

Worship without Words

Worship is how we express our reverent devotion to God. Outwardly, we engage in various activities (praying, confessing our sin, reading Scripture, receiving the Lord's Supper, serving, praising with song) that spring from a heart that is in love. His majesty and goodness silences me, at least at times...I'm not speaking. I'm just intently focused on the Lord. It's prayer, but without words.

Actually, this is my favorite "experience" of God's presence...it's when I most sense that he's near...I come into his presence and open my hands to the Lord, letting go of whatever I might be clenched-fist about. It's adoration. It's like looking into a newborn babies eyes and experiencing wonder—the mystery of a brand new baby—delightful and at the same time deep. No words really can capture it.

Praying without many words has been a journey for me. I remember several years ago when I was first beginning this spiritual practice, I was at Biola at a Newim conference. I had about an hour to myself that morning, so I decided to try entering into wordless, prayerful silence. I sat down on the edge of the track and tried to sit in silence...waiting... listening....I'm not sure what I expected to hear or see, but I do remember expecting something and feeling puzzled by listening so hard and peering into the darkness with my eyes closed so intently and yet nothing...I wanted something and there was nothing.

I guess I wanted an outcome, a product of some sort, something to show for the hour in this kind of prayer. And I heard nothing audible (thankfully) and heard nothing whispered, had no verses of Scripture even that I'd say the Lord was giving me...just silence in return. All I remember was seeing moving clouds and swirls of light as I always do when I close my eyes. This all seemed pretty weird and not all that profitable.

During the hour I was trying to intentionally focus on God. I found I was very distracted by the thoughts that continued to pop into my head and I'd be five minutes down the road of thinking about some thought before I realized that I had lost my focus on God. No sooner had I refocused and I found I was thinking about something else again. It's initially very hard to turn off the inner noise. My mind just kept wandering. Yet others had found periods of silence profitable...so I continued to pursue my understanding of it.

Centering Prayer

That's when centering prayer as I understand it, became extremely valuable for me. Usually, I choose a phrase of Scripture, one that I have memorized or would like to focus on. For instance, "the Love of God lasts forever," or "The Lord is my Shepherd" or "Holy, Holy, Holy." Then, whenever I notice that my mind is wandering off into my "to do" list, or past conversations, I re-center my attention by using my phrase to call me back to worship and silence. Also, I may repeatedly pray this phrase, and allow the repetition of it to quiet my inner voices and to help me focus and contemplate the truth of the phrase.

I've found it helpful to have a piece of paper and pen nearby to write down distractions that I need to remember, so then I can let them go, and I return to silence with my Scripture phrase. The repetition of a centering phrase is much like the repetition I so appreciate in music when different voices (or instruments) come in singing the same motif. For instance, if you listen to an

instrumental version of the Hallelujah Chorus, throughout the song various instruments repeat the same phrase: "And he shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah." This, in essence, is a musical version of using a simple verse of Scripture to recall my focus back to the Lord.

Entering into His Presence

I have found that before I try to enter into silence, it is best if I intentionally place myself in the Lord's presence. This has been most beneficial. I read something from Francis deSalle that was so helpful to me in this way...so simple and so helpful. He has four theological truths of God's presence that he instructs us to consider, slowly, methodically...even ritually because the slow routineness teaches us/prepares us to quiet our chaotic inner voices—all that chatty stuff that keeps talking when we want to enter into silence.

The first truth is to remind yourself that the Lord is present—everywhere present. The Lord fills heaven and the entire universe. Second, is to remember that the Lord is everywhere present, with us—that just as a bird meets the air when he flies across the sky, so we, too, meet the Lord as we walk down the street. Next is to remember that the Lord is sitting next to us and to consider him spiritually with us. Jesus is with us. And finally, to remember that the Holy Spirit is present within us and to consciously breathe in and out a few times and think about the truth that just as the air comes into your lungs and disseminates out to each cell, so the Holy Spirit indwells us—He is that present in our lives.

Between going through the same ritual of intentionally placing myself in the presence of the Lord and having a centering Scripture phrase to draw me back into silence when I'm distracted, I've learned over the years to quiet the noise—inner and outer. And I love simply "being" with the Lord in silence. I've learned that I'm not going to hear anything, or see anything, or have any "outcome," I'm simply there with him and I love it.

Being Mindful of the Presence of God

Someone has also talked about devotional times as sitting in a secret garden with the Lord, and I like that metaphor. I like to think of going behind a huge hedge and sitting on a curved park bench among a garden of beautiful fragrant flowers with the Lord. I like to pick a fragrant flower, a nosegay, something from my Bible study time, maybe a verse, maybe a thought, maybe simply the remembrance of his closeness, to figuratively pin on my lapel and take with me into my day. Then I slowly emerge from my time. I can't just rush into my day. I think I try to extend my devotional time in my guest room office into my morning commute and it concludes when I get the car parked in the garage. Then as I'm walking across campus, I slowly emerge from my devotional time, into my day. When I want I can smell the fragrance of the nosegay, remember the verse or thought, and re-enter into my secret garden regardless of what is going on around me. Or at least that's the hope.

A Metaphor

One morning I concluded my drive to campus with the Hallelujah Chorus, just instruments...which allowed me to really focus on the words and the various musical voices proclaiming "And He shall reign...Hallelujah, Hallelujah" over and over which came with me into my walk and into a time of praise as I walked.

Then I came to "my tree." It's a towering Elm. I've been pondering Isaiah's image of "an oak with fading leaves." I like having a living metaphor—some would call it an icon or an image—something physical that gives insight into something spiritual.

My elm tree was standing in beautiful, bright sunlight, so tall yet it had been stripped of all of its leaves and left seemingly naked. It was very cold this morning as the wind blew. And there the tree stood naked, without the protection or warmth of its leaves, to weather the harsh winter cold. I thought about the Lord and how he was stripped naked to weather the harsh cold of the betrayal and the hatred of the religious leaders and the disdain of the soldiers. And the refrain from the chorus came to mind: "And he shall reign, forever and ever." The juxtaposition between the Lord suffering alone like the elm tree weathering the cold and the Hallelujah Chorus magnifying the exalted Lord and was very moving.

I want to be like that, like Jesus—even if I'm stripped bare, left alone to face winter, I want to trust.

I haven't typically shared these experiences because they are secrets, just between me and the Lord and I find that when I talk about significant spiritual experiences, something of their specialness is lost. Something about sharing them makes my sense of the sweetness of God's presence fade. Richard Foster and other authors and friends have mentioned this as well. And yet I'm so thankful that others shared their insight so that I could enjoy these times, I share them sparingly.

I don't find these spiritual practices: silence, intentionally placing myself in the Lord's presence, centering prayer, and having an icon too "out there" for this evangelical Protestant. I have come to very much appreciate them, actually. They keep the flame alive.

Network of Evangelical Women in Ministry
10004 Cork Oak Circle
Oakdale, CA 95361
World Wide Web: www.newim.org
E-mail: info@newim.org

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