That which I am and the way that I am, with all my gifts of nature and grace, you have given to me, O God, and you are all this.

I offer all to you, principally to praise you and to help my fellow [brothers and sisters] and [all creation].

Anonymous author, *The Cloud of Unknowing*
But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:6

As we approach the one-year mark of when the novel coronavirus pandemic meant widespread lockdown and stay-at-home orders, we are sobered by the suffering and death and loss that this modern plague has caused our world, our communities, and our families. The Ash Wednesday reminder of our mortality – “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” – is and has been a lived reality for so many people, and for so many months now.

Those who focus on survival are seeking ways to temper the anxiety of these times. Those who seek to safeguard themselves and others are seeking ways to do that faithfully while grieving the loss of connection with loved ones. Those who plan and lead and manage need to live with a much higher level of uncertainty.

Spiritual practices are actions which God’s people regularly undertake in order to encounter the divine and the world. Spiritual development happens as a result of spiritual
Corporate worship and intercessory prayer are perhaps the best-known and most widely practiced spiritual practices in Western Christianity.

This Lent we will be introducing the practice of Centering Prayer as a spiritual practice you are invited to consider. A few in our congregation already practice Centering Prayer or have done so in the past. It is a practice that dates to the early centuries of the church and may be similar to Jesus’ own practice of prayer when he withdrew for prayer alone. Centering Prayer is practiced in each person’s own heart, and it can be silently shared by others in the same room or the same Zoom.

I have practiced some form or another of contemplative prayer each morning since my teenage years, often without being taught. By mid-2020 I was ready for a more structured practice to anchor my days and support my life and ministry in the difficulties of life during this pandemic. I began practicing Centering Prayer for twenty minutes twice daily, before eating breakfast and before eating dinner. (This is the core practice taught by teachers of Centering Prayer.) Through this practice the Holy Spirit has sustained my spirit and drawn me into healing and peace that I only find in the presence of the One to whom I belong.

It is a prayer of grace and one which we are not invited to judge but simply practice with a “naked intent toward God,” the intent which in itself is pleasing to God. It is an exercise of gently setting aside mental chatter to enter a silence and unknowing from which deeper awareness, presence, creativity and peace are born.

Lent is our annual time for spiritual renewal. That renewal is deeply personal, and about embodied practices of faith and spiritual life: worship, prayer, fasting, giving. The renewal is also communal – a collective deep breath.

Each year I pray and reflect on what you, the people of Advent Lutheran, have lifted up about your spiritual hungers and thirsts. From that I create an emphasis for the season of Lent that comes through our midweek gatherings as well as Sunday worship that brings together the scriptures and practices for upbuilding our spiritual lives in community. When I raised Centering Prayer as an opportunity this year, the Worship and Music Committee members were interested and thought this rather than other options most resonated. I am humbly grateful to be a part of introducing this way of daily praying together, apart, as we do in these times.

“God, unto whom all hearts are open, and unto whom all wills speak, and to whom no private thing is hidden: I beg of you to cleanse and purify the intentions of my heart, with the unspeakable or ineffable gift of your grace; that I may love you perfectly and worship you worthily.”

The Cloud of Unknowing, prayer before the Preface.
How We Will Learn Centering Prayer This Lent

The Ash Wednesday service will include a ten-minute introductory talk on “Prayer as Relationship” that introduces Centering Prayer. Then, for each of the five Wednesdays that follow, we will have an evening prayer service that will include opening prayer time, teaching on centering prayer (both live and pre-recorded), and a time of practicing Centering Prayer together.

Ash Wednesday Service
7:00 PM
February 17
YouTube Premiere and Facebook Premiere

Wednesday Midweek Prayer Services
7:00—7:45 PM
February 24, March 3, 10, 17 and 24

Holy Week and Easter Worship

Pastor Anita and the Worship and Music Committee meet monthly to assess current conditions and prepare the parameters for worship as best we can in these times. We are considering several options for Holy Week and Easter, depending on health and safety conditions. We are committed to having worship that is safe and accessible to all.
Recommended Books and Websites on Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a simple yet profound practice. One can practice Centering Prayer for years, throughout one’s life, following only the simple method outlined in the brochure that was mailed to you separately.

Some may like to learn more about this practice, though, and share experiences and encouragement with others. Here are resources I recommend:

First of all: The Cloud of Unknowing, a 14th century text by an anonymous English monk. I prefer reading or listening to the translation (from the Middle English) by Carmen Acevedo Butcher. This text is very personal and uplifting and encouraging as well stunning in its elucidation of life with God. The translator begins with this quote by Clifton Walters: “Whoever you are, looking for peace, this book is for you. Contemplation is not the pleasant reaction to a celestial sunset, nor is it the perpetual twitter of heavenly birdsong; it is not even an emotion. It is the awareness of God, known and loved to the core of one’s being.”

The Heart of Centering Prayer by the contemporary mystic Cynthia Bourgeault is best read after The Cloud of Unknowing, as part of Bourgeault’s book is commentary on The Cloud. This author brings current 21st century language, sciences and theology into conversation with a life shaped by this prayer.

Open Mind, Open Heart by Thomas Keating is the classic text introducing Centering Prayer to North American people.

www.contemplativeoutreach.org has many resources, including online Centering Prayer groups.

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**Books and Websites**

The Cloud of Unknowing by Carmen Acevedo Butcher

The Heart of Centering Prayer by Cynthia Bourgeault

Open Mind, Open Heart by Thomas Keating

www.contemplativeoutreach.org
“This book is a rainmaker for anyone whose soul has ever felt dry as a bone. Its nameless author was a gifted teacher. Page after page, he patiently explains what contemplative prayer is and how it can end any spiritual drought, shortages of love, low levels of humility, and absence of peace. Through practice of spiritual exercises that he calls The Cloud of Unknowing, and The Cloud of Forgetting, he teaches us to pray without ceasing, and shows us that a dialogue with Mystery is not only practical, but is, in fact, the work of the soul that most pleases God.

Anonymous begins with a call to self-examination and humility, then recommends contemplative prayer as the only discipline that can deeply purify the soul. He describes it as ‘the easiest work of all, when a soul is helped by grace,’ and gives us this advice: ‘So stop hesitating. Do this work until you feel the delight of it. In the trying is the desire.’

“Next, Anonymous explains what he means by The Cloud of Unknowing, and how this prayer helps us silence our analytical minds, freeing our hearts to love. An experienced mystic, our author understands that contemplative prayer does not immediately enlighten. He admits, in fact, that it may seem like the most unilluminated place initially. ‘The first time you practice contemplation, you’ll only experience a darkness, like a Cloud of Unknowing. You won’t know what this is. You’ll only know that in your will you feel a simple reaching out to God. You must also know that this darkness and this Cloud will
always be between you and your God, whatever you do. They will always keep you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your intellect and will block you from feeling him fully in the sweetness of love in your emotions. So, be sure that you make your home in this darkness.’

“He writes as one who has mastered this early stage but remembers its uncertainty and worry. He keeps reassuring us that we need only one thing: a naked intent, a simple reaching out to God that is this Cloud of Unknowing. Contemplation requires us to be still if we want to be acquainted with its discipline, because God cannot be grasped with our minds, only by our love, as Jesus told the curious, well-educated lawyer: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.’ Anonymous makes this same point when he teaches us that we can’t think our way to God, saying, ‘That’s why I’m willing to abandon everything I know, to love the One thing I cannot think. He can be loved, but not thought.’

“Then he describes the second necessity for contemplative prayer: a kind of spiritual amnesia. ‘To the Cloud of Unknowing above you, and between you and your God, add the Cloud of Forgetting beneath you, between you and the creation. If the Cloud of Unknowing makes you feel alienated from God, that’s only because you’ve not yet put a Cloud of Forgetting between you and everything in creation. When I say, ‘everything in creation,’ I mean not only the creatures themselves, but also everything they do and are, as well as the circumstances in which they find themselves. There are no exceptions. You must forget everything, hide all created things, material and spiritual, good and bad, under the Cloud of Forgetting.’

“Anonymous offers timeless practical advice that we as readers come to The Cloud and its sequel to learn about prayer. For example, he recommends that we focus our scattered minds on one small word and try to hold onto it. ‘Select a little word of one syllable, not two: the shorter the word, the more it helps the work of the spirit. God or Love works well. Pick one of these or any other word you like, as long as it is one syllable. Fasten it to your heart. Fix your mind on it permanently so nothing can dislodge it.’

“He teaches that such contemplation reconnects us to God. If humanity had never sinned, this work would not have stopped. A wise mentor, he teaches that if we choose to contemplate the word “sin,” saturating our souls with it, we will learn ‘how large every sin is, because even the smallest sin separates us from God and prevents us from learning true peace of soul.’ Above all, his books are encouraging. Their Anonymous author reassures us often, saying, ‘You only need a naked intent for God. When you long for him, that’s enough.’ He develops this idea in many down-to-earth ways, helping us enter into a deeper understanding of God as we experience the purity of contemplative prayer.”
How the Spiritual Writings from Past Pandemics Speak Today

The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of the Privy Counsel were written in England, sometime during the last half of the fourteenth century, an age of pandemic. The bubonic plague reached the island in 1348, raged through 1349, reappeared several more times before century’s end, and returned haphazardly for hundreds of years. The horror is heard in a medieval Welsh lament: “Death invades us like black smoke; we fear the shilling in the armpit.” This ‘shilling’ was a chilling first symptom of the plague, an odd black swelling in the armpit or groin followed by purple-black blotches covering the skin, followed by violent vomiting, agonizing pain, and then death. Most victims were gone in under five days; others lasted less than twenty-four hours. Millions caught it: roughly half of England’s population died.

Meanwhile, compassion suffered a slow death also. Guy de Chauliac, the well-known fourteenth-century physician to popes, observed that the deadly illness destroyed community: ‘Charity is dead.’ In the introduction of The Decameron, Giovanni Bocaccio describes the inhumanity of that time: ‘Neighbors never helped neighbors, and even relatives shunned each other. Brother deserted brother, uncle left nephew, sister forgot brother, and sometimes wife neglected husband. Worst of all, parents abandoned their children as if they didn’t know them.’

The plague was merely one of the fourteenth century’s difficulties. From 1337 on, England was also at war with France, during the 116 years of the on-again, off-again and numerically mislabeled Hundred Years’ War. The Peasants’ Revolt began in the summer of 1381, after yet another unfair poll tax sparked social unrest. Commoners grabbed rusty swords, scythes, and axes and stormed their way through the counties of Essex and Kent, opening prisons, attacking monasteries, attacking stately manors, killing every lawyer they could find, and burning whatever they could get their hands on.

The ugly 14th century was also the prelude to the great Reformation. Why did Martin Luther nail
his 95 theses and the flaws of Catholicism to the Wittenberg Castle Church door October 31, 1517? For starters, the corrupt Avignon papacy (1309-1377) had damaged the Catholic Church. Seven secularized French popes (Clement V, John XXII, Benedict XII, Clement VI, Innocent VI, Urban V and Gregory XI) took up residence in Avignon and worshiped opulence, ate from golden plates, fought expensive wars, and meddled in politics instead of feeding the poor and following Christ. Pope Gregory XI brought the papacy back to Rome seventy years later, in 1378, but the politically-driven Western Schism started four more decades of ecclesiastical infighting, resolved by the Council of Constance in 1417. Add to these holy wars Johannes Gutenberg’s mid-15\textsuperscript{th} century printing press and the Bibles, books, and other documents it produced, including Luther’s 95 theses, and suddenly you have a more well-informed populace, many of whom would not indulge their leaders in anything less than the uncorrupted truth.

Out of plague, ego-triggered wars, social inequality and disorder, a divided church and technological change came England’s devotional classics as never before and never since. English mysticism took root in the confusion of transition and grew in the vernacular works of Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Richard Roll, and The Cloud’s Anonymous. English – Middle English, to be precise – was used for the first time instead of the less accessible Latin to lead those with restless hearts into an ancient peace.

What was true for the island was also true for Europe. Birgitta of Sweden, Angela of Feligno, Beatrice of Nazareth, Catherine of Siena, Meister Johannes Eckhart, Gertrude the Great, Thomas á Kempis, Marguerite d’Oingt, Marguerite Porete, Mechtilde of Hackeborn, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, and Umlita of Faenza are some of the continental mystics who wrote during this turbulent but fruitful period. These writers teach contemplation as a practical spiritual exercise that, through grace, unites an individual soul with God. Their goal is audacious: nothing short of total union with the Creator and Savior. They teach contemplation as a spiritual craft that can be learned by anyone, the way cooking or writing can be mastered, if you are dedicated. This outbreak of devotional literature has one theme: contemplation is synonymous with God’s love. It creates interior peace and exterior acts of kindness that Catholics call good works and Protestants call service to the Lord.

Written as a part of the Introduction to The Cloud of Unknowing, Anonymous, Carmen Acevedo Butcher, translator and writer of the Introduction.

We will continue our tradition of sharing Ash Wednesday worship with St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, and we welcome the Rev. Karen Cuffie as well as the congregation of St. Stephen in the Fields Episcopal Church in South San José. Our worship service, hosted by Advent, will premiere at 7 PM on February 17 on Advent’s YouTube and Facebook pages. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the season of Lent. Our worship service will include the Imposition of Ashes, which each can do at home with the ashes that will be mailed to you. The service will also include a reflection on Prayer as Relationship, based on Matthew 6:6, and voices from all three congregations contributing to the hymn “O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days.”
This year we are encouraging everyone who enjoys learning about saints from every place and time of the church to do so online on your own through the website www.lentmadness.org. There are already new posts to introduce the countdown to the season, but Lent Madness does not officially begin until the day after Ash Wednesday. You can find the calendar, brackets and much, much more on the website. Since there are daily matchups, maybe before Lent starts you want to set up your own phone or text groups for voting each day and getting into the competition! Have fun with this and with others in your life and in the church. Do you remember who won the Golden Halo in 2020? Hint: initials are HT.

It has been announced that the Crystal Thimble Award for 2021 has been given to the Lutheran World Relief Quilt and Kit Ministry for their outstanding contribution to quilting. This is the first time a non-profit group has been recognized by the Quilters' Hall of Fame, located at the Marie Webster Home and Museum in Marian, Indiana. Congratulations to Advent's Sew Seeds and to people throughout the country who contribute to LWR Quilts and Kits!
As we continue to pray for one another and our congregation and its leaders, we also pray for the larger church of which we are a part. At the Synod Assembly, which will be held mostly online May 5-7, a new Bishop will be elected. Pastor Anita, Valerie Chambliss and Linda Loftesness will be voting members to that Synod Assembly, with Horst Groesser as an alternate.

My name was lifted as a pre-nominee by our El Camino Real Conference and other conferences in our Synod. I have spent time in prayer and discernment, as well as in conversation with colleagues, friends, and family about this potential call. I am now clear that I continue to be called to parish ministry rather than potentially to service as a bishop; and continue to be particularly called to serve Advent and the South County community. The leadership work of bishop would be aligned with some of my gifts, but it is an administrative call and I’m not ready, or being called, to give up teaching confirmation, and regular preaching, teaching, administration of sacraments and pastoral care within a congregation as well as the network of relationships of care and justice within the wider community. I have written our Synod Secretary, Jeff Pennington, informing him that I am withdrawing my name from the list of pre-nominees and will not be accepting a nomination to serve in this office. I look forward to continuing to serve God’s people in my current call.

I invite your prayers for our synod and for those pastors who have made themselves available for consideration for service as Bishop of our synod.