



Lent 2021

A Practical Lent: Daily Disciplines for Disciples

Epiclesis: An Ancient-Future Faith Community

A Practical Lent: Daily Disciplines for Disciples

Lenten Series Study Guide

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A Word from Pastor Rick...

Why a practical Lent? Did you know that you only have 24 hours in a day to accomplish everything? Did you know that right now, all 24 hours— or 1,440 minutes or 86,400 seconds— are already committed? If your day was a pie, then every slice is already accounted for. This is why in Lent we “give up” something so we can “take on” something else. You



can't add more time to your day, but you can reallocate unfruitful time for something more beneficial.

Here are 3 reasons why you should participate in a practical Lent this year:

- 1) A practical Lent will build consistent disciplines that actually make a difference. The purpose of Lent is not Lent. Practically, it is to cultivate new disciplines, new mindsets, and new faith that replace chunks of unfruitful time in your day, week, month, and year. Lent is simply the launching pad for a new and exciting level of relationship with the Lord.
- 2) A practical Lent builds spiritual confidence in keeping your word to yourself. Why do people struggle with confidence? Because they don't trust themselves. Because they make and break promises and commitments to themselves. Practically, Lent is an opportunity to rebuild our spiritual confidence. Question: If Jesus called you to be his disciple, doesn't that mean he believes you can actually follow him?
- 3) A practical Lent builds daily dependence on the Lord. So, if Jesus called you to be his disciple and actually believes you can do it, doesn't that also mean he is going to supply you with the spiritual tools necessary for a productive and fruitful Lent? Doesn't it also mean you have a new opportunity to cultivate sensitivity to the guidance of the Holy Spirit each day?

Stay rooted and focused on Jesus this Lenten season. Look to redeem time in your day and make it more fruitful. Remember, the purpose of Lent is not Lent, it's a deeper, more confident, more consistent and more practical discipleship moving forward. Be blessed in your practical Lenten journey this year.

—Pastor Rick

A Word from Pastor Ellen...

We often speak of our observance of the season of Lent as a journey. For Lent is not only a time of focus and reflection on the atoning and reconciling work of Christ. It is an invitation—even more, a calling—to walk in Christ's own footsteps, to take on His likeness, and to follow Him in His journey to the foot of the cross. During Lent, in some ways more consciously than in any of the other seasons of the Christian year, we seek to become ever more like Christ—in His devotion to the Father's will, in His acts of love and service, and also in His sufferings—so that as His devoted disciples we may be formed increasingly into His image and filled with His heart and mind.



To be a disciple literally means to be a “disciplined follower.” Robert Webber (echoing Eugene Peterson) spoke of discipleship in this way: It’s “a long obedience in the same direction.” Jesus indicated this, too, of course. He said, “Follow Me, and I will make you...”; “I will teach you...”; “I will show you...”; “Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me.” Throughout His three-and-a-half year earthly ministry, Jesus taught, trained, *disciplined* His followers so that they would be prepared to live lives of love for God and neighbor, and to live out their baptisms and show His life in the world. That may sound like a daunting ideal indeed, but thankfully He’s given us some wonderful, practical means that sustain and assist us along the way.

The Lenten journey often takes on the preparation and practice of spiritual discipline. It's a time of "putting off and putting on": We put off something—an attitude or indulgence, perhaps a pattern or routine—in order to make time and room in our lives for those activities, attitudes, and habits that draw us closer to Him and enable us to love and serve others. During this season of Lent, we are walking together through several *doable* daily spiritual disciplines. We'll look at Scripture, some essential aspects of prayer, living and growing together in community, and several spiritual practices we can do together daily during these six weeks of Lent.

Let's begin the journey!

—Pastor Ellen

A Word from Pastor Chris...



I'm not sure why, but my mind at Lent tends to turn toward the Abbey of Gethsemani in Bardstown, Kentucky. Actually, that's not quite true: I do know why. My mind turns toward that small band of cloistered brothers because I so admire their dedication and discipline. And I often think of Lent in terms of dedication and discipline.

The oldest operating monastery in America, Gethsemani has been the home to some of the most faithful saints since its founding in 1848. You wouldn't recognize any of the names of the brothers, except for Thomas Merton, and you might not recognize his either. And that's part of the point, really.

These Trappist monks (named after the strict order they belong to) follow the Rule of Benedict and live a quiet, almost hidden life of faithful prayer, worship, study, and work.

We need them to do this. The world needs them to do this.

I spent a very formational weekend there once, long ago, while a student. Just that short amount of time was hard work. The cycle of prayer and worship and study begins just after 3 AM and continues throughout the day and into the early evening.

Here are a couple of things I took away from that weekend: Far from “doing nothing” at worst, or “doing nothing consequential” at best, those monks are doing a powerful service for the world and for the Kingdom: They are living out powerful lives of prayer and worship and intercession.

You and I haven’t been called to a monastic life, but we surely have been called to live powerful lives of prayer and worship and intercession.

The Benedictine disciplines that those faithful brothers submit to are hard work, and not many of us would be able to match their zeal and ardor. But we surely could take a lesson from some of their practices in this practical Lent to deepen our life of discipleship.

With God as our help, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, join with me this holy season as we engage in a Practical Lent.

Why? We need us to do this. The world needs us to do this.

Praying, worshiping, and discipling along with you....

—Pastor Chris

Week One:

Introduction to these Lenten disciplines.

If we want to survive, we have to return to the roots of our faith, both in thought and in practice.

We are going to have to learn habits of the heart forgotten by believers in the West.

We are going to have to change our lives, and our approach to life, in radical ways.

In short, we are going to have to be the church, without compromise, no matter what it costs.

(Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 3)



What is a spiritual discipline?

Why are spiritual disciplines important, even essential?

A key definition:

"A 'rule' is a set of habits you commit to in order to grow in your love of God and neighbor."

(Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction*, 21)





Benedict of Nursia and *The Common Rule*

Four Important Aspects of Spiritual Disciplines:

Justin Earley notes these four benefits and goals of observing spiritual disciplines in his book *The Common Rule*:

Love of God

“One way to look at the habits is as they pertain to love of God. You were made to love and be loved by God. Only in the light of his love will you finally see who you really are, feel how you are supposed to feel, and discover what you should do with your days.”

Love of Neighbor

“When we think of better habits, we often think about our own self-improvement.... These habits are meant

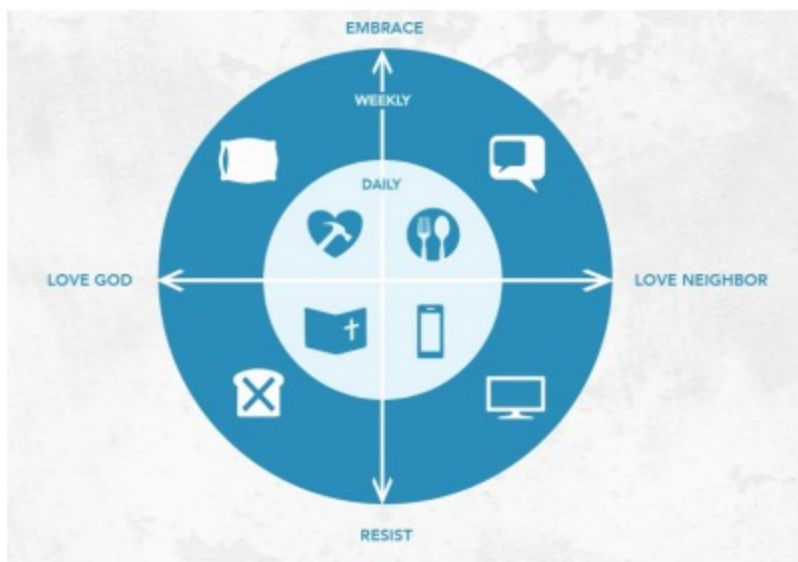
to be practiced with others for their sake.”

Embrace

“Embrace is a reminder that there is much good in the world God made. God’s presence—not his absence—is the primary fact of the world. That we need each other—not that we harm each other—is the primary truth of being human.”

Resist

“When we practice resistance, we acknowledge that evil and suffering are very real, though they aren’t how the world was made to be. But remember that resistance has a purpose: love. The habits of resistance aren’t supposed to shield you from the world but to turn you toward it.”



Weekly Habits and Spiritual Rhythms

Sabbath

The weekly practice of Sabbath teaches us that God sustains the world and that we don't. To make a countercultural embrace of our limitations, we stop our usual work for one day of rest. Sabbath is a gospel practice because it reminds us that the world doesn't hang on what we can accomplish, but rather on what God has accomplished for us.



One Hour of Conversation with a Friend

We were made for each other, and we can't become lovers of God and neighbor without intimate relationships where vulnerability is sustained across time. In habitual, face-to-face conversation with each other, we find a gospel practice; we are laid bare to each other and loved anyway.



Fast from Something for 24 Hours

We constantly seek to fill our emptiness with food and other comforts. We ignore our soul and our neighbor's need by medicating with food and drink. Regular fasting exposes who we really are, reminds us how broken the world is, and draws our eyes to how Jesus is redeeming all things.



Curate Media to 4 Hours

Stories matter so much that we must handle them with utmost care. Resisting the constant stream of addictive media with an hour limit means we are forced to curate what we watch. Curating stories means that we seek stories that uphold beauty, that teach us to love justice, and that turn us to community.



In each of the following four weeks, we will study and embark together on a particular spiritual discipline.

Discussion

Conclusion

Closing Prayer and Litany

Some spontaneous prayer...

Leader: Trust in the Lord, do good, and take on the yoke of Christ.

People: We take on the yoke of Christ and learn of Him.

Leader: Commit your way to the Lord, be still and wait patiently for Him.

People: We gladly take on the yoke of Christ to learn of Him.

Leader: Hope in the Lord, keep His way, and He will exalt you.

People: We take on the yoke of Christ's meekness, as we go forth into the world to love and serve the Lord.

Week Two:

The Daily Discipline of Prayer

How do we usually understand and engage in prayer?

The Rule of St. Benedict encourages us to think of prayer not just as those times when we stop our activities and withdraw to talk with God. Because God's creation is good and His presence is everywhere, all of life is lived in His presence. Prayer is thus an openness to hear God and dialogue with God in every moment, every thought, every action, every relationship, every transaction of every day.

If prayer is part of every aspect of our daily lives, Benedict also encouraged specific times set aside for prayer throughout the day. Following the Psalmist, the rhythm of the monastic day was punctuated by seven prescribed times of prayer.

See Psalm 119:164, 42:8, 92:2, 119:62.

Three Disciplines of Daily Prayer

1) Kneeling Prayer Three Times a Day

Justin Earley encourages us in this way:
"Regular, carefully placed prayer is one of the keystone habits of spiritual formation and is the beginning of building the trellis of habit. By framing our day in the words of prayer, we frame the day of love."



Morning Prayer

Spirit, I was made for your presence. May this day be one I spend with you in all that I do. Amen.



Midday Prayer

Jesus, I was made to join your work in the world. Please order the rest of my day in love for the people you have given me to serve. Amen.



Evening Prayer

Father, I was made to rest in your love. May my body rest in sleep, and may my mind rest in your love. Amen.



2) The Jesus Prayer as Abiding Prayer

***Lord, Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
have mercy on me, a sinner.***



Background to The Jesus Prayer

The Desert Fathers, c. 400 AD.

In some ways anticipating the practices of St. Benedict, as they sought to escape the corruption and worldliness that had seeped into the church, the Desert Fathers developed disciplines using *The Jesus Prayer* as a means to center their minds, hearts, and souls on Christ with the goal of becoming ever more like Him.

The Jesus Prayer is...

an abiding prayer.

a silent prayer.

a heart prayer.

a breath prayer.

a step prayer.

a means of spiritual warfare.

a prayer of "putting off and putting on."

3) The Lord's Prayer as Spiritual Formation

Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4.

In the ancient church, new disciples were required to memorize the Lord's Prayer and to repeat it often, for in this way the holy words would take root deep within them and become a constant and integral part of their daily lives. Robert Webber put it this way: We declare the whole story of God in the Lord's Prayer. The ancient church considered it a piece of our spiritual armor, for it forms and reconfirms our belief and becomes an inner armor of dependence on God.

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Week Three:

The Daily Discipline of Scripture and Study

We probably all are familiar with the age-old admonition that we spend a daily quiet time in devotion, Scripture reading, and study, preferably the first part of our day. But how many of us willingly commit to it, let alone actually practice it, especially in our current age of constant distractions of numerous kinds?

This challenge is at the heart of perhaps the most pointed of Justin Earley's daily disciplines, what he terms Scripture Before Phone.



Here's how he explains it:

"Refusing to check the phone until after reading a passage of Scripture is a way of replacing the question, 'What do I need to do today?' with a better one, 'Who am I and who am I becoming?' We have no stable identity outside of Jesus. Daily immersion in the Scriptures resists the anxiety of emails, the anger of the news, and the envy of social media. Instead it forms us daily in our true identity as children of the King, dearly loved" (p. 92).

Some selected Scriptures for reference and discussion:

Psalm 63:1.

Psalm 119 (especially v. 11).

Proverbs 8:17, 34-35; 9:10.

2 Timothy 3:15-17.

Hebrews 4:12.

Romans 15:4.

The ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*

The concept of study often brings to mind an intellectual exercise that analyzes and categorizes information. That was a tendency even back in St. Benedict's day.

Rather than a strictly analytical approach, Benedict's instructions followed the ancient *Lectio Divina* ("divine reading"), a practice of prayerful reading and praying the Scriptures. Its roots go back to Origen in the third century, whose methods were used and taught by Ambrose of Milan and St. Augustine.

In a similar way, the Desert Fathers thought of Scripture reading as a natural part of their lives of constant prayer.

It's been described as a form of meditative and contemplative praying of Scripture so that the word of God can take up residence within and form us into the image of Christ.



The sixteenth-century mystic St. John of the Cross wrote of *lectio divina* as listening for the voice of God. To explain it, he paraphrased Luke 11:9 into these four steps:

Seek in **reading**,

And you will find in **meditation**.

Knock in **prayer**,

And it will be opened to you in **contemplation**.

1) Read (and listen) to a text (**Lectio**): Listen with your heart and mind. Allow yourself to simply *be* with the text. Be open, vulnerable, and expectant.

2) Think (and reflect) on the text (**Meditatio**): Read, and prayerfully ponder and reflect on the text. Assume the text is addressed to you. Ask, "What are You saying to me? What do You want me to know and understand?"

3) Let the word touch your heart and pray (prayer; **Oratio**): In *Oratio*, the Word of God goes deeper and becomes the prayer of your heart. "There emerges within the heart a holy desire, a longing for the text, the word of God, to be concretized in reality."

4) Enter into rest and contemplation (**Contemplatio**): Contemplation is described as resting in God, a "loving gaze" upon Him, "knowing beyond knowing," and "a call to being." (For the Psalmist's expression of this contemplation, see Psalm 27:4.)

(This elaboration of the four steps is by Robert Webber, *Divine Embrace*, 208-210).

A French Benedictine monk described this four-fold process this way:

**We read (*Lectio*) under the eye of God (*Meditatio*)
until the heart is touched (*Oratio*)
and leaps to flame (*Contemplatio*).**

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Week Four:

The Daily Discipline of Community

In his book, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction*, Justin Earley titles the daily discipline of this week's focus One Meal With Others. He explains it in this way:



"We were made to eat, so the table must be our center of gravity. The habit of making time for one communal meal each day forces us to reorient our schedules and our space around food and each other. The more the table becomes our center of gravity, the more it draws our neighbors into gospel community" (Earley, 61).

That is a wonderful way of highlighting the aspects and blessings of community we read in Luke's narrative of the early church in Acts 2: 42-47.

(For reference and further contemplation, see John 6:1-14; John 21:9-14; and Luke 24:28-35. What other examples can you think of?)

It's a beautiful picture of life together. But scheduling it can be challenging, especially when the calendars and demands of our busy daily lives take us in divergent directions at all hours.

The discipline part:

We have to give up something (a part of our time, a bit of self-interest, etc.) in order to take on the blessings and growth that habits of daily community bring to us and the others in our lives. This echoes what Earley wrote about the weekly habit of conversations with friends: "We were made for each other, and we can't become lovers of God and neighbor without intimate relationships where vulnerability is sustained across time."



The Intertwined Rhythms of Spiritual Life in Daily Life

Just as there is a rhythm to our daily physical lives, which are not meant to be lived without community, so there is a rhythm to our spiritual lives, which are also not meant to be lived out alone.

St. Benedict thought of the disciplines as ways of practicing the presence of Christ and participating in the life of God in the life of the world, because every aspect of our spiritual life is integrated with our routine, everyday life in the world.

The Pattern of Our Spiritual Lives: Baptismal Spirituality

The discipline of baptismal spirituality is a familiar one at Epiclesis. Often we are sent forth with these words from Pastor Chris: "Beloved, go forth into the world, walking out your baptisms, to love and serve the Lord."

Robert Webber calls baptismal spirituality the “deep rhythm” of the spiritual life. It’s the pattern of embodied life in Jesus, of daily dying to sin and rising to new life in Him. We are called to live daily in our baptisms, Webber says, because “to be baptized in water into the death and resurrection of Jesus and into the fellowship of the Godhead is a spiritual identity that we carry with us throughout our entire Christian life.”

“This is the pattern of spirituality—putting off the *old* person who has been buried with Christ in his death; putting on the *new* person raised to the new life of the Spirit.”

As we daily walk out our baptisms, “immersed into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ,” we enter into the pattern and rhythm of God’s story. We bear the constant mark of our new identity in God through Christ, and in this progressive pattern of abiding, we become daily more like Him.



Some Scriptures for reference and contemplation:

Romans 6:6-8; Colossians 2:12; Galatians 2:20, 5:19-23; Colossians 3:5-17.

How is living out our baptisms intertwined with intentional daily community, with taking a meal with others?

Think back to Acts 2:42-47 and Colossians 3:12-17. What kinds of pictures and interactions come to mind? What kinds of growing together? What kinds of blessings?

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Week Five:

The Daily Discipline of Intentional Presence

Here's a common contemporary picture from T.V., movies, and commercials: We see a group of friends, or family, seated around a table together. Perhaps they're gathered for a meal, or a conversation, or a game or other activity. They look so happy, ready to spend quality time together. Except – um.... What's that in the hands of several of them? Could it be a . . . phone??



It's the paradox of what's been called, "Alone together."

This study's final practical Lenten discipline is what Justin Earley titles One Hour with the Phone Off. Here's his explanation:



"We were made for presence, but so often our phones are the cause of our absence. To be two places at a time is to be no place at all. Turning off our phone for an hour a day is a way to turn our gaze up to each other, whether that be children, coworkers, friends, or neighbors. Our habits of attention are habits of love. To resist absence is to love neighbor" (p. 77).

For reflection:

What other causes for absence lurk in your life?

“Presence is the heart of everything.”

Earley writes that “presence is at the heart of who we are, because presence is at the core of our relationship with God” and the center of His story (64-65). In the Garden of Eden, God’s unmediated presence was with Adam and Eve continually; when they sinned, His presence was withdrawn. In the wilderness, His presence led the Israelites in pillars of cloud and fire. He manifested His presence on a mountain, in a tabernacle, in the temple. And when Jesus, the Word of God, became incarnate in human flesh, He was called Emmanuel, because it means “God with us.”

As humans, made in the image of God, we need, desire, and seek His presence.

Consider these examples:

Exodus 33:14-15.

Deuteronomy 31:6-8

Psalms 16:9-11; 17:5; 21:6; 24:3-6; 27:7-8; 140:13.

John 14:18-24.

Matthew 28:20.

Lessons from the Ancient Church Fathers

The daily habit of intentional presence was not foreign to the early church, though of course they did not use that term to speak of it. But they understood, and taught, that this discipline involves both embracing our connection with one another, and resisting those things that draw us away from others and toward our own self-interests.

The oldest surviving written Christian catechism is the *Didache* (meaning "Teaching"), dated about AD 50. The *Didache* includes instructions in the pattern of dying to sin and rising to Christ, which new converts were to learn and study prior to their baptism. They were taught that there are "two ways." One was the way of life, of embrace of Christ, and of loving "God who made you" and loving "neighbor as yourself." The other, the way of death, was that of the sinful life, which they were instructed to "put off."



The Desert Fathers, too, aimed to preserve the early Christian spiritual practices, especially when increasing worldliness crept into the church following the conversion of Constantine in the 4th century. In the discipline of "putting off" and "putting on," they focused on guarding and training the heart, from which all thoughts and actions proceed.

See: Mark 7:6, 20-23; Luke 6:45; Matthew 12:33-37.

(Refer back to Colossians 3:5-17).

To guard the heart, we must also:

Guard the Mind. (see also Rom. 12:2 and Col. 3:10).

Guard the Eyes. (see also Psm. 119:37-38).

Guard the Ears. (see also Mark 4:23-24).

Guard the Tongue: (see also Eph. 4:29, 31; James 3:5-12).

Guard the Imagination and Memory: (see also 2 Cor. 10:5).

Discussion

How might these teachings on guarding and training our hearts help us with our tendencies to continually “check the phone” (and other habits of absence)?

What happens when we split, or “fracture” (in Earley’s words), our presence?

What might happen if we embrace the discipline of being present to those around us?

1 John 4:17 says that “as He [Jesus] is, so are we in this world.” What did (and does) intentional presence look like in Jesus’ life? Since the disciplines form us more into His image, what ought this to look like in our lives?

Other comments and questions.

Conclusion

Looking back over this Lenten study – comments and sharing.

Closing Prayer and Litany

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NOTES:



For Further Reading and Study:

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Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. New York, NY: Sentinel, 2017.

Robert E. Webber: *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006.

Some questions and answers about Lent...

What is the Lenten season, and why is it set apart?

It is a period of six weeks preceding the anniversary of the Savior's death, and is set apart as a special season of fasting, penitence, and prayer.

Why is it called 'Lent'?

Some suggest that it comes from an old Saxon word, lent, which means "spring". Lent always comes in the spring of the year. The practice of Lent is older than the word.

With what remarkable event in Jesus' life does the Lenten season correspond?

The forty days which He spent fasting in the wilderness.

Why is the first day of Lent called "Ash Wednesday"?

It comes from a custom that prevailed in the early church of sprinkling ashes on the heads of worshipers the first day of Lent in a visible expression of humiliation and sorrow for sin.

Are there any examples of this custom mentioned in the Bible?

Yes, many. Some examples are Daniel and David and the people of Nineveh, to which Jesus Himself refers in Matthew 11:21.

If Lent only lasts 40 days, why does it begin 46 days before Easter?

There are six Sundays in Lent, and as all Sundays are considered "feast days" in honor of the Resurrection, they are taken out. To make up for these, six days are added to the beginning of the season.

What is the object of "keeping" Lent?

To deepen the religious life, to purify the heart from sin, and to unite us more closely with the Savior.

Why do some churches ask that fasting be observed during Lent?

Because repentance and humility are essential to growth in grace. Fasting is often coupled in the Bible with repentance and seeking after God. Jesus Himself fasted, as did the disciples.

Holy Week....

Mark your calendars for three special service of worship during Holy Week at Epiclesis



Palm Sunday: March 28: 10:30 AM

Maundy Thursday: April 1: 7 PM

Holy Saturday: April 3: 6 PM

Resurrection Sunday (Easter Day): April 4: 10:30 AM

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Page 7: "Benedict of Nursia." Fra Angelico. (Credit: Public domain/via Wikimedia Commons).

Page 25: "Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles." Unknown Constantinople master iconographer. Early 4th., Pushkin museum.

Epiclesis

An Ancient-Future Faith Community...

Worshipping Sundays at 10:30 AM, at the Carmichael Chapel

4600 Winding Way; Sacramento, CA; 95841

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