

We all try to draw closer to God, and we all try in many and various ways. As we talk about the various traditions of the Christian faith, each has a different focus on how we draw closer to God. In the Evangelical stream, we draw closer to God's Word which draws us closer to Him. In the Holiness stream, we draw closer to God by emulating Christ's character through obedience and good behavior. In the Contemplative stream, which we are talking about this week, we draw closer to God through focused time with God, in prayer, in contemplation, and all through our days.

My studies to become a Spiritual Director began at Techny Towers Retreat Center here on the north side of Chicago. Our class met there for the first time with our teachers, and after 30 minutes of meeting one another, we spent the day in silence, preparing ourselves for the week's training to come. With no communication beyond a nod in the halls, our times were spent journaling in silence, praying in silence, napping in silence, eating our meals in silence (now that was an experience), and just being with God in silence. It was summer, so the outdoors was open to us, as were the chapels, the rooms, the couches (remember the napping part?) and the hallways.

After wandering the Towers for a while, I grew restless – this was our very first foray into the Contemplative life – and headed out to nature, a very comfortable place for me, a place where I had met with God regularly through my life. I walked the grounds, and then found a small pond to sit by and journal. As I sat on the edge of the pond, I looked up and saw a life-sized statue of Mary and Joseph, carved from what looked like ivory and placed on a small embankment jutting out into the pond. Mary was well along in her pregnancy and sat atop a carved donkey while Joseph led them along with his rod in hand.

I was intrigued by this image and so sat and pondered it. I found them not to be the mythic characters of the Advent story but fellow travelers, joining me on my journey. I found myself feeling their fear, pain, and frustration as they were turned away from the inn. I felt their anxiety as they found a small cave and settled down to have the baby. I felt their confusion as they reflected on the fact that this was God's promised Messiah, yet He would be born into a hay-lined feeding trough in a small cave. I was able, just for a moment, to shed the foreknowledge of 2000 years and join them in their feeling that this wasn't how Messiah was to be, the first of so many to feel this when they interacted with Jesus.

It is the Contemplative life, the Prayer-Filled life that allows us, even demands us, to take the time to feel with, empathize with, sit with these familiar people and listen to God. I couldn't tell what they were hearing from the Almighty that silent night in Bethlehem, but I knew it was words of assurance, words that made even this humbling experience OK.

And with that, I could see my own humbling experiences as OK. If Jesus could be humbled before He even began His life (and then constantly as He lived it), then it was OK when I was too. So I wrote a song about it, about these fellow travelers, pressing on through their hard world. I have had a hard time finding the song in the right journal, but someday, when God is ready, I'll find it. And maybe I'll sing it again. But for now I can wait until God is ready.