

## Finding the Middle Way

By Bob Sessions

I've always loved the story of Abram being told he will have as many offspring as the stars in the heavens. Think about it. Here's someone bereft of children in his old age living in a time when kin and clan are vital for everyone's thriving and future. But even in our own time when clan and ethnicity are less important, I'm sure you know the joys of children and grandchildren, if not for yourselves, then for people you know. There's hardly a heart ache worse than wanting offspring and not being able to have them.

For this wonderful miracle to occur Abram had to depend on God. It also depended on Abram's prayers, desires and dreams. The efforts of his faith, his journey through very hard times.

If we're serious about Lent, our journeys will be like Abram's. I doubt that many of us in this congregation are pining for children, but at least Lori and I are soooo hopeful that grandchildren will be coming into our lives soon. What do you hope for this Lent? And what are you doing to help God bring it about?

Perhaps my efforts now and in the past can be helpful to you. In the Lenten seasons past I have tried many disciplines, with more or less

success, to prepare for Jesus' resurrection. Beginning in the 1990s, I gave up alcohol, desserts, and even lunches. Such deprivations helped me focus on my need for repentance, on confession of sins, on my involvements in systems of harm. There's nothing like trying to do without something you enjoy or crave to make you aware of where your treasures lie.

But eventually I came to realize the limitations of aestheticism. Denying myself became easy and turned into one more ego-enhancing activity. "Look at me. I can do without bad habits and they can't" I thought, even if I didn't articulate it. I resonate with the Buddha's giving up aestheticism when he almost starved himself into nothingness (it is reported that you could see his backbone from the front he had such shriveled guts) and realized there was a better way, the so-called "middle way."

For a while I gave up Lenten practices. But I came to realize that I was passing up a golden opportunity to concentrate on practices to help me dive deeper into spiritual life. A major realization has been that a helpful discipline doesn't have to be giving something up; instead it can be taking something up, embracing a new practice. So I've taken the Buddha's advice and have tried several meditative practices.

I now practice Centering Prayer, following after Father Thomas Keating. One of the things I love about this discipline is that you can (and should) practice it all the time, not just in meditative sessions. You can join the daily and weekly Centering Prayer practice and support groups through their website, Contemplative Outreach.

I'm also now following the discipline recommended by Sam Harris in his *Waking Up* methodology and app. It's the easiest to follow and most helpful practice I've found, proving that not everything on the internet is contrary to spiritual life. The Waking Up course is free for the first seven lessons and then there's a nominal monthly fee.

So what's involved in such activities? The heart of meditation is *kenosis*, self-emptying. Learning to open up to what is here, now rather than living inside your head in thoughts about the past or future. I suppose this is a kind of giving up, like my doing without alcohol. But it's an embrace of life and the world rather than of ego, our small self. I'm not far along this path, but already I notice differences in my ability to focus on whatever I'm doing and ignore distractions. Believe me, getting a mind steeped in philosophy not to get lost in abstractions is difficult!

Let me focus for a moment on Jesus and his ministry, and on his resurrection. On the heart of Lenten practice. In today's Gospel we're given

a clue that Jesus already knew his fate. Jerusalem, Jerusalem. Where prophets are killed. And why would he be killed? Because he was ministering to common people of whatever stripe, increasing his following by the day, and posing a threat to the powerful.

Jesus was a radical. Not only because he posed a threat to the authority of his time, but because unlike Abram and most everyone else in his day **and** ours, his ministry and message was for **everyone**. Abram was delighted for **his people**. Throughout history strife and conflict has been between “my people” and “yours,” insiders and outsiders, ourselves and **others**. This natural tendency to care most about those we know and love and to do so by excluding, ostracizing, or even harming others is at the center of today’s war between Russia and the West over who Ukraine “belongs to.” As we’re exploring in our Lenten study of Cracking Open, Episcopal churches have rarely followed Jesus’ radical example but instead have supported the ways their societies and cultures have chosen the “chosen.”

What you discover through meditative practice is that our minds are constantly judging. That’s what they do. And to a great extent that’s a good thing. “I ate that in the past and got sick, so I think I’ll pass.” “I was attacked

by a pitbull once so now I'm wary of them." "No one responded positively last time I wore this shirt, so I think I'll leave it in the closet tonight."

But our natural tendencies of judging and pre-judging are at the heart of racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia, and here's where meditation can help. If we're paying attention to our thoughts as they arise, we begin to realize that many of them, especially generalizations about people, are irrational. And they can be harmful. "Yes, I had a bad teacher in the 4th grade, but not all teachers are bad." "Yes, I don't find hip hop music to be attractive (given the music I'm used to) but that doesn't mean I can't learn to like it." And even more importantly, "just because someone likes hip hop doesn't mean they're stupid or have bad taste."

Thomas Keating, creator of Centering Prayer, has some helpful words about how meditation can help make us peacemakers:

"[T]he peacemaker is one who has established peace within oneself. "Today, God seems to be urging us to take more initiative in dealing with global problems and to take part in the transformation of society, beginning of course, with what is closest to us. ... The power of the stars is nothing compared to the energy of a person whose will has been freed from the false-self system and who is thus enabled to co-create the cosmos together with God. ... The commitment to the spiritual journey is not a commitment to pure joy, but to taking responsibility for the whole human family, its needs and destiny. We are not our own; we belong to everyone else."

- Thomas Keating, *The Mystery of Christ*

By following this Lenten (and now year-round) discipline of meditation I'm learning about the prejudices I have. I'm hoping to move closer to Jesus' perspective and away from the far-more ubiquitous ones exemplified by Abram and most everyone else. But I still expect I'll have a special place in my heart for those grandchildren, should they, miraculously, be born.