



The Center for Christian Spirituality

A ministry of Chapelwood United Methodist Church

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At the Center

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At the Center is a periodic e-newsletter from The Center for Christian Spirituality. Please reply to nsterling@chapelwood.org if you wish to be removed from this mailing list.

"Space for the Uncontained God": An Advent Reflection

Hail, O Space for the uncontained, Spaceless God! (Akathistos Hymn, 6th century)

These words are a small part of an elaborate, sixth-century hymn to the Virgin Mary still used by Orthodox Christians. The Akithistos Hymn celebrates the dichotomies in Christ's birth and life . . . the mother of the Lamb who was sought out by shepherds . . . the mother of the Unreachable One who was reached by wise men, and so on.

I have been especially drawn to the eighth stanza where Mary is described as the "Space for the uncontained, Spaceless God." That image of God as uncontained and spaceless appeals to

me, though I admit to little comprehension of what it means. My concepts, ideas, and images of God are bounded in some way, contained by the size of my imagination and the scope of my mind.

[Excursus #1: I remember one late Saturday night as a teen in Tulsa, Oklahoma, listening to an off-the-wall radio program done by a couple of local comedians – both Gary Busey and Gaylord Sartain ended up having some national run in movies and comedy – who encouraged listeners to call in if they saw a new color that evening. I lay in my bed with the lights off that evening trying to imagine what a new color might look like. Of course, I could only envision what I had been a part of my experience, what was stored in the warehouse of my brain. But I found the concept so enthralling that I remember the experience now, some 35 years later.]

My ways of thinking about God and speaking of God are bounded by my experience. How to conceive of an *uncontained God*, a God who is *spaceless*, beyond comprehension and boundaries?

Simone Weil said, “There is a God. There is no God.” She went on to explain,

“I am quite sure there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is no illusion. I am quite sure there is no God in the sense that I am sure there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say the word.”

Our best efforts at understanding God fall short of the totality of God. We can never, ever exhaust God with our minds.

[Excursus #2: I look at what I’ve just written and realize what a radical departure those statements are from the faith traditions of which I have been a part most of my adult life. Those traditions claimed God is knowable, reachable, and – I suppose – containable. I’ve found that as I get older I don’t have more answers, but more questions.]

Yet, it has taken me years to discover that there *is* a part of me – and a part of every human being, I believe – that *can* imagine and see in ways that the ordinary mind is incapable of seeing. There is a God-seed alive within each of us connected intimately and organically to the Source of all. Through this connection to the Center of everything, we *are* able to imagine and see and create what our minds could never conceive.

This spiritual imagination, this sense of living deeply and soulfully, is available to every living person. It is the capacity of each of us for living our life-space as a container for the Spaceless God. It is this part of Mary, I believe, to which the angel appealed. The angel invited Mary to offer the space of her life to God. Then the angel waited, while Mary considered.

In the end, Mary dared to offer herself as *space* for this *spaceless* God. Hers was an act of courage. She was not meekly obedient, but fiercely courageous to speak her “let-it-be-done-in-me-as-you-have-said.” She was creatively imaginative to say, “Yes, it *can* be done in me. *Nothing* is impossible with You!”

And it occurs to me that each of us has the freedom to use the space of our lives in any way we want. We value our freedom, and God has granted us that freedom. So the question for me is, "What about the space of Jerry's life? How will I use *that* space? Can I open the door into that space courageously, fiercely? Or when the space questions are asked me – by an angel, a neighbor, a stranger, a friend – will I close the door or slink away?"

I hear that invitation to me this Advent. I'm invited to allow my space to be the sacred space inhabited by the uncontained God. No, I don't fully understand it. But there is a part of me deep within that wants nothing more – I mean *nothing more* – than to live the space of my life in this way. So I move into Advent hopeful to hear the angel's invitation.

Advent Blessings,
Jerry

Advent Poetry

The Times of Michelangelo

By Rainer Maria Rilke

Once I read in foreign books
of the time of Michelangelo.
That was a man beyond measure – a giant –
who forgot what the immeasurable was.

He was the kind of man who turns
to bring forth the meaning of an age
that wants to end.
He lifts its whole weight
and heaves it into the chasm of his heart.

The anguish and yearning of all those before him
become in his hands raw matter
for him to compress into one great work.

Only God escapes his will – a God
he loves with a high hatred
for being so out of reach.

Annunciation

By Denise Levertov

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?

Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.

More often
those moments
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.

But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

She had been a child who played, ate, slept
like any other child – but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed
in joy not triumph.
Compassion and intelligence
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,

only asked
a simple, 'How can this be?'
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply,
perceiving instantly

Advent Opportunities for Growth

Sundays: “Contemplative Themes in Advent”

Dec. 2, 9 & 16 @ 11:00 a.m.

Room LC201

Contemplative Themes in Advent

This class explores the themes from the morning’s contemplative worship experience (8:45 a.m. in the Chapel). The class will engage participants in dialogue related to those themes in our lives. The hope is that those involved will encounter the themes more deeply in dialogue with one another.

Wednesdays: “Hearing Our Stories in the Birth Story”

Dec. 5, 12 & 19 @ 6:30 p.m.

Room LC201

Advent Listening: Hearing Our Stories in the Birth Story

This class involves listening with our hearts to the birth narratives, then praying with them in a variety of ways, including silence and solitude, journaling and icons, art and creative expression. Room LC201 will be converted into a *retreat space* each evening as we listen to the Gospel birth narratives, then interact with them creatively, either sitting quietly with them or engaging in some form of creative expression. The class is *hands-on* and experiential. Participants will have an opportunity to share their experiences in listening each evening.

For information or to sign up for these classes, please contact Nancy Sterling at (713) 354-4458 or nsterling@chapelwood.org.

Advent Prayer Retreat: “Be Not Afraid!”

Thursday, December 6, 2007 – 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Cenacle Retreat House
420 N. Kirkwood Road

Early in Advent we will pause for a day to pray and reflect, to sense ourselves invited into the season of longing. As Mary pondered God’s invitation to bear God’s Son, so we wait, rest, and enter into that which is unknown to us. “Be not afraid!” is the angel’s word for us, as it was for Mary.

Our retreat leader for the day will be Cindy Serio. Cindy trained in spiritual formation at the Academy for Spiritual Leadership in the Louisiana Annual Conference. She serves on the board of the *Charis* Spiritual Direction Program in the Texas Annual Conference. Cindy has a passion for reading, writing, and the creative arts. She is a candidate for ordination as a deacon in the UMC. She is currently pursuing an MA in Spiritual Formation at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary. Cindy is a member of Ashford UMC where she serves as Director of Adult Discipleship. She is married to Joe and has two grown children.

The retreat day will begin at 9:00 a.m. at The Cenacle and will conclude at 3:00 p.m. Cost for the day will be \$40, which includes lunch in the Cenacle Dining Room. To register for the Advent Prayer Retreat, contact Nancy Sterling at (713) 354-4458 or nsterling@chapelwood.org.

Christmas Eve Contemplative Worship: A Service of Hope and Remembrance

A special contemplative worship opportunity will be offered on Christmas Eve in the Chapel. The service will follow the style of the weekly contemplative worship experience offered at 8:45 a.m. in the Chapel. The Christmas Eve service will also be offered for those who have lost a loved one and who would like a quieter, more reflective worship experience that makes space for remembrance and grief.

This service of remembrance includes special music, Scripture readings, Holy Communion, and the lighting of candles in memory of loved ones who have joined the great cloud of witnesses. 7:00 p.m., Monday, December 24th, in the Chapel.

Sacred Space Resource for Lectio Divina Available

A Word from Jerry:

“For over three years I’ve done my daily readings for *lectio divina* from a resource called *Sacred Space*. Irish Jesuits offer a website that includes a movement of prayer and daily Scripture readings (www.sacredspace.ie). Since I don’t do well praying with a computer, I use the book. It has been a tremendous resource.

I’ve experienced that something significant happens when a group of folks pray in common over an extended period of time, so we’re making *Sacred Space 2008* available for any who would like to use it as a resource beginning in Advent. We hope to encourage folks to common prayer through this next year. Copies are available through The Center for Christian Spirituality for \$11 (regular price \$14.95). It is not our intention to get into the book-selling

business, but we *are* in the prayer and community-building business, and this seemed like a good opportunity to make strides in those two areas.”

Contact Nancy Sterling at (71) 354-4458 or nsterling@chapelwood.org if you are interested in *Sacred Space 2008*.

Building on the Foundation Class

Sundays, January 13 - March 9, 2008

5:30 - 7:30 p.m.

LC201

An 8-week follow-up course to the *Spiritual Foundations* class will be offered on Sunday evenings beginning January 13. Like the first class, this course includes exercises, readings, and class presentations. It builds on the disciplines and prayer practices introduced in the *Spiritual Foundations* material. *Building on the Foundation*, however, is more intentionally given to sharing the journey together with others. This intentional journey is built around the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. If you have completed the *Spiritual Foundations* class, this experience may be for you.

The class meets Sunday evenings from 5:30 - 7:30 p.m. in LC201 January 13 through March 9. Cost for the class is \$75, which includes six books, class notebook and materials, and refreshments. A limited amount of scholarship assistance is available. You may register for *Building on the Foundation* by contacting Nancy Sterling at (713) 354-4458 or nsterling@chapelwood.org.

++Please note that the *Spiritual Foundations* class is a prerequisite for *Building on the Foundation*.

Check out the website . . .

www.centerforchristianspirituality.org

Check out our new website at www.centerforchristianspirituality.org. Through this website we'll update classes, retreats, and other opportunities offered through The Center for Christian Spirituality, as well as offer some helps for spiritual formation and contemplative practice. Many thanks to Nancy Sterling for her efforts toward getting it up and running!

Two Audio Series Available

Audio CD sets of two recent spiritual formation studies are available for purchase. The 10-part series on the parables taught by Jerry Webber is entitled, *The World Is Not the Way You See It: A*

Contemplative Reading of the Parables of Jesus. Jesus' parables are explored for their inner meaning, with special attention given to the ways they speak to the inner life of the spirit.

Also available is Jerry's 10-part spiritual formation study of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The series, entitled *The Shaping of a Soul: A Spiritual Formation Study of Ephesians*, gives attention to themes within the text that shape persons and communities from within. A limited number of the *Ephesians* sets are available.

Each CD series is available for \$20/set. Contact Nancy Sterling at (713) 354-4458 or nsterling@chapelwood.org if you are interested in these resources.

Centering Prayer and *Lectio Divina* on Mondays and Wednesdays

Each week on Mondays and Wednesdays, The Center for Christian Spirituality offers time for group centering prayer and *lectio divina*. The prayer times are offered for anyone interested in these prayer practices. and begin at 9:00 a.m. in the Bride's Room (behind the Sanctuary).