



Handbook of Spiritual Practices

By Nancy Dibelius

This handbook was initially imagined and designed to complement the training material for *Tending the Soul*, a training program in Missional Spiritual Direction and Congregational Formation within the Upper New York Conference. It includes spiritual practices that are introduced as part of the training program as well as a number of other long-standing Christian spiritual practices. The contents of the handbook have been used in connection with other ministries within the Conference as well.

This handbook also serves as a guide to spiritual practices for others who would like to use the practices to complement other spiritual formation training and activities and to support and nurture their own individual spiritual lives.



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Contents

4

Section 1: Early Church

16

Section 2: Desert Mothers and Fathers

24

Section 3: Benedictine

46

Section 4: Middle Ages

56

Section 5: Ignatian spirituality

56

Section 5: Contemporary and Blended

EARLY CHURCH



PRAYER

INTRODUCTION



The early years of the Church developed out of the foundation of a personal relationship with Jesus, out of a common way of life, and a clear call in *the way* that life was to be lived. Reflecting on the Gospel narratives about Jesus, we see the important role that prayer played in his life. We also see Jesus acting, teaching, healing, leading and participating in worship. The early Church sought to emulate the example of Jesus as they reached out to invite others into this alternative way of life. Key to the life of the early Church was prayer coupled with action, personal piety coupled with community worship, intentional study of scripture and developing a deep, abiding relationship with Jesus.

The earliest spiritual practices of the Church focused an individual's attention on these foundational pieces.

Praying with icons

The spiritual practice of praying with icons finds its roots in the earliest centuries of the Church. “Icon” is the Greek word for image. Icons are seen as windows to the divine, a way to enter into holy space. Icons were a way of telling the Christian story visually; they were used in the earliest days of the Church when very few people could read. They were an important teaching tool in the early church. Originally, there were very specific images that represented specific Biblical narratives that articulated important articles of faith. Because the image was intended to narrate a Biblical story, they are considered written, not drawn; one writes an icon. Originally, they were written on wooden panels and even today, you will most likely find a copy of one of the original images mounted on wood. In more contemporary times, this practice has been extended to include other narratives and images.

During the Reformation, Protestant churches discontinued the use of icons because they were viewed by some to be idols. It has only been in the last few hundred years that the use of icons has been re-adopted in the Protestant world. It is important to remember that we do not worship the image, we use the image as way of entering into scripture in a different way so that we may experience God in that space; the icon is a window into the holy.

If you are practicing this for the first time, I recommend using a traditional icon that tells a familiar scripture story. Start by reading the scripture narrative that is associated with the image. Observe the image carefully letting your mind move slowly across the image. Describe what you see. Analyze the elements of the work; note the colors, the shapes, does it accurately reflect the narrative.

Based on the image, how did the artist interpret the narrative; what does the image tell you about God? Evaluate the image; does the work speak to you in an authentic way, does it convey a depth of meaning that the narrative alone may not? Respond to the image; look at it again as a whole, let it tell you its story, listen for and reflect on how God may be speaking through the image. What is God saying to you this day?

When you have finished, I would invite you to journal about your experience.

I will introduce the practice with a traditional Biblical narrative. The scripture is Genesis 18:1-14. The two images on the next page represent a traditional and a contemporary icon of this scripture. Read the scripture, sit with the image. When you have finished reading, move through the steps at your own pace.

“The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, ‘My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the

tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said.’ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’ The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.’”

--NRSV



Walking the Labyrinth

The spiritual practice of walking a labyrinth dates back well before Christianity. The oldest labyrinth to be identified dates to roughly 3000 BCE; the oldest examples are found in Greece, Italy, and Siberia. Sometime during the fourth century, the labyrinth was adopted for Christian use; there is one in a Christian church in Algeria that dates to 350 CE. The labyrinth became an established practice during the Middle Ages, one of the most famous ones was constructed in the Chartres Cathedral in France in the 13th century. In the early years of the Church, it was a common practice for Christians to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem once a year. As the Church grew geographically, that became more difficult and during the wars in the Middle Ages, it became too dangerous. Walking the labyrinth became a substitute for making a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands.

The labyrinth is not a maze; there is a single path that leads to the center and back out. Walking the labyrinth became a practice that allowed an individual to experience God's presence in a tangible way. It reminds us that we travel this path to God together, even though we may at times be in different places on the journey. As with many spiritual practices, the path leads us to the center where we can be one with God and then, when we have reconnected with God, it leads us back where we can be in service in the world. The intent of the labyrinth is to seek God's presence and to then return into the world with a greater sense of God's deep desire for us. What is God inviting us to take back into the world?

In the earliest days, just as pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem as an outward symbol of their inward journey and relationship with God, walking the labyrinth became symbolic of that journey of faith.

I imagine that many of you are thinking right now that you don't have access to a labyrinth so you won't actually be able to explore this practice. I would like to invite you to be a bit creative and explore some possibilities...first, google labyrinths near me; you may be surprised to discover places relatively nearby where there is a labyrinth. This, for example, is a labyrinth on the top of Gore Mountain in the Adirondacks.



But I would also like to share that creating a labyrinth (either permanent or temporary) is not as difficult as you might imagine. This time, google labyrinth designs and you will find multiple websites where designs for labyrinths can be downloaded; you will also discover that labyrinths come in many sizes; the smallest I've seen has three circuits and the largest has 13 circuits. The width of the path also varies and can be adjusted to accommodate the space you have available.

Here is a photo of a labyrinth that I made.



As you can see, it's probably not the most glamorous labyrinth you ever saw, but that's not the point. If you were wondering when I referred to the number of circuits, each of the concentric circles is considered a circuit not including the center itself. This labyrinth has five circuits and is a great size for individuals who are doing this for the first time (it is easy to lose your focus in a significantly larger labyrinth). I bought four canvas drop cloths at the local hardware store, they are pieced together with Velcro. I initially laid out the pattern with yarn. Once I was satisfied that it was a reasonable approximation of the pattern, I used painter's tape to mark the path and then painted it with black acrylic paint. It is possible to lay out a labyrinth using yarn, or painter's tape or marking tape; many outdoor labyrinths are made with stones, some use bricks or landscape stones; again, be creative. I often place a symbol at the center of the labyrinth that reminds me what the center is a symbol of, but that isn't necessary.

The labyrinth can be walked with a single prayer focus; it can be walked while reflecting on scripture; it can be walked in silence where space is made for God to enter in; it can be walked as a solitary practice and it can be walked in community. For those who may be exploring this practice for the first time, I would invite you to consider three questions...

As you are walking toward the center, ask yourself...What are the things in my life that distract me from fully living into God's deep desire for my life?

When you have reached the center, the symbol of God's presence, ask yourself...As I sit with God, what do I need clarity about this day in my life, in my relationship with God? Stay in the center as long as you like; see yourself in God's presence.

As you begin the journey outward, back into the world, ask yourself...What is God inviting me to take back into the world?

Fasting



The spiritual practice of fasting is an ancient practice; we have examples of fasting in the Old Testament, in the Gospels, and in the earliest days of the Christian Church. The traditional practice of fasting has been a fast from food, but even in the first centuries of Christianity, individuals began to practice a fast from “things” in their lives that tended to control them. Fasting serves as an outward sign, a prayerful action, that signifies an inward change about the things that control us. By opening ourselves to separating from the things that control us, we open space for God to enter into our lives; we give our life to God. Fasting becomes a prayer of surrender, an acknowledgment that we are not truly in control, that our life is dependent upon God. Just as the desert mothers and fathers entered into solitary life in the desert so they could remove themselves from the distractions of life in the world, fasting can help reveal to us the things that control us. It helps identify the nonessential things in our lives that take up unnecessary room in our lives; room that is better filled by the presence of God.

John Wesley taught his followers that “the man who never fasts is no more in the way to heaven than the man who never prays.”¹ Fasting is a prayer practice. And although we traditionally associate fasting with food, it is equally meaningful to fast from other things. If the intent of fasting is to create time and space to be with God, to develop a deeper, closer relationship with the Holy, then anything that demands our attention away from God is a ‘thing’ to abstain from.

With regard to how you might begin to practice fasting in a traditional fast from food, for those who have never practiced fasting, begin slowly. Start by skipping one meal and using the time you would have spent eating in prayerful meditation. And as you do so, remember that Jesus was clear with his disciples that fasting should reflect sincere prayerfulness and not just be for show; don't draw attention to your fast. Over time, you might add two meals or even three; remember however to know your limits if you have medical concerns; always drink plenty of liquids to remain hydrated; start by drinking 100% fruit juices or protein supplement drinks, eventually moving to drinking only water. Remember, this is not about "did I do this perfectly;" it is about giving oneself up to God and being fully present to God.

Consider as well, what are some of the "things" in your life that have some degree of control in your life; they don't need to be big things or things that we might think of as negative; it's more about what priority do we give them in our life; for example, watching too much TV, playing too many video games, too much online shopping; what would it look like to fast from those things; to turn control over to God, to spend that time working on your relationship with God?

I would encourage you to journal both during and after an experience of fasting.



¹ Outler, Albert C. and Heitzenrater, Richard P., ed., John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), pg. 555.

Pilgrimage

The spiritual practice of pilgrimage has its origins in the earliest years of the Christian Church; in the first few centuries of Christianity, it was a common practice to pilgrimage to Jerusalem. By the 3rd century, Bethlehem had also become a common pilgrimage. As the Church grew geographically and travel to Jerusalem became more dangerous, new pilgrimage routes emerged across Europe and the British Isles. One of the most famous Christian pilgrimage routes is the Camino de Santiago in Spain; it is believed that the remains of James (Santiago in Spanish), the first known apostle to be martyred, were brought to Spain in the 9th century and the pilgrimage to the sea became a well-known route. It is still a very popular pilgrimage and was the focus of a 2010 film entitled *The Way*. Other common destinations during the Middle Ages were Rome and Canterbury. In more recent times, places like Iona in Scotland and Lindisfarne in England have become well-known pilgrimages.

As you consider this practice, let's look at the underlying intent of pilgrimage. The earliest pilgrims traveled to "seek" God, experience God, and discern a deeper understanding of God's call on their life; pilgrimage was designed to connect the spiritual body and journey with the physical body and journey and make the journey with and toward God deeper and fuller. The word pilgrimage comes from a Latin word which designates a person who travels to a foreign land and came to designate an individual journeying to that place where they could discover God's presence, that place where they could renew and restore their relationship with God and return to this place with a deeper understanding of God's desire for their life. Pilgrimage is less about your actual destination than it is about your desire and willingness to be transformed by an encounter with God. Actual physical movement is also an essential piece of pilgrimage; that act of connecting your interior body with your physical body opens your spirit in new and different ways.

Consider how and where you might experience pilgrimage; a walk in your neighborhood or a walk on a nature trail. I often suggest visiting a church or retreat center. Be creative about where you could walk; remember you are seeking the presence of God. Consider creating your own pilgrimage route with landmarks along the way. Choose a destination; consider marking that place; something as simple as a small rock cairn for example. As you walk, be mindful of all that you see, be prayerful for your neighbors, your community, be thankful for creation; look for God in the ordinary and the everyday. Spend some time in prayer, in quiet reflection, invite God to guide your life and future journey, and then travel back with a renewed understanding of God's desire for you, God's call for your life. Although it is important to the practice to have a destination that symbolizes God's presence, I would share with you one of my favorite quotes which always speaks to me of our life of faith, "It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end."

Take time to journal about your experience when you return.



Silence and Solitude



The spiritual practice of silence and solitude, for the earliest Christians, modeled the examples set by Jesus for the need to get away from the crowds and demands of life to ground himself in his relationship with God.

It is challenging in our current culture, filled with technological advancements, to find silence. We fill all the little gaps with voices, music, all forms of noise; silence makes us uncomfortable; silence requires us to be with ourselves.

Our prayer practices focus on talking to God. Prayer has been about finding words, speaking words, praying words. In our current culture, prayer has not been about being in God's presence without words; we do not find it comfortable or easy to be in God's presence to listen, or to just be with God.

We may fear that the world cannot go on without us (or perhaps we are more fearful that it can). We may be anxious about our need to respond to every word and request that comes our way. The spiritual discipline of silence invites us to leave behind the competing demands of the outside world for time alone with Jesus. Silence invites us to loosen our grip and to trust our life, and the life of the world to God. Silence invites us to pay attention to God and to the invitations God may have for us.

In silence, our attention is often drawn to things we would rather not notice or attend to. Our external agenda seems more important than our desire to be with God. As we sit in the silence and nothing seems to be happening, we often struggle with the feeling that we are wasting time.

Everything we notice as we sit in this place can become an invitation to prayer. The silence opens the contents of our heart, allowing us access to the deeper places within where God is present.

As we remain in the silence, the inner noise and chaos will begin to quiet itself. Our ability to open up wider and wider to God will grow, allowing God access to places deep within us.

Simply sit with God in the silence. Offer all of who you are to God as a prayer. This is not about accomplishing something; it is about resting in God's presence. Trust that in the presence of God you are slowly being transformed, closer and closer to the image of God within (imago Dei).

You are invited to find a comfortable place to sit or to take a walk. Experience the solitude. Experience silence.

As you begin, be aware of the noises around you, notice each one and then slowly let each one go. Let the quiet of the moment deepen. Be with God, be present to God.

As you enter into this time of silence, hear this invitation from the writer of Lamentations as expressed in The Message...

When life is heavy and hard to take, go off by yourself. Enter the silence. Bow in prayer. Don't ask questions: wait for hope to appear.

Then listen, be patient, simply rest in God. Allow yourself to let go of the need to "hear" and allow yourself simply to be present to God. Give yourself time and space.

At the end of your time of practicing silence, I would invite you to journal about your experience.





DESERT

MOTHERS AND FATHERS

INTRODUCTION



The desert mothers and fathers (Ammas and Abbas) started as solitary individuals who sought to live ascetic lifestyles and typically moved away from urban areas into the wilderness or desert areas; this movement had its origins in Syria and Egypt, but, over time, expanded to parts of Europe and Asia. These individuals focused on lives devoted to strict disciplines and practices; prayer being foremost in their daily lives. Although many went into the wilderness to live isolated solitary lives, they became the forerunners of monastic life (from the word *monachus* meaning solitary person). Some who sought solitary lives found others drawn to their deep spiritual practices and their wisdom and discernment; often those who started out alone formed loose-knit communities of others seeking to emulate their lives. They started out in the earliest years of the Church and by the fourth century had developed into a movement that drew faithful, devoted Christians to places of solitude and separation. They practiced extremely simple lifestyles known for their lack of possessions, celibacy, and constant prayer. Although the first of these individuals were male, women of faith also formed similar communities.

Spiritual Direction

This spiritual practice is traditionally known as spiritual direction. This term can be a bit misleading so it is sometimes referred to as spiritual companioning; the Celts use the term Anam Cara which means soul friend. A spiritual director or companion is someone who walks alongside another on their faith journey. They listen to the stories of others and pay attention to the ways in which God weaves in and out of their story; they help the other person notice God's presence, notice what God might be inviting them into. They also help them discern the ways in which they have been responding to God and the ways in which they have perhaps been resisting God.

Spiritual direction finds its earliest roots in Christianity in the 3rd and 4th centuries among the desert mothers and fathers. The tradition continued to be handed down through leaders in the church throughout the centuries.

A spiritual director will listen to your story focusing on your faith tradition, who God is for you at this moment, what are your experiences of God, what do they notice about how you have responded to God, do they observe some movement by God that you may not, how are you responding to this new movement, is there perhaps a parallel in scripture that might guide you, is there a discipline or practice that might help you. The intent of spiritual direction is to nurture and support your relationship with God as you seek to hear and discern God's deep desire for your life.

A spiritual director named Margaret Silf created a visual to help us better understand our relationship with God and with the world;¹ a set of concentric circles. There are three concentric circles and a center space. The center space is the God place within; people often find it helpful to have a symbol as a reminder...many individuals choose a cross for example; I like to use the waters of baptism.

The outer circle is referred to as the 'where'...where am I...

In this space are the facts and circumstances of your life, the things you cannot change. Things like your family, your genetic make-up, the place of your birth, the culture and race into which you were born, your upbringing, your education, all the things that have already happened to you.

The middle circle is referred to as the 'how'...how am I...

This is the area of your life where you make personal choices and exercise some degree of control. Things happen, but you can choose how to respond to those things, the personal relationships that you have are of your choosing, every choice that you make moves you, often in very subtle ways, inward or outward, and your choices also make subtle changes to the world around you; "choices for truth make the world more truthful, betrayals of your integrity undermine the integrity of all."² Many people live in this space...events happen and they make choices.

The inner circle is referred to as the 'who'....who am I...

This is the center of your being where you are the person God created you to be. This place moves you closer to God and to the presence of God

within, this can be a place of restoration and renewal but at times a disturbing place...because it is a place where you may discover a disconnect between the person you are in the Where and the person God imagines and invites you to be.

The practice of spiritual direction can help you be more aware of your on-going relationship with God and discern where you spend most of your time. Many of us spend too much time in the Where; we may move from one spot on the circle to another, but we are unable to make change in this place. Many of us spend some of our time in the How; as events occur we make choices. But real, substantive change/transformation happens in the Who; that place where I am the person God imagines me to be, that place where I live from the center of my being.

A spiritual director can walk with you as you seek to find your way to the Who. As an objective observer, they are often able to see things that you cannot, or choose not to. They can help you be aware of your behavior in the How; do you turn inward, do you turn to God for guidance or do you turn outward, to the world when confronted with a decision.

I would like to share a quote with you about why you might choose to walk with another...

“We need soul friends, whether gentle and welcoming like most spiritual directors, or direct and prophetic like Jeremiah. We need soul friends who can walk beside us shoulder to shoulder, meandering with us through life the way friends meander through a park. We need soul friends whose conversations with us have the potential to become mirrors to our souls,... We need friends who can help us discover the grace to loosen our grip so that we might learn to receive.”³

If you have never met with a spiritual director before, consider it. If you have and it's been a while, consider seeing them again. There is a list of spiritual directors attached, both United Methodist and other Christian faith streams, who are currently available throughout Upper NY.



¹ Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 1999), pgs. 21-22.

² *Ibid*, pg. 22.

³ *Christian Century*, L. Roger Owens, *Reflections on the Lectionary*, August 21, 2013, pg. 21.

Prayer Beads

This practice focuses on the use of prayer beads as a spiritual practice. For those of you who may not have prayer beads and would like to explore this practice, the instructions for making your own prayer beads follows. I will introduce you to a specific form that is referred to as Protestant prayer beads. Prayer beads were first introduced in the 3rd century by the desert mothers and fathers. There were 150 beads originally; one for each psalm. These 'beads' were made of pebbles, seeds, shells, and other commonplace materials. They were often worn as necklaces, belts, and bracelets. Making the beads themselves was considered a spiritual practice. They were first introduced as a formal act of devotion in the sixth century by Benedict of Nursia. During the Middle Ages, they were in common usage in all of Christian Europe as well as the Eastern Orthodox Church. The form of prayer beads known as The Rosary was introduced by St. Dominic in the 15th century. Protestant prayer beads are much more contemporary and have their roots in the Episcopal Church. The intent in using prayer beads is that they occupy our "busy minds" so that we can be open to a deeper place. They offer a discipline that helps us pray even when we don't feel like it. We don't pray to accomplish something, but to offer ourselves to God so that God might do something in us. Most important; don't worry about whether something happens; God is at work when we open ourselves to God.

There are a number of liturgies that have been written for contemporary prayer beads. However, I would suggest that, over time, you consider writing your own liturgy. The beads include a symbol bead which is intended to provide a theme or focus for the prayers that you will use; then a bead for the prayer of invitation, four large beads, and four sets of seven smaller beads. Think about a scripture that would serve as a guide for your prayers; be creative as you choose a symbol bead; for example, a cross is often used to represent repentance or forgiveness, a dove represents the Holy Spirit, angels often represent compassion and mercy, a butterfly is often used for transformation, a rose for Divine Love. Let your prayer of invitation flow out of the scripture. The large beads, after a form of address to God, might have a more general petition; the small beads in turn, would be more specific.

I think the easiest way to introduce you to writing your own prayers would be to offer an example. The first time I was introduced to prayer beads, I choose a scripture that was meaningful to me at that time. I would suggest that hymns make a great resource for creating prayers if you are uncertain; I do want to remind you that although we do create prayers for the beads, the underlying intent is to make our hearts and minds more available to God for God's movement in our lives.

Let me introduce the scripture and liturgy that I used with my first set of prayer beads.

Scripture: Romans 12:2 "let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God"

Prayer of invitation: Renew me, transform me that I might discern your deep desire for me

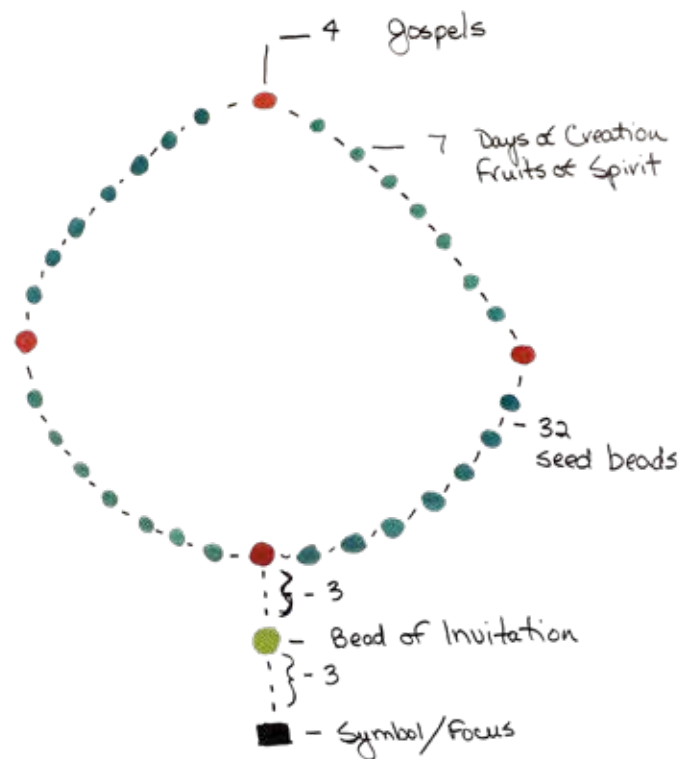
Large beads: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Small beads: Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. (a good symbol bead for this prayer might be a butterfly or a dove) This liturgy came from The United Methodist Hymnal, pg. 393.

The diagram on the right shows the design and layout of the beads. You will note the specific number of large and small beads was not random; four large beads were chosen to honor the four Gospels and the seven smaller beads were chosen for the days of creation and the fruits of the Spirit.

Use the beads for at least a week; the first time I used prayer beads, I was asked to commit for a month. When you have prayed the beads, sit in silence for a few moments. Make time and space for God's movement.

I would then encourage you to journal about your experience.



You will need:

- A focus/symbol bead
- A bead of invitation
- 4 large beads
- 28 small beads
- 38 seed beads
- 1 crimper bead/tube
- Nylon monofilament (nylon fishing line works great)
- Needle nose pliers

The focus bead will go on first and will form the bottom of the 'tail' portion of the beads. Each of the beads on the tail will have both ends of the line strung through them. When you have the tail finished, loosely tie an extra-large bead on one end of the line; this is temporary to keep the beads from coming off as you string them. When you have all the beads on the line, this bead can be carefully untied and set aside. You will join the two ends of the line with the crimper tube and then, using a pair of needle nose pliers, squeeze the tube tightly sealing the two ends together.

The order of the beads is as follows:

Loop the line through the symbol bead, then pass both ends of the line through:

3 seed beads, the bead of invitation and 3 seed beads

Now separate the two sections of line; tie the extra bead on one end. Now string the beads as follows:

Large bead, 7 small beads, large bead, 7 small beads, large bead, 7 small beads, large bead, 7 small beads—in between each of the beads you should string a seed bead (the seed beads are not part of the prayer design, but are used to allow more space between the beads). The last bead should be a seed bead. Now carefully untie the extra bead, string the crimper tube on both ends of the line and squeeze together. Do not pull the beads too tightly before attaching them. Refer to the diagram as a guide.

Jesus Prayer/Breath Prayer



The spiritual practice known as the breath prayer started as a practice known as the Jesus prayer that evolved out of the desert communities in the 6th century; in its earliest form it was called the heart prayer and began in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Over time it was primarily associated with the Eastern Orthodox Church. The intent of the prayer is to invoke the presence of Jesus and to be present to Him. The breath prayer is a variation on the Jesus prayer. It is called a breath prayer because it focuses attention on one's breathing but also because in Hebrew the word for breath and spirit is the same (*ruach*). The use of this prayer helps us to experience what it means for the Holy Spirit to pray in and through us.

When the heart prayer began, there was a specific position in which the body would be held. The individual would lower their head on their chest with their head angled toward their heart. They would then close their eyes and imagine that they were looking into their own heart, carrying their mind and all its thoughts and placing them in their heart. They would repeat the phrases of the prayer frequently and then sit in silence, being patient, at rest and in the presence of Jesus. The words of the prayer that are most commonly used are...

- as you inhale, "Lord Jesus Christ"
- as you exhale, "Son of the living God"
- as you inhale, "have mercy on me"
- as you exhale, "a sinner"

Variations on the Jesus prayer involve the use of sacred words that first address God and then identify a desire. It should be a short phrase that has a comfortable rhythm.

For example...something as simple as

Inhale

Jesus

Spirit of the living God

Holy Spirit

Eternal Divine

Exhale

remember me (Taize hymn)

fall afresh on me (hymn)

flow through me

baptize me with love

I would invite you to consider phrases that might be meaningful for you as you explore this practice.

I would invite you to start with the *heart* prayer in its original form.

Sit in a comfortable place and take a few deep breaths. If you can do so comfortably, lower your head onto your chest and tilt your head toward your heart. Close your eyes and imagine that you are looking into your heart; gather all the thoughts in your mind and gently place them in your heart. As you breathe in, begin to repeat the phrase. You may say the words aloud or not as you are comfortable. Breathe in, Lord Jesus Christ, breathe out, Son of the living God, breathe in, have mercy on me, breathe out, a sinner. Breathing in and out, slowly repeat the phrase.

Pause

Continue slowly breathing in and out and allow yourself to be silent and to simply be in the presence of Jesus.

Pause

I would encourage you to continue your prayer time and then to take some time and journal about your experience. In the days and weeks ahead, practice this prayer. Consider writing your own variation on this prayer using a sacred name for the holy and a desire of your heart.



Praying the Psalms



This spiritual practice became known as praying the psalms. This practice began in the earliest centuries of the Christian Church with the desert mothers and fathers.

One of the most well-known practices of many of these desert communities was reciting the Psalms (all 150) as a form of worship; this practice emerged out of reciting the Psalms as part of worship. They would select specific verses or phrases to take into prayer, to lead them into a holy place where they would encounter God. Over the centuries this practice was used with scripture other than the Psalms; scripture of a poetic nature lends itself well; the writings of the prophets or Proverbs for example. The psalms were the most commonly used because the writers of these poems brought their most honest, authentic, vulnerable selves to God; their language expressed a bold confidence and they trusted this God to hear all of who they were including the angry and fearful places in their lives. We might occasionally take a lesson from the Psalmists and remember that God is big enough to hear and hold all of who we are; God, perhaps better than we, understands our humanity.

The intent of this practice is to enter into a prayerful, holy space and encounter God and hear God's deep desire for you. Start by reading through a single Psalm or section of scripture listening for a particular verse or phrase that seems to speak to you. Moving through the scripture slowly pausing after each repetition, repeat the verse or phrase and each time you do so, drop the word at the end until only one word remains. Listen for what is new or different each time; how does the meaning change for you. Reflect on that newness; what might God's invitation to you be as new understandings emerge. When you are left with only one word, take time to reflect on the many ways in which that may be speaking to you; take time to be in prayer with God and then journal about your experience.

I would invite you to explore this practice using Psalm 78, verses 1-7. I have chosen a particular verse to use for this practice but consider reading the Psalm again and listening for the verse that resonates for you. Read through the verse, each time dropping one word; pause between each reading to allow time for reflection.

"Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

I invite you to breathe deeply, be comfortable and at rest and to hear again part of the 1st verse...

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Incline your ears to the word of my

Incline your ears to the word of

Incline your ears to the word

Incline your ears to the

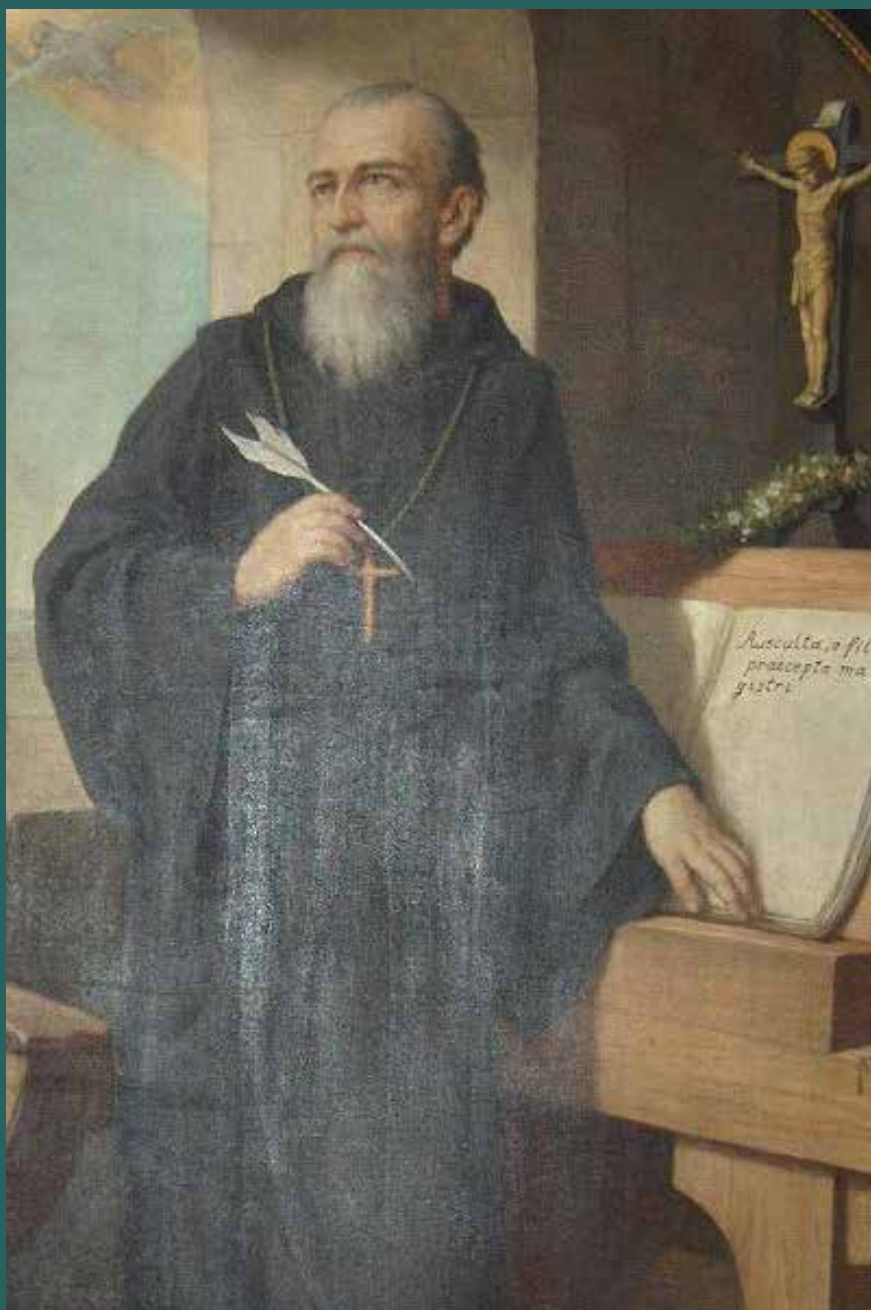
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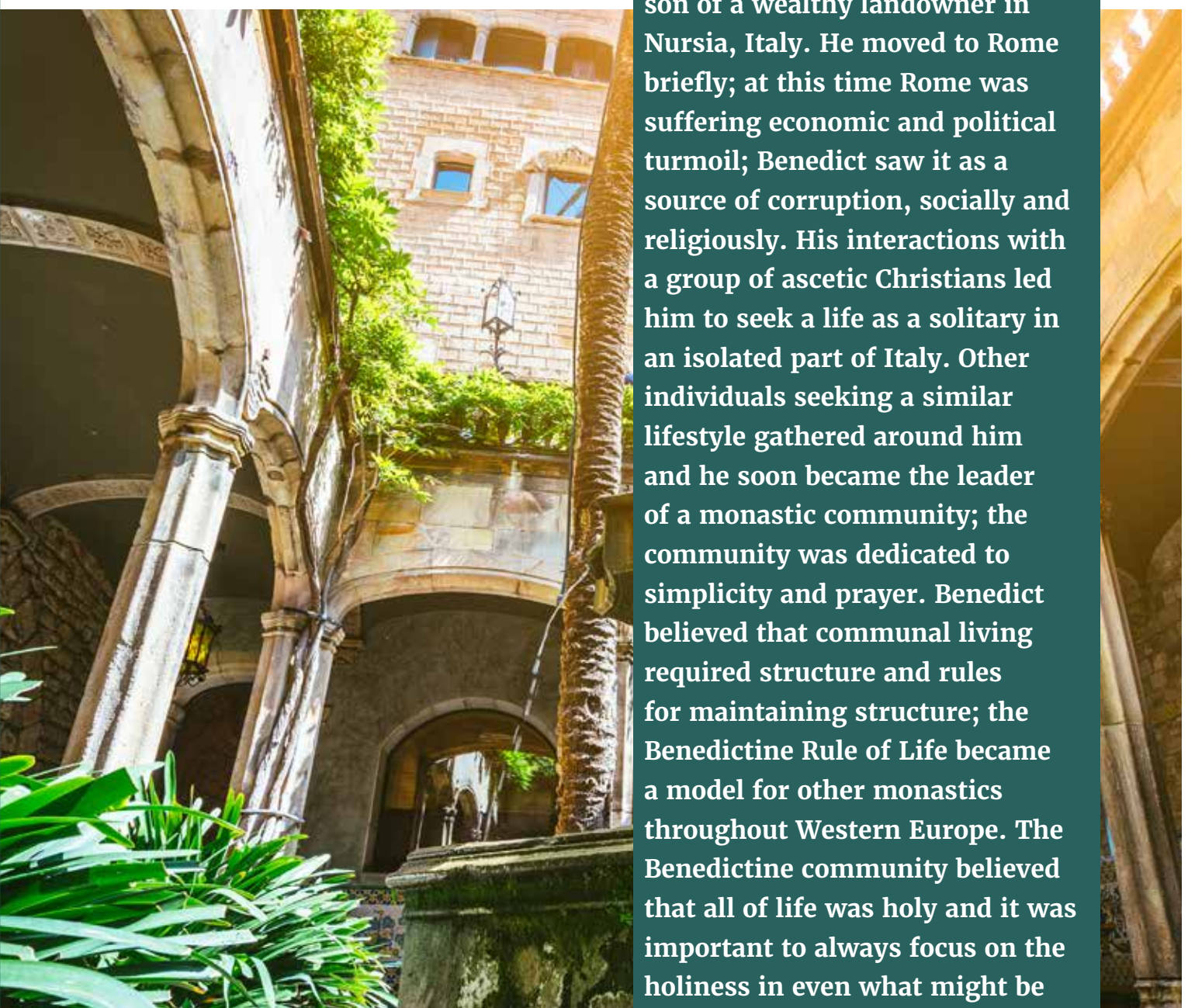
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BENEDICTINE



INTRODUCTION



Benedict lived from roughly 480 to 550 CE; he was the son of a wealthy landowner in Nursia, Italy. He moved to Rome briefly; at this time Rome was suffering economic and political turmoil; Benedict saw it as a source of corruption, socially and religiously. His interactions with a group of ascetic Christians led him to seek a life as a solitary in an isolated part of Italy. Other individuals seeking a similar lifestyle gathered around him and he soon became the leader of a monastic community; the community was dedicated to simplicity and prayer. Benedict believed that communal living required structure and rules for maintaining structure; the Benedictine Rule of Life became a model for other monastics throughout Western Europe. The Benedictine community believed that all of life was holy and it was important to always focus on the holiness in even what might be deemed the most common; one simply needed to discern the holy in the ordinary of everyday life.

Lectio Divina



This spiritual practice is known as *lectio divina*; Latin for holy reading. This practice originated in the 3rd and 4th centuries with the desert mothers and fathers and was formalized by Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century. The 6th century was a period when monastic life began to grow and flourish; religious individuals gathered to form community and companion one another in the spiritual life. *Lectio divina* became a well-established practice in monastic life. The practice was originally used with the Psalms, but it can be used with any scripture. Poetic books (for example Psalms, prophets, John, Revelation) and Gospel narratives are a good place to start. There are four classical steps in this practice.

The first step is *lectio*, Latin meaning to read aloud. Read the scripture slowly. It is intended to be read aloud to help slow the process and help you hear every word. Read the scripture through several times pausing in between each reading. Receive the words as though they were written for you. Listen for a particular word or phrase that speaks to you in your situation, where you are this day. What might God be trying to communicate?

The second step is *meditatio*, Latin meaning to reflect on. Reflect prayerfully on what you have read. Meditate on the word or phrase

that resonated for you. Listen for God's invitation to you today.

The third step is *oratio*, Latin meaning to speak, in this circumstance to be in prayer with God. Allow a prayer to emerge because of hearing God's word to you today. Be honest and open with yourself and with God.

The fourth and final step is *contemplatio*, Latin meaning to contemplate. In this step you are invited to simply rest with God; this is a time of union, a time when the Holy Spirit prays in you and through you.

And finally, give thanks; for the opportunity to be present with God and to listen for God's deep desire for you this day.

When you are finished, take time to journal about your experience.

Remember, this practice is not about analyzing the scripture; it is about listening for God's invitation to you today.



Contemplative Retreat

The spiritual practice of contemplative retreat takes many forms, but the intent of a contemplative retreat is to spend time with God, to listen for God, to wait upon God and to receive God's presence in whatever way it comes to us. It may include many of our previous practices; silence and solitude, for example, is a critical element of a contemplative retreat; perhaps a guided meditation or *lectio divina* or a form of the Examen. The amount of time for a contemplative retreat is highly variable; from a few hours to several days (I have a friend who takes a week-long contemplative retreat every year); it is also an ideal setting for some of the discernment practices that have been introduced. Contemplative retreat in many forms has been part of our Christian heritage from the earliest days of the Church, but as with many spiritual practices, it became a more formal practice in monastic communities.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, he blended times of activity with times of retreat; the times he spent in prayer and silence with God enabled him to return to his active and busy ministry and he sought to find a healthy balance between the two. Jesus' retreats offer two essential pieces of retreat: prayer and silence; reaching out to God and then listening for God. Retreats are sometimes intended to be experienced in solitude, but an element of retreat is sometimes community and small group sharing. If you are engaging in a solitary retreat, it is helpful to "unpack" your experience with a trusted friend or spiritual director who can help you reflect on your experience. With that thought in mind, consider if there is someone with whom you might choose to enter into this practice; you need not be physically together to do so. Move through the retreat a section at a time and then share your experiences.

As a way of introducing contemplative retreat, I have designed a retreat that can offer some flexibility in the amount of time that you are invited to spend; it is intended to be relatively short for those of you who may have never experienced a contemplative retreat. I would invite you to move through the retreat slowly and not jump ahead to see how it ends; allow yourself to be moved through this time and space. I will indicate places to pause; spend a minimum of an hour in reflection and prayer before moving on. Hopefully the experience will resonate for you and you will seek out other opportunities to participate in contemplative retreat.



Retreat



Before we begin our time of retreat, I would like to acknowledge a book entitled *Spirituality of the Psalms* by Walter Brueggemann¹ which offered the background for this retreat.

I am going to invite you at two different points to spend time in silent reflection. I do appreciate however that silence for some is sufficiently uncomfortable that you are not able to be fully present. If that is a concern for you, consider playing some quiet reflective music (preferably with no words) as background for your time with God.

Hear this invitation from God today...

Come away with me to a quiet place, apart from the world with its frantic pace, to pray, reflect, and seek God's grace.

Come and pray with me on a gentle sea, on top of a hill in the Galilee, in gardens like Gethsemane.

Come and say, in words whispered from your soul, the feelings and actions you can't control. Your spirit needs to be made whole.

Come away with me. Come away.²

Gracious and holy God, we seek that our spirit indeed be made whole this day; that we find your grace in the quiet, reflective space, that we can quiet our hearts and our minds to hear your voice and know your presence. Guide our time and our soul this day. In the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I would like to invite you to open your time today in the Book of Psalms, a book that offers words of thanksgiving for God's continued presence in our lives, but a book that also offers words of lament and grief...for such a time as this; a collection of prayers and hymns that cover the spectrum of human emotion.

I would like to share these words from Brueggemann's book..."As children of the Enlightenment, we have censored and selected around the voice of darkness and disorientation, seeking to go from strength to strength...the Psalms as a canonical book is finally an act of hope. But the hope is rooted precisely in the midst of loss and darkness, where God is surprisingly present. The Psalms are profoundly subversive of the dominant culture, which wants to deny and cover over the darkness we are called to enter...Human life consists in satisfied seasons of well-being that evoke gratitude for the constancy of blessing...Human life consists in anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death...Human life consists in turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through the despair...Human life is also a movement from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, finding ourselves surprised by a new circumstance we did not expect, resistant to a new place, clinging desperately to the old circumstance."³

As we find ourselves at this moment in a season of grief and lament,⁴ I would invite you for a moment to sit in this space, to let it hold you briefly and then look to God's invitation to imagine the possibility of newness that is on the horizon.

But for the moment... hear these words from the writer of Psalm 13...

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?... Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

And these words from the writer of Psalm 137...

"By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps...How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

The psalmists knew that it is important to acknowledge the broken and the dark times, when life is marked by a sense of chaos and a lack of order and we ask ourselves, where is God. Even if the psalmists were more comfortable than we at expressing their angst with God, they also knew that God is not absent, but instead, a God 'who is present in, participating in, and attentive to the darkness, weakness, and displacement of life'.⁵ The writers of the psalms understood that God was big enough to hear our complaints, our anger, our vengeance; that a life truly lived in relationship with God withholds nothing. It has been suggested that it is in these times of darkness and chaos where real transformation occurs—'newness that is not of our own making breaks upon us'.⁶

Continued on pg 32.

As we find ourselves in the midst of this pandemic in a difficult time and place, I would invite you to take some time, reflect and be prayerful. If you are truly honest with yourself and with God, what would you say to God, how would you express your complaints...I would invite you during this time to write your own psalm of lament...be as honest as you can be with God, this is between you and God...and God is big enough to hold all of it.

Before you pause to spend time with God, hear these words from a more contemporary 'psalmist'...

"When we are called to sing your praise with hearts so filled with pain that we would rather sit and weep or stand up to complain, remind us, God, you understand the burdens that we bear; you, too, have walked the shadowed way and known our deep despair.

When we are called to sing your praise and cannot find our voice, because our losses leave us now no reason to rejoice, remind us, God, that you accept our sad laments in prayer; you, too, have walked the shadowed way and known our deep despair."⁷

I hope that you will be able to sit with God, to express your feelings and emotions and give them to God.

PAUSE

As you return from a time of reflection, hear the remaining words for the earlier hymn...

"When we are called to sing your praise and life ahead looks grim, still give us faith and hope enough to break forth in a hymn, a thankful hymn, great God of Love, that you are everywhere; you walk the shadowed way with us and keep us in your care."⁸

Before moving into this next piece, I would like to offer some guidance as to how we will move forward.

When we begin our next time of reflection, I would invite you to enter into that time of reflection and prayer using art as your prayer form... and remember, it's not about being an artist, it is about using your creative nature (if we are indeed created in God's image, then we too have a creative piece within) to express your prayer, your deep desire, your yearning...

I would invite you to use an art form known as the mandala. So, at this point, please pause briefly and gather your paper, make your circle, gather crayons, colored pencils, markers, whatever you choose to use so that you are ready to move into that time.

As a reminder, mandalas are a form of art as prayer; they are ancient symbols that were adopted in the early centuries of the Christian Church, but came into common usage in the church during the Middle



Ages. They were placed in churches, cathedrals, and monasteries to serve as visual aids in meditation and prayer. They are traditionally a circular shape since the circle represented wholeness and unity. The intent of a mandala is to open a window into holy space where one can encounter and experience God. In more contemporary times, creating your own mandala has been used as a prayer practice. The intent is to help you explore and process your thoughts and feelings as you encounter God in prayer. In traditional mandalas, you start at the center (in mandalas from the Middle Ages, a symbol was always placed at the center and the most common symbol was the rose, the rose being the symbol for divine love.) feel free to use a symbol or not; go with what you are drawn to.

And now, hear these words from Brueggemann's book, "the Psalms regularly bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected. That new orientation is not a return to the old stable orientation, for there is no such going back... [however] the community of faith is often surprised by grace, when there emerges in present life a new possibility that is inexplicable, neither derived nor extrapolated, but wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God."⁹

I would invite you to hear these words from Isaiah and allow them to guide your prayer and reflective time; let them guide the visual prayer you create.

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing... Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (Isaiah 35:1-2a, 43:18-19)

PAUSE

Continued on pg 34.



Psalms that are referred to as psalms of new orientation are those ‘that bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected’. We cannot return to what was, we can seek to perceive what is new and discover a ‘new thing’; we can allow ourselves to be slowly transformed.

Hear the words of Psalm 138...

“I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness...On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul....though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me...you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.”

Hear these words again...from Peterson’s interpretation

Read Psalm 138 The Message

“Thank you! Everything in me says ‘Thank you!’ Angels listen as I sing my thanks...how great the glory of God! And here’s why: God, high above, sees far below; no matter the distance, he knows everything about us...Finish what you started in me, God. Your love is eternal—“

I trust that God isn’t finished with any of us yet .

I’m guessing that you have each experienced moments when you are determined to go back...to the way we did it before, to what we know and are comfortable with; you are struggling with leaving behind the known for the unknown; it’s actually quite scriptural...from the lectionary for September 20, 2020...from Exodus 16:3...

“The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’”

These words come from a reflection on that particular lectionary reading..."Is it realistic for a human never to complain? Is one's faith in God proportionate to how much they resist the urge to grumble? In the category of grumblers, the Israelites take the cake...the allure of the life they had before is enough to turn their heads and hearts backward time and again...Many Christians have been taught that to complain to or against God is to be less than faithful. [but remember]..God is still God. God can bear our complaints—our sorrows, laments, and frustrations—while also offering provision."¹⁰

It's our human nature, so be patient with yourself and with others, be compassionate, reach out to God as you seek the new possibility, the new thing that God is doing.

Let me share the words of one last hymn...

"I will come to you in the silence, I will lift you from all your fear. You will hear my voice, I claim you as my choice, be still and know I am here.

I am hope for all who are hopeless, I am eyes for all who long to see. In the shadows of the night, I will be your light, come and rest in me.

I am strength for all the despairing. Healing for the ones who dwell in shame. All the blind will see, the lame will all run free, and all will know my name.

I am the Word that leads all to freedom, I am the peace the world cannot give. I will call your name, embracing all your pain, stand up, now walk, and live!

Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine.¹¹

Gracious God, let us trust that your hand is leading, that you are holding our fears and anxiety. Let us open our hearts and souls to the newness that is beginning to blossom in the wilderness, go with us from this place, give us courage and vision.

And from the words of Psalm 138..."Thank you! Everything in me says 'Thank you'... finish what you started in me, O God. Your love is eternal..."

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002).

² Hoyt L. Hickman, ed., *The Faith We Sing* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), pg.2202.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), pgs. Xii, 8–9.

⁴ This retreat was designed during the COVID pandemic that began in March 2020.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), pg.27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 28.

⁷ Hoyt L. Hickman, ed., *The Faith We Sing* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), pg. 2216.

⁸ Hoyt L. Hickman, ed., *The Faith We Sing* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), pg. 2216.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), pg. 47.

¹⁰ *Living by the Word*, Christian Century, September 9, 2020, pg. 20.

¹¹ Hoyt L. Hickman, ed., *The Faith We Sing* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), pg. 2218.

Discernment



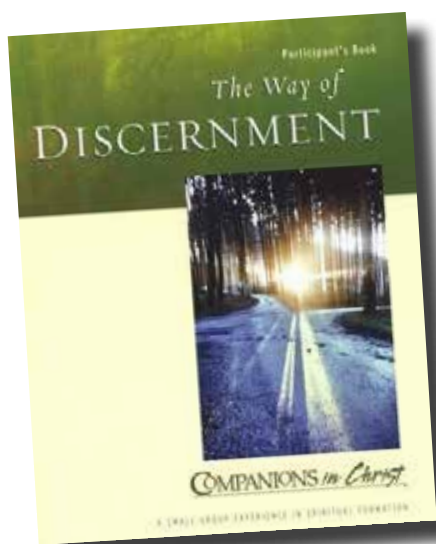
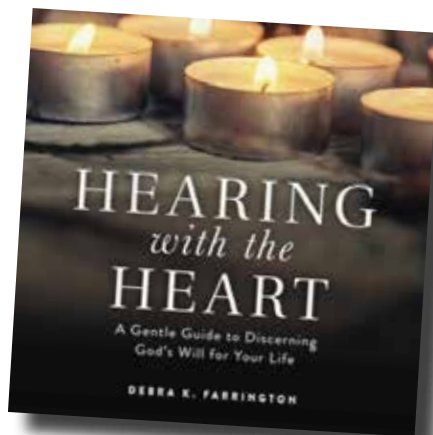
We are going to explore the spiritual practice of discernment; there are a variety of individual practices that are designed to help us acquire the skills of discernment. The word discernment comes from the Latin, *discerno*, meaning to separate, mark off, divide, to keep apart, to distinguish between. The word has to do with separating and sorting; spiritual discernment focuses on separating ourselves from the world so that we can more effectively sort through the many things that may be calling to us, to distinguish that which is foremost, that which God is inviting us into.

Discernment is one of the spiritual gifts that Paul articulates in his letter to the church in Corinth. Although we may not all share in the gift of discernment, there are practices that can help us develop skills that enhance our ability to discern a particular decision or choice in our lives. When confronted with a decision, how do we listen for God in the midst of it?

In any practice of discernment, it is important to take time to journal about the experience, to revisit the experience as part of the process of discerning the path forward.

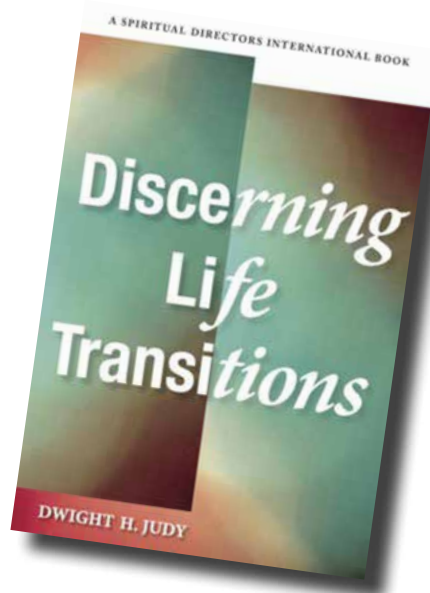
I am going to lift up three different resources for discernment practices; there are many resources available; recommendations from someone familiar with the practice are helpful.

The first resource is entitled *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life* by Debra K. Farrington (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2003). If you are seeking to discern between two options, there is a practice outlined on pages 63–65 that I have found particularly helpful; it involves the use of images and visualization.



Another resource I would recommend is *Companions in Christ: The Way of Discernment* by Stephen V. Doughty with Marjorie J. Thompson (Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN, 2008). This is a wonderful study in the practice of discernment. There is a process outlined on pages 54–55 that is particularly helpful if you are making a major decision in your life; i.e., should I accept a new job that I have been offered?

The third resource I would recommend is *Discerning Life Transitions: Listening Together in Spiritual Direction* by Dwight H. Judy (Morehouse Publishing, New York, NY, 2010). This resource invites the reader into a number of different discernment practices. The process that is outlined on pages 81–83 is particularly helpful in looking at all the aspects of your life and discerning where God is inviting you to set aside something you have been doing for a while in lieu of something new; it addresses how to evaluate the many things for the important things, the things that God is inviting you into.



Journaling

The spiritual practice of journaling began in the earliest years of the Church as individuals learned to read and write and they felt led to record their experiences of God; journaling became a more formal practice in monastic communities.

How is keeping a journal different from keeping a diary? A diary generally records the daily events in your life; a journal may initially record an event, but its focus is inward; how was I affected by the event, how do I feel about the event? It is a way of recording our inner conversations which then help us to better understand ourselves and our reactions to things; it is a way of helping us discover more about ourselves and the world around us. Journaling becomes a spiritual practice when we focus on where God is in these events, how we see and understand God at a given time, what do we need to attend to so that our relationship with God deepens and grows? It often opens us to a wider, fuller awareness of God in the world; we suddenly see God's presence in the midst of an event that we did not appreciate in the moment. It is also a good way to make note of things we would like to take into more intentional prayer as we seek to develop our prayer life. It can serve as a place to record our ongoing dialogue with God; do you sense an invitation from God, are you aware of a resistance to an invitation, how do you feel about what you are sensing?

I would encourage you to write; there is something about the physical act of writing that opens your creative self; that allows time for your mind to reflect and process as you write. As for the journal itself; you can certainly find lovely books with blank pages intended for this purpose, but a simple spiral bound notebook or a composition book works as well; this is really a matter of personal preference.

How might you get started journaling? Journaling after a spiritual practice is a great place to start. What else might you journal about? Perhaps simple daily events in your life as you explore God's presence in your life, perhaps after reading scripture (maybe some particular word or phrase caught your attention) or other reading material, something you saw on the news that day, perhaps you're interested in exploring your dreams (sometimes daydreams are equally insightful), maybe a conversation with a friend.

I would suggest that if you are new to journaling, you don't try everything at once. Choose something specific that you would be willing to commit to journaling about regularly; maybe you start with a particular spiritual practice. Journaling can become a significant practice that will help you deepen your spiritual life and your relationship with God.

To start the practice, I invite you to explore a reading from scripture; perhaps something from this week's lectionary readings.



Praying the Hours



The practice known as Praying the Hours was formalized early in the 6th century by Benedict of Nursia.

The Benedictines believed that prayer was the chief work of their everyday life; they called their daily regimen of prayer “opus dei,” the work of God. They believed that the key to a life lived in a deep relationship with God was to see all things as holy. Daily life was to be lived in a rhythm of remembrance; they sought to find the holy within the daily; they believed that their way of life allowed them to redeem the daily rather than to escape it. They believed that everything was, or could be, a sacrament depending on how you saw it.

The Benedictine daily life was punctuated by particular times of prayer and study known as The Daily Office or Divine Office, more commonly referred to as “the Hours.”

In the Benedictine tradition, there are eight specific times of prayer. Each time of prayer has a specific intent; their understanding of prayer included reading scripture, meditating, solitude and silence, petition, intercession, confession, thanksgiving, and praise. Over the years,

formal liturgies were created for each of the prayer times; these included specific scripture readings, hymns, prayers, times for silence and reflection. You can access many of these liturgies if you google Divine Office liturgies.

Praying the hours invites us to “pray without ceasing,” to designate certain times in our day for specific prayer but also to be a reminder that all of our life is intended to be a prayer. Depending upon your current prayer life, I would suggest that you choose at least one of these prayer times to include as a practice in your daily life; perhaps you could commit to praying the hours for a week to explore the different prayer times as a way of being more intentional about your prayer life.

The hours begin with Vigil or Matins which is traditionally 2 a.m.; I’m not suggesting that you set your alarm for 2 a.m., but if you happen to wake up in the middle of the night, rather than worrying and being anxious, turn to God and let this be a time of awareness and presence; let your prayers be simple.

Lauds is at dawn; the Benedictines would welcome the light, experience gratitude; they would be attentive (Benedict believed you were most alert at dawn); they would seek to be aware of all that is possible; they would spend time in prayer and contemplation, this time would include scripture reading and meditation; this might be a good time to consider making your “devotional” time; again I am not suggesting you set your alarm for dawn, but let this be the first thing in your day.

Prime is early morning before you begin the activities of your day; the intent is to acknowledge God’s presence in all of your plans for the day. This is a time you might check your calendar, your agenda for the day and lift each item to God; invite God into all of your plans for the day.

Terce is midmorning; a time to take a moment to center yourself, breathe deeply, and be aware of God’s spirit. Let this be a time to put your activities on pause and simply be present to God.

Sext is noon, a time to thank God and remember the world and to focus on the needs of others; let this be your time for intercessory prayer.

None is mid to late afternoon; a time to look back over your day and take stock; acknowledge what went wrong; celebrate what went well; offer all of it to God; it is a time to forgive and seek forgiveness, let this be a time for a prayer of confession.

Vespers is sunset; this was a time for reading, praying, and meditating; a time to include a simple Examen of your day.

Compline is the end of the day; a time to settle and relax your body and mind and allow yourself to simply be in God’s presence; a time for thanksgiving and praise.

If this practice is new to you, I would not suggest you try to practice all the “hours,” but consider one or two of the prayer times that might help you frame your day. Remember, the intent was to be conscious of God’s presence at all times and ultimately be one with God.

Rule of Life

This practice involves creating and living a rule of life. This practice was formalized early in the 6th century by Benedict of Nursia. Benedict lived a very structured life and believed that such structure was essential to growing spiritually and in time he developed a rule of life; a pattern of prayer, work and study. By 800 CE, Benedict's rule had become common practice throughout monasteries in Western Europe. The intent of the rule was to enable individuals to be conscious of God's presence at all times and ultimately to be one with God.

A Rule of Life is a pattern of daily actions that are chosen to accomplish something specific. For Christians, the intent is to focus our attention continually on God; to organize our life in such a way as to always seek to be present to and aware of God and the God moments in our life. A Rule is not designed to make our life restrictive, but to offer a structure within which we can stay centered and focused. A Rule of Life enables us to be centered and focused on God in all aspects of our life.

In our contemporary life, a Rule of Life might include a pattern of spiritual disciplines and practices that provide a structure and direction for growing in our relationship with God. It might include attitudes, behaviors, disciplines and practices that are routine and repeated regularly. Developing a personal Rule is a matter of discernment; it needs to be in harmony with your own personality and circumstances. Our western culture has tried to divide things into secular and sacred and so we struggle to notice the holy all around us. Unless we are intentional, we will fail to enter into that deeper awareness of God.

What would a Rule of Life for today look like? A Rule is a chosen daily pattern of life arranged so that there are particular moments in the day when certain things are done; it is a pattern of daily actions that have been chosen to support a continual awareness of the presence of God. You might wonder if a Rule of Life is burdensome or even impossible in our current culture. It is meant to be life giving; to help you establish a rhythm of work and prayer and family life and physical and emotional well-being and all the areas that are important in your life. The intent is not to see how much you can do in a day; it is not to cause pressure and stress in an already busy life. It is to help you discern what aspects of your life are most important at this particular time and place in your life and help you effectively manage those things. Different times and circumstances in your life will focus on different areas and a different rhythm so it is important to review your rule of life from time to time, particularly if a significant aspect of your life changes.

To give you a sense of what a Rule of Life might look like, I'm going to offer two examples; it is important to take note of when in this individual's life they were using this rule.

The first one was a Rule that was written by Pope John the 23rd when he was a seminary student:

- 15 minutes of silent prayer upon rising in the morning
- 15 minutes of spiritual reading
- Before bed each night, a general examination of conscience followed by confession and then identifying issues for the next morning's prayers
- Arranging the hours of the day to make this rule possible while setting aside specific time for prayer, study, recreation, and sleep
- Making a habit of turning the mind to God in prayer¹

This next one was written by Martin Luther King Jr. as a rule to guide the non-violent protests of the civil rights movement:

- Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus
- Remember always that the non-violent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation, not victory
- Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love
- Pray daily to be used by God in order that all might be free
- Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all might be free
- Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy
- Seek to perform regular service for others and the world
- Refrain from violence of fist, tongue, or heart
- Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health
- Follow the directions of the movement and the captains of a demonstration²

You can see that these two rules are quite different, serving different times and circumstances in the lives of both of these individuals. Your rule of life should be unique to you and the circumstances of your life right now.

The following two pages provide a framework for creating a rule of life.

The first page has some questions for reflection to help you discern what is most important in your life at this time. The second page offers areas of your life that you might consider as you are deciding what to include in a rule of life.

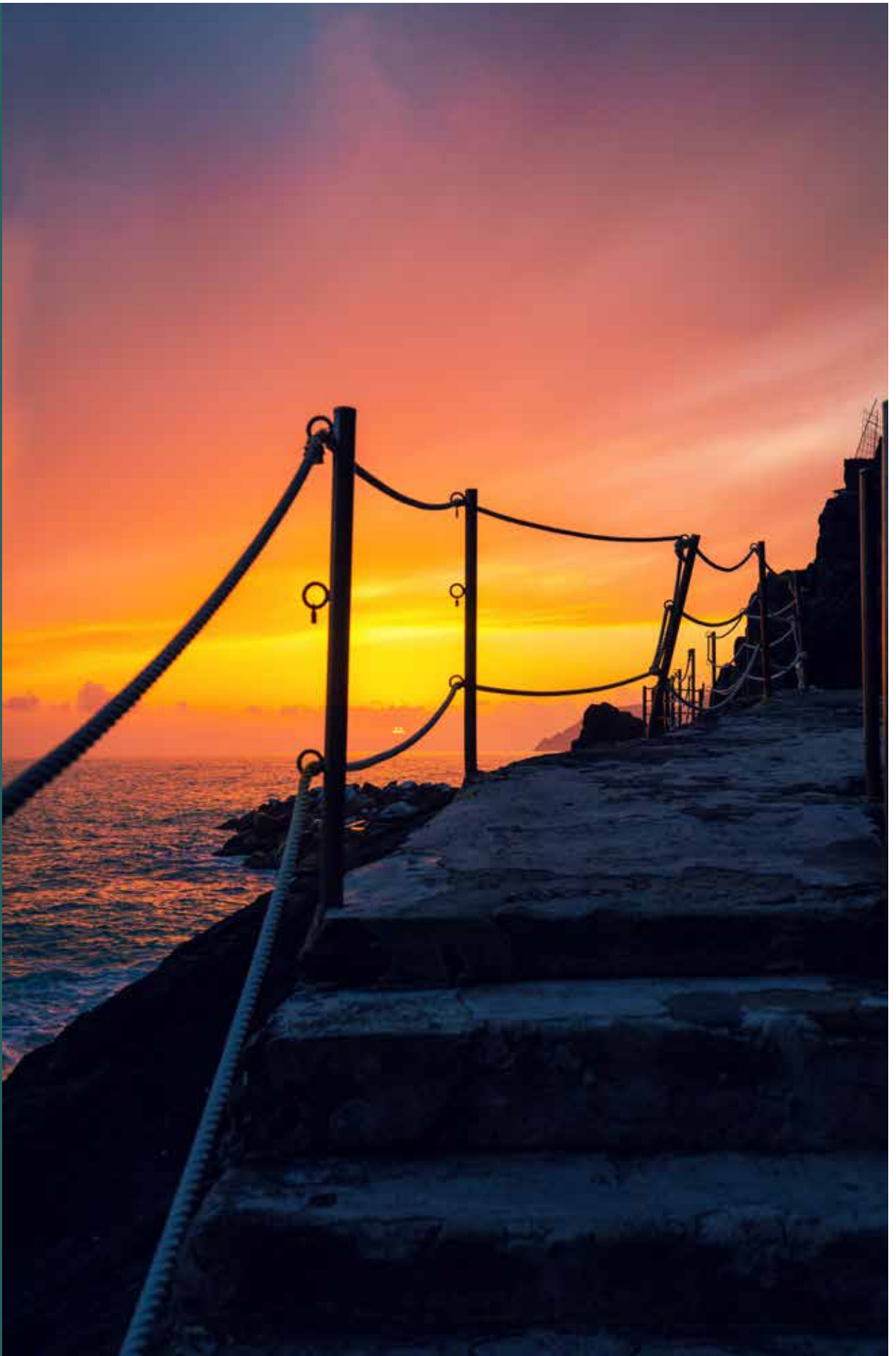
Remember, this isn't about doing everything; it is about making a commitment to attend to those things that are most important for this time and place in living into your relationship with God. Try living with your rule for a week and then decide what might need to be changed. Revisit your rule of life at least once a year; adjust it for changes in the circumstances of your life.

Continued on pg 44.

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), pg. 152.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 152-3.

Rule of Life



Developing a Rule of Life

How will you be open to and help foster the process of being transformed by the Spirit of God?

Questions for personal reflection:

- When and where do I feel closest to God?
- How do I enter most deeply into an awareness of God's presence?
- How do I currently study, pray, meditate, live in relationship, reach out?
- What do I bring to God in my prayer time?
- Who or what receives the most attention in my life?
- How do I tend my own well-being; emotional, physical, spiritual?
- How do I discern God's invitation for my life?

Living out a Rule of Life day by day

Areas of your life to consider:

- Worship
- Prayer and meditation
- Life of study
- Family life
- Physical and emotional well-being
- Issues of concern in the world
- Service and work

I invite you to spend about 30 minutes reflecting on and responding to the questions and the areas for consideration. Then, take another 15–20 minutes and write your rule of life; remember, this isn't intended to be all inclusive of everything you might possibly consider; it needs to be possible given your life and circumstances at the present time. Then live with it for a while, note what works and what doesn't; revise it as necessary.



MIDDLE AGES

INTRODUCTION



The period from the mid-1000s to the early 1500s is known as the Middle Ages; the next couple of spiritual practices originated during this time. One of the most significant changes that occurred in this period was the growth in literacy although it is also known as a time of numerous wars and plagues. Both these changes affected the ways that individuals understood and related to God. A key element of an individual's relationship with God was the regular practice of the sacraments with emphasis on the daily practice of Holy Communion. The elements of solitude, poverty, and simplicity as outlined in the monastic movement continued to influence the changes that began to emerge in monastic communities and their outreach into the world.

The Crusades began in 1095 and continued throughout this period. These ongoing wars (an attempt by European Christians to reclaim lands, Jerusalem in particular, from Islamic influence and control) influenced the use of older practices and the development of new ones. This was a complex period in history which provided circumstances that led to a renewal of long-standing spiritual practices alongside newer practices that were influenced by a more emotional spirituality and ultimately led to reform movements within the Church.

Mandalas

The spiritual practice of mandalas is an early form of art as prayer. Artistic expression as a form of prayer has very ancient roots. It is not just for those who consider themselves “artists;” each of us has a creative nature. When you enter into a prayerful space and allow that creative nature to guide your prayer, you make space for God, the Creator, to enter in as well. The word mandala means holy circle. The earliest mandalas were found in prehistoric sites. Over the centuries they were used by many religions and served a variety of purposes.

Mandalas were adopted for Christian use in the early centuries of Christianity, but they came into common usage during the Middle Ages. They were used in Benedictine monasteries in the 11th century as an aid in meditation and prayer; within the next few centuries, they became commonplace in churches and cathedrals. The most well-known Christian form of the mandala is called the rose window; initially the rose served as the center, the rose being symbolic of divine love. The most famous of these windows was built in the 13th century in the Chartres Cathedral in France. Jesus or the Madonna and child were also frequently used as the center. You can google “rose window Chartres” to see images of these windows.

Mandalas are traditionally circular shapes; the circle represented wholeness and unity. Some forms have very specific styles and traditions, the use of geometric shapes is often common, but the mandala can take many forms.

The intent of using a mandala in prayer is to open a window into holy space where one can encounter God; different symbols at the center can offer different pathways into God’s presence. Remember, you don’t pray to a mandala, you pray through a mandala.

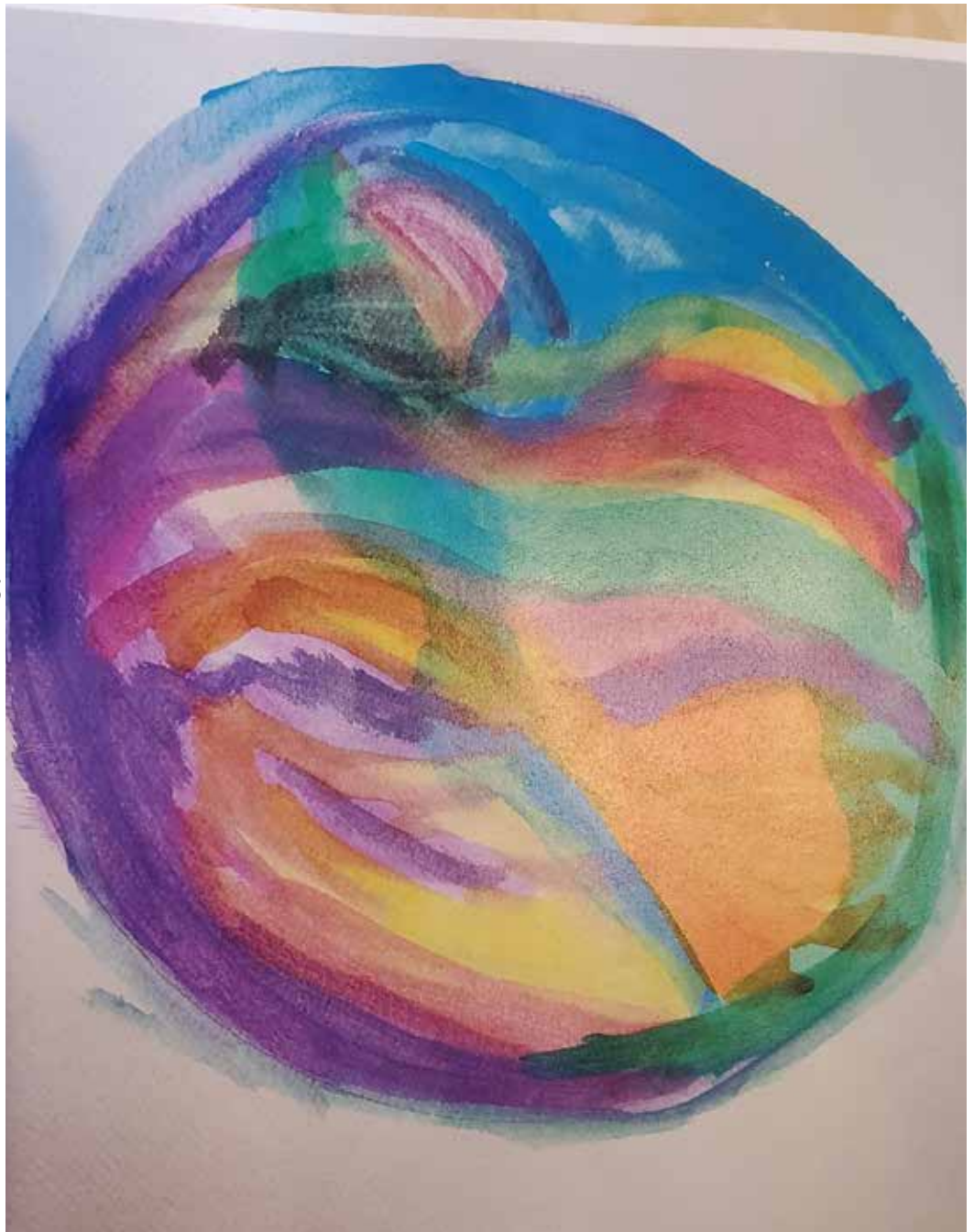
In more contemporary times, creating your own mandala has been used as a prayer practice. The intent of this practice is to help you process thoughts and feelings of which you are often not fully conscious. By inviting God into the creative practice, you are able to explore and express a level of relationship that you may not be fully aware of or be able to verbalize. The mandala becomes a visual prayer that reflects both your desires and the deep desire of God. In this practice, it is important to reflect on what you created; ask for God’s guidance in processing what you created.

This practice can be used to express any prayer you might lift to God; guidance in a particular life circumstance you are dealing with, guidance in discerning a next step; it can also be used in response to reading scripture as a way of hearing God’s invitation to you in that scripture today. If using art as a prayer form is a new experience for you, I would invite you to enter into this practice using scripture as a guide.

Start with a piece of paper as large as you are comfortable with but at least 8 1/2 x 11. Start by drawing a circle; you can draw one freehand or I use something round as a guide; for example, a plate, a pot lid, a bowl. You can use paints, pastels, chalk, crayons, colored pencils. Start either with the center and work outward or the outer edge and work toward the center; let your prayer guide you on this. Use the colors and the shapes that you are drawn to, allow your creative nature to guide you, don't overthink this.

Before you begin, open the practice with a brief prayer. Listen to your heart and let it guide you. Remember, this is a prayer.

When you have finished the mandala, reflect on what you have created.



What feelings arose for you? Were you drawn to particular colors or shapes, what might they represent for you? Did you resist certain colors or shapes, what might they represent? Invite God into this time of reflection.

When you have finished, close this time of prayer with thanks to God and acknowledgement for God's presence. I would invite you to journal about this experience.

Go back to the mandala again in a day or two; reflect again; what might God's invitation to you be?

Centering Prayer

This spiritual practice is known as centering prayer. This practice developed over the early years of the Church and was formalized in the 14th century in a book entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The intent of this practice is to empty your mind, let go of all the thoughts that distract you and wait patiently for God. As you learn to dwell in God's presence, the fruit of that practice is that God's presence enters your daily life. You are better able to hold the quiet center with God when confronted with the busyness and challenge of everyday life. The focus of this practice is to spend time with God without speaking, without an agenda and simply be present to God.

As part of this practice, you are invited to choose a sacred word, a name for the holy (for example, Jesus, creator, spirit) or a desire of your heart (for example, peace, love, wholeness). The word will be used to bring your attention back to God when you find your mind wandering or distracted. As you practice this over time, you will be able to use the word less frequently. It is important to remember that the value of any prayer is not based on your own feelings or experiences in that moment. Know that God is present. When you are ready to close your time, offer a prayer of thanks for God's presence.

If you are practicing centering prayer for the first time, try starting with 15 minutes; feel free to set a timer if that will help free you from watching the clock. As you continue this practice, you will be able to center with God for longer periods of time and you won't need to be concerned with the clock.

Sit comfortably and take some cleansing breaths. Breathe slowly and be aware of your breathing. Close your eyes. Let all the tensions go from your body. Be present to the moment; allow yourself to wait for God. Listen, be still, sit with God; as you notice noise, both inner and outer, acknowledge the noise and then give it over to God. Whenever you become aware of thoughts that distract you, offer your sacred word and allow that to draw you back to God. Do not anticipate or expect a specific outcome; simply be in the presence of God.

Take some time when you have finished this practice to journal about your experience.



Stations of the Cross

This spiritual practice is known as Stations of the Cross. This practice is ideally suited to use during Holy Week; it became common in the period around 1000 CE and started as part of the pilgrimages that Christians would make to Jerusalem. The intent of a pilgrimage was to walk where Jesus walked, to visit the various sites that Jesus traveled through in the days before his death, to experience the presence of Jesus in those places.

During and following the Crusades, pilgrimages were no longer possible, and this practice became a substitute for such a pilgrimage. The practice was formalized by the Franciscans in the early 1300s; the stations focused on Christ's journey to the cross and his death. At this time, there were 14 stations that focused on events in the final days of Christ's life up to his death. Since it was intended as a substitute for pilgrimage, it involved moving from one station to another; each station represented a specific event and offered the pilgrim a prayer and meditation. Each station was marked by some type of physical marker, often an icon or other form of artwork; each station had a cross.

In more recent years, a 15th station was added to represent Christ's resurrection. There are also a number of different forms of Stations of the Cross which often focus on fewer events; thus fewer stations.

I would like to introduce this practice using a variation that involves eight stations; these stations will represent Jesus praying in Gethsemane, his trial, being mocked by the soldiers, carrying the cross, being offered gall to drink, being nailed to the cross, his death, and his resurrection. How you are actually able to practice this will depend on your current circumstances; i.e. can you go outside in a yard to set up your stations, do you need to confine the stations to inside your home? Even if you have a fairly small space, I encourage you to set up separate areas each with their own cross to mark the station. On the following pages, I have provided scripture reading for each station, a suggested thought for meditation and a prayer although please feel free to write your own prayers.

Consider creating your own crosses to mark each station; as you are making the crosses for the stations, be prayerful as you do so being reminded of the events they will represent.

Take some time when you are done to journal about your experience.

Continued on pg 54.



Stations of the Cross

Station 1—Jesus Prays in Gethsemane—Matthew 26:36–46

Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to go with him to pray but they were unable to stay awake; they did not understand what was about to happen. Have there been times when Jesus invited you to stay with him and pray but your lack of understanding precluded you from being fully present?

Lord Jesus, help my lack of understanding; give me the desire and the strength to be fully present to you.

Station 2—Jesus is Tried and Condemned—Matthew 26:57–68, 27:1–2, 11–26

The chief priests and scribes (the religious elite of that day) did not understand or recognize who Jesus was; they feared he might lead a revolt which would threaten their control. When have you failed to recognize Jesus or failed to understand his invitation to you? Have you been fearful that his presence in your life might threaten your sense of place and control?

Great God, give me vision to recognize you, wisdom to understand your call to me. Free me from fear and unbelief.

Station 3—The Soldiers Mock Jesus—Mark 15:16–20

The Roman soldiers did not know or understand who Jesus was; they assumed he was just another rabble-rousing Jew who was seeking to destroy the Empire and so they mocked him. Have there been times when you have found yourself with those who did not know or understand who Jesus was; how did you respond? How difficult is it to go against the “empire?”

God of power and might, help us understand the true meaning of “empire” as you created and imagined it to be; give us courage to stand with you.

Station 4—Simon Carries the Cross/Jesus Speaks to the Women of Jerusalem—Luke 23:26–28

The scripture says that Simon was a man coming in from the country; we don’t know if he was a follower of Jesus or simply a bystander yet he carried the cross for Jesus when his human body was too weak to carry it himself. Have you ever found yourself asked to carry the “cross?” How did you respond?

God of grace, give us courage and strength to be fully present to the struggle, to accept the call to help you carry the cross.

Station 5—Jesus is Offered Gall—Matthew 27:33-34

The soldiers offered Jesus gall (a poisonous plant) mixed with vinegar to drink; in Psalm 69, the writer is offered poison and vinegar as a further humiliation when the psalmist was looking for comfort and compassion and found none. The soldiers have no compassion for Jesus and offer no comfort. Have you ever experienced a time of humiliation in the face of your commitment to Christ? Have you ever sought comfort and compassion and found none?

Compassionate God, give us courage in the face of humiliation; grant us your comfort and peace as we seek to stand firm in our commitment to you.

Station 6—Jesus is Crucified—Luke 23:33-34

In the face of the pain and agony of crucifixion, Jesus asks for forgiveness for the soldiers who have inflicted this pain. He understands that the Roman soldiers do not know or understand who he is. How would you respond to such lack of understanding? Would the strength of your faith and your beliefs allow you to seek their forgiveness?

God of forgiveness and mercy, give us a faith that is solid and firm, that gives us the grace to be forgiving and merciful as well.

Station 7—The Death of Jesus—Mark 15:33-37

Jesus quotes the first words of Psalm 22, a psalm of lament but also a psalm of praise and recognition of God and God's promises. Jesus knows the words of the entire psalm; in verse 19 "they divide my clothes among themselves, casting lots for my garments" and verse 25 "He did not hide His face from him; when he cried out to Him, He listened." When Jesus breathed his last breath, he knew that God had heard, God had listened. Have there been times in your life when you felt God had forsaken you, forgotten you? Were you able to trust in God's promises in the difficult times and places?

Loving God, remind us that you always listen, that you are always there and will fulfill your promises.

Station 8—The Resurrection of Jesus—Matthew 28:1-10

When the women go to see the tomb where Jesus had been placed, they meet an angel who shows them the empty tomb. On their way to tell the disciples, they encounter the risen Christ; they bow down and worship him. Have you encountered the risen Christ; what was that experience like? Were you awed, afraid, joyful; what was your response to Jesus?

God of new life, give us vision to see you, hearts and souls that recognize you and worship you.

Note: The resource used for this script is from Brown, Patricia D., Paths to Prayer: Finding Your Own Way to the Presence of God, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), pg. 224-227.



IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

INTRODUCTION



Ignatius of Loyola lived in the late 15th/early 16th century; he was born into a well-to-do family in Spain and his desire was to become a professional soldier. At age 30, he was wounded in a battle and was no longer able to pursue a career in the military. While convalescing, he read a book entitled *Life of Christ*; this led him to seek a religious life. He began a life of poverty and prayer and began composing notes on his prayer and discernment which later became his *Spiritual Exercises*. His spiritual life relied heavily on what he referred to as “imaginative contemplation.” He formed a small group who committed themselves to a life of poverty and service and ultimately settled in Rome. In 1540, this group was officially designated as the Society of Jesus (later known as the Jesuits) by the Pope. This new order was not confined to monasteries, but travelled throughout the world wherever they believed there was a need.

The Examen



The Examen is a highly structured spiritual practice that originated with Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. The practice has two specific steps. The first step is known as the Examen of Consciousness; the second step is known as the Examen of Conscience. The intent of this practice is to notice the ways in which God has been present in your life to help you become more sensitive to those moments and more aware of the invitation God may have for you in those moments. As you focus your attention on the “God moments” in your life, you will become more aware of those moments as they are occurring and more present to God in all of your life.

In the first step, the intent is to focus on your awareness of God throughout your daily life; do you recognize God in the moment? As you reflect back and become aware of God moments, what was happening within you at that time?

The first step in the Examen of Consciousness practice is to choose a period of time starting with the present moment and moving backwards through the time period. It is easiest to begin this practice with a relatively short period of time; I would suggest starting with 24 hours.

Quiet yourself and take a few deep breaths. Close your eyes and take a few moments to appreciate the silence. Invite God to be present with you.

Look back over the last 24 hours beginning with the present moment; let each hour gently pass by your awareness, pause between each hour. As you move backwards, try to notice the presence of God in the day and your own way of participating in, missing, or resisting God's presence. Then ask yourself: What am I noticing that I have taken for granted during the time period? What feelings and thoughts are emerging?

When you are ready, journal about your insights noting what happened (or didn't happen) at specific times of which you are now aware but were not at the time.

When you have finished journaling, move on to the second step...the Examen of Conscience. It is possible to practice each of these steps separately although they are intended to flow as one. Choose two or three of the God moments that you identified in step one.

In the Examen of Consciousness, the intent was to focus on your level of awareness of God moving through your life and how to be more sensitive to God's presence.

The Examen of Conscience is a time of prayerfulness when you place those moments before God. There are five movements to this prayer time.

The steps are as follows:

- The first act is acknowledgement and gratitude; recall all the blessings you have received over the time period, acknowledge those blessings as gifts from God and give thanks.
- The next act is petition; pray for the grace to see yourself clearly and honestly (your true authentic self), pray for clear vision to see yourself as God sees you and as others see you; empty yourself of self to make space for God.
- Then admit; consider the times in the period when you have lapsed in faith, resisted God's action, or become alienated from God; recognize a specific area of your life that needs healing or attention.
- Next repent; humble yourself and ask for forgiveness; say to God "I'm sorry."
- And finally resolve; to accept God's grace and love. Determine now, with God, to be open to new ways of being in the world, to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

When you have completed the practice, journal about your feelings and insights noting, in particular, what needs attention and what you need to entrust to God's care.

Guided Meditation



Guided meditation was formalized by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. This practice is also referred to as entering the narrative; it encourages use of the imagination, feelings, senses, reason, will and memory as you enter into the experience. You are invited to become a participant in the Biblical narrative; to experience Jesus in a personal way. It is often best to begin with a Gospel story that is familiar to you. The intent is to hear God's invitation to you today in the scripture. Ignatius wrote a number of meditations based on specific Biblical narratives which are included in his *Spiritual Exercises*; you might begin by using one of these. There are also a number of books which offer guided meditations as well as a number of online resources.

In this practice, a Biblical narrative is read. The narrative is then re-phrased in such a way that you are invited to be part of the story. Reflection questions are offered at intervals in the narrative; at the close of the reading, you are invited to be present to God and listen for his words to you.

A guided meditation on John 21:1–19 can be found on page 67 where it has been coupled with a form of art as prayer; you may choose to simply respond to the questions and journal about your experience.

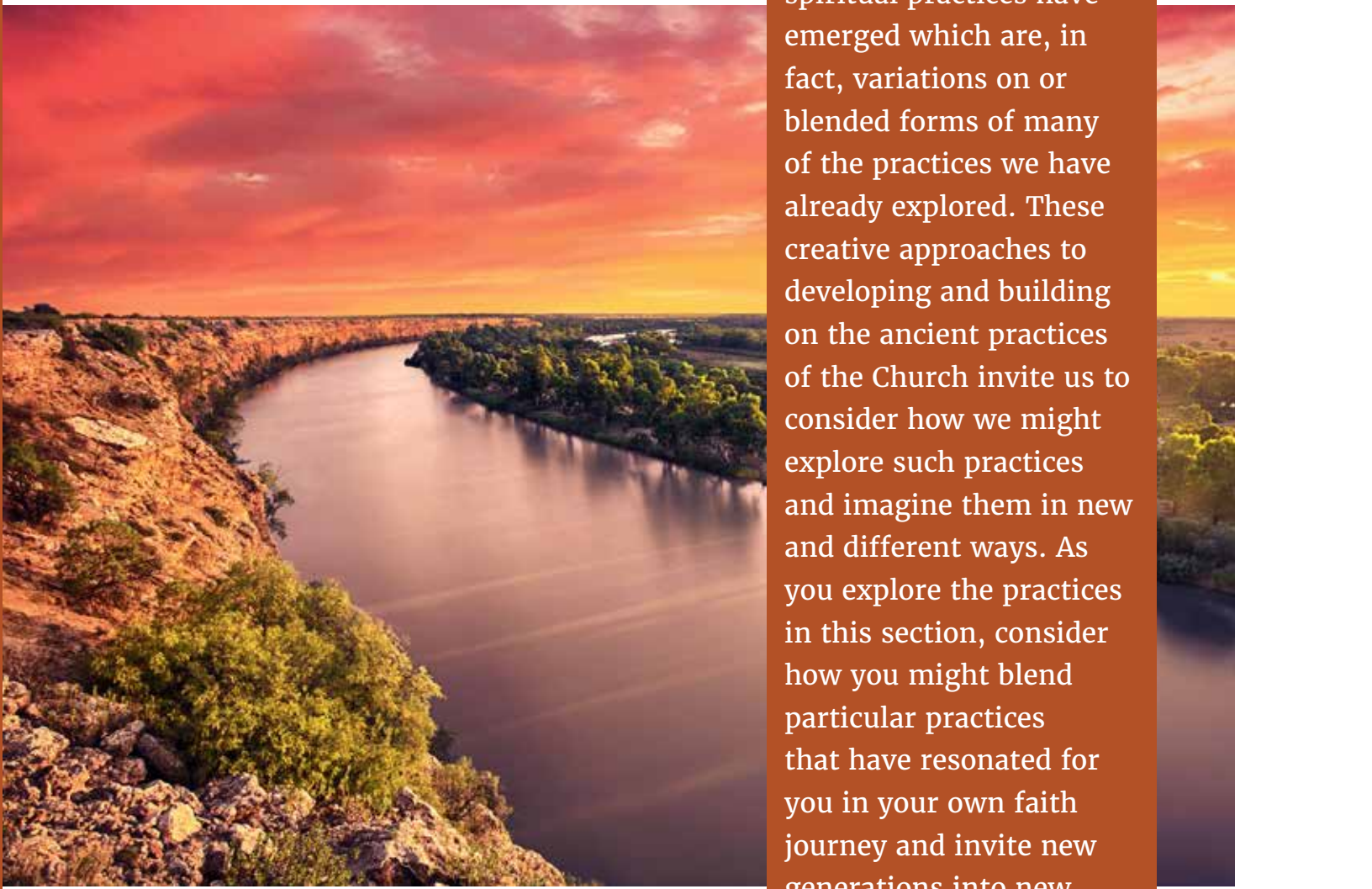


CONTEMPORARY



AND BLENDED

INTRODUCTION



In the last few centuries, new spiritual practices have emerged which are, in fact, variations on or blended forms of many of the practices we have already explored. These creative approaches to developing and building on the ancient practices of the Church invite us to consider how we might explore such practices and imagine them in new and different ways. As you explore the practices in this section, consider how you might blend particular practices that have resonated for you in your own faith journey and invite new generations into new ways of exploring their relationship with God.

Gratitude

This practice is a form of art as prayer that is focused on giving thanks to God, thanksgiving being one of the traditional themes for prayer. Praying through artistic expression is an ancient practice; it finds voice in many different art forms and mediums. But this practice is not just for those individuals who see themselves as “artists;” it is an invitation for each of us to live into our creative nature. And since God the Creator fashioned us in God’s image, we too have the capacity for creating. Through this practice, our prayers take on physical form and offer us a window into the Holy. As we enter into prayerful, reflective space, we seek to express our desires and longings in a physical way and as we do so, God’s spirit begins to inform our hands, our mind, our soul and God’s desires begin to weave themselves into our “art’.” An integral part of the practice is the prayerful reflection on what you have created; how is God speaking/ responding to you as God’s creative nature has informed your own.

This practice takes many forms; this particular practice introduces the use of the art form of collage as a way of expressing gratitude and thanks to God.¹ As we focus on expressing gratitude, we become more aware of all that we have to give thanks for; it can be particularly helpful in times when we may be anxious and stressed. It is a reminder to always give thanks to God in all circumstances; it helps us focus on that for which we are grateful, even the smallest of things.

The easiest place to find pictures of things is magazines and catalogs; I also make copies of photographs that are meaningful to me or even take photographs of specific things I wish to include. On the next page is a photo of one that I created.

Before you begin, invite God to join the process with you; invite God’s creative nature to inform your own. Take a few moments of quiet reflection before beginning. If you have magazines or catalogs that you are finished with, go through and cut or tear out images that represent things for which you are grateful; it doesn’t have to be the object itself, the image could be symbolic for you. It also doesn’t have to be a “big thing,” even the smallest of things are worthy of our gratitude. Also consider

whether there are photographs you might like to include; use the photo itself or make a copy of it. Consider whether there is something you would like to take a picture of to include in your collage. Start with a large piece of paper, at least 8 1/2 x 11, arrange the images on the page until you are satisfied with the overall image and then, using a glue stick or craft glue, glue each image in place. When you have finished, lift it to God as a prayer of thanksgiving; spend some time reflecting on the collage each day for the next week and letting it serve as a focus for gratitude in your life.

Here is a photo of one that I created.



¹ Karla M. Kincannon, *Creativity and Divine Surprise: Finding the Place of Your Resurrection* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2005), pg. 181-182.

Guided Mandala

In contemporary times, combining spiritual practices has become an accepted practice. The grace in spiritual practices is the ability to expand, extend and adjust a practice to accommodate wherever we are on the journey this day.

This practice will draw on the practice of guided meditation and the practice of mandalas. It would be helpful to review the write-ups on guided meditation and mandalas, but I will offer a brief introduction to both practices and explain how to use them together to explore scripture.

Guided meditation or entering the narrative is a practice that began in the early centuries of the Christian church but was formalized in the 16th century by Ignatius of Loyola. This practice invites you to become a participant in a Biblical narrative; to experience God in a personal way; you are encouraged to allow your imagination, your feelings, senses, and memories to enter the experience. The intent of this practice is to hear God's invitation to you today. A Biblical narrative will be read and then re-phrased in a way that you are invited into the story. There will be pauses to allow time to enter in the scripture and there will be reflection questions offered as we move through the story.

Mandalas are a form of art as prayer; they are ancient symbols that were adopted in the early centuries of the Christian church, but came into common usage in the church during the Middle Ages. They were placed in churches, cathedrals, and monasteries to serve as visual aids in meditation and prayer. They are traditionally a circular shape since the circle represented wholeness and unity. The intent of a mandala is to open a window into holy space where one can encounter and experience God. In more contemporary times, creating your own mandala has been used as a prayer practice. The intent is to help you explore and process your thoughts and feelings as you encounter God in prayer.

Start with a large piece of paper, 8 1/2 x 11 would be a minimum size. Draw a circle; I usually use something round as a guide, for example, a pie plate, a cake pan, a bowl. You can use paints, crayons, chalk, colored pencils, whatever medium you like to work with. Traditionally, you start with the center and work outward.

Before we begin the meditation, gather together your supplies and have your circle ready so that you can move to the paper when you are ready.

Remember, this practice is a prayer; it is a form of contemplative prayer that is focused on listening for and hearing God and God's deep desire for you in this moment.

I would invite you to begin your time with a brief prayer inviting God's presence and God's guidance in this time and space.

Using the following meditation, move through the narrative. When you have finished, sit with your experience and then move to your paper; process and explore the experience through the art. When you have finished your mandala, offer it as a prayer and give thanks to God. Plan to revisit your mandala over the days and weeks ahead and continue to be prayerful about God's invitation.

Consider other spiritual practices that you might combine to open new and different space.

Listen to the story of Jesus as He meets the disciples at the Sea of Galilee following His resurrection.

- Read John 21: 1-19
- Then enter into the narrative...
- "You are invited to sit in the boat with the other disciples." (10 seconds)
- "It's early morning and the sun is just beginning to rise." (15 seconds)
- "Feel the warmth of the sun on your back, feel the calm of the water beneath the boat." (30 seconds)
- "Here, surrounded by the other disciples, you feel at peace. The grief you have been feeling is at rest." (10 seconds)
- "As you look out across the water, you see Jesus standing on the beach. He waves and calls out to you. See Jesus standing on the shore." (20 seconds)
- "Jesus invites you to throw out the nets again." (10 seconds)
- "See yourself helping the others to throw out the heavy net. Feel the weight of the net on your hands and arms as it fills with fish. You suddenly have one of those déjà vu moments; you've done this before; feel the joy, the wonder, the excitement as you realize that Jesus really is standing on the beach." (30 seconds)
- "At that moment, perhaps you are like Peter and you jump into the water and swim for shore. Or perhaps, you begin to row for shore. And as you step out onto the beach, you see that Jesus has built a fire. You see the fish and bread that are baking on the fire; you smell the aroma of baking bread." (30 seconds)
- "Jesus invites you to join him on the beach. He offers you the bread and the fish. Again you are reminded of another time when he offered you bread. The bread and the fish are more than just food for your body; they are symbols of his presence, his abiding peace, his assurance to you that he is still your companion, your guide, your master." (30 seconds)
- "Notice what it's like to be in his presence; to be sitting on the beach, eating and talking with Jesus." (1 minute)
- "Jesus turns to you, listen to his words to you; Feed my lambs. Look into his face as he speaks these words to you, what is Jesus inviting you to do; what do the lambs represent for you, what is the food you are asked to give?" (1 minute)
- "Sit quietly on the beach with Jesus. Feel the warmth of the sun on your face. Hear the gentle sound of the waves on the shore. Rest in his presence and know that you are his."

Picture Practice

This practice is a form of art as prayer; praying through artistic expression is an ancient practice; it finds voice in many different art forms and mediums. This practice is not just for those individuals who see themselves as ‘artists’; it is an invitation for each of us to live into our creative nature. And since God the Creator fashioned us in God’s image, we too have the capacity for creating. Through this practice our prayers take on physical form and offer us a window into the Holy. As we enter into prayerful, reflective space, we seek to express our desires and longings in a physical way and as we do so, God’s spirit begins to inform our hands, our mind, our soul and God’s desires begin to weave themselves into our ‘art’. An integral part of the practice is the prayerful reflection on what you have created; how is God speaking/responding to you as God’s creative nature has informed your own. The possibilities for artistic expression are extensive; there are a number of good resources for simple activities for those who are new to this practice. Choose a resource and utilize the exercises provided; begin to explore a variety of forms of expression. This practice introduces the art of photography.¹ Again, this is definitely not about being a photographer; it is about prayerfully seeking out the Holy in a fairly simple way.

With your cell phone in hand and a prayerful attitude, photograph interesting nature scenes; take time to see God’s handiwork around you. Don’t take too many pictures; you will be invited to choose one on which to focus. If you are not able to be outdoors, be creative; perhaps you have some cut flowers or a houseplant in bloom. Take your time, breathe, and be prayerful; invite God to help you see something you might otherwise move past in your often hurried life.

When you have finished, find a comfortable place to sit. Review the pictures you took and choose one that might seem particularly interesting. Before moving on, offer a simple prayer. For example...Creator God, help me to see the deeper picture and help me to understand the deeper meaning and the invitation you have for me this day.

Now look carefully at the picture. Take note of what you photographed; what drew you to take the picture. What do you notice? Now look again and this time notice what is in the background; what is in the picture that you didn’t notice when you took the picture? Where do you see God’s presence? How is God reaching out to you in this moment? Is there perhaps an invitation from God for you in this moment?

Take time to reflect and then journal about your experience.

When you are finished, consider making a collage using all the photographs you took; how might that be an opportunity for prayerful reflection as well?

¹ Karla M. Kincannon, *Creativity and Divine Surprise: Finding the Place of Your Resurrection* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2005), pg. 27–28.



Prayer Walk

This is a simple spiritual practice that grows out of two longstanding practices in our Christian heritage...Stations of the Cross and pilgrimage. If you would like, you can review the write-ups on these two practices. Although Stations of the Cross is traditionally associated with Holy Week and scripture specific to that event, the basics of the practice have been used to focus on other key events and times in our life and relationship with God. Stations of the Cross originally grew out of the early Christian practice of pilgrimage. This practice draws on both of these.

I would invite you to take a prayer walk. But unlike the traditional practice of Stations of the Cross, rather than marking the stations with a cross before you begin, engage your creative nature, find something that can be crafted into a cross at each station as you walk. Here are photographs of four crosses that I crafted on my walk; all were made with simple objects found in nature.



The scripture for this prayer walk is taken from the lectionary readings for the four weeks prior to All Saints Day including that Sunday. I chose to use verses from the Psalms for each of those weeks; they speak to God's goodness and love in the midst of challenges and struggles and offer the reassurance that God is with us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Here are those readings with a brief reflection for each reading:

"Praise the Lord! O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever." Psalm 106:1

See the goodness of God in your surroundings; offer your praise and thanksgiving to God. Remember that God's love will hold you forever. Offer a prayer to the God who loves and seeks good for you.

"They cried to the Lord, and he answered them...Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy." Psalm 99:6b,9

Allow your cries, your grief, your laments to rise up to God and then look around and see the wonder, the holiness, the sacredness of all things. Lift your voice in worship to God. Offer a prayer that reflects the sadness and the fear (be open and honest with God) while giving thanks for God's presence and movement in the midst of it.

"from everlasting to everlasting you are God...Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." Psalm 90:2b,14

Look around...see God's faithfulness and God's love in the created world. Seek joy and wonder within your heart and rejoice for all that is reflected around you of God's everlasting grace and compassion. Offer a prayer that reflects gratitude and joy for God's steadfast love.

"I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears...O taste and see that the Lord is good." Psalm 34:4,8a

Remember to always seek God first. In this place of quiet and solitude, listen for God, hear and see all that is the goodness of God. Let go of your fears and anxieties and remember that God is big enough to hold them all. Offer a prayer of thanks for the goodness of God, acknowledge the fears that sometimes hold you and give thanks that God is always there to hold them for you.

Note: These scriptures are from the NSRV translation.

Take time to journal about your walk and your reflections.

River of Life



This spiritual practice is a contemporary variation on the Examen; you are invited to look back over your entire life, focusing on the significant moments in your life; ones when you recognized God at the time and ones when you only recognized God as you look back.

This practice is sometimes referred to as a spiritual autobiography, but rather than writing about your spiritual life, this practice invites you to use your creative nature as you explore and articulate your spiritual life; use symbols rather than words. The intent of the practice is to focus your attention on the God moments throughout your life and to be reflective and prayerful about those moments; how have they influenced your life's journey to date, and how will they affect your journey going forward. As you become more sensitive to the God moments in your past, you will become more aware of those moments in your life today.

By using symbols rather than words, we open a deeper space within us; we see beyond the words to something deeper.

As a defining symbol, you are invited to think about your life flowing like a river. Rivers have a significant place and meaning throughout scripture; this practice is also known as a river of life exercise.¹

Start with your birth; what were the two streams that came together to form your river like; how did those streams (your parents, grandparents) shape your river? How did aspects of your early life determine the shape and movement of the water? When did you first become aware of God; what was that experience like? What were some of the major influences in your life (specific people, communities,

school, books) and how did they change the nature of your river? When did you first learn to pray; where did you learn to pray? Think about those moments that you would consider significant points in your life. As you draw your river, be aware of the peaceful times in your life when the river was calm; be aware of the stormy, turbulent times in your life when there were rapids or waterfalls in your river. End your river with today; what does your river look like today?

Using whatever materials you have available, draw your river of life. Do you have construction paper, crayons, colored pencils, watercolor paints, chalks? How about some old magazines; consider using them to cut out photos for your river. Be creative; God created us in God's image, which means we are meant to be creative as well.

Don't rush through this practice. Once your river is complete, spend time in prayer/reflection with your river; do you see God in places you had not felt God at the time? How did you respond to God's presence in your life? When did you resist God's presence/God's invitation for your life? What is God inviting you to this day? Sit with your river being prayerful about the ways in which God moved through your life and continues to move through your life. The more we recognize God's presence in the past, the better able we are to recognize God's presence in the moment.

Perhaps you might consider doing this as part of a small group and you could share your stories with one another. Sometimes when we listen to the story of another, we see things they did not, we see connections with our own story, our understanding of our story is enlarged.

Here is a sample river of life that I created a number of years ago.



¹ Miller, Wendy J. and Miller, Heidi A., *Tending the Soul Handbook*, 2021, pg. 38-40.

Visio Divina

This spiritual practice is known as visio divina; it is a practice that developed out of two other practices that have already been explored in the handbook...lectio divina and praying with icons. Lectio divina means sacred reading and it is an ancient Christian practice that focuses on a very intentional way of reading scripture (refer to the write-up of lectio divina). Visio divina means sacred seeing and focuses on a very intentional way of experiencing God through what we see. Again, you might consider reading the write-up on praying with icons, another Christian practice that dates to the earliest years of Christianity. Icon is a Greek word meaning image. When I wrote about this practice initially, I was totally focused on the traditional Christian use of that word; an image that told a Biblical narrative. But I was reminded that the word 'icon' has a different understanding in our current culture; we actually use the word all the time...our computer has icons, our cars have icons...images that represent something more complex; it is a pathway to the more complex thing it represents. I imagine that many of you have become familiar with the little white camera in a blue box that is the pathway to Zoom. Just as we do not actually engage the icon on our computer, but the thing that it points to, ancient Christian icons were not worshipped, but were used as a pathway, a window into a Biblical narrative that opened holy space.

Vision divina is an outgrowth of these two practices; it developed initially during the Middle Ages as a variation on praying with icons and became more common in its current form in contemporary times.

Just as with lectio divina, there are specific steps in this practice. First you must choose an image to explore. In the early years, individuals would focus on images that were created specifically with a religious intent. Over the years, the practice has incorporated many images that may not have been created with a religious intent but clearly offered the observer a window into holy space. I find nature images to be particularly meaningful for exploring the holy and engaging my relationship with God. I will offer some images that you might consider using as a first time exploring this practice; they are all nature images created by a single artist. Feel free to seek out your own images.

Once you have chosen an image, settle yourself and open your time with a simple prayer inviting God into your practice and asking God's guidance as you look for the deeper meaning for you this day.



The first step is simply observing the image. Look at it closely and carefully. Let your eyes move over the entire image simply 'seeing', do not try to analyze the image at this point. (Allow ~5 minutes)

The second step is describing and analyzing the image. This step is not about how you feel, but about what you observe. Ask yourself some basic questions...

What do I see? What is the work about, what is the subject of the image? What is the medium for this image; i.e., is it a photograph, a watercolor? What do you believe its intent was? What colors seem to emerge? (Allow 5-10 minutes)



The third step is to interpret the image. What might have been the context for creating this image, what did the artist have in mind? Are there spiritual questions that begin to emerge for you in this image; i.e. do you "see" God or the work of God in this image? Does this image express ideas about God? Does this image "speak" to you in some way? Does it evoke a deeper meaning; does it engage you at a deeper level? (Allow ~5 minutes)



The fourth step is response. Look at the image once again, this time looking at it from a different perspective; what is the deeper spiritual, personal meaning for you. Spend time simply reflecting on the image and allowing it to "speak" to you, to offer insights into God's deeper invitation to you in this image today. (Allow 5-10 minutes)

When you have finished, take time to journal about your experience and your reflections. Close your time with a prayer of thanks to God for the ways in which God entered into this time and space with you.

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