

February 25, 2018 2nd Sunday in Lent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Psalm 22:23-31
Romans 4:13-25, Mark 8:31-38

(Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, by Cynthia Bourgeault, Cowley Publications, quote on pg 4-5, and details on page 63-68.)

Mercy and peace, from our God and Savior. Mercy and peace, and still more mercy, beloved of Christ.

Our theme this Lenten season is Mystic Mercy.

There's a nice bit about this theme on the inside cover of the bulletin today.

It grew from conversations and then a workshop led by our Worship Planning Team.

How could we focus on God's mystery, revel in mercy, explore some new faith practices?

How could we make space to be open to God's presence deep within?

How could we quiet our whirling minds, move from head focused to heart focused, rest in God?

In that spirit let me start by confessing...

Goodness knows, this preacher is filled with stories.

There is plenty I could preach about these scripture passages we've just heard this morning—

God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah, Peter's struggle with Jesus' hard words about the cross—

These are important passages in our tradition, in our lives.

But today, instead of using my words, I trust the Spirit's mysterious love moving in the silence.

I invite you into that sense of trust and surrender to God that flows through each of our readings.

And, God knows that this has been a big week:

after the bloodshed,

funeral bells still toll and grief overwhelms,

students walked out in protest for gun reform, safety.

As I listened, it was clear that between it all and school pressure, life pressure, the long weeks of winter, the plague of illness, for more than a few young people and adults, too,

tears welled up and we cried out, enough. Enough. It has been a week.

Today as all this swirls around us we make space this morning to learn

an ancient practice of prayer and Bible reading called, *Lectio Divina*, literally: holy, divine reading.

It turns out that the sense of trust and surrender to God that runs through our passages today, is the

same trust and surrender with which we approach this holy reading.

Sometimes when we cry Enough, God makes a quiet space where we can simply be.

Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest and one of the gurus of contemporary Centering Prayer.

She tells of how we so often teach kids to pray; how she was first taught to pray:

We say things like “Prayer is talking to God.” I’ve said this myself, more than a few times.

We teach prayers by heart, we encourage one another to pray with our own words.

That’s all good and fine, vital, I’d say, keep doing it.

But then Cynthia goes another step and recalls her own early education, six years in a Quaker school where they would weekly revel in silence.

She writes, “In that silence,

as I gazed up at the sunlight sparkling through those high upper windows,

or followed a secret tug drawing me down into my own hearts,

I began to know a prayer much deeper than ‘talking to God.’

Somewhere in those depths of silence I came upon my first experiences of God as a loving presence that was always near, and a prayer as a simple trust in that presence.”

Today let us use *Lectio Divina* to sit with God, to surrender, to make a place for mystery, for mercy.

It’s a newer practice for many of us.

It may feel odd, or like we’re not doing it right, that’s okay.

We’ll use a portion of Psalm 22, assigned for this Sunday, as our focus.

We sang a bit of Psalm 22 already, put to music by musician Bret Hesla, Stand in Awe.

We’ll move through four stations, like points on a compass, Cynthia writes.

We’ll hear a portion of the passage and as you hear it, listen for a word or a phrase that touches you.

Then we’ll hear it again; hold onto that word or phrase, memorize it, repeat it, listen to what God may be saying to you through that word or phrase and take what God wants to give you.

Then we’ll hear it yet again, and this time let it be prayer, your heart speaking to our loving God, moving from your head to engage your heart.

Finally we’ll rest, rest in God’s presence.

These stations and the passage are in the bulletin, use them as you need to, but mostly just let your heart settle into this time of prayer.

We begin by getting comfortable, become silent inside and outside.

Listen this first time for a word or a phrase that touches you:

READ _____

SILENCE

Hold onto that word or phrase, repeat it, memorize it, chew on it, listen for what God may be saying to you through it:

READ _____

SILENCE

Listen again and let this be prayer, your heart speaking with our God who loves you, deeply loves you:

READ _____

SILENCE

Finally, rest, rest in God's presence.

SILENCE

Thank you for doing this risky, vulnerable, trusting thing and trying something that may have been new.

In the Gospel Jesus tells his confused disciples, Peter and the others, if you want to be my followers, take up your cross, follow me.

We've often heard this, maybe even used it, as a bit of a martyr's line: that's my cross to bear.

Today, I wonder: How do we remain open to the places in our lives, in our world where there is suffering?

How do we remain open to this suffering?

Truth is, we don't often choose our crosses, but rather when we're open, we surrender to them.

Instead of muscling through, letting our guilt and shame overtake, overthinking, and rethinking,

maybe Jesus meets us in the places of suffering—our suffering, our neighbors suffering—

and gently opens us with a beautiful mix of courage and vulnerability and letting go,

and in the end, taking up, taking up the cross.

What we did this morning, this practice of *Lectio*, this way of praying, this vulnerable, risky, trust, it can change who we are and how we act and how we live.

Will we remain open, trusting and courageous before the suffering, the hard stuff around us?

That dear ones, is the mystic mercy of lent. Thanks be to God. Amen.