



Day 1 | Tuesday, March 8, 2022
Presenter Tammy Liddell

At every moment of every day war is erupting, exploding, seething below and above the surfaces of relationships, families, communities, cities, countries—crossing every boundary.

At every moment of every day racism spreads its ugly, diseased existence—unchecked and without resistance through entrenched systemic oppression, wreaking generational trauma.

At every moment of every day for the last two years the global Covid-19 pandemic has separated us by distance, sickness and death. It has separated us by fear and lies. The pandemic exposed already-existing inequities in access to health care, in workers rights, in housing, in technology, in education.

I am depleted and weary. We can't know another's pain, not truly, but I wonder if anyone can relate?

St. Francis Xavier—our intercessor and inspiration for these nine days wrote in a letter, at a particularly low time, "I am so out of humor with life I would rather die than witness so many wrongs without having any power to correct them".

There are many times in my life when Francis' helplessness and sadness would have resonated with me. But never at such length and depth as during these last two years. I have witnessed the same inertia in friends, family, co-workers, students and in my communities—in people and places that I have always looked to for hope and energy.

Paradoxically I have also witnessed the opposite of my own lassitude. I have seen in courageous protest the energy that activates conscience, compunction and resistance to inertia. I have experienced this as an invitation to Magis—to be part of 'more'. More right relationships with loved ones and strangers, more peacemaking, more love.

And here we are—here YOU are in whatever way you are here! This gathering of souls in the body of this beautiful church and the many who gather in spirit. This choice you have made to be here. This action of faith in spite of your own weariness. You are audacious in your belief that prayer changes things. Francis must have felt very lonely when he wrote to his friend about his feelings of powerlessness. You are, we are, together going to join our prayers together. To expand and compound our prayer in community, with each other in person, in spirit, in unity. Together we have the audacity to believe that our prayer will change things.

Our prayer to God in these days is bold: "Renew Us In Your Spirit". I am finding that word 'renew' tricky right now. In this upside down world am I asking to return to a spirit that I

once had and have lost? I am trying really hard these days not to ever say, “I can’t wait for things to return to normal”. Was that past-tense ‘normal’ so great for everybody? I feel like I’ve had unique opportunity to see how drastically things can transform in a relatively short time. Haven’t we learned a few things along the way? Haven’t we been given the opportunity to be more conscious? I am so grateful to my old friend, the thesaurus, to help me wrestle my issues with the word ‘renew’. It helped me put the “new” back into “renew” so humor me as I say to God that I want us all to be ‘renewed, rekindled, regenerated, revitalized’ in Your Spirit! I want us to move into the next moment, the next hour, the next day—newly infused with your Spirit. And I must remember that your Spirit, God is ever new and I am asking that you renew us in your Spirit.

I still live in the reality that asking for more of anything is really hard for me right now. My inner world feels full of the outer world—full of conflict and I confront most things these days with overwhelming anxiety. I imagine a funnel over my little brain with so much trying to get through—how can I ask for more? In fact, my prayer lately has been a begging for less. Less sadness, less grief, fewer deaths among friends and families, less injustice, less war. Yet this weary reality exists in the same reality as our prayer: Renew Us In Your Spirit. Give us more of that Spirit, not less! What a paradox for my overfull self right now. Bert Thelen, a former colleague in ministry preached once that wherever there is paradox there is an opening for the Holy Spirit. Paradoxes are like a crack in the window, a liminal moment, a door unlocked and the Spirit finds its way in. On Saturday my spouse, Bill, locked his keys in our van with the motor running. When AAA came to the rescuer pulls out what looks like a blood pressure cuff, pumps it up, creates a crack in the door and suddenly there is enough space to hook the lock. In a minute, everything changed.

My own images of fullness are obviously at odds with what the Holy Spirit has in mind. Finding other images—not hard! Right there in scripture and song, right here, tonight.

Isaiah, the master of powerful images envisions God’s abundant word falling to earth as rain and snow, providing nourishment—“making the earth fertile and fruitful”. Renew us in your Spirit of more fertility and tasty fruit!

The Psalmist promises that God is close to all of us with broken hearts and crushed spirits. Renew us in your spirit of unconditional comfort and love.

Jesus wants us to ask God to give us TODAY’S bread so that we might eat our fill and not worry about tomorrow. Renew us in your spirit of generosity so that we can share that bread with the world!

And from our song tonight that will carry us through this Novena:: surround us with your peace, Spirit of God. Renew us in your spirit of peace, Spirit of God.

These abundant images of fertility, comfort, sustenance and peace surround my weary, depleted self, gently but with urgent persistence. I feel enveloped by the softly falling rain—nurturing me, giving me vitality, saturating me and running out from me to the world. I won’t drown in this soft rain, I will never be full, there is always room for more.

God’s ‘more’ is not like my ‘more’. God’s Magis is about quality, not quantity. God creates room for more of the spirit, not in square feet. This is sometimes the extent of my prayer: “I cannot find space—please make the space, God, and enter in”. Your presence here, my presence here, the devotion of our nine linear days to God’s time is already an answer to a prayer.

And how should we think about the moments, hours, and days that make up this novena? How do I experience this time as God's time which crosses the boundaries of my time? We have put so many restrictions and expectations on our own, human, linear time. We use it well, we waste it, it is money, we spend it, make the most of it, squander it. All these metaphors objectify it, make it into a commodity to be bartered and bought and sold. I'm back to my unhelpful image of a funnel—tempted to cram the most into this finite, human-made measure of time. We all know that time is more bendy than we give it credit for. My spouse reminded me recently that there is no comparison between one hour on the treadmill is equal one hour of a Bruce Springsteen concert. One goes so slowly and one flies by—you can figure out which is which.

There is an urgency to our prayer: Renew us in your Spirit: NOW. Surround us with your peace: NOW. Jesus tells us to ask for THIS DAY'S bread—fresh and nourishing. It, like time, can't be saved up for tomorrow, it must be eaten and digested today, in this moment. You can try to save it for tomorrow, but it won't taste good. It's OK to eat it, God has promised us bread tomorrow. Time is like the rain and the snow falling from heaven, filling the earth with nourishment, taking all the time it needs until God's will is fulfilled, returning when finished, not a moment before.

I remember when my grandmother was getting older, less mobile, still living on her farm, unable to do the many physical things she enjoyed, like planting, tending, harvesting and, most of all eating, her garden. But as her physical perimeter constricted, her ability to live in the moment increased. We no longer worked all day on the farm when I would visit in the summers, we would sit at the kitchen table and I would listen to stories of her life. Time was bendy as she pulled the past into the present moment. There were tears and a lot of laughter. I would find her at that same table in the middle of the night, when she had trouble sleeping, reading her Bible and praying for all the people on her list, which seemed to increase every year. I think of her as abandoning, in some way, linear time and embracing the spaciousness of God's time.

God's time intersects with my time ALL the time. Will I take these days of prayer and intentionality to notice those sacred moments? I invite myself to experience these days as I would newly baked bread. Enjoying the flavor and satiating my hunger, and not anticipating tomorrow's bread. The urgency of our prayer resonates with the needs of the world: Renew Us in Your Spirit, now, in this time, in this place, where we are. As I reminded us a few moments ago—you are here because you know and trust that prayer changes things. But our prayer is not 'renew ME in your spirit'. Our prayer is "Renew US in your Spirit". The power of our prayer is that we ask it together, in community with each other and will St. Francis Xavier. We trust that God's power to renew OUR spirit will also renew my spirit and your spirit.

As we will hear in our beautiful theme song each night, let us pray: With one song, one voice, Spirit we are calling you. Where we are. Renew us in your Spirit, Oh God.

