

Our Vision: To Grow Spiritually through Education and Worship

Exodus 19:1-6

Psalm 91

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Life has so many distractions. If it isn't the home landline, it's the cell phone; or the e-mail or a social network beckoning. Or you are interrupted by a child tugging at you, a crying baby, or a dog barking and wanting to be fed. At work there is never enough time to finish everything; there's always one more thing that calls. Even the relationships of our lives—though we love them—pull at us. I remember when getting to church on Sunday as a family of five was quite an accomplishment, to get everybody ready, and then we sat in the car waiting for the last one to appear. So often in my life I've wished for balance. If only my life were calm and in balance.

Robert Schnase's book *The Balancing Act*, makes the point that it's a false notion ever to expect to be in balance. It was kind of a relief to read that. He says that we are always in the process of balancing, like on a tight rope, leaning right or left to compensate for being out of balance. It's the normal state to be out of balance, and always trying to adjust in order to cope.

A couple of weeks ago I helped organize a retreat for the pastors who are still in the ordination process. It was held near Aptos in the Santa Cruz redwoods. I had been the one to make arrangements for some of the recreation, including a high ropes course. This was an optional, free-time activity. The staff at the camp offered a tight rope walk high in the redwoods for free, so I figured there would be people who would enjoy that experience. When it came time for the free-choice activities, I went to check on the ropes course to thank the men for setting it up. Only one person had shown any interest in the tight rope that morning, and it had taken a great deal of time to set up all the equipment. As one of the organizers, I felt badly for the staff people, so when they asked me if I was going to walk the high rope, I felt I should—high ropes and athletic challenges are not my usual forte! But I figured, oh well, why not? I climbed up the 30-some steps of iron foot-holds on the giant redwood, then tentatively put my foot onto the tight rope and, slowly eased my way, side-stepping, across to the far, distant tree, leaning forward and back to keep my balance, certainly not looking down. Of course, I was all hitched up in a harness on a pulley; there was no way I would fall, but still I felt every movement of the rope under my feet as if I would fall, and reaching to each next hanging ring to hold on felt like a major challenge. It was an exercise of trust—trust that the man below would hold me, trust that I could compensate back and forth and complete this balancing act. Believe me, I was relieved to come back down, but all in all glad I had tried something new.

In life what brings us stability and trust is our internal life. St. John's vision includes the objective "to grow spiritually as individuals and as a community through education and worship." We deal with all the stresses of life on the outside by developing a strong inner self and spiritual connection to God.

I wonder when you feel most connected to God. I wonder if you recognize times when you are able to achieve inner peace.

Inner peace is quite elusive. It's not so easy to achieve...sometimes we think only monks and gurus can achieve inner peace... They say, if you can start the day without caffeine, if you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains, if you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles, if you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time, if you can take criticism and blame without resentment, if you can conquer tension without medical help, if you can relax without alcohol, if you can sleep without the aid of drugs, if you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it, ...then you're probably the family dog! Our lives are too complicated and we don't seem to be able to accept life as it comes nearly as well as the good old family dog.

Human life is complex and stressful. But I'm sure you have felt at peace at certain times and places.

Maybe for you it's in nature that you find peace. I think of walking at a place like Muir Woods and looking up at the giant trees. There's a peace and calm and sense of harmony in nature. We feel small and we sense that God is big. In the scheme of it all, our problems are insignificant, and it's good to remember that.

Maybe you feel at peace when you listen to music. I remember one time listening to a Bach Cantata in a tiny chapel with only a few benches for seating. The music filled the room and it filled my soul.

You may have a favorite place where you go—to a garden to weed, or on a long walk with a special view, or to a gravestone where you remember a loved one. And you may grieve, but you may also feel like you are not alone. In the stillness, you may feel like you are in the presence of God.

How many people speak of moments of birth as "God moments." Such a miracle it is to witness a birth! And those who have sat with a dying relative and watched the person take the last breath say that too is a "God moment."

I have felt an awareness of God in special places of pilgrimage. Our family visited Dachau, the concentration camp near Munich, Germany. The visit was important for me when I was a German teacher. We walked through the museum with all the pictures of the horrible atrocities of the Nazi extermination camp, then we walked along the barracks, row after row, and past the gas chamber and crematorium. At the far end of the camp we came to a small chapel. There I felt a presence of God as I prayed for the dead, for their families, and for the world.

Some connect with God best when they are alone, others when in company. A woman named Ginger Howl has written Psalm 91 as a prayer in her own words, applying her Christian theology to a psalm from the Hebrew Bible:

"O God, you are our refuge and deliverer.
 When we are wounded or ill you send angels—human and divine—to minister to us.
 Through Christ we are bound to you in love our whole life through.
 And, we dwell secure in the shadow of the Most High.
 Thanks be to God. Amen" (in *Rhythm and Fire*, p.53)

Some prefer to seek God with other people. I remember sitting on the floor of a small stone chapel in Scotland, on the Island of Iona, where there is an ecumenical community. It was late at night, completely dark outside, with the wind blowing. Inside, a group of maybe 40 people sat together by candlelight singing Taizé songs a cappella. The singing went on for two hours. It was a very holy time and place.

We can seek out the presence of God, or, better said, develop awareness that God is already present, and we can do this intentionally. That is what we mean by spiritual practice. When we grow spiritually, we cultivate spiritual disciplines, like prayer and worship. Some spiritual practices can be used individually, and some communally. Many people like to use metaphor to find God. A labyrinth represents an inward path to God. Candles represent the light of Christ. All the symbols in a church and in the liturgy of worship bring us to an awareness of God because they are familiar, and we have declared them holy. We hope that in weekly worship you are able to encounter God in some part of the service. We have set this time and this space apart just for this purpose.

The Orthodox Christians use icons in their worship. Each icon is a window to God. It could be a painting of Christ or of a saint of the church. Each painting invites worship through that painting to God. Our church has this icon, given to us by our pianist's brother. It is from Georgia. Through meditation and prayer, icons—as well as the candles and incense in an Orthodox church—draw the worshipper into communion with God. "Through" Jesus or "through" a beloved saint, we come to love God. Through our belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God we come to know the Father. We know the Father "through" the Son. The word "through" is significant.

Through these rituals, *through* these practices, we are able to commune with God. We grow spiritually when our spiritual disciplines become habit and part of our lives.

Spirituality groups can help develop the practice of reading, sharing, and praying together. In a small group where people care about one another, we find we connect with God. The reading of the Bible itself can become a spiritual discipline—reading and reflecting, is a very old practice known as *lectio divina*. In this practice you read a Bible passage several times and allow it to speak to you. Really you are allowing God to speak to you through the passage. This is a form of prayer. *Through* the Bible we come to know God.

Our vision calls us to grow spiritually as individuals and as a community. In Bible study classes we learn about the history of God's interaction with the people of God through the centuries. Some of us have a spirituality of the heart, and some have more a spirituality of the mind. You'll find, some like to pray and meditate; others prefer to read and discuss.

Disciple Bible Study is a wonderful program for those who want to learn about the Bible. Gail is offering a class in October after worship that will introduce participants to the whole Bible in less than a year. It will be an important way to stretch the mind, and at the same time get to know a small group of people well. In this class you will learn, for example, about the reading today from Exodus, how the people's story of God leading them out of Egypt to Sinai is the story of God's faithfulness, how God bore the people on eagles' wings to be with God.

You may not know you need to grow spiritually. Sometimes it is easy to ignore our need for inner peace. A pastor of 25 years admits, "I was a well-educated, well-trained, well-adjusted pastor serving a wonderful, loving congregation when the hunger came for something more. I [didn't know] what I was looking for. [I was] in deep denial about my needs. The loneliness of parish ministry was consuming me; my faith was poorly formed, my ministry limited by an overdeveloped sense of caution. I needed healing in places I didn't know were broken, and I needed to repent in ways that I could only begin to understand" (Jerry Haas in *Rhythm and Fire*, p. 134). This pastor attended the Spiritual Academy, offered by the Upper Room, a Division of the United Methodist Church, and in a retreat setting found spiritual renewal.

We know God *through* the experiences of life. Through memory, we remember Jesus' last supper with his disciples. (Next week we will practice the universal Christian sacrament of Holy Communion, on World Communion Sunday.) Through memorized prayer and repeated ritual, we find ourselves in God's presence. Through metaphor, through icons, candles, music, and natural beauty we are drawn to God. And through relationships of love and care we encounter inner peace. And here at St. John's, *through* the body of Christ we find God.

In the distractions of daily living, in the stresses and problems of life, developing a strong inner life with God can be a lifesaver. We may still totter back and forth and never achieve complete balance. But we will not fall, because, when we grow spiritually, we can access God's love and it will raise us up on eagle's wings.