

Advent:
Incarnation and Contemplation

Grace Episcopal Church
Fourth Sunday of Advent
19 December 2021
Rev. Brian C Justice

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Micah 5.2-5
Canticle 15
Hebrews 10.5-10
Luke 1.39-45, 46-55

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O God of Love,
Whose home is among mortals,
Let us be at home in Love in You.
Amen.

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There are two essential messages in Christianity. We hear the one in Advent; we hear the other in Easter.

The message of Advent is that God is a God of Incarnation.
The message of Easter is that God is a God of Resurrection.

Just as Advent and Easter are parts of a larger whole – namely, the Liturgical Calendar in which the story of Christ is retold and relived – so the messages of Incarnation and Resurrection are parts of a larger whole – namely, the reality that God is with us and in us and around us right here, right now *and* that God makes new what is old, makes whole what is broken, and makes alive what is dead.

Here we are in Advent, in which we are hearing the story that tells the first of these two essential messages of our faith: God is a God of Incarnation.

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The word ‘Advent’ from Latin means arrival, coming. So, Advent is the season in which we prepare for the arrival of, the coming of God ... in other words, when we prepare for the *Incarnation* of God.

What does “the Incarnation of God” mean exactly?

It means that God is known in the person of Jesus ... that God is *in – carne* ... literally, in the body, in the flesh, in the life of Jesus.

As we confess in the Nicene Creed, “by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man.”

Repeating the Nicene Creed every Sunday, hearing the Christmas Story every year, we may miss the miracle and the majesty of this message. *This is amazing.*

If God is really incarnate in Jesus, then when we see Jesus we are seeing God. As Jesus says to Philip in the Gospel of John, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (14.9) Whatever Jesus says and does and is ... *that is God ... that is God’s saying and doing and being.*

And, if Jesus is really human, then when we see Jesus we are seeing ourselves, the full potential of ourselves. What we are and can be with the grace of God.¹ Whatever Jesus says and does and is ... *that is what we are called to say and do and be.*

God is not a god
who is *only out there*,
who is *only with dead people*,
who is on top of a cloud,
who is an old man with a beard,
who is Zeus and Santa Claus,
 throwing a lightning bolt at you if you are bad and bringing you a treat if you are good.

No. No, that is not God.

There are two Bible verses that say the whole thing about God ... “The home of God is among mortals.” (Rev 21.3) and “God is love.” (1 John 4.16) ... Hardly a mean old man in the sky.

God is the vulnerable life of a baby.
A little child who was born to an unmarried teenage Jewish peasant.
A little child who was born in a stable and clothed in rags.

God is the vulnerable life of a man.
A man who gave his own life away in service and in sacrifice and in love.
A man who loved everything and everyone
 but who called out the injustice and indifference of the powerful
 and who lived among the poor, the sick, the weak, the lonely, the powerless.

God is an Incarnate God. “The home of God is among mortals.” “God is Love.”

In Love, God has joined our humanity to God’s divinity. By God’s action, we are one with God. In God, in Love, we “live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17.28)

¹ The Eastern Orthodox Churches develop the theology of theosis (or, deification) based on this understanding. As Athanasius wrote in his refutation of Arius, “God was made man that man might be made God.”

As St Athanasius – 4th century Egypt – said, “God became man that man might become God.”

God is as close to us as our own breath. In a sense, God *is* our breath. In Hebrew, the word for breath and the word for spirit is the same word, *ruach*.

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So, if the Incarnation, which is the message of Advent and the meaning of Christmas, is a foundation of our faith, then what do we do? What does that mean for me? For you? How do we live into that reality in the everyday practice of our faith?

The two people in our reading this morning show us the answer: Elizabeth and Mary. Elizabeth, the mother of John; Mary, the mother of Jesus, the mother of God. (Theotokos)

With them, we see the reality of God who is Incarnate in the world, who is embodied in human life. Because ... God is with them. God is in them. God fills them with God’s Holy Spirit. God fills them with Love.

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Mary, in particular, shows us to how live into the reality of Incarnation through prayer, and in particular, through contemplative prayer.

In fact, Mary is the patron saint of contemplative prayer. Why? Because she is the model.

Mary listened to the Holy Spirit that was within her.
Mary “pondered” these things in her heart.
Mary said ‘yes’ to God.

And from the archetype of Mary, a great tradition of contemplative prayer arose in the Church. It thrived in the ancient and medieval Church, but was largely forgotten in the early modern world when differences in belief and practice consumed Roman Catholics and Protestants. But since the end of WWII, contemplative prayer and meditation and mindfulness practices have returned with vigor and vitality.

There are many different kinds of prayer. Most often, we think of prayer as thanksgiving (“Thank you, God, for the blessings of this day and of our lives”) or prayer as supplication (“We pray, God, for the Church, for our leaders, for the suffering, for the dying, for own needs and hopes”). We say these prayers in our private practice and in our public Liturgy.

But there is also contemplative prayer where we just *be* with God who has already come to us. Like Mary, we just open up, listen, and say ‘yes’ to God who loves us with a fierce, incarnate love.

How do we do it?

In recent decades, the ancient practices of contemplative prayer have been shared in a simple method known as Centering Prayer.

There are three steps:

1. Sit in a stable position and take a few moments to settle down. Practice mindful breathing for a few seconds or a few minutes. You might say the Lord's Prayer or another favorite prayer to attune yourself to the Divine Presence.
2. Gently repeat your prayer word, which is any single word or short verse or sentence you choose that expresses your intent to be with God. Whenever you notice that you're distracted by other thoughts (and you will get distracted!), just return to your word and to God.
3. When you are ready to conclude, say the Lord's Prayer or read a favorite passage in Scripture or read a favorite poem. Then, go mindfully and heartfully to love and serve God and your neighbor.

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In Advent, we prepare for the arrival of God. But, in truth, God has already arrived. At Christmas, we hear the story that Christ will be born, but we know that it's already happening. Christ is being born. Christ is born every moment. In us! The gift is given. It's already ours. All we have to do is say 'yes' to it.

When we serve our neighbors with acts of care and compassion, when we come to Church to participate in the community, when we hear the Scriptures, when we pray the Liturgy, when we gather at the sacred table for a piece of bread and a sip of wine, we are saying 'yes' to God.

When we practice centering prayer, we don't do anything. We just be in love with the Love that already loves us, that is already ours in the center of our being. That is also saying 'yes.' 'Here I am God.'

And then ... the prayer of Mary is really our own prayer:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
My spirit rejoices in God my savior;
For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed:
The Almighty has done great things for me,
And holy is his name.

Amen.

Centering Prayer
A Modern Form of an Ancient Practice

Centering prayer is for everybody.

If it is difficult, it is only because it is so simple that we struggle to accept its simplicity. We are doers, and it is hard to accept the fact that *we don't have to do anything* in centering prayer. We don't have to *do*, we just have to *be*, and that can, at first, seem difficult.

The ancient and medieval traditions of *lectio* (reading), *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (meditation), and *contemplatio* (contemplation) were typically practiced by monks and nuns in cloistered monasteries and convents. Today, people from all kinds of backgrounds and in all kinds of circumstances seek real interior spiritual experience. Meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and contemplative prayer have become popular!

In the Christian tradition, the Blessed Virgin Mary is the archetype of the contemplative: she listened to the Holy Spirit within her, she “pondered these things in her heart,” and she said ‘yes’ to God.

From that archetype, a vast and vital tradition of spiritual practice and theory emerged in the Latin speaking West as well as in the Greek and Syriac speaking East. The great writers on the practice and theory of contemplative prayer include:

Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers	Hildegard of Bingen
Ephrem the Syrian	Meister Eckhart
the Cappadocian Fathers	Gregory Palamas
St John Cassian	Julian of Norwich
John Climacus	author of <i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i>
Maximus the Confessor	Catherine of Siena
Isaac of Nineveh	Teresa of Avila
Bernard of Clairvaux	John of the Cross

Through the work of Thomas Merton, Basil Pennington, Bernadette Roberts, Thomas Keating, and many others, this ancient and medieval spiritual heritage has been renewed and presented in a method known as Centering Prayer. I draw freely upon and synthesize some of their work here.

Here are the three steps of the practice (followed by a brief commentary on each step):

1. Sit in a stable position and take a few moments to settle down. Practice mindful breathing for a few seconds or a few minutes. You might say the Lord's Prayer or another favorite prayer to attune yourself to the Divine Presence.
2. Gently repeat your prayer word. This is any single word or short verse or sentence you choose that expresses your intent to be with God. Whenever you notice that you're distracted by other thoughts (and you will get distracted!), just return to your word and to God.

3. When you are ready to conclude, say the Lord's Prayer or any other favorite prayer or passage in Scripture or poem. Then, go mindfully and heartfully to love and serve God and your neighbor.

Commentary on Step 1

Centering prayer can be done in any number of seated postures (in a chair, on a cushion, etc.). Ultimately, it can be done anywhere, anytime. But for the practice when you are starting, the most important thing is to be in a stable position with your back straight, your shoulders square, your head up, and your eyes closed or downcast. The energy rides upon the breath, and this posture will allow you to breathe deeply and calmly and to feel positive energy. You are strong when you take this posture!

Commentary on Step 2

Your prayer word can be anything you choose. A word that warms your feeling, calms your thinking, and reminds you of God's presence incarnate within you. It is like a photograph of a loved one: when you look at the photograph, you *are* in the presence of the one you love. So, the prayer word brings you to the Presence of God. It can be a single word (Love; Abba; Peace; Stillness; etc.) or it can be a verse or sentence from scripture or a hymn or a poem or a song (The Lord is my shepherd; Be still and know that I am God; God is love; You are my Beloved; Be thou my vision O Lord of my heart; etc.).

But just sit and gently repeat your word to let yourself be open and be present to God who is with you. God is as close to you as your own breath. Really, God is your own breath. In Hebrew the word for spirit and the word for breath is the same word – *ruach*. So just sit and let your word be what relaxes your body, focuses your mind, and opens your heart to the Holy Spirit of God. Anytime you get distracted by thoughts – and you *will* get distracted by thoughts! – just go back to your prayer word and reset yourself. It's OK! You can practice for 2 or 3 minutes or 5 or 10 or 15 or 20 minutes. Eventually you will get comfortable with not *doing*, but just *being* with God. Like being with a best friend in the car on a long trip – you don't have to talk the whole time, you can just be together without talking and it's fine. You know how you feel about each other.

Commentary on Step 3

When you are ready to conclude, let yourself move to discursive prayer, where you actively pray to God with thoughts and words. You can pray any prayer you like: a spontaneous prayer or the Lord's Prayer or a canticle or a favorite prayer from the Book of Common Prayer or from your own life. Then, move into the rest of day, doing what you do, but remembering that God is always with you, even as you give your primary focus to the people, places, and tasks that claim your attention in any given moment.