

WAKE UP!

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. (Mark 13:32–37)

We live in a universe that is constantly expanding, evolving and emerging. This dynamic flow can be seen as the process of connecting, where “things,” “people” and even “personalities” come into temporary existence because of and through relationships. Nothing exists independent of relationships. Nothing. Not God—our understanding of the trinity makes that clear. Not you and me. Not the planet we live on or the cosmos of which we are a part. Relationships are the web of life underlying all creation. Jesus’ life reflected this.

Jesus proclaimed the importance of relationship every time he stood up for the oppressed, the poor, the abandoned and outcast. He recognized that if one of us is hungry, it reveals a hunger in all of us. If one of us is diseased, we all experience disease. If one of us is not included, we are not whole. This is why he healed the wounded, fed the hungry and challenged any abuse of power. This is why he commanded us to love our enemies. This is why he invited everyone to the table—everyone! Women, tax collectors, zealots and sinners!

Jesus drew near those most easily dismissed because he was so strongly convinced that nothing separated him from them and nothing separated them from God. Nothing and no one is separate from the rest. We are interconnected to each other and to God.

What we do to our enemy, we do to ourselves. When we fail to reach out to another, when we fail to uplift another, we bury ourselves. Until we see ourselves and all creation as one, as an intimately connected body of Christ, we fail to envision the kingdom for which Jesus gave his life and we miss entirely the reason for gathering together to pray and break bread in community.

We are immersed in relationships and if we desire to follow the path of Jesus we have to develop the capacity to see God in ourselves and others—*all* others, at *all* times. Developing this capacity requires that we trust that the Word within is contained in each person, circumstance or relationship with which we are involved. An even greater challenge is to remain convinced of this when that is not immediately apparent. Responding and relating to the deeper truth, regardless of what a given situation presents, opens the door to manifesting the Christ consciousness in ourselves and calling it forth in others.

Our relationship with God is like any other relationship. If we open ourselves and allow ourselves to be exposed to the presence and power of God, we will be changed by it. Our relationship with God has to be nurtured so that as we grow, it grows, as we change it changes and as it blossoms, we blossom into the person we are called to be. If our relationship with God has not changed over the years, if we are still praying in the same way we prayed as children—or if we have quit praying altogether—if our image of God is still an old man with a white beard, we can be sure that our relationship with God has grown stale and stagnant. By grounding ourselves in the Word of God through prayer, cultivating the ability to be still in mind and body, and listening for God, we discover that in our relationship with God we have a trustworthy friend who is closer to us than our own breath.

Friends are those who choose to accompany us through the ups and downs of life. Those who stay with us as we journey through the joys and sorrows, dry deserts and fertile valleys are companions who make a difference in our lives. Friendship

gives us opportunities to safely discover and test our limits and evolve as our life unfolds. God alone makes the entire journey with us.

God alone is with us prior to our conception and beyond our death. God alone knit us in our mother's womb. God alone knows the secrets we carry, the dreams we hold, the doubts we have and the challenges we face. God alone is our constant companion, our beloved and our friend. This is the relationship that must be primary in our lives if we truly desire to discover lasting contentment, purpose and meaning.

God uses everything to communicate with us. Nothing is beneath being an opening for God. The sacred Scriptures are one means of communication, but nature, relationships, music, art, stars and birds, babes and sages awaken us to the beauty before us, guide our lives and draw us into deeper awareness of our communion with God and the Word contained in all creation.

Deepening our awareness of God's presence in our lives is critical to nurturing this relationship. Jesus advises us all to "Keep awake." Rumi, the great Sufi mystic and poet from the thirteenth century, who often referred to God as "the Friend," once said when speaking of our relationship with the divine, "Our friendship is made of being awake."¹

Jesus' challenge to keep awake summons us to develop a keen sense of God's presence. It demands that we be perpetually open to the possibility that God's presence can be found in everything, every circumstance, every relationship and all creation. The call to stay awake implies that God can use absolutely any relationship, circumstance or encounter as an opening, as a means of commu-

nication or revelation. If we want to nurture our relationship with God and resonate with the Word within, we have to begin to look and listen for God in every moment—in the ordinary and mundane as well as the special and sacred moments of our lives. Awakening to God's presence in the moment can come through conversation with a friend, an encounter with a stranger or simply in meeting the eyes of someone who needs to be seen.

Awakening involves developing the ability to see that all things, people and creation are interconnected by the Maker's design. God's presence is in the beauty of the green Earth, the blue water of the rivers and oceans, and in the deep black space of the heavens. The presence of God is in the eyes of a child, in the wisdom of one who has weathered what comes through the ages, and even in those who remain forgotten on the fringes of society. All of creation is imbued with the love of God and thus has the potential to reveal God's love to us.

As Rumi indicated, this friendship relies on our being awake to it, aware of it. However, for most of us awakening is not a one-time occurrence. It is something we have to do over and over because keeping awake is about growing in consciousness, growing in awareness of God's presence in all things, at all times. While growth of any kind can be difficult because it may demand that we change our perspective, do things differently or make different choices, developing a spiritual practice can assist us in this transformation.

Our spiritual practice will only bear fruit if we put our relationship with God first. Prayer and contemplation are the portals through which communication flows, intimacy grows and a

sense of the interconnectedness of all things arises, but putting our relationship with God first demands that we return time and time again to such practices—whether or not we are able to discern the fruit of our labors.

Consistently engaging in spiritual practices such as prayer, contemplation and acts of loving-kindness are the antidotes for sleepwalking through life, but staying awake takes more than spiritual practice. It takes commitment to maintaining the primacy of this relationship with God. It means choosing God as our Beloved and Friend. Developing this kind of relationship with God requires regularly turning to God for counsel and listening for God's Word in our hearts. In this way, the Word of God becomes the rudder that steers us to our destiny and points us in the direction of our life's purpose.

MAKING AN EFFORT

...When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. (Matthew 14:15-23)

According to Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B., "Prayer is what forms us in the presence of God. To fail to do it formally and regularly is to barter the only relationship in life that is guaranteed."² Cultivating a prayer practice is crucial to nurturing our relationship with God because prayer pulls us out of preoccupation with ourselves. In prayer, we lift our mind and heart to God and begin to see that our seemingly solitary lives are connected to all life, that ultimately there is only one life in which we all partake.

If we desire to keep God as our Beloved and Friend, we must pray. The essence of prayer is returning. Returning again and again to God's Word in the Scriptures, in nature, in ourselves and in others. Returning to silence and stillness. Returning to the heart where our deepest center is located and arousing our deepest self in the presence of God.

Prayer is our response to the often silent but persistent desire to become what we are really meant to be. Calling out to God is a response to the Word within. It is a response to the Word that has already been placed in our mouths and in our hearts. The act of prayer brings God's goodness to us in the same way an infant's cry causes milk to flow from her mother's breast. The response is immediate and certain. God waits to nourish us in prayer.

When we pray, we make ourselves aware of God's presence and express the intimacy we share with one who knows us completely. We acknowledge that we, all of nature and the cosmos are hemmed in by God. God surrounds us on all sides.

We have to set aside time to be with God alone. Like Jesus, we too have to “go up the mountain to pray.” We have to leave the busy activities of the day and take time to meet God in the silence of our hearts. We have to be willing to remove ourselves from the things that distract us from God’s presence in our lives so we can more fully give our heart, mind and spirit to God.

“Going up the mountain to pray” as Jesus did, implies a substantial effort. We don’t have to literally climb a mountain, but for those of us with busy schedules setting aside time, regularly, to be alone with God, might seem even more insurmountable. Running a mile one day won’t restore your cardiovascular system, but running a mile every day might. Spending a few moments in prayer one day won’t change your life, but spending a few moments in prayer every day might.

Praying allows us to give voice to our deepest desires, our greatest fears and our most daring hopes. Returning to the practice even when we are unable to discern God’s presence is essential to maintaining the steadfast perseverance this relationship requires if we are truly going to allow it to transform us. Developing an innate trust that the Word is contained in our flesh, that you and I are made in the image and likeness of God regardless of how we appear, present ourselves or come off to others, is the payoff prayer offers.

Developing that kind of trust in the one who created us frees us to try new things. It frees us to fail, to make mistakes, because we know that no matter what, we have the Word within; we belong to God. Nothing changes that. Not the gravest of sins, number of failures or losses. Getting to that level of trust depends

on believing that nothing can separate us from God.

Engaging in a regular prayer practice can support us through the changes and challenges of life, and comfort us in times of doubt and distress, but we have to be willing to make an effort, to persevere even when prayer becomes difficult. Returning to the Word within, trusting that it is the essence of our being, even when we cannot sense it is there, is how we make it through the deserts of doubt and despair that the journey of transformation involves.

A HOME FOR GOD

Judas said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me."
(John 14:22-24)

There are many ways to pray. Explore different methods of prayer and meditation from both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. Find what works best for you. One means of discovering the Word within is centering prayer.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton wrote,

God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself. A word will never be able to comprehend the voice that utters it. But if I am true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to thought of Him I was meant to embody, I

shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself, and find myself nowhere. I shall be lost in Him.³

If, like Merton, we desire to remain true to the Word of God uttered in us, committing to a steadfast practice of prayer is essential. Centering prayer helps us not only access the Word within, but it also assists us in growing into the Word of God we are meant to embody and express in the world.

Centering prayer allows us to enter into communication and foster intimacy in our relationship with God. It helps us discover that indeed we are the Word of God en-fleshed, that the Word of God is contained in all creation, and as a result, all of creation gives expression to God. Centering prayer connects us to God and deepens our understanding. It can lead us to the well of union where our greatest potential lies and can help us grow into the person God desires us to be.

Though centering prayer is an ancient Christian prayer form, it can still be used today as a relevant and reliable means to cultivating an intimate relationship with God.

According to M. Basil Pennington, author of *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form*, there are three simple rules guiding the practice of centering prayer. They are:

Take a minute or two to quiet both mind and body and bring oneself into awareness of God's presence dwelling in our depths; also upon completion of the prayer take several minutes to come out, mentally praying the Lord's Prayer or some other prayer.

After resting for a bit in the presence of God, take up a simple word that expresses this response and begin to let it repeat itself within.

Whenever in the course of prayer we become aware of anything else, simply gently return to the Presence by use of the prayer word.⁴

Let us spend some time with each of these rules in order to better understand how to engage in this practice.

Begin by relaxing as deeply as possible, quieting your mind and body. The mind remains alert and awake, aware of everything, but focused on nothing. As you let go more and more, you are doing physically what you also desire to do mentally—letting go and resting in God.

Letting go and resting in God begins by cultivating a posture of loving attentiveness to the fact that God is the source and sustenance of all life. Gently recognize that everything is held in and contained in God. The psalmist expresses this consciousness by saying, “You hem me in, behind and before, / and lay your hand upon me” (Psalm 139:5). This is the awareness you are trying to cultivate as you descend, both body and mind, into stillness.

After resting in the stillness, centering prayer begins with *lectio*, or what Pennington refers to as “an instantaneous recall of the goodness of God’s creative and redeeming love” and then moves into *meditatio* or “momentary reflection” on God’s goodness, which evokes *oratio*, or a “response of faith-full love, which brings us into the Presence” which in turn readies us for *contemplatio*, “to simply *be* to that wonderful Presence.”⁵

Quieting your body and mind and bringing yourself into the awareness of the presence of God should take a few minutes at most. This resting place gives way to a prayer of quiet recollection, of presence. This is the heart of centering prayer. It is an attempt

to tune in, or align ourselves with the Word within. Here, in this presence, we strive to stay alert and awake to this presence alone.

The purpose of the second guideline—taking up and gently repeating a prayer word—is to facilitate your ability to remain in this presence. Gently recalling and repeating this simple prayer word when you realize you have been distracted returns your attention to God's presence. The prayer word you choose should be an expression of God's steadfast love. Many choose the name of Jesus as their prayer word. Others use a word such as *Abba* (Father), *Amma* (Mother) or *Sophia* (wisdom). Still others choose a short phrase such as "letting go" or "God alone" as an expression of their relationship with God.

Centering prayer does not consist of repeating the prayer word continuously. Rather, it should easily rest in your heart and whenever you find that you have been distracted by engaging a thought, feeling or emotion, gently employ the prayer word to fully return your attention to God's presence. Thoughts and feelings will come and go as you seek to remain in a constant state of awareness of God's presence. The challenge is not to rid yourself of thoughts and feelings, but to disengage from entertaining them. When you realize you have been lost in thought or distracted by a feeling or emotion and your attention has drifted away from the Beloved, your Friend, invoke your prayer word to gently return your attention to this loving presence that constantly surrounds you and desires to make a home in you.

After twenty minutes or so, bring some of this depth of attention to God back with you to your everyday activities of living. In order to do so, you need to bring your attention back from the

depths of silence and stillness and gently prepare yourself to perceive the presence of God in all aspects of your life and relationships. This kind of practice is how the Word within germinates and begins to take root in us.

Becoming a dwelling place for God begins with our commitment—our commitment to becoming, our commitment to transformation. Our commitment to free ourselves from our egos places us directly on the path of Jesus.

Bringing our awareness to God's presence through centering prayer is just the beginning of keeping God's Word. Cultivating this relationship requires returning again and again to the Word within. By investing ourselves in and making our relationship with God the primary relationship of our lives, we begin our transformation from simply housing the Word of God to becoming a home, a dwelling place and full-blown expression of God's unity.

PRACTICE

Ego Identification Exercise

Take some time at the end of the day and do a review. Look over your entire day, your interactions and your attitude. Identify when you were acting from the perspective of the ego. In order to see the ego at play, look for overreactions, defensiveness or self-pity. Do not judge yourself when you see that you've been acting out of ego: simply acknowledge it. Then, in your mind, replay the interaction. As you replay the interaction, imagine how you would have responded if you were planted securely in the Word within. Really consider the difference between the two scenarios—reacting from ego and reacting from the Word within, that place deep within where we know we are one with God.

Contemplation

Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and [God] will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). What does it mean to you "to keep God's word?" How do you or how can you prepare yourself to be a home for God?

Prayer

Reread "A Home for God" (on page 35) and follow the directions for engaging in centering prayer.

Action of Loving-kindness

Share a meal with someone who is going through a difficult time. Do not try to solve their problem. Instead, offer your presence to them by actively listening or simply being with them.