



### ***Practices to Bring Us Closer to God: Christian Meditation***

The Advent-Christmas season has barely ended. Many of us celebrated Epiphany on January 6, and are now into the Epiphany Season. Yet my thoughts already turn toward the Lenten Season which begins with Ash Wednesday, Feb. 17.

Just like Christmas, and what leads up to it is a major Christian holy day, so is Easter a major Christian holy day of celebration. And the six weeks before Easter are perfect times in which to develop practices that can draw us much closer to God.

Many Christians emphasize "giving up," "going without," and "doing penance." I like to encourage our church members to "take on" something that will help them form a much closer relationship with God. We call these things that we take on "disciplines" or "practices."

One of the practices I have taught in the churches I have served is Christian meditation, based on scriptures.

Richard Foster in his classic book, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, defined meditation: "The ability to hear God's voice and obey his word."

Another Christian writer, Susan Annette Muto, defined it as, "attending in quiet vigilance, in gentle reverence, to what is there," and "the doorway to Divine wisdom" (*Pathways of Spiritual Living*).

We are a noisy, talkative society. Too often, when we could be listening to some wisdom from those wise persons in our midst, we are thinking of other concerns, or trying to imagine what we shall reply to this person who is speaking to us.

Lent, therefore, is an opportune moment to set aside our busyness and our concerns. It is a time to get quiet and to listen. I especially like to encourage people to listen, with full concentration, to selected passages of scripture.

During the Lenten season, we concentrate on the scriptures that tell about Jesus, his life, and his journey to the cross. One of the lectionary scriptures this year comes from the Gospel of John, when Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha and Lazarus) anoints Jesus with a costly, fragrant perfume (John 12:1-8).

In order to meditate effectively, find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed for at least 15-20 minutes.

I find it helpful to set up a small corner of my home office as a quiet place for meditation. Some of the things I do to create a worship center are:

- \* place a candle in a glass, ceramic, or metal container;
- \* set the candle on a small worship cloth (on my piano bench);
- \* place a religious picture or icon on the music stand of the piano;
- \* have my small butane firestarter nearby, plus a small candle snuffer for the end of my meditation time.

Gathered beside me, on a small bookstand I keep my Bible, a copy of *The Upper Room Disciplines 2010*, a small notebook and pen, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God* by Reuben Job, and several other smaller books to which I refer from time to time. I keep the blinds closed on my window, and the light in my room turned down low. I shut my door so that my husband or

our dog will not disturb me.

Following are some suggestions for meditation on scripture:

Sit in a comfortable chair with both feet on the floor, and your back straight against the back of the chair.

Sit for a few minutes, eyes closed, breathing in and out very slowly. Then read the scripture, John 12:1-8 slowly and silently.

Again, sit quietly for a few minutes. Read the scripture aloud, slowly, pausing whenever something catches your attention or touches your heart.

Ask yourself the following questions about what you have just read:

\* What would I be feeling, if I had watched Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead?

\* If I were Mary, sister of Lazarus, why would I want to anoint Jesus' feet?

\* Continuing in the role of Mary, what do I feel as I lovingly anoint Jesus' feet? When I hear Judas criticizing my love offering?

\* If I were one of the disciples – remembering that Jesus was a friend to Mary, Martha and Lazarus – what would I think and feel as I watched Mary of Bethany anoint the feet of Jesus?

\* What do these various feelings tell me about my love for Jesus, who he was and is, and what he has done for me in my life?

Then, sit quietly for another 5-10 minutes, and listen.

When you are finished, share your feelings and questions in a prayer, asking God to open you further to this scripture passage. What does God want you to learn? What is God telling you about yourself, through this scripture passage?

Close with a short prayer of thanksgiving, such as, "Thank you, God, for being with me during this time. Help me to listen more closely for your voice throughout this day. In Jesus' name, Amen."