

March 10, 2019

TEXT: [Mark 5:38–42](#); [Luke 7:11–15](#); [John 11:38–44](#)

TITLE: Faith & Meditation

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

In recent years, there has been a tremendous growth in the practice of meditation. Or rather, there has been a tremendous growth in talking about the practice of meditation. Lots of people are quick to extol the virtues of meditation—how it reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, and leads to a general state of well-being and peace. But practicing meditation is much less common than talking about meditation, which is not surprising in this frenzied world we live in.

Meditation has deep roots in the Christian tradition. Think of the famous verse from Psalm 46: *Be still and know that I am God*. Ancient Christians living in monasteries used to practice something called *lectio divina*. This was a type of scripture-based meditation, in which you slowly read a passage of scripture; then you read it a second time and listen to what words or phrases stood out to you. Then you read it a third time and spend some time pondering the meaning of the verses. Finally you simply are still—contemplating in silence what you'd read.

Meditation is a discipline that doesn't come naturally to most of us. You get comfortable; you close your eyes; you try to empty your mind—and either you doze off or your mind keeps getting filled up with distracting thoughts. I'll admit that I'm not good at pure meditation. Sometimes when I pray I have moments of meditation. Sometimes when I'm in nature, my senses become heightened and I have a strong sense of the majesty of God. But for me, the best vehicle for self-awareness and a type of meditation is when I play the piano. In those moments, I have to totally focus on something outside of me: on the music, the notes, the sounds I'm creating. I have to be aware of my fingers, my posture, my breathing.

This type of focused awareness is the first step in Christian meditation. So I will play some pieces this morning, not as a performance (so please don't clap), but rather as a way to help you explore what it means to meditate. The first piece is part of a short piano work by the French composer Erik Satie. As you listen, you can keep your eyes open or shut them. Simply be aware of one thing—the fact that you're breathing—notice as you fill your lungs and empty your lungs. Breathing is a natural act that we almost never focus on, but our very lives depend upon it. You can breathe in time with the music or not; trust me, there's no right or wrong way to do this. Simply breathe, be still, and know your life is a gift of God. (Play "Gymnopédie no. 1")

Now we're going to explore a second aspect of Christian meditation. Synonyms for meditation are words like "contemplation" or "loving attention." Which begs the question, what are we contemplating or giving our loving attention to? Here's where Christian meditation differs from our Eastern friends. In Buddhism, for example, a goal of meditation is to reach *nirvana*—a state in which we empty ourselves completely and all our desires go away. One author (Madeleine L'Engle) suggested that the word *nirvana*

means “where there is no wind,” where nothing stirs. But for Christians, we don’t seek to be emptied as much as we seek to be filled. We don’t seek a place “where there is no wind,” for the movement of wind, of God’s spirit is important to us. It is the movement of Spirit that led to creation in the first days of the world. It is the movement of Spirit that sent the disciples out into the crowds on Pentecost.

Meditation is in less about emptying ourselves toward nothingness, and more about opening ourselves to be filled and made whole. This is both a loving process and a surprising process. It involves quieting our own voices and inner demons long enough for the peace of God to fill us in unexpected ways. For me, this is analogous to when a piece of music takes a surprising turn; when I hear an unexpected modulation or chord change that happens to makes me smile.

This past Christmas I received some new music, including a copy of all of Rachmaninoff’s Preludes and of Shostakovich’s Second Piano Concerto. The middle movement of the concerto has this wonderful moment in which the music takes a surprising turn. It opens with the orchestra playing an introduction in c minor—a dark and somber key. (Play several measures) At this point, the piano is going to enter and you expect it to continue in c minor. However, the piano’s melody is in C major, one of the brightest, sunniest keys of all. So listen to this music excerpt. Be aware of your breathing, and enjoy the way the spirit moves in surprising ways through the simple gift of a C major melody. (Play excerpt)

The last idea I want to present today involves the interplay between faith and meditation. If we are able to take time to quiet ourselves—to become aware of our breathing and the miraculous fact that we are alive—and if our contemplation is not about losing ourselves, but about being filled up and renewed, then what is the goal of all this? To what end does all this meditation direct us?

Christians often use the word “salvation”—how our faith “saves” us. Too often that word is used in reference to life after death, arguing that our faith in Jesus saves us for heaven, saves us from hell and damnation. Theologically this understanding of salvation is too narrow and simplistic. Jesus wasn’t in the business of selling fire insurance; he was offering life in abundance. He insisted the Kingdom of God is in our midst. His miracles moved people in this life from places of exclusion to places of inclusion: the lame and blind right here were healed; the lepers made clean; the ritually impure woman with a flow of blood or the morally impure tax collector hiding up in the sycamore tree were brought once more into the communion of common society. They were all brought back to life.

And in case anyone missed that last point, there are bible accounts of the times when Jesus literally brought people back from death to life. Earlier you heard us read about the raising of Jairus’ daughter and of the widow’s son, and of Lazarus being called out from the tomb. These mini-resurrections foreshadow the big resurrection on Easter. But more importantly, in a world that can be violent, fearful and obsessed with death, faith in

Jesus offers us a promise of peace, of hope, and yes, of resurrection to life even now. Especially now.

For me musically, this good news is like a melody that persists despite the activity of other notes, other themes, musical turmoil and dissonance. It is like the combination of the bible phrases “Be still and know that I am God” and “Be not afraid, for I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

For today, as an example of this idea, in the book of Rachmaninoff Preludes I received, there was one I’d never heard before. It is a piece built around a simple melody that is played twice, before entering a middle section that is more agitated and violent—just as every life includes times of turmoil and struggle. In the end, the melody comes back an octave higher than before—bell-like, defiant, a promise of resurrection offered to us all. So listen to one more piece—be aware of your breathing; be open to God’s surprises; and remember the promise of resurrection life that is for you right here and now.

(Play Rachmaninoff Prelude op. 23 no. 4)

There. You’re done a bit of Christian meditation. Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts, your minds, and your spirits in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.