

Spiritual Practice for January – Praying Our Experiences

January 6 is the Feast of the Epiphany, inaugurating a season in which we glimpse the beginnings of our Lord's earthly life and ministry – that is, how Jesus revealed God to the world. We are told in the Gospel reading from Matthew how Herod instructed the wise men to “go and search diligently for the child,” a worthy quest even if the king intended a nefarious outcome. By showing us how Jesus manifested God in first century Palestine, the season of Epiphany asks us the question, where do we find Jesus today, in our own lives?

Perhaps like the wise men, we need to “go and search diligently.” What does that really mean, especially when because of COVID we may literally venture very little beyond our own doorstep?

A range of spiritual practices offer us the means to search diligently, but this month I want to focus on a very down-to-earth practice described in a little book called *Praying Our Experiences* by Joseph Schmidt (Word Among Us Press, 2008). After all, as someone once said, the only place where we meet God is in our own experiences. Even when we read the Bible, if it doesn't connect in some way with our own lives, God's presence in Scripture isn't truly real for us.

This method of seeking God is good news for anyone who has wrestled with distractions in prayer, because the very thoughts and feelings that plague us may actually serve to bring us to Divine awareness.

For instance, this morning I am seeking to pray for my daughter who is moving to another state to find work. Yesterday when I saw Stephanie she spoke of her frustration waiting for her unemployment claim to be processed – the state agency that handles these claims is utterly swamped, yet her bills continue to come nevertheless. My first concern, of course, is my daughter, but God doesn't want me to stop there. Her situation is unfortunately typical of that of so many these days. As I reflect I am moved with compassion for the other young people (and those not so young) who are suffering financially, even as I give thanks for my own comparative security. And then I ask: how am I being called to help, right here and right now? The answer for me won't be the answer for you, for my circumstances and gifts are different from yours.

But suddenly something else intrudes on my prayer for Stephanie. I recall a chance remark she made, alluding to an event years ago which had sad repercussions not only for her own life but also her sister's. I realize now that my own pain associated with this time has not yet been fully healed, and so I pause to offer it up to God for greater healing.

These seeming distractions have in fact been prayer. They are the movements of the Spirit within me. And in the self-offering that comes from a time of wrestling and questioning, pondering and seeking to trust, I am in fact like the Magi who opened their treasure chests before the Christ Child. For as Joseph Schmidt says,

The Lord, as we know, wants the offering of ourselves. We sometimes fail to see, however, that this offering is not made in some abstract way with pious words or readings but is rooted in the acceptance of the concrete details of our life. The offering of ourselves can only be the offering of our lived experience because this alone is ourselves.