

Saint Anne's Adult Forum  
The Christian Spiritual Tradition

**Overview**

The aim of this series is to help participants better understand the spiritual underpinnings of our faith. We will be exploring different spiritual traditions: how they came to prominence, how they were received or rejected by contemporary communities of faith, how they developed, and how they came to be a part of our own Anglican and Episcopal heritage. Although this approach is something of an historical survey, each week there will be time for discussion and reflection on how these traditions might help us deepen our own relationship with God.

**Week 1.** Introduction, overview, and the basic tenets of faith.

(Belief in a God, the ONENESS God, the GOODNESS of creation, the awareness of SIN, the importance of COMMUNITY)

**Week 2.** "Chosen by God" - The notion of COVENANT, the formation of IDENTITY, and the reality of SUFFERING.

**Week 3.** Apocalypticism, Evangelism, and Withdrawal.

**Week 4.** Incarnation, Resurrection, Ascension, and Return - the Person of Jesus.

**Week 5.** The Early Church - Wrestling with who Jesus is.

**Week 6.** The Desert Monastic tradition

**Week 7.** The fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of cenobitic monasticism.

**Week 8.** Celtic Spirituality.

**Week 9.** Medieval Mystics (Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Meister Eckhart, et al)

**Week 10.** The Reformation

**Week 11.** Ignatius of Loyola

**Week 12.** The Early Moderns

**Week 13.** Evangelical v. Catholic (in Anglicanism)

**Week 14.** 20th Century developments

\*This **14 Week** list is not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive. If there are areas of spirituality that you would like to explore, please be in touch with me, and we'll either work them into a planned section or tack on another week to the course. My goal in offering this course is to help congregants engage and strengthen their own spiritual lives, so if there's something that speaks to you that you'd like to learn more about, I'd be happy to include it in the course.

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The Christian Spiritual Tradition

Week 1. Introduction, overview, and the basic tenets of faith

We have to start somewhere...and since it's Christian spirituality, you might think we'd be starting with Jesus Christ. But in order to understand who Jesus is, I think it's best to start with the traditions into which he was born and which shaped his own understanding of his mission and ministry. And so we'll begin with some of the basics of Judaic religion.

First, our spiritual tradition makes the claim that there is a God. It's assumed; not arrived at via deduction. It's more like a revelation. The foundation myths of our tradition begin with God.

\*\*\*Genesis is NOT a scientific description; it's meant to point out that God created the world and all that's in it, and God takes an interest in human affairs.

God being the creator does more than serve the purpose of describing the stages of creation. It's also meant to point out that no matter if other religions view things like the sun and moon or sea creatures as gods, Israelites believe that God created those things and therefore God is greater than they are.

A. **God is ONE** - but this seems only to have emerged after centuries of struggle.

Exod 15: 11 (Song of Miriam):

Who among the gods  
is like you, Lord?  
Who is like you—  
majestic in holiness,  
awesome in glory,  
working wonders?

This verse (and others like it) presupposes a pantheon, in which one God stands above the others. It's interpreted to mean something less troubling later on, but still there is evidence that early Hebrews understood their God to be one among many - greater than the others, perhaps, but not radically alone.

From what we know of non-Biblical Caananite religions, "El" was the chief god of a clan or tribe who directed that clan's wars and took special interest in the clan's progeny and inheritance. "El" presided over the council of the gods which met on a mountain (mountains are where the gods meet). So it's possible that the early Hebrews believes YHWH was merely one of a pantheon of gods and that this god known as "El" had special concern for Israel. It's worth noting that Israel's God uses the moniker "El" in various forms (Elohim, El Shaddai, etc.) until Moses gets God's name: "YHWH." After that, "El" becomes a generic noun meaning "god."

Baal - provider of rain and fertility; god of war and thunder. In ancient Caananite mythology, Baal defeats the water monster of chaos and emerges as the king among the gods.

See Psalm 77: 16-17.

The mythic waters of creation hearkens to this Baal imagery. In Israel, though, there's no conflict. God's power is over the darkness already.

Ancient Ugaritic text:

"Baal opened a slit in the clouds. Baal thundered from his lip, sounded his holy voice, the earth's high places shook."

Compare with Judges 5:4-5

"the earth trembled, the heavens poured water from the clouds, the mountains quaked before the Lord the one of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel. "

Because of the similarities, Baal and YHWH could easily be confused - and there's evidence that there's a fair degree of syncretism going on in ancient Israelite religious adherence. The idea was just adapt to local circumstances

and since they are similar, worship of Baal doesn't necessarily mean forsaking YHWH.

The Prophetic tradition stomps on this. For the prophets, Israel's God is utterly unique and there is to be no substitution or syncretism.

If you're interested in learning more about how the trend towards finding similarities between religious traditions is still going strong, have a look at Huston Smith, Bede Griffiths, and Cynthia Bourgeault among others.

(But please do be careful about what you mean if you say "all religions are basically the same." Because while the intention may be good, it might come across as dismissive of certain traditions. For instance, if you're having a conversation with an orthodox Jew, they might take offense at the idea that the Hindu pantheon can be compared to the uncompromising Oneness of God.)

**B. Creation is GOOD** - The belief is important because of dualistic religious worldviews that might have undermined Judaism's trust in a benevolent God. Various "gnostic" traditions assert the superiority of the "spiritual" over the material.

Super-simplified version of gnostic dualism: the material world is either a prison or just downright evil because made by a malevolent force seeking to entrap good spirits. Counter to this is the idea that creation is inherently GOOD and created by God.

In the Book of Common Prayer, see the collect for Proper 17, p181. Also, the collect for Christmas 2, p214.

**C. Sin is REAL** - In the foundation myths in Genesis, sin makes an appearance right away, and in almost all of the stories, sin plays some part in what happens.

In the Book of Common Prayer, see the Confession of Sin on p. 360; the Penitential Order, p. 319; the collect for Saturday Easter Week, p. 224; the collect for Advent 2, p. 211

**D. Community is INDISPENSABLE.**

Again, in the foundational mythology, community is of paramount importance. Even in cases where God shows a specific concern for one or another, it's always in the context of that individual's relationship to others. See the collect for Proper 18, p.181; the collect for Social Justice, p. 260; and the collect for for Labor Day, p. 216.

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Questions to ponder:

What might be some of the ways in which you've understood the ONENESS of God? Are there ways in which you may have fallen short of it?

Are there times when you've been more keenly aware of the goodness of creation? Are there times when you've questioned it?

How do you understand sin? Does awareness of sin mean only feelings of guilt, OR can it mean that you are being asked to consider your own responsibility and freedom with regard to how you interact with others.

Have you ever felt that you didn't need others or that you could make it completely on your own? Have you ever felt that you didn't need a community? Have you ever felt part of a community? What are the results of these attitudes?