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Study guide

Contemplating the new year

By Robert C. Blezard

As many people with strong religious traditions, Lutherans are sometimes reluctant to change and try new ways of thinking about and practicing faith. But there is a groundswell movement of people who are looking for deeper experiences of faith, people who are eager to make meaningful connections to the holy. Contemplative practices are designed to do just this, and Lutherans around the country are discovering the joy of sacred practices. But far from being something new, contemplative disciplines have a strong biblical foundation.

EXERCISE 1: BE STILL

Psalm 46:10 declares: “Be still, and know that I am God!”

- What do you think “still” means in this passage?
- In this context, “still” would take on a spiritual dimension. As a study group, come up with a definition of “spiritual stillness.”
- Why would God command us to “be still”? What advantage to knowing God would stillness bring?
- By way of contrast, what would be the opposite of spiritual stillness? What words would describe it? What would be a name for it?
- Are you ever still? Describe times in your average week when you are “still.”
- Does stillness come easy for you? For our culture? Why?
- How can spiritual contemplative exercises help us achieve stillness?

EXERCISE 2: A DESERTED PLACE

Contemplative practices are aimed to help us encounter God without distraction or interference. Take inspiration from how Jesus found solitude in Mark’s Gospel.

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do’” (Mark 1:35-38).

- Jesus wandered off “while it was still very dark” and made his way “to a deserted place” where his companions couldn’t easily find him. There he prayed. What was his motivation for being so sneaky?
- Why couldn’t he have prayed back in the town, where “everyone is searching for you”? How might his experience of prayer been different there?



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- What added dimension to prayer was his choice of location—a deserted place where nobody could readily find him?
- What kind of setting do you choose when you want to pray? How is it conducive to prayer? What elements make it less than ideal for prayer?
- Describe when you have been to a deserted place. What was it like?
- When Jesus went to his deserted place to pray, he was all by himself without any distractions. Jesus lived in a preindustrial age so he had no cellphone, no MP3 player, no radio to distract him. There were no airplanes buzzing overhead or the sound of distant traffic from an interstate highway. How did your experience in a deserted place compare?
- Jesus was alone before God with just his thoughts. In a sense, he was “naked” in spirit. Nobody, no human-made objects, no devotional to distract or protect him from his encounter with the Almighty. Have you had an experience like this? If so, describe it. If not, how do you think you would feel and respond?
- **Experimentation:** As a study group, agree to this exercise over the next week or two. Find a place that most nearly replicates Jesus’ experience in his deserted place. Alone with your thoughts and God, pray, perhaps using one of the contemplative practices outlined in the article. When you are together again, compare your experiences, observations and encounters with God.

EXERCISE 3: “SQUIRREL BRAIN”

Achieving a contemplative mindset can be hard work. In the article, Doris Janča of Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in Cincinnati described how a contemplative practice helped “stop the chatter in my brain.” Another member, Martha Newfield, described the frustration of achieving a contemplative mindset: “Sometimes you sit there and you try to be open, and then you go back to squirrel brain.”

- Do you ever notice the “chatter” in your brain? What’s it like? In what ways is it like a television that you can’t turn off? Describe how it interferes with your spiritual life.
- How would you define “squirrel brain” as it relates to prayer and contemplation?
- When have you, in the course of worship or prayer, experienced a torrent of unwanted squirrel-brain thoughts? How have these thoughts affected your prayer or worship?
- What coping strategies have you used to help counter squirrel-brain distractions in worship or prayer?
- Practitioners of contemplative disciplines say that over time these techniques can help calm the mind and eliminate squirrel brain. Have you tried? What’s been your experience? What’s preventing you from trying now?

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- **Practice:** As a study group, pick a contemplative discipline and agree to practice it faithfully for a couple weeks. Gathering together again, share your experiences of conquering or coping with squirrel brain.

EXERCISE 4: SABBATH—“STOP”

Call it squirrel brain or call it the busyness of modern times, by whatever name the patterns of thought and culture can hinder our spiritual growth. Contemplative practices aim to overcome them. So, too, does the ancient concept of sabbath keeping.

Every Sunday school pupil knows the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. But how many of us have questioned whether we are keeping it properly, keeping it as explained in the Ten Commandments recounted in both Exodus 20: 8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Read the two passages and discuss:

- Why does God declare the seventh day holy?
- God’s intention is for us to block out 24 hours of every week as sacred time devoted to the things of God. How many hours of the week do you block out as sacred time for God?
- How do the passages say that sabbath should be observed?
- How would you define “work” in the commandment’s context?
- Who is forbidden from working on the Sabbath day? What are the exceptions?
- Why does the commandment single out our male and female servants?
- What do you make of the fact that animals and non-Jews (aliens in the land) are also forbidden from working on the Sabbath Day?
- The commandment envisions an entire day, one out of seven, where work stops. Why is this a holy exercise? Why does work and chores interfere with our blocking out the sabbath as sacred time?
- Given what Exodus and Deuteronomy say about the sabbath, how well do you observe it? How well does our culture observe it?
- Most of us do not have servants, but if we go to a restaurant, don’t we call the one who brings us our food a “server”? If we eat out or shop on the Sabbath day, don’t we ask others to work for us? So, in this sense, are we breaking the commandment if we engage in commerce on the Sabbath day?

The Hebrew word from which we get “sabbath” is Shabbat, which literally means to stop, to cease, to rest. We are commanded to stop, to cease, to rest for one day out of seven.

- How do you observe the sabbath and keep it holy? How does your church and our culture educate, equip and encourage us to keep it holy?
- How does your church’s and our culture’s observance of sabbath compare with the commandments explained in Exodus and Deuteronomy?

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- What changes would be necessary in your life to observe the Sabbath day as the Bible outlines? Changes to your church? Our culture?
- How would observing the sabbath change your life? Our culture?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Contemplative practices encompass a number of spiritual disciplines, such as breathing prayer, *lectio divina*, yoga, centering prayer, using prayer beads, etc. What is your understanding of these practices? Have you tried any? What has been your experience? How might your church encourage, equip and organize contemplative practice groups? What is stopping your study group from leading the way?
- Are you happy with the pace of life that you keep? Explain. Why is it so hard in our lives to slow down? What cultural pressures discourage us from slowing down? How can contemplative practices help us to slow down and experience life in a different way?
- Squirrel brain refers to the constant chatter that runs through our minds. How do you experience this phenomenon? How does squirrel brain affect your ability to focus on the things of God—prayer, worship, service, etc. How might contemplative practices help?
- Jesus frequently set off by himself to pray in deserted places. What are the benefits of 1) setting apart a time of your day to pray, and 2) finding a place to pray where you won't be distracted by people, either in person or via phone, text, email, podcast or any other media? Have you done either of these things? If so, what was your experience like? If not, why not, and when can you try it out?
- Are you addicted to your phone? How many minutes can you count before you have to check texts, email or other information on your phone? If you mistakenly leave home without your phone, do you feel anxious and agitated? Explain. How is our culture's addiction to our phones symptomatic of our reluctance to slow down or stop—the very thing that contemplative practices aim to do?
- It's been observed that we are human beings, but modern life has turned us into "human doing"—that is, we put much more emphasis on doing than being. Many people keep a to-do list of important tasks that need to be accomplished, but how about keeping a "to-be list" as well? It might include to be quiet, to be in the presence of God, to be open to God's workings in my life and the world, to be aware of the needs of others, to be a listener, to be disengaged from the busyness all around me. Contemplative practices can help.
- How do you observe the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy? The idea behind the commandment is to block out one day of the week as holy and sacred. If you attend church, that's a great start. How might you begin to forego work and chores on the day you observe as the sabbath? How might prayer and other contemplative practices help you keep the sabbath holy?

Contemplating the New Year

*Lutherans explore meditation,
mindfulness and
contemplative practices*



By Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

Illustrations: Todd Grasty

Two years into a global pandemic, the toll on human life and livelihood is undeniable, and the toll on mental, emotional and spiritual health is no less profound. Enormous shifts in the way we work, gather and worship have left many people reeling.

Julie Stevens, once a nurse practitioner and now director of contemplative practices at Gloria Dei Lutheran in Rochester, Minn., said that this challenge to human health and well-being is also an invitation to the church. “We see so much anxiety and angst,” she said. “As a spiritual community, how can we be a resource?”

“It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

For a number of ELCA communities and leaders, contemplative practices offer just such a resource for people who are weary, overwhelmed or simply searching for something more—a different way to encounter God in a time when so much is suddenly different.

Perhaps you’ve heard these common phrases associated with mindfulness: “Let go and let God” or “Don’t just do something—sit there!” But how do we let go or sit still when we are surrounded by constant pressure to achieve, accumulate and act?

That’s where contemplative practices come in—concrete, specific activities and exercises designed to facilitate “a direct experience of God’s presence, of divine love,”

said Ian Hill, pastor of St. Mark Lutheran Church in Hamilton, N.J., where he has taught a weekly mindfulness class since 2016.

The new year is often a time when we open ourselves to new experiences. Perhaps now is a time to consider contemplative practices for yourself, your congregation

or your community. In a time of deep change and uncertainty, such practices can bring body, mind and spirit together to engage in what Stevens calls “a heart encounter with God.”

To get you started, several Lutherans with experience leading and participating in contemplative ministry share advice and tips below, as well as reflections on what these practices have meant in their lives.

Contemplative practices are both ancient and new—and authentically Lutheran!

Practices such as silent meditation, centering prayer, walking a labyrinth or yoga may feel unfamiliar to some Lutherans, but contemplative practices have a long history within Christianity.

The Gospels describe Jesus going off alone to pray and be in God’s presence. Some early Christians, the so-called desert fathers and mothers, withdrew to isolated areas to dedicate their

lives to various contemplative practices. Martin Luther reportedly spent four hours per day in prayer.

And in more recent decades, Catholic and Protestant theologians such as Thomas Merton, Howard Thurman, Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault and Barbara Holmes have popularized contemplative Christian practices in the United States that draw on both Christian and non-Christian traditions, such as Zen meditation or yoga.

“Meditation at its root is about letting go of the ego.”

Hill’s meditation group, Peace of Mindful, is rooted in Buddhist practice, and he is clear that the ministry is “interfaith work.” But he also finds strong support for meditation in Lutheran theology, including Luther’s sacramental understanding of divine presence “in, with, around, under” ordinary human and earthly matter, which reminds us that we



Let go and let God

Walk
the
Labyrinth

are part of something bigger. Luther also described sin as a state of being curved in on the self, an anxious preoccupation remedied only by grace.

“Meditation at its root is about letting go of the ego,” Hill explained. He likened it to the apostle Paul’s reflection “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20) and to John the Baptist’s declaration that “[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

“It’s so encouraging to pray together, meditate together and talk about our struggles and joys.”

Luther further insisted that in baptismal life we die and rise with Christ every day, an idea that resonates with Hill’s concept of meditation. Christians, he said, understand that “we let go into something, and what we experience is that we’re held.”

This experience is amplified by participating in a group, something Hill considers an expression of the communion of saints: “It’s easy to think of meditation as something you’re doing alone, but you’re not.”

For members of Peace of Mindful, the silence of meditation isn’t just an absence of sound but a presence shared by the whole group, like the presence of a friend who sits with you wordlessly at your most difficult hour. “We are here with each other in the sitting,” Hill said. “It’s a palpable kind of community.”

You can start anytime—and there is a practice for every personality.

The Looking Within Center at Gloria Dei, which Stevens now directs full time, started small. In 2016, Stevens—then part of the congregation’s music ministry—offered a decluttering class based on the work of Marie Kondo for about a dozen members, who then

REFLECT ON
SCRIPTURE

realized the practice could be applied to their inner lives too. Now Gloria Dei offers prayer classes, monthly “reset” mini-retreats and a Facebook page called “Looking Within Collective.”

For newcomers to contemplative practice, Stevens recommends *lectio divina*, a slow and reflective reading of Scripture. “Take a short passage and read it several times, with silence in between,” she said. “Then ask yourself: ‘What is God saying to me? What do I need to hear?’”

An alternative is the Daily Examen. Developed by Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish priest and theologian, this simple exercise involves looking back on the day, asking where you saw God and naming one example. It teaches you to recognize God’s presence in your life.

Emily Meyer is an ELCA pastor and director of the Ministry Lab, a resource center at the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in St. Paul, Minn. She said one of the benefits of the contemplative practices taught by the lab is that they’re mobile: “You can engage in it anywhere. Your breath is something you carry with you wherever you go.”

Meyer teaches an introductory mindful-breathing exercise that encourages people to focus on “inhaling the breath of God, exhaling and letting go of what I don’t need.” Given that

the purpose of breathing is to take in life-giving oxygen and release carbon dioxide, mindful breathing, she said, is “both physiological truth and spiritual practice.”

Martha Newfield, a member of the Christian Mindfulness Community at Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in Cincinnati, was raised as a Baptist but turned to the Lutheran faith when she had breast cancer. Resurrection was the closest church to her house, but beyond proximity, she said, “I was searching for something.”

Fellow member Doris Janča noticed Newfield reading a book by Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, and the two launched a contemplative study group.

Experience
God's
Presence

Now Resurrection also offers a monthly contemplative worship service and a yoga group. Its leader, Sarah Pritts, has taught yoga as a Christian practice for two decades, including seven years at Resurrection. Newfield said the congregation's mindfulness ministry "has been such a joy to me—a deep and thoughtful path."

Jancha agrees: "It's so encouraging to pray together, meditate together and talk about our struggles and joys."

Newfield, Jancha, Pritts and Nicole Kelly, a pastor of Resurrection, all agree that intention is key to contemplative practices—and that setting aside space, time and intention can look different for different people.

Pritts' yoga mat becomes a space for her to practice physical *lectio divina*. She reads Scripture, goes through a series of asanas (yoga movements) and reads the text again to grapple with its meaning and its implications for her life and calling in the world. "There's something about that squishy rectangle," she said, referring to her mat, "that makes it a gentle place to practice, contemplate and ask for help, in community—to receive grace."

"These practices are not about us. They are for the good of the world."

Jancha finds a similar grace in walking a labyrinth: "Something happens to stop the chatter in my brain." She also has a corner set aside with her meditation chair and books. "It's my place," she said.

Kelly often practices centering prayer in the afternoons in Resurrection's empty sanctuary, using a free meditation timer app on her phone, she said, to "hold the boundaries of time for me." But she has also prayed in her car while waiting to pick up her kids. Kelly urges people new to contemplative practice to "try different things ... give it some time."

Various meditation practices may resonate with different people—or at different points in people's lives. What's important, Kelly said, is "the willingness to try, and to trust that God is in every expression." In different practices and in different seasons, God still shows up.

"If it is your intent to spend time with God—to be attuned to God in that moment—that is contemplative prayer."

If at first you don't succeed ... you're probably doing it right.

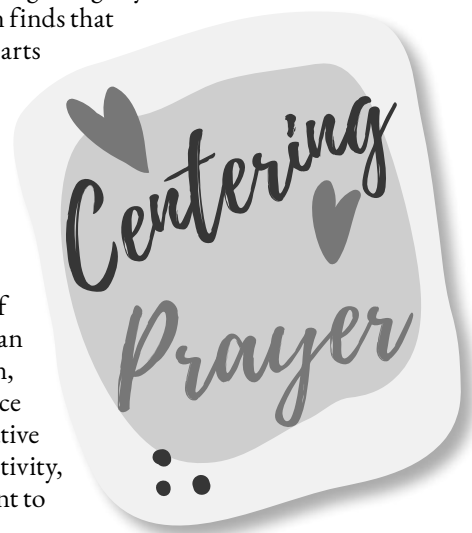
"People are more contemplative than they realize," Stevens said. Nevertheless, that doesn't mean contemplative practice is easy—for newcomers or long-time practitioners.

Newfield recalled a piece of wisdom that has guided her contemplative practice: "It's not how it feels, but how it becomes."

She and her fellow church members have discussed the common experience that contemplation is "not necessarily a feel-good practice [in the moment]. ... Sometimes you sit there and you try to be open, and then you go back to squirrel brain. It can be frustrating, thinking, I didn't do it better or wasn't calmer. ... It can feel like a waste of time, not getting anywhere."

However, Newfield often finds that afterward she considers parts of her life in a new light.

To those who doubt their capacity to sit still, Meyer points out that outdoor and movement-focused practices can also be contemplative. While serving as pastor of Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center near Chelan, Wash., Meyer taught dance as one form of contemplative practice. Whatever the activity, she said, "if it is your intent to



spend time with God—to be attuned to God in that moment—that is contemplative prayer.”

It’s not just navel-gazing: Contemplation as compassion, justice and outreach

One common misconception of contemplative practices is that they are exclusively self-focused or inward-directed. Hill said the opposite is true: “These practices are not about us. They are for the good of the world.”

The members of his meditation group focus on compassion, both a Christian and a Buddhist principle, to better practice “loving-kindness” with those around them. Trusting God in the ups and downs of daily life, Hill said, teaches the brain new patterns of relating to others. Long after the meditation ends, “the fruits happen in work, family and worship,” he added.

Kelly agrees: “Like the infinity sign, [it’s about] going out into the world and coming back to be refilled, and then to pour back out into the world again.”

“If I am listening to the God within me, I am listening to the God in you.”

Meyer said one outgrowth of this idea is contemplative activism. Worship and prayer—including contemplative practices—have long been part of faith-based justice work. Howard Thurman inspired Martin Luther King Jr. to spend two weeks in contemplation during the civil rights movement. In the Twin Cities, where Meyer lives and works, religious leaders organized in-person and online opportunities for prayer and contemplation during the 2020 protests that followed the murder of George Floyd.

Like Hill, Meyer finds that contemplation and active love for the neighbor go hand in hand: “If I am listening to the God within me, I am listening to the God in you.”

In her role with the Ministry Lab, Meyer interacts with many Protestant congregations that have found contemplative ministries to be effective community outreach. Labyrinth-walking or Taize-style contemplative services “tend to be places where young adults are connecting—and perhaps surprisingly, families too, since these activities tend to be shorter and more physically engaging.”

Some participants in St. Mark’s Peace of Mindful group are parishioners, including some who joined the church through the group, but the majority are members of the wider community—diverse in culture, age, race and gender—who find that this ministry creates a supportive, authentic community without judgment or expectation.



“People notice: ‘Your church does this,’” Hill said. “People are hungry for different kinds of spiritual practice and are drawn to St. Mark as ‘a place where I can be.’”

At Resurrection, some members are more involved than others, but mindfulness ministry can be an entry point to the congregation, Kelly said. Aware that the world is hungry for contemplative practices, the congregation deliberately named its facility the Christian Mindfulness Center *at*—rather than *of*—Resurrection, which reflects the congregation’s vision of an ecumenical and community-focused ministry.

“Contemplative practice opens us up, loosens the edges of church so that the walls become permeable,” Kelly said. “We remember that we’re all in this together. What follows is the felt sense of what church is—those who are gathered.”

“You’ll meet God in a different way.”

Whatever contemplative practice you try, the Lutherans interviewed all agreed that the practice is worth the trouble—and will change you.

“There are all kinds of ways people can be in prayer and meditation, and it can be liberating,” Hill said.

Such liberation, Meyer has found, extends from within the self, through congregations to whole



communities. “If Lutherans could disengage from a very Western, Northern European mindset of always expecting more out of our clergy—and one another, and ourselves—we might develop a healthier, more gracious, more inviting, more Christlike environment in our congregations that would attract stressed-out, overworked, overstimulated people like moths to a flame,” she said.

“You’ll meet God in a different way. ... It’s profoundly good for physical and mental health.”

When in doubt, Hill shares an invitation he once received: just try it. “Check it out and see if it’s true,” he said. “Do it and pay attention. You’ll meet God in a different way. ... It’s profoundly good for physical and mental health.”

Meyer agreed: “We’re built to be in relationship with God. There is no downside.” †

Learn more about contemplative practices

Web resources:

- The Ministry Lab: theministrylab.org/contemplative-practices
- Looking Within (Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Rochester, Minn.): gloria-dei.com/contemplative-practices
- Christian Mindfulness Community (Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, Cincinnati): lcreresurrection.org/contemplative
- Center for Action and Contemplation: cac.org
- Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation: shalem.org

Books:

- *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind* by Cynthia Bourgeault (Shambhala, 2008)
- *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* by Barbara A. Holmes (Fortress Press, 2017)
- *The Daily Reader for Contemplative Living: Excerpts From the Works of Father Thomas Keating* by Thomas Keating (Continuum, 2009)
- *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* by Henri Nouwen (HarperOne, 2015)
- *Dancing Standing Still: Healing the World From a Place of Prayer* by Richard Rohr (Paulist Press, 2014)

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.