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AMDG

Advent 1B - December 3, 2017

Today we begin the three-week-long season of Advent, a season of longing, of preparation, and of joyful anticipation. It is a longing for something much more beautiful than a white Christmas, preparation of something much more valuable than our most precious tree ornaments, and it's the anticipation of something profoundly more joyous than a frenzy of gift opening at the Christmas tree. During Advent we long for, prepare for, and joyfully anticipate the revealing of our Savior Jesus Christ.

This deep longing we recognize during Advent, is poignantly expressed in today's Hebrew Scripture reading and Psalm - "O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down...shine forth, stir up your strength and come and help us...show us the light of your countenance...give us life, restore us."

And, we can certainly understand these cries of yearning. We all carry deep longings within us - perhaps the resolution of a conflict with a loved one, a healthier mind and body, a more fulfilling job, relief from fear and resentment, peace and security in the world. In longing to fulfill an ache deep inside we may spend our lives searching for the right partner, the right place to live, the right cause to support, the perfect church to join. St. Augustine expressed this longing very accurately and very succinctly - "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

We all carry that restlessness within us, a great longing for freedom and peace. And, ironically the very thing we long and search for is within us. As Paul has said we are not lacking in any spiritual gift. That which we search for, we search with. While we might think our relief is outside of us - God's vengeance to come down from above and smite our enemies, the right job appearing out of the blue, losing that 20 pounds, or for the person we resent to get their act together and treat us right - and any one of those actions might give us some measure of satisfaction - they will not bring peace which passes all understanding. It is only the

transformative love of God revealed to us in Christ that brings the satisfaction of our deepest longings.

So, in Advent we focus on the longing we all share, a longing shared since before our forbears in Paletstine, a yearning shared across cultures, across millennia, across continents -a longing for God. And, thus our preparations during this season should be to make us more receptive to God, for God came down at Christmas. Many use this time as a sort of mini-Lent - practicing increased devotions, more generous giving, more spiritual readings. And, those are very worthy pursuits, and can do much to prepare us to be more receptive to God's work in our lives.

What I would like to commend to you today is contemplative prayer-prayer that is focused not on talking to God, but on listening to God. Prayer of the heart, centering prayer, lectio divina, silent walks, all help us assume the stance in which we are most likely to experience the satisfaction of our deep longings - God's transformative love. We can't make that gift come on demand, because it is grace. But, we can assume the stance that offers the least resistance to receiving that gift of God's transformative presence and action within us.

Whichever contemplative practice one engages in they all do three things that help us assume that stance of receptivity to God's transformative work in our lives.

First, is re-orientation. By quieting mind, body, and heart contemplative practice physically asserts that it is God we seek, and nothing else.

In contemplative prayer we re-orient ourselves from me-centeredness to God-centeredness. By intentionally setting aside time and space in our lives to be still with God, we consent to God's presence and action within us.

Second, in contemplative prayer, we will quickly find that we come up against all the things that get in the way of a transformative relationship with God - our myriad thoughts become very conspicuous. It's impossible to be still for very long and not have all of one's favorite, worries, resentment, fears, and preoccupations go parading by.

Sometimes they come and go quickly, but oftentimes they try to grab us and pull us in to be Grand Marshalls of the parade. But, as we engage in

our practice we gently release all our thoughts, good and bad, and, gently is the key word here. In contemplative prayer we might be startled to find just how often prideful, angry, covetous thoughts come up. But, these are thoughts that are always there...God knows them well. And, this is our opportunity to acknowledge them, and let them go gently and without judgment, in the same way God deals with us. This isn't a time for judging, or problem-solving, or psycho-analyzing. It's simply a time to release. "There I go judging that person again..." Release. "Here I am feeling sorry for myself again. I wonder why..." No, release. "What shall I have for dinner?"...Release. This is the most difficult part of contemplative practice. But, keep at it. Just remember, we can't make our minds a blank, we can only release the things that try to grab our attention. And, each release is one more step towards God's embrace.

The third effect of contemplative practice is that it slowly and methodically changes our response to life. If we spend 15 or 20 minutes a day in diligent practice, we're spending that time releasing thoughts 100s of times. This toughens the inner letting go muscle, and strengthens our ability to respond to the challenges of the world just as Jesus would have us respond. Contemplative practice may not change the circumstances in which we live, but it certainly changes how we perceive and respond to those circumstances. I guarantee, that after just a few weeks of diligent practice, you'll notice your attitude and outlook on life changing. Serenity will begin to increase. You'll begin to see things in a different light - the light of Christ. Problems and worries will begin to disappear, and you'll begin to see God working in your life in ways you hadn't thought possible.

I have practiced various forms of contemplative prayer since I was a teenager, and after 40 years I often still feel like a beginner. But, I can honestly say that no single practice has had a greater influence on my spiritual growth than contemplative prayer. And, if you are interested in beginning this practice I'm very happy to listen to your experiences and share my own.

As we enter into this season of longing, preparation, and anticipation, my prayer for all of us is that we are able to set aside time during the busyness and noise,, to assume the proper stance of body mind, and spirit that will make us better able to joyfully receive the love of God which passes all understanding.

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.