if I pray, and if I thank Heavenly Father for all the things and then, you know, ask for some blessings at the tail end, then, if I'm worthy enough and righteous enough and do all the right things, then that will come to pass. So, I can just look back in my life, and I actually do feel pretty blessed and privileged, that I haven't had a lot of tragedy. That's not to say, I have not had trauma because I absolutely have. But as far as, like, premature death that's hit close, or, you know, massive job loss or disability, or just, you know, really life life life altering things. I didn't have to face any of those as a Mormon. And so, it's easy to just, kind of, pat yourself on the back and think that that's because you're so righteous, right? Like, I was a really...

Nancy Ross 11:59

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 11:00

...really good Mormon, and it was terrible.

Nancy Ross 11:02

No, I mean, so, in my life, um, you know, and I've mentioned this before, when I was 17, my mom died by suicide. And there was a period between when she had, when that process began, and then she was in the hospital in a coma for several weeks. And I was just convinced, at this time, that, like, that while she was in the hospital, and it seemed like she still had chance at life, that of course, God was going to save my mother. I had prayed, like, every day, multiple times a day, my whole life, for Heavenly Father to, like, heal my mother's mental health problems. And I felt like, at some point, like, God was going to really make that happen, which I now understand is super-ablest and are just a really, put a lot of pressure, an unfair expectation on her, to just not have mental health problems, which was not a thing that she could do. And I remember, just being so convinced, during this time when she was in a coma in the hospital, that, like, this is what God has promised me, right? God has promised me that He will make my mother well, and I believe that, more or less, until she died, like until the day she died. And because every lesson manual, every primary story, right, like when you're righteous, you, when you're really trying to live a righteous life, good things will happen. And it's not that that my mother's death, right, caused a reframe, a bit of a reframe, not a tremendous amount of reframe, but some reframe, which allowed for the fact that, like, bad things could happen to good people and we didn't necessarily know what it meant. But um, but just this idea that we could control God through our actions and prayer had been such a powerful and forceful narrative in my life, which while I was, I was very sad and upset when my mother was in the hospital, but I also had, just like, this tremendous hope that everything would work out. And when it didn't, I, you know, I think I was a little bit lost there, because it didn't feel like the story was playing out as I had hoped. But I also then went back to that narrative, you know, right? Like, like, yes, this terrible thing happened, and I'm not even sure how I worked that out, in my mind exactly, but like, but it didn't break the whole thing.

Brittany Mangelson 13:58

Yeah, but it was, it was still a disruption.

Nancy Ross 14:00

It was very much a disruption, because it's like, well, how, and then I think that the answer that I came to was, well, God must not work that way, exactly, but I still lived as though that was true. Like, it was just such a powerful narrative that it could continue to impact. And I think, so that, I think this is key, it continue to impact my life in very strong ways, even the face of, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that that narrative was not true. And that, yeah, right? Like, and a lot of this did center around prayer, like I, you know, I was praying regularly. I was praying regularly for very specific things to happen. And I was awaiting those very specific outcomes. Yeah, I guess, I just feel myself paying attention to the sense that, like, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that this narrative was not true, I was holding on to it anyway,

Brittany Mangelson 15:09

Yeah.

Nancy Ross 15:10

Like, right? You know, and I think that's the case with so many things, as we have discovered in deconstructing and reconstructing our faith.

Brittany Mangelson 15:19

Because, because you're giving up a lot, right?

Nancy Ross 15:22

Right.

Brittany Mangelson 15:23

When your thinking shifts, and you go from that, "I can control God," to then, like, "Oh, bad things happen to good people," and it doesn't matter if I'm praying, not praying, praying the right way, praying to the right God, doing the right things, and I should be, you know, air quoting around, right.

Nancy Ross 15:43

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 15:44

But you're giving up a lot. So, can you verbalize some of those things that we give up when we shift our thinking?

Nancy Ross 15:52

Yeah, because even if that, like, meaning making framework is not awesome, it's still what we've got, right? It's like, I didn't have another way of making meaning of this event in my life, and I think I did carry a lot of guilt for a long time, because I felt like maybe I had caused it in one way or another, you know, and I think within that meaning making framework that would make a lot of sense, right? Something terrible happens in your life, well, you must have done something terrible. And even though I had a lot of people telling me in my life that, like, my mother's death had really been about her illness, you know, it was also just really hard to internalize, because if that narrative wasn't true, then, like, the whole house was gonna fall, my whole house of faith was gonna fall down. And I just didn't know how to, like, manage that, right? Like, as a 17 year old, how do you manage that? You know, um, especially when you're a committed believer? Yeah. So, it seemed like I had everything to lose, and I was just not willing to lose things in that process, and that the price I paid for continuing that narrative was feelings of guilt and shame to continue to hold on to a narrative that didn't exactly fit my own life story. Ah, man.

Brittany Mangelson 17:29

That's, that's tough. That's really tough.

Nancy Ross 17:32

No, it is tough, right? But I also, right, like, in telling the story, it's not because I want, you know, people to feel bad for Nancy, like, but I'm sure that lots of other people have been through similar experiences where some unexpected thing happened, and then there's like a crisis of meaning making. Like, how do we understand why this thing happened? How do we, like, you know, within a religious or spiritual framework, and there just wasn't anything else that I had that could help me make meaning of it?

Brittany Mangelson 18:06

Yeah. So, this is making me think of, and I may have shared this on the podcast before too, but I have twins, they're 11 years old, and when I found out I was pregnant with them, I also had a co-worker who found out she was pregnant with twins at the same time. We actually had, our due date was either the same or she was due a day

or two before me. And so, we both worked at the same place. We were friends, we were good friends, and she lost her twins. She miscarried them and it was absolutely horrific. And, you know, all of our co-workers knew that we were having, we're both having twins, so, we're going to have this big work baby shower for the four babies, and it was going to be this big thing. And then suddenly, she didn't have twins anymore. And I was left thinking, you know, what did I do to deserve this? What did she do to deserve this? Like it was such a split because when you looked at us on paper, her testimony of Mormonism was probably stronger than mine at the moment, right? She was, you know, I was active and everything but if you really got us talking, I would say that I had more doubts than she did and I was struggling with issues of feminism more than she was and, you know, she's still actively engaged in Mormonism, which is great for her, right? But it was a really big struggle for me because, how do you pray to God after a moment like that, right, and after this huge thing in your friendship and your work dynamic and all the things. It was a disruption for me, being, kind of, on the flip side of that, of watching something horrific happen to my friend. And yet, here I was still benefiting from this shared experience that we thought we were going to be having, and then suddenly she was left with nothing. And it just, it really, theologically, again, it just puts these barriers between you and God, because suddenly you're looking at your life and thinking I couldn't have done anything better than she did or, you know, had more faith because again, the reality was, is I didn't and I didn't have more faith than she did. And yet, we were still left with this reality, and having to pick up the pieces and figure out, you know, how do we still maintain this friendship when this point of bonding is now this huge source of pain, and it's really, really complicated. And when you're supposed to feel grateful in the midst of a pregnancy, and you're supposed to still pray the same way, still express your faith the same way, it just, it's, it disrupts everything, and it's awful.

Nancy Ross 21:03

So, if we can just stay with this then, thank you for sharing this. That's so awful. It's, what an awful thing to happen, right? And then it's, like, nobody did anything, and yet, it affects this relationship, you know, in all these ways, which is just devastating.

Brittany Mangelson 21:23

Yeah. And like you said, humans, we need to make meaning out of a situation, right? And finding meaning in situations when you have a more traditional, literalist framework really becomes this God that's controlling things. And, again, your communication with God is through prayer. And so, it's just this huge ball of wax...

Nancy Ross 21:49

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 21:49

...that is so, so hard to untangle.

Nancy Ross 21:51

So hard. So, at that time, do you remember, did you struggle with knowing what to pray? Do you feel like this? I mean, what happened with you and prayer in the wake of this event?

Brittany Mangelson 22:05

Yeah, it was hard, because I wanted to be grateful, right? I wanted to express gratitude. But walking with my friend through this really, really difficult experience, it, kind of, I mean, it definitely put me on edge thinking that

this could happen to me at any moment. So, I kind of buckled down and became more scrupulous in my religious expression, and that was part of me deciding, you know, to be a stay-at-home mom, to really devote everything to my kids. I felt like, once they were born, I felt like I had to just continually express gratitude for them and, kind of, push aside any difficult, you know, feelings that I had. I can look back now and, for sure, recognize that I had postpartum depression, but I felt like I could only be grateful for them, and so, my prayers were not ones of asking for anything. They weren't ones of self-reflection, or, you know, I certainly didn't ask for help. You know, I wasn't inspired to ask for help. I really took on the weight and the responsibility of that, and I didn't lament to God, because if I was lamenting to God, that meant I was ungrateful. So, I think that I just turned into this little toxic positivity ball of over-functioning and pretending like I had it all together, because if I didn't, then I was ungrateful. And again, that just creates a weird dynamic between you and God.

Nancy Ross 23:47

It does, because then you can't, because the expectation then, isn't that you are honest about what's going on your life, in your life, in your conversation with God through prayer, but rather that you're like performing something, or pretending to something. And I think, yeah, like I, at that time in my life, I couldn't lament to God in prayer, you know. And I also, my mother's mental health problems had just caused a lot of difficulty in relationship with her, and I didn't want to be the person whose mom died by suicide, but I also really didn't want her back either. And so, because we had not had a good relationship, and what do you even say to that? Like, within this worldview, what do you say to God in that? And I think I didn't necessarily jump into over-functioning like you had described, but I think I'm, it's hard to remember exactly, but I think I must have pulled away, to some extent, or just had much, very superficial prayer experiences, because how, how do you talk to this super controlling God, and always be expressing gratitude when you're really confused, and in tremendous grief? Which probably describes both of these situations.

Brittany Mangelson 25:27

Yeah. And I think hearing you talk, it seems like it almost creates a dishonesty between the person and God. And I feel like if you can't be honest with God, then you probably can't be honest with other humans, like other people in your life. If you're not able to lament to this God figure, whatever God looks like, how are you supposed to be honest and vulnerable with people who actually can physically show up for you and help support you in real life? I think that it, it really just creates this, for me, I think it created, like, this hyper-independent streak where I just felt like I didn't need anyone to help, when in reality, I was just absolutely drowning. And, but again, I just, I felt like I had to carry the burden myself, because God had blessed me with these two babies. And to be clear, I love my children, but it was just really, really complicated, because I was just grappling with this idea of blessing and worthiness and righteousness and being grateful and communicating with God in a way that expressed all of those things, because I didn't want them to be taken away from me, and I, kind of, felt like they could at any moment, right? Even after they were born, even after they were here, I still had this looming, you know, God is in control, and if he wants to take them, he can, so be grateful for what you have. And that's, that doesn't, that's not a healthy foundation to start parenting on, but that's what happened.

Nancy Ross 27:14

No, it's not a healthy parenting, right? And I want to go back to this idea that like, right, like, if you can't be honest, in your prayers, like, to yourself and with God, it's, you know, that's just going to create a lot of real disconnects in your life. And it did, certainly, I think, for me, right, that not being able to speak the truths of our lives is not a sign of health, you know, certainly not a sign of emotional health, and needing to feel gratitude. And

see, the thing is, in the wake of my mother's death, people also expected me to like, be heroically grateful. And these same things, and this was just really complicated. It was very sad, and unexpected to me, and very complicated, and I had a lot of different feelings about it. And, but I do remember feeling a lot of strong pressure to, like, perform enough grati-, you know, like, to perform a, kind of, perfect, graceful walk through this awful thing, if that makes sense. I mean, it's like, right, like, to be seen to be handling this really well, or to, and to not, like, be sad. And when you have, when you have someone close to you die by suicide, like, everybody's reaction is super awkward. Nobody knows what to say. Everybody says the wrong thing. And then having to take other people's weird expressions of grief and like, need to, like, handle that well.

Brittany Mangelson 29:05

That's a huge burden, and for a 17 year old! That's not...

Nancy Ross 29:09

For a 17 year old. Yeah, it's a lot. It's a lot. But I also, the people that were closest to me and our family were other church people with the same worldview, right? So, like, somebody must have, I'm sure people were like, well, they must have done something or, you know, I'm sure that, or she got what she deserved. I don't know what people were thinking. But it wouldn't, but I think people were also wrestling with this, but also holding our family at a distance. Like, "Oh, that terrible thing happened to them," you know, but if I'm, if I, like, I'm gonna try and insulate myself from terrible things and then not have to feel bad.

Brittany Mangelson 29:59

Yeah, Ah, it's so hard!

Nancy Ross 30:04

Right? And then how do you pray? How do, how are you, like, um, "God, my life is falling apart," right? Like, how do you, how do you then as a faithful Mormon, pray to God and be like, my life is falling apart. I'm having a lot of, like, big feelings. I don't know where to put this. No one can really hear me when I talk, but everybody needs me to be a certain way. Well, like, and I'm sure that, you know, a lot, I mean, what I'm saying sounds, echoes to some extent what you said, like, you've, you, right, you suddenly have two babies, and people, you feel like people are expecting you to respond in a very particular way that you cannot perform authentically. And so, then that gap between how you're feeling and how, if you feel like you need to present in the world, has to be filled with, like, an abundance of effort in that performance.

Brittany Mangelson 30:58

Yeah. Hearing you and I both talk, it almost feels like, like modern day versions of the song, "Come, Come Ye Saints", right? Like, I'm getting real Mormon here, but, you know, like, this idea of, like, people traveling across the country, and it's freezing, and babies are dying, and mothers are burying their children and limbs are falling off, like, really...

Nancy Ross 31:22

Right.

Brittany Mangelson 31:22

...terrible, terrible things. And then they're singing...

Nancy Ross 31:25

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 31:25

...like, "All as well!" Like...

Nancy Ross 31:27

Right.

Brittany Mangelson 31:27

...just this amount of, like, denial, and yet, like, we still need to praise God, you know, like "Happy day, all as well!" And it's like, "Well, actually, no, life is terrible right now!"

Nancy Ross 31:39

Yeah, no, and I think that that's, right. So, then I think that there, like, there was no space for lament of grief in prayer, and there, and there wasn't a lot of space for that in life, and people did not know how to mourn. And I can only imagine that the people in your life, right, like your other colleagues who were like, "Wow!", you know, kind of, they also wouldn't have known, like, how do we lament with this poor other woman who's just, you know, miscarried twins and celebrate with Brittany at the same time? But right, like, that's really, kind of, a complicated thing.

Brittany Mangelson 32:16

Super complicated.

Nancy Ross 32:18

Right, and that would mean, like maturity, to be able to do both. Man.

Brittany Mangelson 32:25

This is heavy stuff.

Nancy Ross 32:27

It is heavy stuff.

Brittany Mangelson 32:28

So, we've named the problem, right?

Nancy Ross 32:30

Okay, yes. I think so.

Brittany Mangelson 32:31

We've named that praying in the midst of turmoil and doubt, and terrible things happening, and faith transitions, it's really, really difficult, especially when you have this idea that God is in control, and in some ways, you can control God with your righteousness and the things that you do and the level of your faith. So, if we shift our

thinking away from that, which I understand is a really long process and something that I'm continually doing, what are the types of things that we are gaining, right? Like, what is the new relationship with God, or just the cycle of life and things that happened to us? Like, has it shifted the way that you interact with just your daily encounters? And how has that changed your prayers?

Nancy Ross 33:29

Okay, so that's a great question. So, I think there was a while where I just couldn't pray. I couldn't, I couldn't, I didn't want to pray, because I didn't know what it meant, and I didn't want to try and pray if I didn't know what it meant. And that was not a problem I could solve so, I just, kind of, set it aside for, mostly for a while. And then I was asked, but I probably did pray on impulse sometimes, because it had been such a habit. And then I wasn't quite sure what to do with that, with that, either. And then a friend of ours, Gina, suggested that I should just pray anyway. Like, it didn't matter if I knew how God worked, or I didn't know how God worked, but that I should just do it anyway. And I felt really silly trying to do it again, especially in the not knowing. But I did start to just feel some relief in doing that, like, and, kind of, bringing your resolution to some of this prayer stuff. It's like, well, I'm going to just do it, and I don't know what it means, and we're just gonna, that's just, like, gonna have to be enough, until I started doing it again, and that felt, it felt like relief. And it also, I didn't use the formal language that I used before. I didn't use gendered language. I feel much more comfortable these days praying, generally speaking, to a God without gender, without pronouns, and so, you know, that felt like relief. And I think that what I've learned in the last couple of years, and especially in the pandemic, is that authenticity and my relationship with God looks like speaking my lament as well as speaking thing, you know, words of gratitude, and things that I desire. I actually don't think I pray for, like, desire, like, things that I want a lot, unless it's, kind of, a prayer of desperation, you know, like, like, you know, "Dear God, so and so is in like, dire straits at the moment. Please be with them, and fix it, but I know you can't fix it, but, please do anyway, bye," you know, like, amen." You know, and that's, I'm sure we all have those. But I allow myself space to express the thing that I know that I feel like today, that God cannot do. And I recognize that as, like, you know, an extension of just wishing to fix a world, a world that feels broken. And that, and I feel like over time, I've grown more words for prayer and I like to write down prayers these days, more than just giving them spontaneously. I like to choose my words in prayer, and writing them down helps me do that. And that's become, which I never did as a Mormon, you don't write down prayers, that's not a thing you do, but it is actually a process that brings comfort to me now, but not because I can think I control God through my words and actions, but just because prayer gives me that space for honesty, and just naming, naming the things that are pressing in that moment. What does that look like for you, for you today? What is, you know, have you found a prayer practice? Are there things that work for you, or that still don't work for you? Or, you know, what does that look like for you, Brittany?

Brittany Mangelson 37:07

So first, I have to say that I think I need to start ending some of my prayers with just "bye!" I really liked that. But I think that for me, I resignate with writing prayers down, I'm kind of a brain dump person. I really hold a lot of things in and then I just want to process them. And I feel like I can be more honest with God these days because I think God can take it, right? I used to have a lot of guilt for being angry at God or being confused by God, that kind of thing, and I don't feel that anymore. I think that God can handle the all of what makes a human human, right? So, I've done, you know, a gratitude journal or right now I have a bullet journal that I just do these big brain dumps that, I have found that gratitude journals, they do get just cheesy after, you know, the first, like, week of doing it. It's like "Oh I'm grateful for my dog". But if I do just a full brain dump of all of the things, all of the good things, all of the bad things, and I actually write them down, whether I physically write them down in my

notebook, or I do have just, kind of, a running word doc, that I feel confident in then deleting at any point. Sometimes I'm like, "I don't know if I want people to know what's in my brain dump." But the point is, is that writing is helpful for me more than just closing my eyes and just thinking to myself or verbalizing it out loud. I think, I really think, that because I can be honest with God, I am more comfortable being honest with people. In my ministry, I, a lot of people ask me about my personal theology, right? You know, so I started in this place. How did I end in this place? And I think that a lot of people expect that I have the same level of certainty or confidence in my current beliefs than I, you know, had it with past beliefs. And I think, because I am able to express frustration and lament to God, I am able to express that to others. So, I feel like it is, in general terms, made me a more honest and authentic person because I'm not constantly trying to hustle for God's love, and I'm not trying to control God. I recognize that I can't actually control the order of the universe, right? No matter how much I try to be a good person, things are still going to happen to myself and to people I love and that it's not my fault. And that creates big theological questions for me, right? Like this last year and a half has been tough and I have just wept with grief and anger and just sadness, and God has held that, and it hasn't been fixed, right? Nothing that I've been frustrated about has fully been fixed. And yet I, I feel like because I can be honest with God, I can be honest with myself, and then I can show up as a minister, or as a mom or as a friend, in just a more real way. And so, and prayer, like, touches at all of those points. You know, I've, being an elder in Community of Christ and offering administration to folks has also been something that I've had to reframe because, again, in our former church experience, there was an element of, if you have enough faith to receive this blessing, and things were explicitly said in ways that would make that apparent that, you know, you, you need to be worthy of this, and you will receive healing if you are worthy. And to be abundantly clear, that is not what administration is in Community of Christ, but, you know, we often get seekers who are asking for this sacrament, and that they're still, kind of, in that headspace in some way or another. So, prayer theology is something that I encounter every single day, and I have to constantly, well, I guess, it's easy for me to, kind of, revert back to my old ways, right, and thinking that I can control God or thinking that I still have to hustle for worthiness. I guess what I'm trying to say is, old habits die hard, but when I can be frustrated with God, and just be honest about that, I feel like that also opens the door to being able to just have more joy with God and to recognize that I am always worthy, and that I don't need to sell my soul to this over-functioning, dysfunctional relationship with God, that what I have to bring to the table is enough. So.

Nancy Ross 42:40

Yeah, what I'm hearing you say is that, you know, you started off with a very transactional God, and now, prayer, and that transaction was large, in part, conducted through prayer, and that prayer now is not a transactional thing, but rather, it is a relational thing with God, where you trust God with your hard things, and maybe other things, but also with your hard things, with your grief, with your lament. And, you know, that just sounds like a deeper relationship, right? Like, if you have a friend, and I'm using air quotes here, if you have a friend, right, and you can't share your grief with them, right? That's not a very deep relationship, right? That's not a relationship of trust. But what you're, I feel like you're describing is more, is a growing relationship of trust in God. Not that that doesn't also bring up, like, other questions or that, you know, that that would mean you don't have doubts or things but, like, but it signals, like, a willingness to be vulnerable to God, and then to open ourselves up to the, to the experience of being vulnerable with God, which I definitely didn't want to do in that older Mormon frame of God, because that just seemed like a dangerous thing.

Brittany Mangelson 44:09

Yeah. Hmm. That's a really good point.

Nancy Ross 44:15

Okay, so I am wondering, so I, and this might sound like an odd question, but I'm going to ask it, how, as we have this conversation, as we have been exploring prayer, exploring, you know, changing concepts of God, and talking about some tricky things that have happened in our lives and how we responded with prayer, you know, at that time, and kind of through our journeys, how does this conversation feel in your body?

Brittany Mangelson 44:47

Yeah, that's a good question. And I think it's an important question because, you know, in our former faith tradition, any sort of discomfort, physical, spiritual, emotional discomfort was supposed to be a signal that we were on the wrong path, right? Which is tricky when you're talking about really heavy things, which we have talked about in this podcast. And I think that, you know, I mean, I felt that, right? Like, we are talking about difficult things, difficult periods of life, and the, not just the thing that happened, but what's going on behind the scenes in our head, which are things that we don't talk about all the time. So, there's, there is a heaviness, right? There's a sense of grief and of loss that I think I will always carry, I will always carry with me, with the situation that I specifically talked about. But then also the larger conversation about prayer. It was a comforting thing to have a formula. There was confidence there. There was, I mean, I can sing the song, right? I already basically did. And it, that made me feel like I was part of a theology that had, not only a formula of how to get the end result, but it also came with a really tight community. And so, recognizing that your theology has shifted, it just brings up all the feelings about faith transition as well, and losing that community. However, I mean, I, kind of, joked that I was a really good Mormon, which makes, which I feel did not make me the most authentic, best person, and I was not living up to the potential that I had. Like, I don't know how to state that any more, clearly. But I was, I was very judgmental, and I was one that would have pointed to someone who had something bad happen to them, and I would have judged them for that. Like, I, I need to own that, right? Um, and so shifting my framework, and getting rid of all of that, it was like eating a big old slice of humble pie, and recognizing that that is not how God works, helped me see humanity in a completely different light. So, just because there is suffering does not mean that, that somebody did something wrong. And even talking about that now, physically, in my body, it feels like weights being lifted off. But it also comes with some discomfort, because I have to face my own demons and my own theology that was so rooted in prosperity and blessings and obedience, and these things that were so easily measurable, right? And just my unhealthy relationship with those things. So, I'm facing demons. I'm excited to move beyond that framework but in doing that, you really do, I really do have to face my own demons. So, I guess it's complicated.

Nancy Ross 48:16

No, and I think, right? And I think that the important thing here is that there wasn't, like, a problem, and you resolved it in the past, and now everything is hunky dory. But rather, that there was an issue, you made a bunch of steps, but there's also a lot of this working out of, like, faith and meaning, that is very much an ongoing thing, that is not stopped by arriving at a similar kind of certainty than what you experienced in the past. So, my...

Brittany Mangelson 48:45

Yeah. How does it feel for you?

Nancy Ross 48:49

Yeah, so I, I've really been working on paying attention to the way in which feelings crop up in my body. So, when I started talking about, like, my mom, and, you know, what happened, and complicated feelings and even, you know, just admitting out loud that she was gone, and I didn't necessarily want to be that, the person whose mom had died by suicide, but I also didn't want her back. Like, that, that, like, that's, that's hard to say out loud. And I feel like a tightness at the top of my chest and in my throat. Um, it's not like acute, but it's kind of just a lingering sadness, that just kind of weighs there. Um, but also, you know, just talking through and reflecting on the ways in which things have improved or even just that, you know, today there, today, I feel like I have a much deeper relationship with God. And I feel like the God I know is not fragile, and the God I know can hear my lament and that lamenting to God is a real act of faith and trust, you know, not that I have some perfect understanding of God or that I experienced the certainty that I once did, though I do feel like I have a, kind of, growing confidence in God. I don't want to say certainty, but I, you know, I have, I feel like I have a growing, a something, it doesn't feel as tidy, and as warm and fuzzy as my sense of Mormon God did, but it feels present and it doesn't feel conditional. And that's also comforting to me, even if it doesn't come with the same strong feelings of comfort, anymore. Like, coming, coming to feel like God is with me, regardless of what I do, you know, has actually come to be a comforting idea. It just doesn't feel the same as it used to, and I don't want it to and that's okay, because that can be, that can be complicated. That can be its own complicated thing.

Brittany Mangelson 51:20

Yeah, it can be. I relate to that so much, because I keep saying the word hustle, you know, like when you, when you're constantly chasing after God, and when you're constantly wondering what you could have done better or different, it's, that's a really hard God to approach. You know, you don't want to pray in those situations. And regardless of the form that prayer takes, it doesn't feel good to approach this entity that is God when you feel like you're on bad terms. And so, shifting the idea that God is always with you, whether you're praying or not, and is inviting you into relationship, and is the, you know, the one that that is constantly reaching out, the one that is constantly having the door open, and that it's unconditional, that's comforting for me, because when I'm facing my demons, and looking at past decisions, past frameworks, past judgments that I've laid, past insecurities, current insecurities, right? Knowing that God is with us, and that there's really nothing that we can do to change that, I think, also helps rid myself of some of my past religious shame. And I mean, you and I both live in Utah, so we're still surrounded by this larger culture, and it can be really easy to, to feel that shame for going through a faith transition. And, like, even that is, you know, seen as, like, "Well, you must have done something wrong to lose your faith."

Nancy Ross 53:08

Right. No, totally.

Brittany Mangelson 53:09

You know, this concept just comes up all the time. But if you, if you really truly believe that God, again, whatever God looks like for you, in whatever moment, if you believe that God can be with you, that is with you, through all of that, it just takes a lot of the pressure off of you and you don't have to be super scrupulous. And you don't have to keep chasing God for love and worthiness and just feed into this dysfunction. And I mean, again, I'm speaking from my own experience, but, like, my relationship with God was super dysfunctional. And yet...

Nancy Ross 53:49

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 53:49

...I thought I was super righteous.

Nancy Ross 53:54

And yeah, no, I hear you. I also, in reflection, in this reflection, I am reminded that, at some point, maybe like a year and a half ago, two years ago, I started experiencing feelings of joy with God in prayer and in meditation that I had truly never felt before. But it was only in learning to lament, but, like, that was only after learning to be more honest with God in prayer. And so, right, if you get to let, and I definitely feel this, to let go of the hustle of being, of proving yourself to God continually. Like, if we can let that go, one thing that I feel, and again, everybody has different experiences with God, but one thing that I have felt, in learning to express grief and lament with God is also to feel joy with God, which I would have totally told you I had experienced in Mormonism, but I think that that, that that joy with God doesn't look anything like what I experience as joy with God now, which is a much feeler, deeper feeling of like peace.

Brittany Mangelson 55:17

Ah, this is so interesting. What would you have said your joy with God looked like in Mormonism? Or like what would the conclusion, what conclusions would you have drawn from that joy?

Nancy Ross 55:32

Yeah, so I think that practically that would have looked like, you know, feeling good intense feelings, like very intense emotional feelings. You know, maybe while singing a congregational hymn or, like, singing something together at girls camp, or, you know, that they would have been, it would have been an intense feeling, group related experience. And it's not that I don't have good, intense group related, happy feelings now, or that I don't love, you know, outside of pandemic times, love singing with my congregation, I get a lot of joy out of singing with my congregation, but the joy of that, kind of, quiet peace of God when I am on my own in prayer is something that is new. Like, I didn't, I didn't get that kind of peace as a Mormon. I got feelings that I would have identified as the Spirit or peace, but this, I don't know, it feels less like intense, like, affective emotion, but I'd still describe it as joy and yeah, sorry, that's about, kind of a very abstract, but um, yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 56:57

Yeah, no, this is really interesting to me, because I think that I probably would have been the same way. I would have denied any sense of lack of joy in my relationship with God or in my prayers. But again, I think that in order to feel joy with God, you need to be able to express lament. And I think that in order to feel joy and belonging and connection to a community, you need to have some feelings of like, "I am okay."

Nancy Ross 57:31

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 57:31

And I never felt that, hardly ever. And I always felt like I could, should be doing more. And so, when I sit with God now, it's coming from a place of, of I am enough.

Nancy Ross 57:47

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 57:47

And while there's always room for improvement, and there's always things that, you know, we could be working on or whatever, but it, there's a difference, I don't know how to say this, there's a different weight to it. Because yes, everyone can, you know, be better agents of peace in the world. But yet, I'm not coming from a place where I think I'm fundamentally broken. And I think for me, that has changed my relationship with God the most and how I'm able to sit in, in a, in the presence of God. I mean, that sounds so dramatic, but, you know, like, sit with myself, and whether it's in a formal meditation, whether it's through writing, whether it's through just listening to noises in nature, while I'm on a walk with my dog, or you know, practicing some yoga at home or whatever it may be, I'm coming from a foundational understanding that I am enough and that God accepts me and that I don't have to keep bending over backwards to win God's approval. I feel like I've stated this so many times, but I think for me, like that's really what it comes down to, is just being okay with myself because God's okay with me. And that's changed how I communicate with God and how I hear God in my life.

Nancy Ross 59:19

And that's just a very different framework than the, I must control God through my actions and prayers, just fundamentally different. So, yeah, what is, what are your main takeaways or insights that you want to remember from this conversation?

Brittany Mangelson 59:43

Yeah, so I think for me, number one, there's not one right way to pray. There's not a song that can teach you exactly what you need to pray.

Nancy Ross 59:52

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 59:54

Even though sometimes that seems easier. And it, you know, I, kind of, liked being told what to do, or having some framework, again a formula of one plus one equals two, and you know it's always going to work. But prayer is not like that, that prayer is a lot more fluid, that praying and experimenting with prayer and pronouns and images and prayer can be art, prayer can be body movement, prayer can be an intention, a way that you're living your day. I think that cracking up those possibilities, cracking open those possibilities, has been really, really helpful for me. And again, has just liberated me from feeling like I need to control God. And maybe what I need to do is to make space in my life, to be able to see and hear and experience God more fully, and again, in just a more honest way. And it's not that I have to approach God in the right way, it's that I need to open myself up, starting from a place of knowing that I'm enough, and that I can't control God, and all I can do is just be open to recognizing the way that that God is moving in my life.

Nancy Ross 1:01:16

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 1:01:17

What about you? What are your, what are your takeaways?

Nancy Ross 1:01:20

I think what's really rising at the surface for me is that I don't need to perform prayer in a particular way, as you were describing, but that my faith in God has grown since trusting God with my grief and lament. And that, you know, it's not going to lead me back to a place of certainty but that, and I like the word confidence here, but it has given me a growing confidence of God, that God can hear me and, like, and be present with me, in all the situations of my life. And that is its own kind of comfort, which is very different from certainty. But it's like an, it's like a constancy that I am still learning to live into. And that feels like the main thing that I want to take away from this conversation, which is that, right, that honesty with God has been the best thing for my relationship with God.

Brittany Mangelson 1:02:42

Yeah, that's beautiful. I think that that really takes, really has potential to take a person from a very dysfunctional, distrusting place with God, and again with self and community, and can help us move to a place where we know that we are enough and that God is always present, and that we can invite others to get to know a God that values their worth, and is not going to bless them or smite them, based on their hustle. So,

Nancy Ross 1:03:21

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:22

Nancy, thank you. I feel like this conversation was like a group processing, you know, something that really does impact us so much, like we both said, every day. You know, we are impacted by our theology behind prayer and in a faith transition, feeling like, you know, I felt like I needed to have all the answers immediately. But my relationship with prayer has continually shifted over, you know, the last eight to 10 years, and it's just really good to talk to somebody that gets it and your contribution to this conversation was really valuable, and I thank you for it.

Nancy Ross 1:04:05

Thank you.

Josh Mangelson 1:04:14

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