

Greetings friends and welcome to a Linton Interior Pilgrimage inspired by Teresa of Avila Interior Castle. The settings for this pilgrimage are the souls dwelling places, the interior rooms. Teresa of Avila offers as an image of her own learning about God and her soul through her life of prayer. With the dwelling spaces as the setting, prayer will be our mode of travel on this interior journey.

Before we depart, you may wish to collect a few supplies; the itinerary document that accompanies this recording, a pen or pencil, and notebook, and a timer. As the itinerary unfolds, I will introduce four contemplative prayer or writing practices. As I introduce the practices, you can pause the recording to write, reflect, or pray using the timer as a support. Of course, you are welcome to ignore the suggested times and engage in the practice as long as you like, re-joining the recording when you are satisfied.

With our supplies gathered, let us begin. As many of you know, Teresa of Avila was a Spanish Carmelite nun, reformer, organizer, writer and woman, deeply engaged in prayer. Her lifespan, most of the 16th century, from 1515 to 1582, a time and location whose moment of uncertainty and unknown resonate through the urgency we hear in Teresa's call to prayer, to find solace and understanding in prayer.

Teresa was a person of courage, a voice demanding honesty and integrity. A woman determined and devoted to God the work of the church and saw the fruits of prayer life manifest in service to others. While she was relentlessly ruthlessly questioned for her reform work by the power of the Spanish church during her time, she, along with Catherine of Sienna, became the first two women to be named as doctors of the church in 1970, almost 400 years after her death because of her teachings on the life of prayer.

Written in interrupted periods of about two to three months in 1577, the Interior Castle is perhaps Teresa of Avila is most well-known work. She wrote the Interior Castle under some distress as her own life and writings were being examined by the Spanish church. In the book, we hear resonances of that concern. For me, Saint Teresa's call to her sisters and daughters to have courage and fortitude to engage in this life of prayer, to understand and reflect on prayer life as the way to find themselves in God, is what calls us to her in this moment.

In the Interior Castle, Teresa describes and unfolding life of prayer as an anterior journey through seven dwelling spaces, seven rooms, seven mansions, in which the soul encounters increasing knowing and unknowing, and greater intimacy with God. Through that growing intimacy, Teresa's sense of humility reflects the recognition of her closeness and distance from God all in the same moment. At the center of these seven dwelling spaces, the soul experiences itself in God, that interior space of abiding with God.

Here is Saint Teresa's description of that interior space. "We consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or a very clear crystal in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places. For and reflecting upon it carefully, sisters, we realize that the soul of the just person is nothing else but a paradise where the Lord says He finds His delight. So then, what do you think that abode will be like, where a King so powerful, so wise, so pure, so full of all good things takes His delight. I don't find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of a soul and its marvelous capacity. Indeed, our intellects, however keen, can hardly comprehend it just as they cannot comprehend God."

Teresa goes on in the book to describe the seven dwelling places, all interconnecting, each surrounding or containing their interior rooms, a winding floor plan or layout, or rooms and experiences of prayer and God, each with its own hidden secrets and treasures to be discovered. At the interior is the soul, the shining diamond and the rooms are like the unfurling, the peeling open of the Palmetto. Our purpose on this pilgrimage is not to explicitly explore the seven dwelling places of Saint Teresa's Interior Castle, but rather to learn about and engage in the practices of prayer as a mode of travel through the rooms and to imagine prayer, anteriority, quietness, and solitude before God as a way to know ourselves in God.

As I mentioned, Teresa wrote this book as a support to her cloistered sisters and daughters in the Carmelite order. She offered them freedom of movement within their circumstances. Let's hear Teresa's encouragement to her sisters and to us. "Considering the strict enclosure and the few things you have for your entertainment, my sisters, and that your buildings are not always as large as would be the fitting for your monasteries, I think it will be a consolation for you to delight in this Interior Castle. Since without permission from the priories, you can enter and take a walk through it at any time."

She continues, "Once you get used to enjoying this castle, you will find rest in all things, even those involving much labor, for you will have the hope of returning to the castle, which no one can take from you." And so dear friends, with Teresa's sense of freedom and searching, let us prepare to depart on this pilgrimage. When we depart on pilgrimage, often, the Pilgrim or the guide offers a prayer for the going out, for the journey, as a blessing or a reminder of the intention for the journey. Some journeys are hoisted on us, others we choose. Whatever the circumstances, taking a moment to reflect can focus or frame the journey.

In a moment, I will ask you to take about 8 to 10 minutes to prepare for this journey. In the guide are questions to prompt your consideration of your life of prayer. If the term prayer is not one that resonates, please substitute the term that describes your contemporary practice connected to understanding yourself and God. As an invocation and dedication for the journey, I offer a prayer written by Saint Teresa. After listening to the prayer, please pause the recording right for 8 to 10 minutes using the questions in the itinerary as a guide, then resume, listening to the recording.

Feeling desperate. The earth and sky will open their purse for you and your life will change, if with all your heart you say words each day, "Teach me dear God, all that you know." One night I walked through the streets feeling desperate and need of alchemy. A hooded priest passed by where there were no lamps. I could not see his face. I only heard these words that he kept repeating, "Teach me, dear Lord, all that you know." I knew a treasure had entered my soul.

One prayer practice deeply rooted in the Christian tradition is the chanting or reading of the Psalms. In the earliest desert Monastic communities, the Psalms were the rhythm of prayer filling the days as the monks chanted from memory through the 150 Psalms through the cycle of the day. By the sixth century, Saint Benedict organized the Psalms or the chanting of the Psalms into the daily office as a means for monastics to work their way through the 150 Psalms in a systematic order. In varying forms, the daily, weekly, monthly cycle of the Psalms continues to inform Christian liturgies and religious life.

Samadhi is a practice that calls us to closely read, hear, ruminate on the words of the Psalms. I'd like to imagine those sisters and brothers who ruminated on the words of the Psalms embedded in their memories, as most of them probably had no books from which you read. Imagine over time how the Psalms may have shifted and changed the word replaced by another word in the process and passage of time. Imagine how the repetition of these prayer words worked on the hearts and minds of those early monastics and how they reverberate in our own lives.

In the itinerary are three Psalms chosen to reflect the longings heard in Saint Teresa's writings. The Psalms are reproduced as they are printed in the Book of Common Prayer, numbered by verse and with an asterisk at the end of the line to indicate a place of pause. I invite you to read the Psalms aloud with me. Ruminate on the words as they resonate in your mouth and ears. Please slowly, steadily, read the Psalms along with me, pausing for about two breaths at the asterisks and at the end of the verse. Or you can choose to read the Psalms antiphonally, alternating voices with me or perhaps with a loved one sharing in this practice with you. If you prefer to read aloud on your own, feel free to do that as well.

Let us open ourselves to the word of the Psalms. "As the deer longs for the water brooks, so longs my soul for you, Oh God. My soul is a thirst for God, a thirst for the living God. When shall I come to appear before the presence of God? My tears have been my food day and night. While all day long they say to

me, 'Where now is your God?' I pour out my soul when I think on these things, how I went with a multitude and led them into the house of God. With the voice of praise and thanksgiving, among those who keep Holy day, why are you so full of heaviness, oh my soul? And why are you so disquieted within me? Put your trust in God for I will yet give thanks to Him who is the help of my countenance and my God.

Oh Lord, I am not proud. I have no haughty looks. I do not occupy myself with great matters or with things that are too hard for me, but I still my soul and make it quiet like a child upon its mother's breast. My soul is quieted within me. Oh Israel, wait upon the Lord from this time forth forever more. Lord, you have searched me out and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up. You discern my thoughts from afar. You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted with all my ways.

Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, but you, O Lord, know it altogether. You press upon me behind and before, and lay Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain to it. Where can I go then from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I climb up to heaven, You are there; if I make the grave my bed, You are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me and Your right hand hold me fast.

If I say, 'Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night.' Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike. For You Yourself created my inmost parts; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I will thank You because I am marvelously made; Your works are wonderful, and I know it well. My body was not hidden from You, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book; they were fashioned day by day, when as yet there was none of them.

How deep I find your thoughts, O God, how great is the sum of them. If I were to count them, they would be more in number than the sand; to count them all, my life span would need to be like yours."

Now friends, we return to our prayer practice rooted in a number of ancient Christian voices, drawing on and shaped by the prayer life or writings and teachings across the tradition. A prayer practice called Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer, a time of intentional silence before God, is a prayer of emptying, a prayer of emptying the mind of thoughts in order that the mind can rest in the heart. An entrainment of heart and mind in order that prayer may connect us with the heart and mind of God.

The practice may be a bit different from other forms of meditation or mindfulness you may have practiced. Instead of focusing the mind on an object, on the movements of breath or the recitation of a mantra, the prayer is one of emptying, of letting go of any object of focus in order to rest in the heart. For most of us, the mind has infinite things to say. In order to return to the silent prayer, choose a word, a word of one or two syllables that will be the word that you say internally to yourself to call you back to the silence. Choose a word purposefully and stay with the word during your prayer.

Examples of the word may be God, love, peace, here or this. A dear friend of mine for many years has used the words 'be still'. And I imagine as I observe him moving in the world, how his prayerful focus on those words has formed his being. Select a word, again, not to repeat over and over, but as the dark that returns you to the silence of resting in the heart when you observe the mind wandering. To begin, I will read a poem of reassurance by Saint Teresa to introduce our time of silence. Then I invite you to set a timer for 15 to 20 minutes or longer, depending on how long you would like to hold the silence.

Remembering that as your mind wanders, you gently repeat the word, reminding yourself to return to the prayer of resting your mind in the heart. At the close of your silent prayer, resume the recording for

a time of end gathering and reflection. Again, I will read the poem then you can begin the timer and pause the recording for your time of prayer.

“Let nothing trouble you. Let nothing frighten you. Everything passes. God does not change. Patience attains all things. Whoever has God lacks for nothing. God alone is enough. Lift your thought, to heaven it rises, for nothing worries you, let nothing trouble you. Remain in Jesus Christ with great heart, and come what may, let nothing frighten you. See the glory of the world. The glory is vain. Nothing is stable. Everything passes. Aspire to the heaven league, which always endures, faithful and abundant in promises, God does not change.

Love that which is worthy, immerse goodness, but no love is skilled without patience. Let trust and living faith maintain the soul, that whoever believes and hopes attains all things. Harassed from hell, even if she sees it, whoever has God will evade its fury. Hopelessness may befall her, burdens, misfortunes, God being her treasure, she lacks for nothing. Go then worldly good, go vain words. Even if everything is lost, God alone is enough.”

As you returned from your interior space of silent prayer, take a few moments to return to your notebook. Reflect on this journey through prayer practices, writing and reading as prayer, listening and reciting the words of the Psalms, and sitting in silence. As you begin to write, I leave you with these words from Saint Teresa, “In saying that the soul is made in God's own image, makes it almost impossible for us to understand the sublime dignity and beauty of the soul. We seldom consider the precious things that can be found in this soul or who dwells within it, or its high value.

Consequently, little effort is made to preserve its beauty. All our attention is taken up with the plainness of the diamond setting or the outer wall of the castle, that is these bodies of ours. Let us consider that this castle has many dwelling places, some up above, others down below, others to the sides, and in the center. And middle is the dwelling place, the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place.”

Dear ones, with Teresa's invitation to continue as journey, I hope you will return again and again to this place of prayer, an anterior secret space, only known between you and God. Return to attend to the precious things found in your soul. Be well and all good things.