

Ancient Meditation Practices for Modern Anxiety

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[0 : 00] So, we are in a series called Sacred Self-Care, a series for Lent. As James so beautifully prayed earlier, as you watch the news, as you pay attention to anything, there's obviously a little weight and heaviness in the world.

And we thought a, you know, a series leading up to Good Friday and Easter on self-care would be important. Scripture tells us that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, and that implies that we have to love ourselves well.

And if we don't, we're not going to love our neighbors well. So, we've been talking about some of the practices of self-care last week. I gave you just a sort of thumbnail sketch of a biblical theology of self-care.

Talked a little bit about my story with anxiety and depression. And then today is going to be sort of more practice-based, okay? So, I'm going to give you just a little bit of church history, connect it to our day and age, and then introduce you to some practices on self-care and meditation.

Now, the reason I want to give you some church history is because I think if we look at the past, it helps us to understand our present moment. And I also know that there's a lot of suspicion that can happen when you bring up the word meditation in church.

[1 : 19] I grew up in a conservative Christian home that found yoga, meditation, mindfulness all very suspicious. And I invited some of our church folks into like a sermon discussion chat, and we had heard some of those stories in the chat as well around like, oh man, if you empty your mind for meditation, you're inviting demons in, things like that.

Or that meditation, you know, shouldn't be dabbled with by Christians because that comes from Eastern religions. So, I want to break some of that down and then actually introduce some practices.

So, the first thing I want to talk about is Constantine. Anybody know the name Constantine, Emperor Constantine? So, he's a Roman emperor, and he is coming into power in the early 300 CE.

So, about 250, 270 years after the time of Jesus. And Constantine is coming into power just after one of the worst seasons or decades of Christian persecution in the Roman Empire.

Christians and Jews were variously persecuted throughout the Roman Empire in sort of fits and spurts. It wasn't all for all 200 years. Sometimes they were, sometimes they weren't.

[2 : 33] It's a myth that there were any or many Christians sort of like fighting gladiators in the Colosseum. And it is true that they did have to fight lions and gladiators in other sort of circuses throughout the Empire, that they'd feed the Christian to the lions.

So, one emperor before Constantine, he does instigate a very, very serious time of martyrdom for Christians, of persecution. Because the Christians, for the most part, are refusing to worship in the imperial cult.

The emperor saw themselves as divine figures. And Christians said, no, we're not going to worship the emperor. Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. So, this emperor passes away.

Constantine comes into power. And then, as you read your history books, you're going to see some debate. The debate is, did Constantine have an honest-to-God vision of the sign of the cross in a battle and have a conversion experience and become a Christian?

Or, did Constantine see a political opportunity to use religion as a way to consolidate power and take that opportunity to make himself more popular?

[3 : 46] Because at this point, Christianity is one of the fastest-growing religious movements in the Roman Empire. It's fast-growing because of the things that had made it deeply unpopular were now making it deeply popular.

The things that made it deeply offensive to the Roman emperor were the fact that it brought in all of these marginalized folks. It treated women as equals, treated slaves as equals, and encouraged manumission, the freeing of slaves.

It did not worship emperors and governors and all of that. It was treated people as equals. And initially, the citizens of the Roman Empire found this deeply offensive.

But eventually, they came to realize, like, oh, most of the empire is made up of slaves or former slaves or young children or women or impoverished people. And the Christians, they keep doing things like caring for the poor and building hospitals and caring for the orphans and the sick. And so, the scales begin to tip in favor of Christianity. And the historians then debate, did Constantine have an honest-to-goodness conversion experience? Or did he see a political opportunity and take it?

[4 : 55] Regardless, Constantine becomes emperor. He purports to have this vision of a cross over the battlefield and says, Christianity is no longer illegal. It is now a legal religion in the Roman Empire.

And it now has protected status. That if you are Christian, nobody can rightfully persecute you, cast you out of the marketplace. Christians are now safe from that. And there's sort of, like, pop culture, history channel sort of views on Constantine that he was the one who decided what books are in the Bible.

That's not true. He was the one that was decided what was in the Nicene Creed. That's not true. And he was one who was consolidating all of the Christian bishops and synods and regions and sectors and financing their ability to get together and to consolidate their own power.

So, no, he didn't decide what books are in the Bible, but he also was the financial influence over the folks who would sort of finalize the canon of the scriptures. And if you're a Christian in the 3rd century and you just got done experiencing massive amounts of oppression and marginalization and persecution, and then an emperor comes along and says, your religion is now legal and I'm going to finance your ability to practice your religion, this to you is going to feel like a relief.

Now, 1,700 years later, we have the benefit of hindsight of saying, you silly Christians, you're being co-opted by the empire. They're using you. But, of course, we can say that.

[6 : 26] Somebody just getting done experiencing all that persecution is going to see this as very good news, that the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, has finally reached the seats of power.

Praise God. Now, Constantine dies. Power passes on to Theodosius. He passes the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, so the latter part of the 4th century.

And this not only makes Christianity legal, it makes all other religions illegal. So, Christianity is the only religion that you are allowed to practice in the Roman Empire. And again, from the perspective of this generation of Christians, this feels like success.

This feels like the good news has done its work, that it has fulfilled the word of Jesus by going to the ends of the earth. This is great news, isn't it? Now, you can see maybe some parallels with our current moment.

Now, the parallels break down because, for the most part in America, Christians, particularly white Christians, have never experienced widespread persecution. Really, the only Christians who have ever experienced widespread persecution are black Christians in America.

[7 : 34] But we don't say it's because of their Christianity. We say it's because of, you know, their radical things like wanting freedom. But in America, you see a similar thing happen where you have a group of people who perceive themselves of being persecuted.

And then a powerful person comes along and says, I will be your champion. I will be the person who takes your religion and makes it legal to say Christmas again. And, of course, Christians are, again, falling for the same thing that they fell for with Constantine and Theodosius.

Oh, this is good news, right? Now, in the halls of power is somebody who is championing our religion. Now, there's 1,700 years of mutation that have gone on where the thing that's being championed looks very little like the way of Jesus.

But you can see the pattern play out. Now, even then, even in 313 and 380, as Christianity seems to be no longer under threat of the empire, but now actually seems to be a sword that the empire can wield for its own power, there are folks who are suspicious.

So you have a guy named St. John Chrysostom. His liturgies are still said to this day in the Eastern Orthodox Church. And this is what he says about the time that he's alive in the 300s.

[8 : 53] He says, So the plagues, as St. John Chrysostom is explaining, in the 300s, around the time that Christianity is becoming legal, and not only legal, but the enforced religion of the state, Chrysostom is saying, you know what's a plague?

It's the excessive wealth. It's the enormous power. It's the luxury. It's the fact that you can sell the office of pastor to the highest bidder. So Chrysostom is noticing this.

Other church fathers and mothers are noticing this. And this begins to birth the monastic movement. So the monastic movement are where we get our monks and our nuns.

And it's where we get folks who say, I am no longer interested in a religion that is taking up the halls of power and being wielded by the state, wielded by the empire to get its way.

So we are going to remove ourselves from society and move into the desert. The father of the monastic movement is St. Anthony of the Desert.

[10 : 13] Great name. Love that. And St. Anthony of the Desert, there's a book called The Sayings of the Desert Fathers. He's a Coptic, Egyptian, Christian. He moves out into the desert and he starts battling demons, according to his journals and writings.

And so he's tortured, he says, with boredom, laziness, visions of women and demons. He goes out into the desert, begins to fight these demons, literal and metaphorical.

And his primary way of engaging in these battles is through meditation. All right? Now, if you're like me, or if you grew up in any sort of conservative environment that had cast suspicion upon meditation, you probably heard something like, it's not Christian, it comes from these Eastern religions, it's Buddhist, it's Hinduist, it's Taoist.

And it has nothing to do with Christianity. And what those conservative folks are saying is very, in the end, silly, because what they are saying is, comes from, you know, Eastern religion.

Well, one, remember, Christianity is one of those Eastern religions, okay? Comes from the Middle East. The theology of Christianity is defined by Coptic and North African Jews and Gentiles.

[11 : 32] Thomas goes into India. There is a debate among scholars around, like, what influence, too, if Sufi influenced Christianity, if Christianity influenced Sufi religions.

There's lots of mingling going on, and it's been happening for years and years and years. Two, Judaism had a meditative practice that predates Jesus, goes into the early Jewish mysticism that was being established around the times of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

And three, while conservatives are saying, you can't practice Christian meditation, it's pagan, it's foreign, it has nothing to do with Christianity, there are millions of Christians who have been doing it all along. All right? So it's this voice that says, hey, you can't practice this, which is by far the sort of minority voice which is ignoring at least 17, 2,000 years of history, if not more.

So, St. Anthony of the Desert goes into the Egyptian desert, begins battling his demons, and begins the monastic movement.

And the primary way that the monastic movement is sort of identifying itself against the state, against the empire, against established religion, is by developing what's called the contemplative or mystical tradition.

[12 : 42] Mysticism in Christianity is just a fancy word that means, I believe that I can really experience God. That's all mysticism means. It means that I can really experience God. It's out of the mystical tradition that we then get the charismatic tradition that has a particular emphasis on the Holy Spirit, gifts, tongues, healings, things like that.

But the charismatic tradition is a branch off of the mystical tradition which comes out of Christian monasticism, which was a rebellion against the empire. Now, I find it fascinating that the Christian nationalists who are, you know, arm in arm, kissing the ring of our current administration, they are the same ones who are likely to tell you that contemplative spirituality, mystical spirituality, meditation are wrong and evil.

While 1700 years ago, it was the contemplatives and the mystics and the meditation practitioners were the first ones to cast suspicion upon empire and just sort of hit the eject button and go.

All right? I find that parallel fascinating. So, the contemplative mystical tradition influences much of Christianity, both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox religion.

The Protestants come along in the 14, 15, 1600s and they have some, cast some suspicion, rightfully so, upon particularly Roman Catholicism and its emphasis on icons and pictures and the more mystical experiences that the monastic tradition had brought along.

[14 : 21] So, Protestantism, of course, had its benefits. I'm a Protestant. If you're sitting here, congratulations. You might be one too. Protestantism had its benefits in terms of handing Scripture over back to its people, of trying to do something to have less of a divide between clergy and laity, emphasis on grace, all of that.

And also, it moved further and further away from the mystical contemplative spirit that Orthodox and Catholicism had.

Now, that's been revitalized. And again, we have the charismatics to think to that. We have modern mystics and contemplatives to think for that. And in general, I'm much more sort of, again, fancy word, ecumenical, meaning a willingness to cross denominational or even religious lines in order to learn from one another.

So, when I first became a Christian, sort of consciously became a Christian, I was always raised Christian, but made a decision around 12 years old.

I accidentally sort of stumbled into meditation. I was an introvert. Being alone was sort of my jam anyway. And I was deeply into Scripture. I was nerding out over Greek and Hebrew about as early as I could.

[15 : 40] And I would journal. I would write. And I would also love to just go find a quiet place and essentially pretend that God was right there with me.

There's this deeply influential book called Practicing the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence. And somebody had handed me this early on in my faith saying, hey, read this. You know, it's about a monk who's trying to practice the presence of God.

Pretend as if God was really there. And the book is very simple and very repetitive because it's basically Brother Lawrence saying, when I wash the dishes, I act as though God is there with me.

When I mow the lawn, I act as though God is there with me.

When I go for a hike, I act as though God is there with me. And so there I was, 13, 14, 15 years old, sitting on the same green couch which is in my parents' living room today with all the lights off and sort of sitting like, you know, cross-legged Yoda saying, I wonder if God is with me right now.

And what I didn't know is I was actually tapping in to a much ancient, much older stream of Christian tradition that said, what if you sat in silence and acted as if God was with you right now?

[16 : 46] So that's what I want to sort of break down for us of that meditation, contemplative spirituality, the mystical tradition. It doesn't have to be super woo-woo or super magical or super like wild thinking.

It is simply the idea of what if I acted as though God were with me right now? All right. Now, what I want us to do for honestly the rest of this sermon, oh, sorry, sorry, sorry.

I have a couple more things to tell you. I'm sorry. I got distracted. Let me give you a definition of prayer, how prayer is helpful and then we're going to move into some practices. So the first one, this is Mike McCarg's or Science Mike's axiom on prayer.

I've shared this before but I'll share it again. Prayer is at least a form of meditation that encourages the development of healthy brain tissue. It reduces stress and that can connect us to God.

Even if that is a comprehensive definition of prayer, the health and psychological benefits of prayer justify the discipline. So prayer already is a form of meditation.

[17 : 46] It sort of sounds silly to those outside of Christianity to say, oh, we're Christians. We pray. We don't meditate. No, no, no, no. Prayer is a form of meditation and according to Mike McCarg's definition here, it encourages the development of healthy brain tissue.

And that part is true. I've done extensive training on trauma competent care. I'm a child that had complex trauma as a kid. So I've done a lot of work on what does it take to sort of reform the brain in, you know, healthy patterns.

And meditation is one of those ways. I'm not going to get into all the brain science today but essentially you are retraining your brain to make your amygdala smaller, that part of you that has fight and flight and fear and fawn.

Make that smaller and your prefrontal cortex, the part of you that has compassion and empathy and reasoning to grow a little bit stronger. You know, the fact that there are Christians out there who say that empathy is a sin, they're just waving this like bright red flag that says, I am not safe.

And like empathy is a sign of like an emotionally mature person. So if you're saying empathy is sinful, you're just saying like I have no interest in growing as a person.

[19 : 04] So prayer is at least a form of meditation that develops healthy brain tissue, it connects us to God. But it doesn't matter what kind of God we're praying to. And again, this might be review for some of us in here.

I've talked about this before but I believe it's crucially important. Andrew Newberg is a neuroscientist, neurosurgeon. He wrote a book called *How God Changes the Brain*. And he wrote this.

He says, the personality you assign to God has distinct neural patterns that correlate with your own emotional styles of behavior. So stay right there for a second. The personality you assign to God has distinct neural patterns that correlate with your own emotional styles of behavior.

So if you imagine or if you've been handed a tradition that imagines God as angry, wrathful, upset, vindictive, coercive, and you meditate on that God so you pray to that God, well that's going to rebound back onto you and help form you into an angry, wrathful, coercive, vindictive kind of person.

This goes both ways of if I imagine God one way then the God I imagine is going to form me into this and it becomes this vicious cycle.

[20 : 16] Now, maybe you were handed that tradition. The good news is you can break free of that tradition. You can choose to believe and join up with a tradition that believes in not that kind of God.

So next slide. Religious and spiritual contemplation changes your brain in a profoundly different way because it strengthens a unique neural circuit that specifically enhances social awareness and empathy while subduing destructive feelings and emotions.

And if you actually read the book they talk about the experiments that they're doing, the research that they're doing. Now, I can't imagine doing this as myself but basically sending people into MRI machines and saying, hey, do your prayer practice right now.

Like imagine if you've ever done an MRI you have to be completely still and this massive magnet's clunking around you. Hey, pray to God during this incredibly stressful time. But as they do that throughout different religions and then different styles of religion from the more vindictive, coercive to the more graceful, loving, they can see where brain waves are active.

And Newberg's point here is that then you can track this over time and to see that if you are praying to an angry God the parts of your brain that activate anger become more active.

[21 : 33] If you believe in a more loving or graceful God or empathetic God the parts of your brain that help you become empathetic they become more active. So, prayer, meditation I think they are helpful.

I think they help us actually shape our personalities in important ways. Christian meditation is a form of prayer in which a structured attempt is made to become aware and reflect upon the presence of God.

So, I want to do some practices right now. This is sort of a crash course in historic Christian forms of meditation. If you are the sort of person who takes notes during a sermon I am going to relieve you of your responsibility.

I am going to email out a PDF that has a summary of all of this. So, I know you are all note takers. You are fine. It is okay. So, we are going to do some practices of a variety of different practices of Christian meditation and try this out together.

We have got some music that you are going to go ahead and put on. Thank you. And, like I said, this is crash course. This is sort of counter to the spirit of Christian meditation because we are in a hurry.

[22 : 39] But, I want to at least get you familiar with some of these ideas and terms and hopefully over the course of several different types it brings you to a place of calm. Alright. So, the first one I want to introduce is called centering prayer.

Centering prayer. Now, my typical prayer life is one that is awfully wordy. I'm a wordy person. I know lots of words and I like to impress God with my many words.

Centering prayer is a practice that attempts to reduce that down to a single word, phrase, or symbol. And so, finding a simple word that brings you close to God or reminds you of God.

Today, we're going to just use the word peace. Okay. I'm just going to use the word peace. Peace is a word related to some of the names of God in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus is called the Prince of Peace.

And so, we're just going to invoke God's presence by centering on the word peace. And what centering prayer invites us to do is just try to not bring my many hundreds or thousands of words to God, but to simply focus on God as peace.

[23 : 53] And, of course, with any meditation practice, the thing that inevitably happens is distraction. Our minds are busy. They're running. Some of us think in words. Some of us in pictures.

But the invitation is to always bring our attention back to our centering or our sacred word or symbol. In this case, peace. And the thing that practitioners of centering prayer will tell you is that oftentimes emotions will come up as we do this.

As you think or center on peace, you may end up with emotions around the places where you're not experiencing peace. You might think go back to times earlier in your life that were not peaceful.

And so, if you're going to pay attention to anything, it's not the distractions, it's the emotion. As I pray the word peace, what feelings are coming up for me? And then again, just sort of noting those and bringing those to God and coming back to the centering word.

Do we have that music ready? Go for it. So, I'm going to invite you to find a posture that's comfortable for you. I will say sitting and kneeling, all of that is some of those options, but also walking, gentle swaying.

[25 : 08] I often find myself sort of doing this like step touch with my toes because often sitting still, I just become overly aware of all of my, I don't know, creaks and, you know, belly sounds and all of that.

We all have them. It's fine. So, if you need to walk around, if you need to step in the back, all of that, you're welcome to. But again, find a posture that's comfortable for you. You may close your eyes.

You may find a point of light that you can look at. You can just find like maybe the communion bread or cup or a spot on the ground in front of you.

Whatever feels safe and comfortable. And I invite you to either in your head or gently whisper or place upon your lips the word peace.

Find a very natural, steady state of breathing. Marie, do we have that, that, the different playlist, the worship flow or something like that?

[26 : 15] Thank you. And again, as thoughts, worries, thinking ahead to the next hour comes to mind, just bring your attention gently back to the word peace.

thanks.

Thank you.

Thank you.

The challenge is not to do it for a minute, but to gently, slowly extend the amount of time that you can keep your focus on that word. And as we do it, of course, there might be agitation.

[28 : 05] What St. Anthony of the Desert called that laziness and boredom. How long is it possible to focus on just peace?

Now, to bring us to our next practice, we're going to just keep the same sort of contemplative spirit that we have in the room. And related to the centering prayer is breath prayer.

If you've seen like black liturgies or liturgies for parents, some of those, you'll see this idea of inhale this, exhale that.

And again, this actually comes from St. Anthony of the Desert, where he would practice a breath prayer with something called the Jesus prayer.

The Jesus prayer comes from the Gospels, often the cries of those who are sick or demon-possessed to Jesus. They would say, Lord Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me, a sinner.

[29 : 03] That's the Jesus prayer. And so St. Anthony in the early monastics, they would do a breath prayer with Jesus, Son of David, and exhale, have mercy on me.

So again, continuing in the same contemplative spirits, we're going to practice two breath prayers. So inhale, Jesus Christ, and exhale, have mercy on me.

Again, you can do this in your mind or whisper it out loud or just place it on your lips gently. Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.

I'll just repeat that a few times, and then I'll offer another phrase that we can practice. Amen. Our next phrase, inhale, my work does not own me.

And exhale, give me courage to rest. Inhale, my work does not own me. And exhale, God, give me courage to rest.

[30 : 56] You might find it helpful to place your hand on your diaphragm or belly just to feel the breath come in and out of your body. The Hebrew word for wind, breath, and spirit is ruach.

As we breathe, we remember that we are dependent creatures, dependent on the very breath of God. Inhale, my work does not own me.

And exhale, God, give me courage to rest. You may believe it helpful to know what you are doing. You may believe it helpful to know what you are doing. Now notice what's happening in the room without anybody saying so or telling you to do so, but you can start to hear breaths begin to align. This is why gathered worship is such a powerful experience or any sort of gathered concert or practiced experience, a yoga class, an exercise class.

[32 : 28] Of course, that has deep implications for the possibility of manipulation. And when there's a spirit of consensus and joining together, it can create a deep sense of unity that we are larger than ourselves and that perhaps the powers that make us want to fear are not invincible.

Next practice I want to introduce is called Lectio or Lectio Divina. And this is simply a slow way to read scripture. It's a Lectio, Latin word, simply means to read.

And as you do Lectio, you moved from words into contemplation. So from words into non-words, from ideas and concepts and thoughts into simply beholding or being part of the presence of God without words.

So I'm going to read a passage four times, and each time encourage us to do something slightly different with it. So the first time we'll read, this comes from Psalm 131.

It says, My heart is not proud, Lord. My eyes are not haughty. I don't concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.

[33 : 57] But I have calmed and quieted myself. I am like a weaned child with its mother. Like a weaned child, I am content.

As I read that, are there any things that stand out to you? Ways that God's ruach, spirit, breath might be asking you to pay attention?

I am not looking for facts.

I am not looking for facts.

I'm not looking for knowledge. But more, how do I experience the passage? My heart is not proud, Lord. My eyes are not haughty. I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.

[35 : 07] But I have calmed and quieted myself. I am like a weaned child with its mother. Like a weaned child, I am content. I am not looking for facts.

This time as if I were praying to God. As if I were directing these thoughts in conversation with God. God, my heart is not proud.

God, my eyes are not haughty. I try not to concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.

God, would you calm me, quiet me? I don't know. I don't remember. I don't know if I ever knew what it was like to be a weaned child with a mother.

A child content with a parent. So God, would you show me what that's like? And then finally, moving into contemplation where there are no words.

[36 : 59] It's just loving presence. as if you're with a dear friend or lover, where words are no longer necessary to feel content with each other.

You know what it is like to be a child. Thank you.

And the last practice we'll introduce is called imaginative prayer. It comes from St. Ignatius of Loyola. And again, this one is scripture-based.

He encouraged to start with a scripture passage, usually the Gospels, and to become aware of God's presence as we've been practicing already, to read the scripture, and then to use your imagination to set the scene and walk with Jesus in the scene.

You can pair this with Lectio, like the practice that we just did. It usually works best with a narrative, like a Gospel. And so, since we're sort of already in a meditative, contemplative place, I'm going to read a passage.

[38 : 33] This passage just comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 8. And as I read this passage a couple times, I invite you to try to use the senses of your imagination, what you might be seeing, smelling, hearing, touching, tasting.

And it might be helpful to put yourself either just as a character next to Jesus or one of the characters in the story. What do you notice?

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and demanded Jesus to touch him. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village.

And when he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, Do you see anything? The blind man looked up and said, I see people, but they look like trees walking around. Once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes, and then his eyes were opened. His sight was restored. He saw everything clearly. So again, just going to read the passage.

[39 : 55] Perhaps imagine you are this man. Begin to pay attention to the emotions and the senses, what it might feel like to be led by Jesus by the hand. What it might feel like to have people demand and shove you into Jesus.

Jesus' care, and then for Jesus to take you away from the crowd. They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and demanded Jesus to touch him.

Jesus took the man by the hand and led him outside the village. And when he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, Do you see anything?

He looked up and said, I see people, they look like trees walking around. Once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes, and then his eyes were opened.

His sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. So just take a moment to sit with Jesus in this moment.

[41 : 05] Think of it. Jesus, we thank you for these moments.

May we be reminded that you are near. That we don't just have to pretend, but that we can live as if it were true. Let me say a couple more closing things.

This comes from Pastor Rich Velotus, talking about prayer and contemplative prayer. This is challenging. It takes time. It pushes against many of the natural tendencies of our culture and our world and perhaps ourselves.

And so Pastor Rich Velotus says, in order to sort of come to these practices, we have to do a few things. Number one, befriend silence. Silence is hard.

I mean, even in setting this up, I wanted to make sure there was music in the background. Silence is hard. So befriend silence. Normalize boredom. Almost everything in our culture does not want us to be bored.

[42 : 45] And I think there are some direct correlations and lines to be drawn between a rise in an anxiety and an inability to be bored. To reframe distractions, you know, setting aside the time to do this.

If you've got work, if you have a job, if you have kids, if you have people that you're caring for, if you have neighbors, if you live on Georgia Avenue where there are sirens everywhere, like, there's going to be a lot of distractions.

So to reframe those as opportunities just to note and then to move forward. To remember that prayer is not something that we master, but rather an act that forms us.

We don't master prayer. I've been practicing Christian meditation in some of these forms for at least 15, 20 years. And it's still difficult. I'm not going to lie.

It's not, no point does this become like super easy breezy. It is still something I have to practice. I have not mastered it. And I also know that when I take the time to practice some of these things, it makes me more attuned to God's presence in my life.

[43 : 53] It makes me a less reactive person. And then the trust that God is always waiting for us with open arms. I know sometimes there can be a fear that, oh, it's been so long since I prayed that if I go to God, I'm just going to feel guilty about it and God's going to shame me for how long it's been.

No, no. Remember the parable of the prodigal son that when the son returns home, the father is there on the road running towards the son that ran away.

And I think this is a good image of what every time we turn to God in prayer is. At no point is God annoyed or shaming us, but rather rushing towards us in love.

With that, let's go to communion. With that, let's go to■■■. With that, let's go to■■■.

With that, let's go to■■■.