



Winter 2019 Discipleship Group Materials

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Introduction

We all think about and experience God in different ways. And that is a good thing because surely the Divine mystery—the ultimate reality of our universe (and any others out there)—must be bigger, more mind-blowing, and more beautiful than any single one of us can fully grasp alone. So as we seek truth and a deeper understanding of God, ourselves, and the world in which we live, we can benefit from the perspectives of others. Rather than having to go it alone and rely on our own perceptions and understandings, we can embrace difference and celebrate a diversity of approaches that gives us a fuller and healthier way of relating to God.

People have been following Jesus for more than two millennia, and there have been all sorts of different emphases, distinctives and characteristics to this faith journey. In this series, we will reflect on how various traditions have understood and experienced God, with their respective strengths and limitations. We will also explore how our own temperaments, personalities and cultural backgrounds create a unique lens through which we see God, and how scientific, artistic, contemplative and activist approaches can all be helpful. In this way, we not only hope to better understand and validate our own approach, but also embrace and be nourished by the approaches of others. Together we will seek truth without fear, with the aim of nurturing a deeper connection to God and celebrating the divine image in one another.

Overview

The seven weeks of the series will cover the following themes:

- *January 6: God of Good News*
Christ's presence with us, empowering us to be and share the good news, thereby partnering with God in the healing and reconciliation of the world.
- *January 13: God of Intimacy*
Silence and solitude for a deeper consciousness of our intimate union with infinite Love.
- *January 20: God of Compassion*
Following God by living a life of compassion, mercy, and the pursuit of justice for the vulnerable and marginalized.
- *January 27: God of Integrity*
Allowing God to transform our hearts so we live in a way that expresses love through honesty, empathy, self-control, and a sense of responsibility.
- *February 3: God of Presence*
Practicing traditional and everyday sacraments, as well as engaging with nature, science and the arts, to gain a fuller understanding and experience of God.

- *February 10: God of Power*
Being open to the Spirit of God within us, empowering us to grow more like Jesus, and to experience God and serve others in a way that reflects our uniqueness.

Practicalities

Messages

In this packet you will find the discussion questions for each week. The questions assume you have heard the message for that week, so if you were not able to be at Cedar Ridge that Sunday, please listen or watch the message online (www.cccc.org/messages/).

Annexes

At the end of this packet, you will find Annex 1, containing examples of contemplative practices for use in week 2; and Annex 2—a list of suggestions for additional reading.

Additional Activities

MLK Jr. Day of Service—Monday, January 21

On Sunday, January 20, we will focus on God's love for the vulnerable and marginalized, and the call to partner with the Divine in advancing social justice. The following day is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Join us and other faith communities in the Greater Olney area at Shaare Tefila Congregation, 16620 Georgia Ave., to participate in onsite service projects. Stop by between 11AM and 2PM to drop off donations of children's books, men's and women's professional work clothes, and non-perishable food (canned meats, pasta sides, baked beans, instant potatoes, canned fruit, and non-perishable juices). Find out more and register at bit.ly/MLKDayOlney.

Creative Cup Coffeehouse—Saturday, February 2

On Sunday, February 3, we will explore the presence of God in the world around us, experienced in various ways, including art and music. Our annual Creative Cup Coffeehouse provides an opportunity for people of all ages and abilities to express and appreciate the creativity within each of us. Invite friends and neighbors and come along for a fun evening of live music and community art. Submit a piece of art for display, sign up to perform music or spoken word during the open mic, and/or relax with coffee, chai, Italian sodas and desserts.

Winter Discipleship Series 2019 God: Partial Perspectives

Week 1: God of Good News

This week we mark Epiphany, which celebrates the revelation of God incarnate as Jesus Christ. After all the festivities of the Christmas season and the birth of Jesus, we are challenged by the manifestation of this person Jesus, his life, and teaching. The angels declared that his birth was “good news of great joy for all people” (Luke 2:10), and from the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus called everyone to “repent and believe the good news.” The good news was that the “kingdom of heaven” was at hand—the revelation of a new reality that God is love, and this love can set us free to truly live. Jesus lived out this reality: loving, healing and reconciling people of all kinds. And he invited them to follow him in living the same way, and bringing healing to the whole world.

Since that time, people from all manner of different cultures have been following Jesus in all kinds of ways. Throughout the centuries, there has been a consistent emphasis on the “good news,” and this week we explore this tradition. It is one we might call “evangelical” because that is what good news means (although this has taken on a very different religious and political connotation in recent history). This way sees God as a progressive agent of Love in the world, inspiring us to personal transformation and to be the change we want to see in the world. Christ’s presence is with us now through God’s Spirit, empowering us to live this way, sending us out to share the good news with others, and partnering with God in the healing and reconciliation of the world.

This week’s discussion questions

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What was difficult for you?
2. Break into groups of 2 or 3 and share with each other about your own spiritual journey. What churches and traditions have you experienced before? How were they helpful or unhelpful? What has made you make your home at Cedar Ridge?
3. How do you feel about the term “evangelical”? Is it a helpful term? What about today’s message might cause you to think about it differently?
4. Repentance means to change your mind, to think differently, to open your mind to a higher consciousness (a different way of seeing things). What does it mean to you? In what ways do you need to repent?

5. Read Matthew 28: 16-20. A characteristic of this "Good News" tradition is that we are all being "sent." We are all on a "mission"!
 - In what ways do you feel sent?
 - Do you have a sense of mission in everyday life? What is it?
6. This tradition has a very positive and progressive view of history: God is in the process of reconciling all things! As we partner with God this could be seen either as a way of inviting everyone to share in loving union with God, or as a plan for world domination by one religion. What can we do to keep focused on the former?
7. What are some strengths of this traditional view of God? What are some of its potential weaknesses?
8. Each share a way we need to experience more of this good news, or a situation where we need to be good news. Then take some time to pray for one another.

Activity for the week: Agents of love, peace and hope

Our vision is all about this tradition of receiving, being and sharing the good news. As a community that "dares to dream of heaven on earth," we are striving to live in a deeper and more holistic understanding of reality that Jesus called "the Kingdom of God." It is all based on love. Love is how we are healed and live differently. Love is what we share, and how we help bring hope and healing to others. We seek to be "agents of love, peace and hope, wherever we are." This week try to be more mindful of be a "sent one." As you go out into the world (wherever you are) try to see yourself as an agent of love, peace and hope. Here's one possible approach:

- Take a few minutes each day before you leave the house or go about your regular day to sit quietly alone. Practice breath prayer. On the in-breath, take in the reality of God's immense, unconditional love for you. Imagine you are surrounded by that love, and are just absorbing it like a sponge. On the out-breath, imagine your life giving that love away to the world. Don't force it out; just breathe out God's love into the world.
- Throughout the day, try to be more conscious of yourself as one who is full of God's love and who is an agent of love, peace and hope. You might want to set a timer or some other reminder to bring you back to this consciousness on a regular basis. Don't try to force any action; just adopt a different posture to yourself and those around you, and see what happens.

Winter Discipleship Series 2019 God: Partial Perspectives

Week 2: God of Intimacy

The ancient Hebrew and Christian traditions teach that God is in essence Love. The same traditions teach that we are made in the same image. In other words, our essential being is made of the same stuff: Love. Love brought us into existence and our home is intimate union with God—infinite union with infinite Love. Our whole lives—our psyche, our emotions, our bodies, our families, our societies, etc.—all function best when operating in the natural give-and-take flow of Love. And our whole universe of space, time, energy and matter operate the same way! This incredible notion is exceptionally good news, but very hard to apprehend because our finite minds can never fully grasp this reality. God is more than our best thoughts and experiences of God, and cannot be fully “known” within the confines of human rationality and experience. This in part causes us to look for love and intimacy elsewhere, in ways that we can control much more easily. We seek this through relationships, work, heroic causes, religion, perfectionism, possessions, and addictions of all kinds. None of them satisfy, but succeed only in distracting us from the real thing: the reality that our beings are yearning for—infinite union with infinite love.

This week we explore the contemplative tradition, which has been a part of Christian heritage from its very beginning. To “contemplate” means “to gaze upon,” and this tradition has developed ways (practices) to spend time in silence and solitude in order to gaze upon the beauty and wonder of God. The intent is not an intellectual understanding, nor even a particular experience, but rather a letting go of all that separates us from God (or perpetuates the illusion of separation), and a deeper consciousness of infinite union with infinite Love. This tradition tends to run against the modern human sensibilities that achievement comes through mastering and controlling our environment rather than letting go, and this is where a clear pathway for practice can be really helpful for us.

This week’s discussion questions

1. Go around the group to share how the “Agents of love, peace and hope” activity from last week went.
2. What stood out to you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that was new or surprising? Was there anything that seemed particularly timely or appropriate to a situation you are facing?

3. How does the word "intimacy" make you feel? Is intimacy with God important to you in your spiritual journey?
4. How does the term "infinite union with infinite Love" make you feel? Is it helpful or unhelpful?
5. Read John 14:9-12, John 14:20 and John 17:20-23. How might these relate to the last question?
6. What are some contemplative practices that you have tried, and how was that experience? What has worked for you and why? Why do you think we find regular practice so hard?
7. The speaker on Sunday suggested that suffering is another means to bring us into intimacy with God.
 - How has suffering impacted your own life and relationship with God?
 - In what ways can suffering be helpful to us?
 - In what ways can suffering be harmful?
8. Break into groups of 2, and each share as honestly as you feel able about what you think distracts you and keeps you from actively seeking more intimate union with God. What alternative practices or habits do you employ to overcome any sense of dissatisfaction with your spiritual life? Then take some time to pray for each another.

Activity for the week: Sheltering from the frenzied pace of life

Imagine a community of peace and safety where it's possible to shelter from the frenzied pace of life, in order to slow down and explore the mystery and meaning of our existence; where we can take time to address the roots of our anxieties and pain...

As a community, we are striving to live more contemplatively in order that we might embody the good news of infinite union with infinite Love, and experience that working in our everyday lives. This week, set aside some guarded time for silence and solitude each day. You will need to plan ahead, and might need to ask others for help with things like caring for dependents while you do this. Pick one of the practices in Annex 1, and do it for 5 days in a row. Don't worry about outcomes. You can't force intimacy, but you can put yourself in a place where it is more likely to happen. Before the next group meeting come prepared to share about how it went, and anything you noticed.

Winter Discipleship Series 2019 God: Partial Perspectives

Week 3: God of Compassion

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures reveal to us a God of compassion, who cares deeply about the vulnerable. God “defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you” (Deuteronomy 10:18), and longs “to loose the chains of injustice,” and “to set the oppressed free” (Isaiah 58:6). In Jesus, we see the compassionate heart of God embodied. Jesus was often moved with compassion, and acted to alleviate human suffering through healing, providing food for the hungry, and breaking down social barriers that kept certain members of society oppressed and vulnerable. Peter described how Jesus “went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

Throughout history, God’s plan for caring for the poor, hungry, lonely and vulnerable has been through stirring those who follow God to act with compassion, mercy and justice towards all who are around them. God frequently challenges people to love their neighbors by looking after the most vulnerable, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving money to the poor and other acts that reflect God’s compassion. Christian church communities have often been on the front lines of doing just that. As our perspective of God expands, we can learn from such communities and individuals in the “social justice tradition” about how to be faithful to the God of compassion in our day.

This week’s discussion questions

1. Take some time at the outset of the meeting to discuss your experiences with last week’s activity, “Sheltering from the frenzied pace of life.”
2. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? Was anything unclear or difficult for you?
3. Describe your awareness of the God of compassion, or the social justice tradition, during your earlier years. Was God’s concern for the vulnerable something that you were very aware of, unaware of, or skeptical about?
4. How do you understand God’s concern for the poor and those who are treated unjustly? Has your perspective changed, and if so, how?

5. Read Deuteronomy 10:12-22.
 - What does this passages reveal to you about God’s concern for the vulnerable?
 - What does it say about the connection between an inward (heart) response and outward (action) response?
 - Why does the writer include the call to remember “you yourselves were aliens”?
 - How might this affect how we think about the people we serve, and our own neediness?

6. Do you feel inspired to deepen your knowledge of the God of compassion? If so, how might you do that? Who might you learn from? Who can you share with?

7. In what ways are you currently involved in showing compassion for those in need? How can your group support you? If you are looking for ways to get involved, brainstorm together practical ideas that may work for you.

8. Spend some time praying together for justice issues that are heavy on your hearts.

Activity for the week: True spirituality

Set aside some time this week to reflect upon Isaiah 58:1-14. In this passage, the prophet serves as God’s spokesperson to the people. They seemed eager to participate in spiritual practices (like fasting) and expected God to bless their efforts by coming near to them. The prophet’s message seeks to re-focus the people on what matters most to God.

- Take a moment to quiet yourself and express your openness to God and willingness to pay attention to God’s Spirit.
- Read Isaiah 58:1-14 in a favorite version of the Bible, or in The Message version, if possible.
- As you read, imagine yourself as one of the worshipping Israelites who were hearing the prophet’s message. Feel the intensity of their spiritual efforts and frustrations. Imagine hearing the prophet’s response.
- How do the words about true fasting/spirituality challenge and correct you about your life right now? How do these words affirm and encourage you about your life right now?

As you finish your reading, spend some time in quiet reflection, seeking to align yourself with God’s priorities. If you sense God encouraging you for the way you are giving yourself to the vulnerable and marginalized, receive this with joy. If you sense God prompting you to stop or start acting in a particular way, express your commitment to be on the lookout today for ways in which you might show compassion to those in need.

Winter Discipleship Series 2019 God: Partial Perspectives

Week 4: God of Integrity

We live in a society that can often seem highly untrustworthy: on a daily basis, we see people in positions of prominence exposed as engaging in corrupt, abusive, or dishonest behavior. In all walks of life, integrity, virtue, even “common decency” are sacrificed in the quest to get ahead or be personally fulfilled. But we see in Jesus a very different way of living—not a life of hypocrisy, nor a life of rule-following, but a life of integrity. Jesus’ oneness with God led to a life of consistent love that was characterized by healing, sacrifice, and the power to respond appropriately to the many challenges of life.

As followers of Jesus, we are likewise called to live a life of integrity. Recognizing that what we say and do matters, we want to allow God to work in and through us to make us more like Jesus—even in situations where it may be costly, and on days when we just don’t “feel like it.” Different traditions—including Puritanism and the Holiness Movement—have emphasized the importance of a transformation of the heart and the development of practices to promote a virtuous life. We can learn from them to grow to be more like Jesus through spiritual disciplines that help us connect with God and identify areas in our lives in need of transformation. The challenge is to focus on growth without becoming self-absorbed, and to live well, without becoming legalistic or self-righteous. We can avoid these potential pitfalls by remembering other “partial perspectives” such as the contemplative approach that reminds us we are loved unconditionally for who we are, not for what we do; and the social justice approach that shifts our focus beyond ourselves to a world in need of God’s love.

This week’s discussion questions

1. Take a few moments to discuss your experience with the “True Spirituality” activity from last week.
2. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What resonated with you, and why? Was there anything you disagreed with, or found difficult?
3. Think of an example of where you saw a failure of integrity. This could be a celebrity or someone much closer to home. What emotions did this failure of integrity produce in you? Why do you think you felt this way?
4. Read Matthew 7:24-27, and James 1:22-27.
 - What do these two passages teach us about integrity?

- What do the pictures of a house built on rock and looking into a mirror tell us about the importance of applying Jesus' words to our everyday lives?
 - In James 1:26, what do you think it means to keep a "tight rein" on one's tongue, and why is this significant?
4. There are several summaries in Scripture of religious practice that is acceptable to God, and we read one of those in James 1:27.
- What do you think James means by keeping oneself free of the pollution (NIV) or corruption (Message) of the world?
 - What might caring for the vulnerable and being free of pollution look like for you in your daily life?
5. Read John 15:5-17.
- What do you think it means to "remain in" Jesus?
 - What do you think it means to "bear fruit"?
 - What practices or situations help you to remain in Jesus?
6. In John 15, Jesus sums up his commands in one simple statement: "Love each other." Are there relationships in your life that you know are not characterized by love? Break into groups of 2 or 3 and take a few minutes to share about one such relationship. Spend some time praying for one another to "remain in Jesus" in these relationships and to be able to respond with consistent love.

Activity for the week: Integrity Examen

Integrity looks different in the various relationships and situations we face in our daily lives. Some indicators of integrity are honesty (with oneself and others), empathy (seeking to look beyond our own perspective), self-control (not acting on impulse), and a sense of responsibility (choosing to live out our values).

Over the course of this week, take some time to assess your personal integrity in everyday life. You may find it easiest to conduct this exercise in the evening as you look back over that day's activities.

Sit comfortably in silence with your back straight, feet planted on the floor, arms relaxed and hands supported in your lap. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. To begin, listen to your breath as you breathe. Feel your breath in your nostrils, chest and abdomen, inhaling and then exhaling fully and deeply—hold your exhale a bit longer than usual to completely expel air. Continue with regular rhythmic deep breathing. Allow tension to fade away from your body, and your spirit to be at peace.

Think back over the previous day (or the period of time since you last conducted this exercise).

Trace the story of your life during this period of time and observe what happened. As you do so, consider the following questions. Do not evaluate or judge yourself; just be honest.

- 1) At what times during your story did you exercise honesty, empathy, self-control, or a sense of responsibility? What happened? Were you aware of “remaining in Jesus” at the time?
- 2) At what times during your story did you fail to exercise honesty, empathy, self-control, or a sense of responsibility? What happened? How could you have thought, acted or believed in a way that would have embraced the reality of being one with Jesus, and channeled more love into the situation, with the person or yourself?

When you have finished reflecting on your story, continue with deep breathing for a few more minutes. Consider what these reflections reveal to you about how you experience God’s presence during the day. Invite God into the story that lies ahead of you, and ask God to help you be more embracing of your oneness with God tomorrow.

Winter Discipleship Series 2019 God: Partial Perspectives

Week 5: God of Presence

We have seen in previous weeks that God is more than our best ways of thinking about God (our theology) and our greatest experiences of God. This illustrates the transcendent nature of God: God is mystery and can't be deconstructed, codified, and fully understood within the confines of our human faculties alone. But the ancient Hebrew and Christian Scriptures teach that God is also imminent—present and accessible within our reality. In fact, this tradition would suggest that our whole material universe is charged with the presence of God, and God can be found in the most unlikely, ordinary, and even mundane places and experiences. The birth of Jesus is a dramatic example of the presence of God in matter, and this incarnational tradition emphasizes the goodness, beauty and wonder of the material world, and how it can point us to a fuller understanding and experience of God. The material and spiritual world are one unified whole—we just don't always see it.

Various traditions have emphasized different locations, practices and objects as important because they help us access a fuller experience of God. We call these *sacraments*, and the sacramental tradition seeks to engage with these visible symbols of God and means of spiritual engagement. Religious rituals and liturgy (like communion, baptism, icons and candles) can help us access the mystery of God. But we can also practice the “sacrament of the present moment” through our everyday experiences of work, relationships, eating and serving. In addition, we can find God in the beauty of nature, science and the arts, and perhaps thereby appreciate the divine in ways that are not so likely “in church.”

This week's discussion questions

1. Go around the group to share your reflections on the “Integrity Examen” activity from last week.
2. What did you take away from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What was challenging for you?
3. What has been your experience with traditional religious liturgy and sacraments? Have you found them meaningful?
4. Do you tend to think of the material world as good or bad? How does this affect how you feel about your body and what it does? How does this affect how you feel about

God being present within you? Does being more full of the divine mean being less human?

5. Describe some times or situations where you have most felt God's presence. Where were you and what were you doing? Why do you think you experienced God in this context? Do you think it's possible to reproduce that?
6. How have science, nature and the arts helped you experience God? Have any of these ever obstructed your relationship with God? How are you working through this?
7. Read Colossians 1:15-20. What do you think Paul is saying about Christ in terms of material and spiritual dimensions? What is the significance of this to our physical and practical needs, and those of the world?
8. Spend some time sharing any practical and physical needs you have currently, and then take a moment to pray for one another.

Activity for the week: Treasuring the Earth

Imagine a community of people who live simply and ethically, who share their land and resources with their neighbors; a community that treasures the Earth and reaches out beyond global, cultural and political barriers to offer friendship and practical support.

We are a community that seeks to treasure the material world: our planet and all the living people, plants and animals on it. God is present in all these things, so this week, pick a "sacrament of the present moment." This could be an everyday object or activity, a specific location, or a person.

- *Objects* could be photos, flowers, paintings, etc. Spend some time each day looking at these, enjoying them, reflecting on them, and be aware of God's presence. You could use a piece of music in the same way.
- *An activity* could be your commute to the office, changing a diaper, cooking a meal, doing some yard work, etc. Do this activity mindfully aware that God is with you in it.
- *A location* might be one of your favorite views or walks, or perhaps just a very familiar place that you enjoy.
- *A person* might be a friend, co-worker, family member, or even strangers you encounter as part of your normal day. Interact deliberately and mindfully, aware of God's presence in them and with you.

Interact with this sacrament for a few moments each day (as is possible) and reflect on its impact on you.

Winter Discipleship Series 2019 God: Partial Perspectives

Week 6: God of Power

As followers of Jesus, we do not have to try and live God's way simply through the strength of our own will power. Rather, we know that the Spirit of Christ within us transforms us and empowers us to be more like Jesus—to be good news, compassionate, having integrity, experiencing intimacy with God, and bringing more of heaven to Earth. That does not mean we are passive in this process: transformation occurs as we interact with God through a variety of ways—many of which we have discussed during this series. Because we are unique—having our own individual personality, temperament, cultural and religious background, and set of life experiences—the presence of God's Spirit will look somewhat different in each of us. We see this reflected in various individuals' and church communities' forms of creative expression, emotional responses to worship, and gifting. Nevertheless, it is the same Spirit within all of us, whose presence brings about the same fruit in each of us, and binds us together in love.

This week, we take up the challenge to be increasingly open to the Spirit of God within us, and to pursue personal growth in partnership with the Spirit. We will consider how our lives reflect love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; and identify areas in need of continued transformation. We will also take time to think about the ways in which we have felt purposeful, fulfilled, and used by God. Through prayer and the input of trusted friends, we will ask for God's Spirit to increasingly indwell us, and work through us to bring more love to the world.

This week's discussion questions

1. Go around the group and discuss your thoughts on last week's activity, "Treasuring the Earth."
2. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What was difficult for you?
3. Take a few minutes to briefly describe your own religious background. What role did the Holy Spirit (or the Spirit of Christ) play in your understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus? How has your understanding changed over time?
4. Read the following verses that describe the beginning of Jesus' public teaching and healing ministry. What do these verses tell us about how Jesus was filled with the Spirit? What were the consequences of Jesus being filled with the Spirit?

- Luke 3:21-22
 - Luke 4:1
 - Luke 4:14-21
5. Read Galatians 5:16-26 in the Message version.
 - In what ways do you identify with this passage?
 - What are some of the traits of a life filled with “self-interest”?
 - What are some of the traits of a life filled with God’s Spirit?
 6. Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-14 and Romans 12:4-10. There are multiple lists of “gifts of the Spirit” in Scripture, and each differs slightly. Clearly these are not meant to be exhaustive lists.
 - Why does the Spirit give us gifts, and what are we supposed to do with them?
 - Which of the gifts listed here—or other gifts used to lovingly serve people—do you think you have?
 - What gifts do you see in others in your group?
 7. Break into groups of 2 or 3. Share about an area of your life where you need more of God’s Spirit. This may be a “fruit” that you are struggling to see in your life. It may be a specific relationship or situation where you long for God’s Spirit to bring about change. It may be an area of gifting that you would like to see strengthened in you.

Set a timer and spend 10 minutes in silent prayer for one another. Invite the Spirit to speak to and through you. Quiet your thoughts and be open to God’s “still, small voice.” At the end of this time, share any loving thoughts, feelings or impressions you experienced that you think may be relevant to yourself or others. Be brave in speaking up! At the same time, be humble, knowing that we all make mistakes.

Activity for the week: Series review

Look back over the six weeks in this series. For each of the weeks, consider what this “partial perspective” shows you about how you can engage with God, how you can understand who you are, and how you can engage with the world around you. Perhaps there is a summary statement or practice from each of these 6 traditions that can help you grow in your relationship with God. Note these on the following page.

Partial Perspective of God	What can I learn about how to engage with God?	What can I learn about myself?	What does this say about how to engage with the world?	Is there a helpful thought or practice?
Good News				
Intimacy				
Compassion				
Integrity				
Presence				
Power				

Winter Discipleship Series 2019
God: Partial Perspectives

Annex 1: Contemplative Practices

Breathing the Breath of Life

Sit comfortably with your back straight, your shoulders back, and your feet on the floor. Listen to your breath as you breathe. Feel your breath in your nostrils, chest and abdomen, inhaling and then exhaling fully and deeply—hold your exhale a bit longer than usual to completely expel air. Breathing accompanied by prayer will awaken you to God’s presence as you “breathe in” the love of God and calm your mind, heart and body. Use a short phrase that can be repeated interiorly in rhythm with breathing. Pray a prayer from scripture or from your heart, like “I breathe in Christ and all that is good,” and then “I breathe out Christ and release all that is fearful and false.” Continue the practice for five or ten minutes, always conscious of God’s love infusing your being. (Children can easily engage with this kind of praying. You can ask them to lie down and watch their stomach rise and fall as they breathe, or close their eyes and listen to the sound of their breathing through their mouth or nostrils.)

Lectio Divina: “Sacred Reading”—Conversing with God through Scripture

Read a bible passage twice through, slowly and gently. Let the words flow over you. Savor each phrase, believing that God is present and has something for you. No need to search, simply listen for a word or phrase that somehow speaks to you or touches you. It might attract or even disturb you. Spend some time in silence with the word or phrase, just resting in it and allowing it to sink into your heart. Then read the passage slowly again.

Reflect or meditate on the word or phrase that stood out. How might it be speaking to you or challenging you? Allow memories, thoughts or situations evoked by the word to rise up gently. Allow God to reveal to you how the word or phrase applies to your life. Ask, “What meaning does this have for me here and now? What does God want me to know or to see?” Spend time in silence, reflecting on the phrase and allowing it to interact with your life. Now read the passage again.

Respond to God. Open your heart to God and openly and honestly share how you feel about your experience with the passage. These may be questions or doubts, or prayers of thanksgiving, petition, confession, lament, or praise.

Rest in God’s presence. Allow your prayers to gently fade away and move into a time of simply resting in God’s arms. Allow yourself freedom from thoughts, both mundane and holy. Open your mind, heart and soul to the fullness of God’s love and peace. Rest.

Centering Prayer

Find a time and place where you can sit comfortably with as few distractions as possible. Ideally, you will be able to set aside 20 minutes for this practice. Set a timer so you do not have to think about it. Select a “sacred word” or “prayer word” that will symbolize your intent and consent to focus only on God during this time. It should be short and not distract you. Something simple like love, God, Jesus, peace will be fine. The word itself is not important—the intent to surrender is what’s important.

Close your eyes and tell God that you are willing to release your whole being in order to be one with God and that you are offering your sacred word to signify your intent. Ask Jesus to help you. Begin by slowly and silently letting the word rest in your mind. This is not a mantra to be repeated, it is only to signify intent, and your word will slowly drift away along with your thoughts. Whenever you notice a thought, emotion or memory, silently and gently offer your prayer word to replace it. Let your thoughts float by—do not be distressed by their presence, just acknowledge them and let them go with the help of your sacred word. Even “spiritual” thoughts or prayers—let them all go and allow God to work in your mind and heart, unencumbered by your “self.” At the end of your time, remain in silence with your eyes closed for a few minutes, allowing your thoughts to return.

The Examen

This is best practiced in the evening as you look back over that day’s activities. Sit comfortably in silence with your back straight, feet planted on the floor, arms relaxed and hands supported in your lap. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. To begin, listen to your breath as you breathe. Feel your breath in your nostrils, chest and abdomen, inhaling and then exhaling fully and deeply—hold your exhale a bit longer than usual to completely expel air. Continue with regular rhythmic deep breathing. Allow tension to fade away from your body, and your spirit to be at peace.

Think back over the previous day (or the period of time since your last Examen). Trace the story of your life during this period of time and observe what happened. As you do so, consider the following two questions but remember not to evaluate or judge yourself; just be honest:

- 1) At what times during your story did you experience God’s presence? What happened? How was God present? Were you aware of God being present at the time, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it? What did you do that enabled you to experience God? What was the outcome?
- 2) At what times during your story were you resistant to God’s presence? What happened? How did you resist? Were you aware of resisting, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it? What were your feelings or beliefs about the situation and any person(s) involved, including yourself and God? What was the outcome? How could you have

thought, acted or believed in a way that would have embraced the reality of God's presence, and channeled more love into the situation, with the person or yourself?

When you have finished reflecting on your story, continue with deep breathing for a few more minutes. Consider what these reflections reveal to you about what God is like. Invite God into the story that lies ahead of you, and ask God to reveal more of God's being to you. Ask God to help you be more embracing of God's presence tomorrow.

Welcoming Prayer

Start by breathing deeply. Then focus, feel and sink into whatever negative feeling you are experiencing, be it anger, anxiety or fear. Welcome the feeling into your body as an opportunity to learn and heal. Try to sense where you are experiencing the emotion in your body and place your hands on that area. Let go of your emotionally needy programming by repeating this:

I let go of my desire for safety and security, power and control, and esteem and affection. I let go of the desire to change what I am experiencing, and I turn these feelings over to Jesus. Amen.

Practicing Presence

Prepare. Begin to let go of all thought of the future or past. Focus on your breathing. As you inhale, allow the Holy Spirit to come in as you breathe. As you exhale, let go of anxiety, stress and fear.

Be present to where you are. Consider the environment around you—your space, the natural beauty you may see, smells, sounds, the people nearby. Truly notice these things and thank God for providing them.

Be present to who you are. Ask God to show you what you are feeling at this moment. Where is there anxiety or concern? What are your emotions? Are you happy or sad? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what you are trying to control, and release it.

Be present to God. Rest in this awareness, being mindful of where you are and who you are, and that God loves you and is present with you.

To close this time of prayer, thank God for being present and for loving you, and slowly return to your activities, bringing the Holy Spirit with you. Repeat often.

Winter Discipleship Series 2019 God: Partial Perspectives

Annex 2: Recommended Reading

Overview

- Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith by Richard J. Foster

Good News

- Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good by N. T. Wright
- The Gospel of the Kingdom by George Eldon Ladd
- Jesus: The Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary by Marcus J. Borg

Intimacy

- Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel by Thomas Keating
- Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God by James Finley
- The Dark Night by John of the Cross

Compassion

- Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just by Timothy Keller
- Jesus and the Disinherited by Howard Thurman

Integrity

- The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society by Eugene Peterson

Presence

- The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence
- Grounded by Diana Butler Bass
- The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Power

- "The Holy Spirit and You: A Guide to the Spirit Filled Life" by Dennis J. Bennett and Rita Bennett
- "How to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit" by A.W. Tozer