

Encountering Taizé

The first time I heard a Taizé chant was over a decade ago, when an interim minister introduced us to “Ubi Caritas.”

As novelist/playwright Romulus Linney says in *Jesus Tales*, my “blood jumped.” In Linney’s novel, based on folktales about Jesus and St. Peter from the villages of Corsica, Italy, Spain, and elsewhere, when Peter the fisherman first encounters Jesus the teacher and healer, he’s thunderstruck by a deep jolt of recognition that he can’t put into words.

That’s how I feel about Taizé. When I sing Taizé I *know* that God is there. I feel the same kind of quiet awe and wonder I’ve felt in the wild watching buffalo square off on the Great Plains in the back country, watching bears feed at dusk up in the mountains on the Olympic peninsula. I feel God’s peace.

More than almost any other spiritual practice or prayer form, the stillness, the focus on one simple phrase, the repetition and above all the music draw me into the presence of God — especially when the mind is focused by darkness and candlelight.

When fellow parishioners and I first organized a Lenten Taizé series in 2016, we made it mostly a cappella out of necessity. But we found that the sparseness had its own power. I would fret that it wouldn’t sound like the glorious recordings on YouTube or the beautifully accompanied Taizé services at our Burlington cathedral. And others would remind me that the focus wasn’t on production values but on prayer.

When my family and I later traveled to the Taizé community on our way to walk the Chemin St. Jacques, I was struck by the simplicity of the everyday services. I realized that in our enforced simplicity we had, almost accidentally, found something very like the way the Taizé brothers pray every day.

The Taizé community began in France during World War II, when founder Roger Schutz (who came to be known, simply, as Brother Roger) sought to create a place of safety and refuge amidst the horrors of that war. Today, the French village of Taizé is a site of pilgrimage for hundreds of thousands from all over the world, especially young people, who come to sing and pray together and live in kindness, reconciliation, and simplicity.

Kindness, reconciliation, and simplicity all seem like really good ideas right now.

From St. Michael’s in Brattleboro to St. Luke’s in Alburgh, we are a far-flung bunch. Still, we invite you to join us Wednesdays in Lent to take an hour out of your busy lives and come sing and pray with us and listen to the Holy Spirit as she speaks in your own heart.

Lenten Taizé series

7 p.m.; March 4, 11, 18, 25 & April 1

St. Stephens Episcopal Church, on the Green (3 Main Street), Middlebury, VT

— Gaen Murphree