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The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
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Seasons of prayer: Advent invitation

For many churchgoers, Advent consists mainly of four Sundays that function like four commas between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Yet, making more room for silence amidst the wordiness of our lives is the ancient call of the Advent season. For more than a dozen centuries Advent has been observed as a season of prayer and repentance to prepare for the coming Christ. Each year this invitation is extended: Stop speaking and start listening so that you might attend to the Holy and commune with the Divine.

As a Baptist, I grew up praying mostly with words: listening to the words adults and ministers spoke on behalf of the people, saying my prayers either aloud or in my mind, and singing prayers in worship. As a teenager, I heard my youth minister encourage prayerful listening and prayer as conversation. But still the emphasis was on hearing the words of God spoken to me.

I tried meditation for a few weeks in seminary. Richard Foster's urging in *Celebration of Discipline* convinced me to sit cross-legged and breathe deeply. But I wasn't ready. It was a failed experiment. Following seminary I moved into the role of minister and offered public prayers filled with words, evoking images, soothing pain, seeking presence and comfort, often focused on feelings and griefs.

Eventually words became inadequate vehicles of prayer for me. For a time, guided images provided the sustaining nourishment for my soul. But even they wore thin. I was writing every few days in my journal that I needed to "get centered." I was distracted, anxious and unsettled as one vocational season in my life was coming to a close. One afternoon I stumbled across a brochure about centering prayer. I tried it the next morning for the suggested 20 minutes. A new season began.

Centering prayer moves beyond *communication* with God to a profound and silent

Resources

- www.centeringprayer.com
- www.upperroom.org
- Bourgeault, Cynthia. *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*.
- Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*.
- Jelenek, Frank X. *Journey to the Heart, Centering Prayer for Children*.
- Keating, Thomas. *Open Heart, Open Mind: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*.
- McGregor, Wynn. *Companions in Christ: The Way of the Child*.
- Muyskens, J. David. *Forty Days to a Closer Walk with God: The Practice of Centering Prayer*.
- Steere, Douglas V. *Dimensions of Prayer: Cultivating a Relationship with God*.
- Thompson, Marjorie. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*.
- Vest, Norvene. *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scriptures in Small Groups*.
- Wolpert, Daniel. *Creating a Life with God and Leading a Life with God*.

communion with God. According to Trappist monk and priest, Thomas Keating, who has practiced and taught this prayer for more than three decades, it is a daily practice of 20 minutes of silent attention to the Holy. It goes beyond words, feelings, speaking or even listening. It is a kind of deep intention to be present to God and to become aware of the profound silence of God's presence upholding our very being.

I had been practicing centering prayer daily for more than five years when I suddenly was no longer able to pray in this way. The season changed again. It turns out that pregnancy and total stillness and quiet did not resonate in my body. I had to return for a time to journaling and praying the Psalms.

The call and the gift of centering prayer, like all disciplines of the heart, come and go with the seasons of our lives. Richard Foster helped me to understand the beauty of spiritual

disciplines to free the soul, not to become legalistic or dogmatic demands inducing guilt and angst. When spiritual practices no longer nourish, but deplete, the season may be changing. Some times of life may even be completely empty of prayer, requiring the prayers of others to uphold us.

Centering prayer has changed me. Sometimes the 20 minutes hold a profound moment of God's presence in sheer stillness and silence. Other times I struggle when my inner voice and feelings will not settle. Either way, the task is neither to talk nor to listen, but to return ever so gently to a sacred word. The act of letting go and detaching from whatever comes into my senses prepares me the other 23 hours of a day to receive the presence of the Divine.

Maggie Ross says about entering into silent prayer: "We are what we adore. It is the quality of our core silence — or lack of it — that determines how we behave, what we commit ourselves to, and who we become. If we lose silence, we lose our humanity" (*Weavings*, March/April 2008, 14).

Sometimes you can't know if you are called to a new practice until you try it. Try it once. If it compels you, try again. Read a book about it. Talk to a friend. Attend a workshop or retreat. Visit a website. Invite a few others to join you in the practice. If you keep finding nourishment in this prayer, then try it for a week, or better yet follow the 21-day rule and see if it sticks as a more stable discipline.

In many churches the ancient wisdom of Advent has not yet come to bear on public moments of praying. Those times have been reduced to naming those who are ill in the community and a minister speaking a few words. This Advent, hear again this invitation: Stop speaking and start listening so that you might attend to the Holy and commune with the Divine. Anchor your prayers in silence and await the coming of Christ. **BT**

THE RESOURCE PAGE is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month's page was written by Eileen Campbell-Reed of Nashville, Tenn., a practical theologian who writes, teaches, leads retreats and consults on a variety of topics. Resource Page Archives are now available at <http://www.thefellowship.info/Resources/Church-Resources/Baptists-Today-resource-page>.