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Bethlehem Lutheran Church - Davey

December Helpers

Lector—Nielsen's, Charlie Brown
Communion Assistant—Nielsen's
Ushers—Larry Pasco, Charlie Brown
Cleaners—Wk 1/2—Becky Teti
Wk 3/4—Larry and LaDonna
Altar—LaDonna Pasco, Karen Brown

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Encounter Christ Grow in faith Love as Christ loved Tell the Story

A Contemplative Advent

Off and on over the last 20 or so years of my life, I've dipped my toe into the waters of contemplative Christianity. In the last year or so I've delved in a bit more deeply.

Contemplative Christianity isn't some weird offshoot of the Christianity most of us have experienced. It has long been a part of the way of following Jesus. Jesus himself went off by himself to pray and spend time alone with his Abba. John's gospel is a very contemplative sort of gospel, and the early church fathers and mothers were often contemplatives.

Contemplative Christianity is not specific to any denomination. Contemplative practices have been a part of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church for the longest, because they are the oldest, but they aren't specific to Catholicism or to the Eastern Church.

Protestantism in many ways moved away from contemplative practices, and in doing so, lost some of the richness they offer. Lutheranism for example has tended to be a much more learning and thinking type of faith rather than an actual encounter with God.

There is nothing wrong with thinking and learning. In fact Christians who haven't learned scripture or who aren't open to thinking in new ways about it in their own time and place have wreaked all sorts of havoc in the world. Christian contemplative practices are rooted in an understanding of Christ's work and the work of the Holy Spirit in and through us.

But we have essentially abandoned a contemplative faith. It is my intention to bring some contemplative practice into our Advent worship this year. While the church knows this time as the season of Advent, the rest of the world considers it a time for Christmas parties, Christmas shopping, Christmas cooking and baking and so on. None of those are bad, and in fact they can bring a great deal of joy. But they can also leave us frazzled, tired, and when it's all over, sometimes even a little empty. At a minimum, perhaps everyone could use a bit of quiet in the midst of the hubbub.

In the following pages, you'll see a little more description of what will happen in worship, and how you might bring some contemplative practices into your own Advent.

In a nutshell, here's how I think of contemplative practices. We believe that because of our own birth, through baptism, into Christ's death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit lives in us. But there is often a lot of stuff between our conscious thought and any awareness of the presence of the Spirit in us. The goal of contemplative practice is to move some of that stuff...our whirling thoughts, jumbled feelings and sensory overload...out of the way so we can experience God within us. And maybe even experience real communion with that God within us.

Advent blessings,

Pastor Kris

Contemplative Advent Worship

What is Contemplative Worship?

The cornerstone of contemplative practices, including worship, is silence. That doesn't mean the whole worship will be silent. But there will be periods of silence, some long enough for some folks to feel antsy. It's OK if you do, but stick with it. The music will be more reflective, the service simpler, and each Sunday we'll begin worship with a Taize song. These beautiful, repetitive verses help to quiet our minds in preparation for worship.

Contemplative worship also seeks to engage all the senses. In addition to music, you may hear an unfamiliar sound—the chime of a singing bowl—to mark a period of silence. Sometimes incense is used, although in small spaces it can be challenging and some people can be sensitive to it. There might be other ways to get at that.

Often candles are used to provide most of the light. Morning worship makes that more difficult, but we'll aim for at least some of that effect.

What should I do during the silence?

As much as possible, quiet your mind. You can't keep thoughts and sensations and irritations away, but imagine they're like a boat on a river floating away. If it works better for you to meditate on a word, or image, or just pray with silent words, feel free to do that. But mostly, enjoy the quiet in the midst of a busy, bustling season.

Contemplative Practices

These are the primary contemplative practices. Further instructions and my experience with each can be found on the newsletter insert.

Lectio Divina

I think this is the easiest option for beginners to contemplative practices. *Lectio divina* means "sacred reading." It's a way of reading scripture that lets it speak to you. No particular knowledge of the background for the passage is needed.

Centering Prayer

This is a practice of more extended silence, perhaps 20—30 minutes, in which a person uses a sacred word to return to as the mind wanders. Centering prayer is challenging, even for people who've done it for a long time. Its benefit comes out more in the rest of your life than in the actual prayer time.

Praying the Divine Hours

In contemplative communities, the community reads scripture and prays together anywhere from three to five times daily. The practice of praying the hours can be done solo as well.

December Calendar

December 2	9:15 am—All-Congregation Sunday school—Christmas program prep 10:30 am—Worship with Holy Communion
December 5	No confirmation
December 9	10:30 am—worship
December 16	9:15 am—Program practice 10:30 am—Christmas program
December 23	10:30 am—Worship
December 24	9:00 pm—Christmas Eve Service of Lessons and Carols with Holy Communion

Looking Ahead

On Sunday January 6 we will worship at Grace Lutheran Church, rural Wahoo, for our Epiphany Service of Light and Music. We are planning to invite Edensburg in Malmo and Alma in Mead to join us.

Bible Questions of the Week

1. How can it be proven that God is real?

Frustratingly perhaps, it really can't. Ultimately, we believe God is real by faith. I think God grabs hold of us in love and we experience God as real in a way that's hard to explain.

But that doesn't mean there's no evidence. I think the best place to start is with Jesus and the resurrection. That seems to be the action of God...it's certainly not something we can do. The resurrection also can't be proved, but the evidence is better than most people think.

The evidence for the resurrection is primarily based on the writings of the New Testament. There are at least 11 authors of the New Testament who have somewhat different understandings of what the resurrection means, but they all agree it happened. And there's never been a body produced to prove otherwise.

The actions and relatively cohesive message of the apostles and the early church is difficult to explain if the resurrection didn't really happen.

To go further, I'd suggest reading a book called *Jesus and the Victory of God* by N.T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope* also by N.T. Wright goes into the argument as well, although not quite as deeply

2. What are good books or resources that talk about the historical Jesus and his times?

Here are a couple of my suggestions:

Jesus and the Victory of God by N. T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope* would help as well. *Excavating Jesus* by John Dominic Crossan. Anything by Crossan will be helpful historically. He considers himself in some fashion a Christian, but doesn't believe Jesus was divine and doesn't believe the resurrection really happened.

Contemplative Practices

Centering Prayer

Centering prayer is challenging. It's difficult to maintain inner silence for very long, and typically after sitting in silence for 20 to 30 minutes, you don't feel anything has happened. As my Spiritual Director says, for 95% of the people who practice it, 95% of the prayer time is a mess. But over time, the benefits start coming out in the other 23 1/2 hours of your life. It is rather mysterious how this happens, but that's the value of contemplative practice. It taps into the mystery of God and not so much the God we always want to grasp and define.

Not everyone is ready for this. But if you think it's something you want to try, here's enough to get you started. It should be done every day, preferable twice a day. Most days I only get it in once, but that seems to still be helpful. If you have a smart phone, there are some good free apps for centering prayer that are very helpful. If you want more information, talk to Pastor Kris. Persistence is the key.

Steps

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.

After sitting quietly and asking God for guidance, choose a one or two syllable word that will be your "sacred word." This word will represent your openness to the presence of God during prayer

The sacred word is not a mantra to be said repetitively. Rather it's the word you turn towards when your mind wanders

Some may do better with an image, but the image shouldn't have a lot of detail, or you will start thinking about it

2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within. This is the beginning of your centering prayer time. Twenty minutes is a good starting point. It's best to use a timer with a gentle alarm, or use a centering prayer app on your phone. That's what I do.

The goal of the prayer time is inner silence – letting go of the inner dialog, anxiety, sensations, thoughts and so on that stand between our conscious mind and the Holy Spirit within us.

The goal really isn't to "empty" your mind. Rather it's to let thoughts and sensations pass by like a boat on a river.

Thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections.

3. When you notice that you're engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

Lectio Divina

This is probably the easiest for beginners. The goal is to let the Word of God sink in to you in a more personal way. It doesn't require any particular knowledge of scripture or theology. First pick a passage—perhaps one from Sunday worship, a favorite Old Testament story or a favorite story of Jesus or a Psalm. Or go to one of the gospels and pick out a story of Jesus. Don't make it too long.

Steps

1. Read the passage aloud a first time. (If you are doing this with others, take turns reading.) What phrase, sentence or word stands out to you? Allow a minute or two of silence to reflect on that word or phrase
2. Read the passage again. How does the phrase or word connect in some way to your life or things happening in the world. Allow a minute or two of silence to contemplate the connection.
3. Read the passage again. This time is for prayer to ask God for help or guidance in whatever situation has presented itself through the word or phrase. Allow a minute or two of silence.
4. Read the passage a final time and Rest in the word, reflect or pray and allow God to speak in the silence. Allow three or four minutes of silence.
5. Done in a group, there can be a time of sharing your experiences briefly at the end. There should be no comment from others and no judgement.

Praying the Divine Hours

This is based on monastic practice where the community gathers to read Psalms, scripture and pray anywhere from 3 to 5 times per day. You can set an alarm on a clock or phone to be your "call to prayer." There are websites and books with set prayers. I've used a three set volume by Phyllis Tickle called *The Divine Hours*. Praying the hours really was originally meant to be practiced in community and works best that way. So it's better to do it as a couple or with friends or family. It can be done solo and many people find that practice rich. I've found it tedious and struggle to stick with it more than the others.