

**RENEWING OUR
HUNGER
FOR GOD**

A Lent Devotional



CHURCH OF THE
SAVIOR

Cover image: mural of the Parable of the Prodigal Son by Sister Francis, 2010, located in the chapel apse of the Monasterio de la Conversión in Becerril de Campos, Palencia, Spain.

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RENEWING OUR HUNGER FOR GOD

INTRODUCTION

Sandy Richter

Ecclesiastes 3:11 suggests that God has placed in every human heart the longing, the hunger, for what is eternal. Made in the image of the Triune God, we are created for connection to God and to one another, and we are made to hunger and thirst for the eternal perfection of living in the love of God and all he has created.

Sometimes, though, our hunger is stunted and we don't know how to get back in touch with it. Or, we've been hungry for too long, and we've lost hope that we will ever find what satisfies.

This devotional is for all the above. We have asked various friends from Church of the Savior to share ways they have found to connect with God and others in meaningful, formative, life-giving ways. Our hope is that as you read their practices, stories, and reflections, God might spark something in you. Perhaps you'll gain an imagination for the ways you are already meeting God and others in your daily life, and with that, a renewed determination to participate in what God is doing. Perhaps a new means of pursuing God will emerge. God knows just what each of us needs in this season and we can look for him to meet us as we pray that he would renew that hunger that drives us towards himself.

One word of caution:

You may be tempted to sit down and read this all in one setting, skipping over the meditations and practices for the sake of enjoying people's stories. That is of course your prerogative. But be aware that there is much more here than the momentary satisfaction of seeing into another person's life. There is your life, what God is doing in you right now, to draw out your hunger, and to connect you in more satisfying ways with himself and his beloved creation. Slow down enough to become aware of what inklings he might be whispering, what invitations he might be issuing, what courage he might be stirring. We might be surprised to find that God is indeed renewing our hunger for him.

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

FIRST READING

ROMANS 12:4-8

⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

FIRST REFLECTION

CHRISTINE KINDBERG

Christine Kindberg is a professional writer who published her first novel last year. Here she describes the way in which creative writing connects her to God and others.

Writing fiction isn't prayer, but I've noticed they're connected for me. I write better when I'm praying regularly, and I pray better when I'm writing regularly. Writing fiction helps me pay attention to the everyday magic of the world God created and the people who reflect God's image. Writing helps me to slow down, to notice the texture of a hand towel, the smell of crushed rosemary, the weight of a cold pebble. Noticing is a half-step toward gratitude, and then as I share with others, I can extend an invitation to wonder and worship God with me.

In one of my stories, a character runs through a lavender field. As I wrote that scene, I had to stop and ask: what is a lavender field actually like? So I went to a lavender field to experience one for myself, to see how tall the shrubs grow and what their shadows are like and how they feel brushing against my ankles. (It turns out: spiky!) Needing to recreate an experience on the page makes me ask questions as a tourist

might, sparking curiosity about the small marvels I might otherwise take for granted.

Besides helping me pay attention to the physical experience of the world God created, writing about pretend people helps me better appreciate the real people who surround me. Imaginary characters are sometimes easier to deal with than real people, but sometimes I get to the point where those pretend people surprise me, and it reminds me that real people always have more to them than I know. And the affection and delight I feel toward the fictional characters, especially when their stories get messy and complicated, reminds me of the great love God has for us, regardless of the mess we make.

C.S. Lewis says there are no mere mortals, and (though C.S. Lewis would disagree) I believe the fictional stories we create here on earth, the ones that are important and good, will also somehow continue into eternity. There's something about stories that opens a part of us and allows us to connect with God and others in a different way. Twice I've bonded with someone who became a close friend because of a shared experience of a fictional story. Stories can delight and challenge us; they remind us we are not the defining point of the universe. Stories can help us say "You too?" I think there's something about stories that especially helps us be vulnerable. Some of those places we might be afraid to address directly, God can deal with tenderly through parallels and parables.

One of the most fun aspects of publishing my novel has been to see how it seems to draw out other people's stories too. I love to hear how my book gifted someone insight into their own experience, whether because their teenage struggles to adjust to US culture were similar to my character's struggles, or because a moment of injustice they witnessed is similar to something that happens in the book. Some people have told me they'd never thought about those experiences in that way before. It's such a privilege to see how a story I made up, that I benefited from as I was writing it, also speaks to others.

I have a friend who reads through *Lord of the Rings* every Lent, taking heart from the journey to Mordor as a parallel for the Christian spiritual journey. There are poems I've come back to so many times for the metaphors of God's mercy and the beauty that comforts and challenges me. And it feels like a grace that we get to create things like this for each other.

When I'm writing, I feel like I'm doing what God made me to do, more fully inhabiting my little corner of humanity. Isn't it amazing that God gifts us in ways we can respond to him with wonder and delight, expanding our love for him as we exercise those gifts?

Whatever those gifts and callings are for each of us, may God help us to live into them more fully and through them open our hearts to experience him as he is at work around us.

FIRST SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: DISCERNMENT

Developing a sense of purpose and vocation requires a great deal of discernment. However, the fruit of this work is what Christine describes above — an interweaving of our hunger, our joy, the needs of the world, and God's Spirit at work in all.

Spend some time reflecting on the following:

- Do you have a sense of what gifts, interests, skills, God has specially entrusted to you? Are you able to see how those gifts connect you with God? With others?
- If your answer to this first question is yes, spend some time thanking God for the ways he has made you and the joy of participating with his mission in the world.
- If you answered no to the first question, consider:
- What brings you great joy? What brings you desolation? What might the answer to these questions tell you about the ways God has made you to be in the world?
- If you are struggling with any of these questions, who might be able to discern them with you? Can you reach out to this person this week?

SECOND READING

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

¹ Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be
used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is
Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

SECOND REFLECTION

SANDY OYLER

Deacon Sandy Oyler describes the formative power of humility and answering God's call on her life.

It's hard for me to believe that I've been a deacon at Church of the Savior for over five years. I vividly remember my ordination — the bishop laying his hands on my head and praying for the Holy Spirit to fill me with grace and power; Father Bill and Mother Linda delivering a very personal sermon and then vesting me with my first diaconal stole; the encouragement I felt from the congregation when they robustly responded, “We will” to the question “Will you uphold her in this ministry”?

My journey to the diaconate was complicated and filled with stops and starts. I knew for a long time that I was called to a vocation of bringing hope and healing to others, and I had been living that out as best I could as a clinical social worker for a number of years. Yet something was missing. Deep down I always felt there was a pastoral part to my personality, but I didn't know what to do with it as I never felt a desire or call to lead a church.

I was drawn to the deacon role since arriving at Savior. There was something about it that seemed to embody all of my ministry longings. I discovered that I was a sacramentalist by nature and that I always had been, just without the language to explain it. I appreciated how the deacon participated in the service in both practical and symbolic ways. I developed a love for the altar — the clay communion vessels, the pouring of the wine, and the beauty of the table being set prior to the Eucharist.

Now that I'm a deacon, I've found that serving in this capacity has been a meaningful way for me to connect with God and others. I love ministering with the acolytes, and assisting with pastoral care. Some of my tasks, such as setting up before the service are the same every week. Though I'm generally someone who resists routine and structure, such weekly tasks have created a rhythm in my life and have become spiritual practices. Like most spiritual disciplines, I don't always feel like doing them. But I have found that when I do them with love and presence I feel closer to God and serve with more joy.

Baking the communion bread is another weekly ritual which helps prepare me for communal worship. I love the

tangible nature of the activity since most of my work during the week is so intangible. As I roll out the dough, I think about how something as simple as flour and honey and oil will soon become the Body of Christ and the Eucharistic meal that nourishes us all for the week to come. With this in mind, what can sometimes feel like just another task to fit into a busy week becomes a holy endeavor.

I often bring communion to those in our congregation who are not physically able to attend services. As I pray for them, my desire is to bring some measure of hope on behalf of our whole church. And when I serve the bread to someone who is suffering, I'm reminded that we're all broken and in need of healing.

If I'm honest, my diaconal duties can sometimes be humbling. I encounter people whose lives are much more painful and challenging than my own but who live with so much grace. And sometimes it's just plain difficult to be in a servant role. When I'm in this headspace I try to focus on Jesus. He is both my model and strength for ministry. Through it all I've come to see that being a deacon is not only for the good of others, but it's also a significant means of personal spiritual formation and refinement.

SECOND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: HUMILITY

Adele Calhoun describes humility this way: "Humility is not thinking less about yourself but thinking about yourself less. Humble people let go of image management and self-promotion. They honor others by making the others' needs as real and important as their own."

Deacon Sandy describes her work of serving as a deacon as both routine and seemingly ordinary, and yet as she attests, profoundly formative. Consider what routine practices in your ordinary life God might be using for the sake of others and for you, as a means of spiritual formation and refinement. Talk to God about this and ask for the grace to follow Christ in his humility.

If you are quick to draw attention to your good works, begin to do some things anonymously. What is it like for you? What does it mean to you to have only God know?

THIRD READING

JOB 12:7-9

- ⁷ “But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;
⁸ or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,
or let the fish in the sea inform you.
⁹ Which of all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?”

THIRD REFLECTION

KRISTEN PAGE

Kristen Page loves nature, photography and science and finding God's beauty in and through all of these. Here she shares her experience of meeting God in these ways.

I cannot remember a time when I did not feel a strong sense of peace when in creation. Memories of my childhood are dominated by times spent in my grandmother's garden, birding with my mom, or catching crawdads and tadpoles in the creek behind my house. My parents saved a recording of me at two years old explaining to them that Jesus was in heaven, and that heaven was in the woods! In fact, I remember the first time that I considered my need for Christ was at a church camp held in a beautiful hardwood forest dominated by the smells of sassafras and the sounds of birds. Even now, if I find myself longing for peace or connection to God, I go out into creation.

Camera in hand, I love to wander. I walk and explore my surroundings so that I can understand what makes each place unique. I love exploring, observing, listening, watching and capturing new experiences or creatures with my camera. I pay close attention to my surroundings and celebrate the expected and delight in the unexpected! God is revealed in his creation and he delights when we pay attention to it! We are part of creation, and when you spend time in nature, you can see how much God provides for us (and everything he made).

Slowing down and spending time in creation allows me to rekindle a sense of childlike wonder at the things God has made. In fact, the best walks are with my daughter Wren! I remember

one walk to school where we sang with the black-capped chickadees. As we walked, I would whistle the call. I don't know what was more wonderful, the fact the chickadees followed us and sang back, or the amazement and awe that I saw in my child's eyes. Spending time in creation results in a slowing of life. Exploring what God has made in an attitude of wonder and joy requires this slowing down.

On a different walk with Wren along Lake Michigan, we had a conversation about time and transformation — but in ways that a then six-year-old could comprehend. It started with her observation that the “rocks” making up the sand look like glass. We talked about this large lake, and how all of the land around it was under a glacier. We thought about how big that river of ice must have been to make such a huge lake. We thought about how heavy it was and how long it took for that ice to move back and forth over large rocks to make such small grains of sand. Through the conversation, Wren was hearing about how God cares for his creation, about the long processes required for transformation. She learned that beauty takes time, and although I did not say as much, eventually she will have this experience as context to understand the slow process of how God refines our lives.

All of creation sings God's praises, as we read in Isaiah 44:3: “Sing for joy, you heavens, for the Lord has done this; shout aloud you earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the Lord has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel.”

When I spend time in creation, I am able to join in the chorus of praise! Experiencing a beautiful sunset from a mountain peak might be the closest I come to “hearing” the chorus of creation, but when you open your eyes and ears to the many “ordinary” sights and sounds around you, you can also experience and join in creation's song. The first pink of a spring beauty blooming in the forest, the transformation of leaves from green to yellow, orange and red, singing spring peepers, honking sandhill cranes, even the music of ice cracking and moving along a river are sights and sounds that help me worship.

Not long ago, I was spending time taking pictures at a Texas wildlife refuge. I was close to the edge of a lake taking pictures of the thousands of snow geese who had stopped for a rest during winter migration. As I stood and watched, close to 3000 snow

geese took off over my head. I could feel the breeze off of their wings, and the honking was so loud it was disorienting. I have never experienced anything like the lifting of my spirit at that moment. I felt joy, just as I believe our creator hopes we will when we are spending time in his creation.

THIRD SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: ENJOYING GOD' CREATION

Take some time to meditate on the Scripture passages Kristen referenced here. What is your experience of nature? Do you naturally experience God in his creation?

Find some time to get near to nature — maybe a walk outside, or a trip to an indoor conservatory, maybe with a pet — and ask God to help you notice the beauty, the intention, the design, the creativity. How might you be invited to encounter God in a new or unexpected way through these encounters?

SECOND WEEK OF LENT

FIRST READING

ROMANS 8:26-27 (MSG)

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our ... condition, and keeps us present before God.

FIRST REFLECTION

ELLE RICHTER

Elle Richter is one of our younger friends of the Savior. Elle loves all things creative and has recently discovered ways that creative practices help her to pray.

What's a hobby or something you like to do that helps you connect with God?

Writing or drawing.

Let's go with drawing. Tell me what it's like for drawing to help you talk to and listen to God.

I feel like when I'm drawing or making art, I can really express what I'm feeling. And then, it helps me think of what I want to say to God.

Can you think of a specific time when this happened?

I think one example is that it really helped me to talk to God with the Parable of the Sower where I made the flower out of seeds--it helped me picture the story and it helped me think more about the story.

Were those materials already there for you in Children's Worship?

There were a variety of seeds, two kinds of beans, a piece of brownish cardstock. I started by making a patterned circle and then I added a pyramid stacked on pyramid to make a stem.

What did you think about as you made the flower?

I thought about a lot of different things. I thought about how there were a bunch of different ways you could interpret it. It made me think that there wasn't a wrong way to interpret the story. It's just what you picture it as. I thought about how parables are supposed to help you picture something.



Do you usually start out wanting to talk to God, so you do art, or do you start making art, and end up talking to or hearing from God?

I think it's sometimes one and sometimes the other.

Is there anything else you want to say about the connection between art and connecting with God?

I feel like art also helps me communicate in a lot of ways because when I do art, I think about what I'm going to say before I say it, and then I can think about if that's what I want to say. Art gives me time to think and it helps me think.

FIRST SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

This practice is all about cultivating an open posture before God, waiting on God's presence to meet you in the deepest places of your heart. This prayer particularly focuses on trusting and resting in the work of the Holy Spirit deep in our own spirit.

There are many ways to quiet ourselves and become aware of God's inner presence. Here are some suggestions:

- Engage in a quiet practice that you enjoy, that stills your mind, like Elle describes that art does for her. As you engage in this practice, thank God for the enjoyment, be aware of his presence in your delight, ask the Spirit to speak in and through your work. Pray in the midst of the practice, with or without words. As words arise, allow yourself to be open and honest with the Lord.
- Choose a simple word or phrase to describe your desire to meet with the Spirit, or a word to describe something weighing on you. Repeat this word quietly as you offer this word to the Lord in prayer. Allow for a good amount of silence and if your mind wanders, come back to this simple word or phrase. Throughout the day, come back to this word and sit with it before the Lord.

SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

SECOND REFLECTION

BRANDON BURDETTE

Brandon Burdette loves church and Dungeons and Dragons — two things many have seen as contradictory. Here he talks about the power of imagination in and between each of these loves to draw him closer to God and others.

When I was a child, I listened to a lot of *Adventures in Odyssey*, an audio drama based in the fictional town of Odyssey. It mostly centered around a discovery emporium entitled Whit's End, named after the owner, Mr. Whittaker. Inside Whit's End was an invention of his known as the Imagination Station, which allowed children (mostly) to experience past events — not just as bystanders but engaging and interacting with the people from that historical (often biblical) event. In one two-part episode, “Castles and Cauldrons,” the series tried to take on the “problem” of community-based storytelling with a small amount of chance — otherwise known as the roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons*. Now, the episode is much more complicated than just trying to take down this game. However, my childhood take away was that *D&D* was to be avoided.

Fast forward two decades and I still find myself occasionally listening to *Adventures in Odyssey*, but also regularly playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, moving from an audio drama that encouraged the use of my imagination as a child — to visualize the stories and characters in my head — to using my imagination to form community and better relationships. Now, am I saying that *D&D* directly aids in my relationship with God? Yes. And no. Do I ponder the mysteries of the Almighty as I am playing an elf who can shift into a bear to attack enemy cultists? Unfortunately, no, I do not. However, I do experience God through the people with whom I play — other members of God's family. While we are playing, do our side conversations

turn to theology, the church, and how we live our faith (among many other things)? Certainly, yes!

Playing *D&D* has been an outlet for me to use the imagination that my creator gave me. I get to use my mind (and some dice) to help create a new fantasy story. Exercising my own creativity (no matter how limited I feel that it is) is a way for me to continue to ground myself into who I am — who God has created me to be. Whether I always realize it or not, *D&D* helps me to recognize God's creative spirit that he has put within me.

When I first started regularly attending Savior two years ago, I was disheartened by God and the institution of the church. I came to church, because that's what one does in my family. And I wanted to be there — I started saying, "I'm religious but not spiritual" — because I love church, but it was a period when it was mentally and emotionally difficult to recognize that love. I came; I was present, largely because I knew the church could have the faith for me in that moment. I knew that those around me could stand, sing, and proclaim the goodness of God, while I would sit and listen. Knowing the church would carry me through this time while I did not feel well connected to God or his church took the use of my imagination.

In these last two years, *D&D* has brought me deeper into community with God's people and himself. In one session with my original group, we stopped playing after 20 minutes because we were too distracted talking about church, gender, and sexuality. We talked for hours with each of us sharing our struggles with the way we saw men's and women's roles play out in our various home church experiences. For the last seven or eight months, I have played weekly with friends from Savior. How would this time not lead me closer to God and his family? There have been many times when we close our books, "become" ourselves again, and end up in an hour-long conversation about life and the Church.

Never as a child did I think I would grow up to be the kind of person who would play that "evil" game. And now that I play *D&D*, I cannot understand why people did not research the game enough to understand that it is all make-believe. Or that almost everything in *D&D* is taken from Tolkien or faerie and fantasy stories. As Jesus taught us in the gospel of Matthew, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children,

you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” *Dungeons & Dragons* may not be your outlet for imaginative expression, but whatever it may be, sometimes we all need to become like a child again and allow our imaginations to better connect us with God, our Father.

SECOND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: IMAGINATIVE SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

Ignatius of Loyola is best known for developing the practice of imaginatively engaging Scripture. In his book *What Is Ignatian Spirituality?* David L. Fleming, SJ, describes this kind of Scripture meditation:

[This] method of imagining is to place ourselves fully within a story from the Gospels. We become onlooker-participants and give full rein to our imagination. Jesus is speaking to a blind man at the side of the road. We feel the hot Mediterranean sun beating down. We smell the dust kicked up by the passersby. We feel the itchy clothing we’re wearing, the sweat rolling down our brow, a rumble of hunger. We see the desperation in the blind man’s face and hear the wail of hope in his words. We note the irritation of the disciples. Above all we watch Jesus—the way he walks, his gestures, the look in his eyes, the expression on his face. We hear him speak the words that are recorded in the Gospel. We go on to imagine other words he might have spoken and other deeds he might have done. ...In the course of the Exercises, Ignatius proposes many such scenes from the Gospels for imaginative contemplation. He chooses scenes of Jesus acting rather than Jesus teaching or telling parables. He wants us to see Jesus interacting with others, Jesus making decisions, Jesus moving about, Jesus ministering. He doesn’t want us to think about Jesus. He wants us to experience him. He wants Jesus to fill our senses. He wants us to meet him.

*the practice continues
on the next page*

Read Matt. 18:1-5 (NIRV) using Ignatius' suggestion to give full reign to your imagination and ask God to meet you in the story:

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus. They asked him, "Then who is the most important person in the kingdom of heaven?"

² Jesus called a little child over to him. He had the child stand among them. ³ Jesus said, "What I'm about to tell you is true. You need to change and become like little children. If you don't, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Anyone who takes the humble position of this child is the most important in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Anyone who welcomes a little child like this one in my name welcomes me."

THIRD READING

JOHN 3:1-8

¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

THIRD REFLECTION

LINDA DIXON

Linda Dixon has a deep love of God, history, and teaching. She taught for nearly four decades and now works with the Lombard Historical Society researching what she calls the “heroes and she-roes” of African-American descent. I asked her to share how she came to love these things and how they connect her to God and others.

Being the fourth child with much older siblings gave me a sunny disposition and a feeling of security. My parents were educated and hard working, but they had no roots in God and home life was not easy. However, God surrounded me with people that helped me see Jesus in action. Many of my neighbors, school friends and relatives lived through WWII or

came from the South, and these people of God taught me to care for my family and others by working together.

My brother loved math, so he helped me with that part of my homework and I took joy just being with him — pitching in the alley, going to the store, reading comics, building a scooter and telling him if anyone bullied me. My sisters would take care of me while my parents worked, and they also took me to the church next door, which had beautiful stained glass windows showing the Bible stories I had read in the children's picture Bible my uncle gave me when I was ten years old. I read every story.

I loved to read more about the Bible. In the summer I went to Sunday School when I went to stay in Dayton, Ohio with my mother's mother. Other times I went to my father's family in Molene, Illinois and again I went to Sunday School. I loved church and the Word of God.

When I got into high school, the African-American students faced a lot of discrimination and we petitioned for an African-American history class. I took the class and fell deeply in love with all of the heroes and she-roes of the United States who were of African descent. This led me to see even greater achievements of all people, because my whole family was diverse, from black-black to white-white and every color in between. I loved my family and understood even more that God created and loved all people, just like the many beautiful colors of the flowers. Yet, I knew God was crying because his children were not loving each other. Many suffered from poverty, racism, starvation, war, killings and just ugly indifference. They were hurt and yet loving like Jesus. So my passion for God and history became my compassion for all people, to work toward racial reconciliation of God's children and a new Reconstruction of the hearts and minds of God's children, as God promised he would put his Spirit — loving him and your neighbor — in our minds and hearts.

I started to think about how we fight the brokenness, the chaos and the anger of this world. To me, the internal brokenness of the heart and mind is the result of a world turning from a loving Father-God. This outer chaos and internal chaos shows up in a person who hates him/herself and hates others. This goes against God's/Jesus' command to love God and love your neighbor. So we must come back to God.

I ended up teaching low income kids. The children that

were the hardest to break through to were those who really needed love (like they needed water), for a teacher to care about them and believe they could learn and were somebody (like all children are). Like our heavenly Father, I had to be loving, kind, strict, and go after them when they went astray. In the end, they knew I cared. A day of teaching and learning was a day of healing and growth for the students and for me. The students realized they were not 100% genius, but they were no one's "throw aways" either. They were God's children with a great destiny ahead of them. There was hope in their eyes. Like Jesus giving sight to the blind, they were starting to see and believe in themselves. I taught almost 40 years. I spoke intentionally to my students about hard work and their destiny. I still talk to people, no matter how old they are, about the glorious light of Jesus and of God's word. Be intentional. Speak to others with God's love and do unto others as you would like them to do unto you. Christ's sufferings on the cross have given us redemption and salvation, healing and love. Let's start living like it.

THIRD SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: DISCOVER A STORY

Read about the life and work of a Christian hero or she-roe that you don't know much about. Thank God for this person as you reflect on how their story speaks to your life and/or our world today.

Resources:

- The Daily Office website (<https://dailyoffice.wordpress.com>); this offers stories about a different saint every day.
- *Meet the Saints Family Storybook*, by Melody Wilson Shobe and Lindsay Hardin Freeman (Forward Movement Press).

THIRD WEEK OF LENT

FIRST READING

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4, 15-17

¹ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

FIRST REFLECTION

LUKE WULBECKER

Luke Wulbecker serves on the vestry at Church of the Savior, co-leads our Compassion Ministry team, and participates in leading our weekly worship.

I originally volunteered to play drums for Church of the Savior because I felt that certain songs were being played too slowly during worship, especially songs that focused on celebrating the Lord. I feel that celebrations should generally be loud and upbeat. By offering to play drums, I was convinced that I could liven things up a bit.

When I do play the drums during a weekend service, I often feel very self-conscious. I have thoughts like, “How do I sound?” “Am I going too fast or too slow?” “Did anyone notice that I just messed up?” The problem with all of these thoughts, including the ones about trying to speed up the tempo, is that they are

very self-focused. When I am thinking these thoughts, I am not taking into account what others may need; I am only thinking about what I am experiencing. When I am focused on myself while worshipping, I become anxious and timid in my playing. I lose focus on the Lord and the communal aspect of worship.

Oftentimes, during a service, I will look up from the corner where I am sitting behind the drums and see someone in the parish worshipping in what seems like a very heartfelt way. It is obvious that they are experiencing something deep — their eyes may be closed, their hands may be raised, they may even be standing. Something changes in my soul when I see that. My thoughts of my own performance seem to dim, and my joy of allowing others to feel connection with the Lord becomes my focus. I notice that I feel a sense of peace, and I worry less about each note that I am playing. My drumming becomes less of a performance and more of an offering to the Lord and those around me. I am no longer the center of my attention, but instead my drumming becomes a response to a deep love that I feel.

I am a Two (Helper) on the enneagram, and I love encouragement. Playing drums in a way that helps others praise the Lord does my heart good. Encouraging others is a way that I worship the Lord; I am aiding in the Lord's work by helping build His church. In this way, my purpose becomes bigger than my own desires. My worship becomes tied to the worship of others, and I feel that we can offer up a communal song to the Lord that will be like incense rising to Him.

Drumming for Savior services has taught me some things. First, it has taught me that I am very self-focused. I feel that everyone is (and, if I am honest, should be) paying attention to me because I think I am really important. Second, it has taught me that self-focused thinking leads to feelings of anxiety, timidity, criticism, and loneliness. Third, I have learned that thinking about encouraging others frees my heart from many of the aforementioned negative feelings, and makes me feel more connected to the Lord. Fourth, it has taught me that it is often not my surroundings that determine whether I feel joy, but where I decide to put my focus. Focusing on the Lord and others frees and feeds my soul. And fifth, I have learned that the enemy wants me to focus on myself and not others, so he makes it very easy to forget that true joy is found outside of myself. I often find

myself too easily slipping right back into my self-centered ways. I love drumming. I love people (most of the time). And I love the Lord. I am my best self when I use my drumming to respond to the Lord and to help others do the same.

And I still think that it's good to have fast and loud songs during worship sometimes.

FIRST SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: ENCOURAGEMENT

Whether through words, drumming, or otherwise, Luke's gift of encouragement is a gift best employed when, as he said, it is focused on Christ and in the service of sharing God's love with others.

Here are some suggestions for practicing encouragement/ blessing:¹

- Craft a blessing for someone you know. Ask God to lead you to Scripture that can encourage this person, and then give the blessing in person or in written form.
- Choose one day this week to bless or encourage as many people as you can. Don't flatter. Ask God to give you divine eyesight. When appropriate, share this blessing out loud, or when not appropriate, speak the blessing to God and ask God to bless this person. At the end of the day, reflect on what it was like to be one who carried the blessing of God into the day.
- Ask God if there is any gift, skill, or talent you have that could be used to bless others. Take one tangible step towards using that gift this week.

¹ Suggestions adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, p. 200.

SECOND READING

ADAPTED FROM PSALM 27

Teach me how to live, O Lord.
My heart has heard you say, "Come and talk with me," and
my heart responds, "Lord, I am coming."
I will see goodness in the land of the living.

SECOND REFLECTION

CARA PETERSON

*Two poems, and a meditation: on the opening of the spirit through
the natural world.*

Opening to each other, in celebration . . .

Opening to God, in pain . . .

*And easing the heart open, season by season, at one of the
best places I know for "radically resisting busyness and hurry": the
Morton Arboretum.*

— Cara Peterson

Open House

There was beauty all around.

The studio was open
To accomplishment and possibility,
To the moment,
To guests.

Then the skies opened wide
And the ground swelled up over our sandals and
The wet snatched at us under our round rain shields
And we sought shelter until it relented.

Then we opened up too,
To the air, calm yet alive,
To the lake tossing in its rocky pen, light mutely
streaking above,
To latte art and pie shop charm,
To one another, gently.

Benediction

Thank you for the orange today
Whose juice flowed astonishingly plentiful
over the reamer
And whose oil blessed me later
As I pressed my fingers to my eyes
In pain.

How to Visit the Arboretum

You could plan to cross-country ski with Christine. It might never happen — bluster aside, Chicago doesn't have that kind of snow lying around — but it might remind you to see it that way, as riches.

If those four inches come, you could also ski with Sheri, who knows the way and doesn't mind you falling over and might increase your odds of spotting creatures, because can be present. When the coyote streaks along the prairie or the buck regards you from the woods — you'll be present too.

Now if it's birds you want to see, you really should go with Rod, who knows them by name. Or with Donna, who will find the American woodcock's strut as funky as you do or the blue heron as majestic, unfolding his staggering wingspan. You'll stand together in wonder.

Snow but no skis? Take Erik; try snowshoeing. He'll laugh when you sink, accompany you all the way across the daffodil glade — dormant bulbs one foot below — and back to the bridge where you can take beauty into your ears and eyes: water over dam, sun on sparkling snow. Don't pretend not to be dazzled!

Say there's no snow. Forget the snow. Traipse among the trees, reach out a hand to green velveteen and finger-scan the moss's message. Go alone, or with someone who will let you breathe; walking these woods in winter you might hear, "Consider the oak leaves. . . ."

Soon (maybe today!) you can catch the earliest blooms on the witch hazels in their little tumble of a dell. No buxom blossoming cherry, this subtler show. But angle your head up

close, spot the mophead flowers, give them your attention, and they will favor you with delicate fragrance — you will possess the sweet spice of late winter.

Spring is near, and here it's already the Lenten "springtime of the soul." Go and go again in spring, that season of awakening, to this place where anticipation and change are palpable. (Who knows what may stir?) Sit long and silent with a friend above a sea of squill flowers. Let the basin of blue take your breath away. Receive it back, refreshed.

If it's June before you remember the Arb, go play in summer's abundance of bloom and buzz and green and green and green. Rustle up some children, or not, but find the bee hives, try the hedge maze; cool your head under the giant watering can, or your feet in the wading stream while little engineers shift rocks around them. You might run into Mike and Amy and Meiyong at a cultural festival, your heart might shift into rhythm with a taiko drum, you might launch a lighted boat at dusk. When you're spent, stillness awaits. Find a path with your name on it, or a bench with a view. "In returning and rest," you know, "you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."

Don't forget: every day is good for a slow loop in a vehicle. When the days are long, what luxury to go just before closing! Wend your way around by car, or stroll just far enough from one to sit overlooking the pond, glinting in the Tuscan gold of sunset. Light-bathe, side by side — with Linda, with Sandy — talk about life, or death. You'll be talking about love, you'll be breathing it. Pull out your tea flask and you'll be drinking it. Together.

Speaking of gold, in autumn the Arb gets gussied up, everyone knows, and everyone goes! Be one of them. But here's a secret: if you time it just right, after a late-season rain, if you drive through ever so slowly, introducing someone who's never been there (Emma, say) to those dark-barked, golden-haired maidens, the rain-wet maples that glow their quietly brilliant welcome to the East Woods, you'll be a conjurer, conspirator. You will be the body of Christ, or maybe just a finger, bent—one of millions reenacting that marvelous, mischievous beckon: Taste and see.

Or you could call me up. Anytime. I'll bring the tea.

THIRD READING**JOEL 2:28-29**

²⁸ “And afterward,
 I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
 Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
 your old men will dream dreams,
 your young men will see visions.
²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women,
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”

THIRD REFLECTION**HEATHER GANDY**

Heather Gandy volunteers with women inmates at the DuPage County Jail. Here she shares a bit of her experience and where she has seen God in and through this ministry.

DuPage county jail tends to be notable in its absence of color. The walls are a cinder block off white, with grey metal doors. Our meeting room tends to be a bit on the grungy side: the tables are white, the women are all dressed the same. However, in our time of worship there, our Sunday evening service, it becomes a sanctuary, and it is like an explosion of color.

Our singing is a mixture of contemporary Lauren Daigle and traditional Jesus Loves Me. It also includes new songs that the women request — singers like Tamela Mann and Kirk Franklin that I haven't known before, but I have come to love.

When it's my week to teach — that can be a stretch. I spend most of my time as an accountant, working with numbers in black and white. Teaching (probably better described as leading a discussion) is definitely coloring outside the lines for me. My teaching is a bit like throwing paint at the wall. Sometimes it looks like a picture, but often it takes the course of the discussion (and help from my partner) to add an outline to make the picture clearer. But it is sincere and from the heart, if not especially polished and smooth in delivery.

At the end of most classes we hand out adult coloring sheets — they're a mix of pictures, many with Bible verses and artful

calligraphy, and the women share them with other inmates and often send them home to their children. It's a simple way for the message to go beyond our classroom.

Most importantly, women share about how they have encountered God — in places I'm not familiar with, in ways that I may not realize — and they show me a slightly different perspective, helping my own picture of God to be just a little bit broader, bigger. Or maybe they add another shade to my color palette that makes up my own image of God.

It's a beautiful mosaic of women — women singing, praying, sharing, reading Scriptures. The Holy Spirit tends to show up as well, blessing us all with his presence in a beautiful, colorful overflowing of his grace.

THIRD SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: COMMUNITY

Adele Calhoun defines the practice of Community in this way: “Christian community exists when believers connect with each other in authentic and loving ways that encourage growth in Christ. They engage in transparent relationships that cultivate, celebrate and make evident Christ’s love for all the world.”

What is one way you can cultivate community with someone new, perhaps someone who has a different life experience, perspective, etc.? Suggestions:

- Invite someone new to join you for a friends/family gathering.
- Cultivate deeper community with a friend, or in a small group, by sharing life stories. Be a proactive listener. Reflect back to the storyteller ways you see God at work in their lives.
- Join a small group or attend a Men’s Breakfast, Women’s Night Out, or small gathering of Savior friends. Invite someone from outside the church along.

FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

FIRST READING

MATTHEW 19:13-15

¹³ Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

¹⁴ Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” ¹⁵ When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

FIRST REFLECTION

SHERRY ANAST

Sherry Anast has been a part of the Savior community for the past three years and every since I met her, I have been impressed by the way she interacts with young children, which she has been doing for over 65 years! So I asked Sherry a few questions about how working with children has been a means of connecting her with God and others.

When did you start working with kids?

I always loved kids. I started babysitting when I was ten and at twelve had the full care of a newborn for twelve hours a day. (The mom had to stay in the hospital and the dad had to work). In college I committed my life to Jesus and started teaching Sunday School. I think the kids knew more than I did at times, but it was fun!

What do you see of God when working with kids?

Young children come to God with a fresh, open attitude. They don't have a lot of preconceived ideas. I love exploring with them. They see God's story as being about them, their life, their world. As an adult, I love seeing God through their eyes.

What have you learned while working with kids?

To tell God's story in simple, concrete ways. I often ask kids to retell the story back to me the next day. Sometimes it's amazing what they hear. (For instance, "The lame man had a broken leg. Or "The leper had chicken pox!" or "God created things with his super powers.")

I've learned that God is about me and my world. He is not too complicated for the simplest thinking, yet he is deep enough to challenge the most intellectual thinker.

I've learned that worship is an awe of God that I can share with children and they with me. He really is amazing to all of us.

What continues to move you to work with kids?

I just love finding out where they are being a part of helping them take another step. I love the expressions on their faces when they learn or experience something new. Most of all I love how excited they are about their own progress and growth as they discover God.

FIRST SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: CHILDLIKE FAITH

Who are those in your everyday life who are of "humble position" like children? As you spend time with them, ask God to give you an open posture to see more of him through their eyes. Consider what being in awe of God together with this person, might look like.

SECOND READING**GENESIS 2:8-10, 15**

⁸ Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰ A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

SECOND REFLECTION**KAREN LIEBOLD**

Karen Liebold is passionate about Creation Care not just as a means for right living, but as a meaningful way to connect with God.

I grew up in rural Ohio and our house was surrounded on two sides by corn fields and then beyond the fields was an apple orchard and a pond. As a child I helped garden with my parents. I helped plant, water, harvest, snap beans, shuck corn and peas. I loved walking barefoot in the garden and I still think it's the best feeling on the feet a person could ever have. I went on adventures tromping through the corn fields to the orchard where I would pick apples, wonder at the blossoms, and cringe at the worms lodged in the apples I picked. I wandered through the woods looking for Jack in the Pulpits, May Apples and any other flowers I could find. I would fish in the pond after catching grasshoppers to use as bait. Gazing into the pond, wandering in the woods and making mud pies, I felt connected to God through His creation.

We lived ten minutes from Lake Erie and the lake served as my “bearings” in life. I always thought of the lake when I was giving directions or being given directions. “Go north, towards the lake.” My grandfather was a speed boat racer in the area and

some of my fondest memories are when he would have me sit on the bow of his racing boat while he blasted off through the water. The wind on my face, all my cares lost as I watched the waves crash against the boat, splashing me while I held on for dear life. I was never afraid, I loved the water and I loved the freedom I felt being there. I would look up to the sky and thank God for the water as I asked Him to save my grandfather.

As I considered leaving rural Ohio for college, I had two good choices: Moody Bible Institute or Toccoa Falls College. I visited Moody, but as a country girl, I never thought I could feel safe in the city. I visited Toccoa, named for the large Toccoa Falls waterfall on campus, and it was a no-brainer. I spent years at the falls, thinking, journaling and praying for a godly husband. I never would have imagined a decade later, I would love living in Chicago, married to a Chicago city-boy. Even then, I had to take Steve to see the falls, where I spent so much time praying for him, and to experience the power of the water.

Throughout my life, I feel connected to God and others when I am near water or in the woods. Cleaning the creek behind our house by picking up garbage in and around the water feels to me like a janitor who cleans a sanctuary in a house of worship. It may be a job of no fame, fortune or prestige but it is a high calling, important and necessary. It's a gross job and we get wet, muddy and stinky cleaning up bottles, golf balls and plastic bags, trudging home after the Sweep the Creek events soaked and kinda grossed out. But we get to work side by side with our non-believer neighbors, cleaning God's creation. We bond, we laugh, we lug bag after bag of garbage out of the creek. Even though no God language is spoken, we build a common bond and God language is spoken. We all walk away feeling tired but good because we cleaned the place where we live. I feel like we cleaned our place of worship. It feels like holy ground and we get the privilege to walk it and take care of it. What higher calling can there be?

In caring for our creek, the city of Bartlett has developed a pilot program with me to plant native plants and seed along the creek bed to restore it to its native habitat. Last year I found myself alone out there next to the creek, cutting down 6 ft. tall ragweed. The ragweed towered over me and I felt small and frustrated with my pruning shears as I chopped away, sometimes

swearing as I went along. In my swearing and sweating, I all of a sudden heard quaking behind me and saw a happy duck couple swimming down the creek and then I heard a whoosh of wings as a heron flew above me. I was in awe and felt re-connected to my Savior, who cares for His creatures and His creation. Even in the midst of ragweed, I found there was life and hope.

SECOND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: CARE FOR THE EARTH

Choose one of the following:

- Become familiar with some part of our distressed environment. Commit yourself to one step you will take to care for some earthly resource.
- Take stock of the ways you interact with the earth. Thank God for the cows that give you milk; the trees that provide wood for your table; the cotton that makes your clothes; the electricity that fuels your daily tasks. Consider ways you can interact with these parts of God's creation with deeper gratitude and less presumption.
- Become conscious of litter in the places you live and work. Invite others to join you in clearing up shared spaces.

THIRD READING

PSALM 131 (NRSV)

- ¹ O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
- ² But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.
- ³ O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and forevermore.

THIRD REFLECTION

MARY JEAN YOUNG

Mary Jean Young is well-versed in all kinds of spiritual formation practices and has led many others in retreats, Bible studies, seminars and the like. Here she describes a creative practice that has enriched her personal prayer life in recent years.

I am always searching for a better way to pray. Specifically, I look for tools, techniques, methods, and practices that will help me be a better pray-er — one who prays more consistently, effectively, and joyfully. Instead of prayer being a practice of lists and monologues that I feel I ought to do, I want prayer to be more relational and enjoyable. In my quest to become a more joyful, effective pray-er, I learned that if I give myself something to do while my heart and mind are engaged in prayer, I do pray more joyfully and consistently (and with less distraction). This is not a new idea, of course. Many people have discovered the value of praying while doing a favorite activity like walking, running, coloring, gardening, jigsaw puzzling, or painting. Why? Because all these practices allow the mind to go into a meditative state, freeing it to ponder, pray, or contemplate.

Several years ago, Church of the Savior offered a workshop based on the book *Praying in Color*. The book was written for “word-weary pray-ers” who want to pray but may find it hard to sit still, or fumble for the right words, or have wandering minds and short attention spans, or are experiencing prayer as joyless

obligation. The author discovered that by doing something she enjoyed — doodling with bright colors — her mind was free to offer silent, wordless prayers for those she was praying for, imagining them wrapped in the life, light, and love of God.

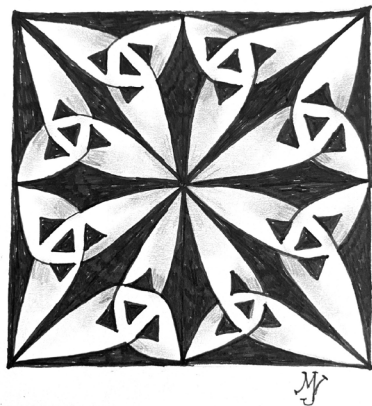
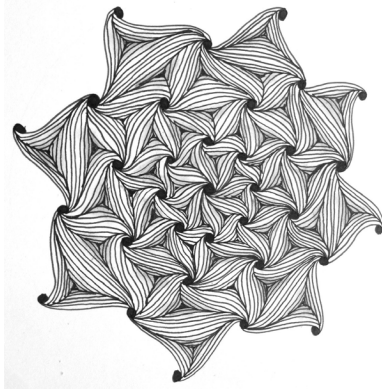
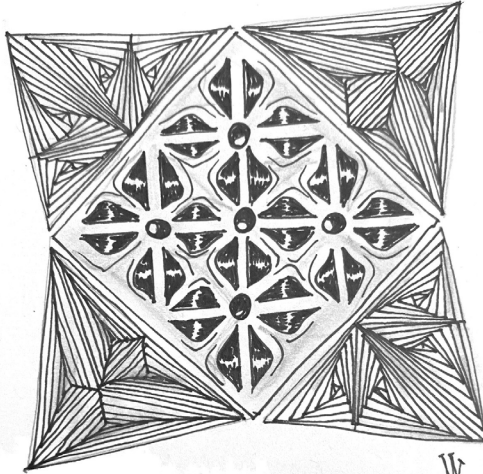
This technique for prayer appealed to me and so I began to experiment with praying this way. After a while, however, I noticed that I was a little more focused than I wanted to be on drawing my doodles and choosing what color to use next. I wondered if there might be a simpler and less distracting technique that I could use while praying. That is when I discovered the Zentangle method — a meditative, repetitive-stroke art form that requires only a pencil, black ink pen and paper, and no artistic skill other than drawing straight or curved lines in simple patterns that are repeated over and over.

After learning and practicing a few basic patterns, I quickly discovered that the process of drawing simple repetitive patterns requires little focused attention and is perfect for meditation or prayer. The fun part of this method is the surprise waiting at the end of the process when the pattern or tangle is finished. As the simple repetitive strokes are drawn, an intricate and interesting design emerges. The finished product appears delightfully complicated, and one would assume it took some artistic skill to create it, but that is not the case at all. Anyone who can hold a pen and draw a line can do it. And, I love that the finished pattern, which I usually draw on a small square of paper, in a sketchbook, or in my journal, is a beautiful reminder of my prayer time.

A tangle or pattern can usually be completed in ten to twenty minutes and over the last seven years, this has become a wonderful way for me to intentionally quiet myself before God as I intercede, meditate on Scripture, worship while listening to music, or just be silent as I listen for anything God may whisper to my heart. This is not the only way I pray, of course, but it has become one of my favorite ways to pray. However, I have learned that even though this is an enjoyable process, I still have to choose to “waste time” with God, rather than doing something that seems more “productive.” But each time I choose, I’m grateful for the way this practice frees my mind, stills my body, quiets my soul, and refreshes my spirit. It has become a tangible way for me to pray for others and to respond to Jesus’ invitation to come be with me and be still and know that I am God.

THIRD SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: MEDITATIVE DRAWING

Meditate on Psalm 131 either trying the Zentangle method or some other meditative practice such as those Mary Jean mentioned above. Ask the Lord to open your spirit to hear what he may have for you, and to be present with him with whatever you are carrying.



(This examples of tangles were not drawn “freehand” but created by making repetitive strokes following a simple pattern. If you want to know more about the Zentangle method, check out zentangle.com.)

FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

FIRST READING

ACTS 17:24-28

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”

FIRST REFLECTION

RICHARD KEPNER

Richard Kepner is a longtime friend of the Savior who loves history and finds deep meaning in the ways the study of history informs his study of Scripture. Here he shares some of those insights.

In most sermons and Bible studies, the focus is naturally, properly on the Bible, the Word of God. But I was a historian long before I was a Christian and I’ve often been disquieted by the fact that almost all church studies end quickly after New Testament times. Perhaps a few prominent martyrs are mentioned as well as a handful of early writers, including John Chrysostom and St. Augustine. Then fast forward to St. Francis, (maybe a nervous glance at Thomas Aquinas on the way), Ignatius Loyola and the rest are Protestant leaders, with a lot of modern authors cited.

That’s fine and sufficient for the spiritual needs of the modern Christian, but it leaves the impression that Christianity was pure in that first century, valiant in the time of Roman persecution and then confused and sullied until our guys (read here Protestants) came on the scene and started the process of

straightening things out. It seems that Christ's promise to be with us always, "until the end of the age," is nearly forgotten, as well as the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit.

By studying history, especially non-Christian historians in the early church era, a lot is added to our knowledge of the long life of Christianity and to intellectual defenses of the Gospel. For example, it is compelling to find that none of the early pagan historians denied that Christ lived, that he existed. Had he not lived it would have been a simple matter for early pagans to say, "We don't find this guy in our legal archives!"¹ Instead they acknowledged his existence, but said that he was a wizard, or a con man.

Likewise in the histories of Tacitus, perhaps the most respected of early Imperial Roman historians, we find two entries of compelling interest. The first, in Book 15 (44) of his *History*, is a reference to Christians being martyred by the Emperor Nero — crucified or soaked in tar and set on fire as living torches to illuminate night time gladiatorial combats. Tacitus explains that Christians were followers of an "abomination" superstition, based on the teachings of Christus, "who suffered the extreme penalty... at the hands of Pontius Pilate."

Another fascinating historical entry from Tacitus is found in the *Annals*, Book 5 (1), concerning an unusual event in Egypt, long before the Roman occupation of that Empire. Since Tacitus was writing with the sponsorship of the Roman Emperor that meant that he had complete access to all the archives and records of all the parts of the Empire, including the records of Egypt. The record is of the Exodus, but told from the perspective of the proud Egyptian state. It says that the Egyptians found themselves the reluctant hosts of Jews and tolerated their presence until the outbreak of disease that was believed to be the fault of the Jews. The Egyptians expelled their displeasing guests into the desert and there they were quickly seduced by the words of "Moyse" who took over leadership of the Jews.

¹ When my German barbarian ancestors took Rome in 410 and again in 476 AD they cheerfully made bonfires of the centuries of Roman records out of sheer vandalistic malicious joy, depriving us of precise documentation of Roman history and doubtless the official record of the trial of Christ, which Pilate would have submitted.

Moyses set up a new worship of one God, “supreme and eternal” and led them away from Egypt. The religion Moyses imparted is “tasteless and mean” and “all their other customs, which are at once perverse and disgusting, owe their strength to their very badness.” This is the only non-scriptural written evidence of the Exodus I’m aware of, an example of history lending support to faith, an answer to those who argue that our belief rests only on faith, without substantiation.

FIRST SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Get to know some of the early history Richard mentioned here through one of the following:

- Do an internet search for Tacitus or Josephus and read some of what they had to say about the history of the near eastern world surrounding Jesus’ life.
- Read works of some of the early saints such as Athanasius, Cyril or Basil and their selected works found in the Ancient Christian Commentary series by IVP.

There are many great books on understanding the context of both the Old and New Testament. Here are just a few:

- *The World Around the Old Testament*, edited by Bill Arnold and Brent Strawn
- *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament*, edited by Jonathan Greer, John Hilber and John Walton
- *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, by K.C. Hanson and Douglas Oakman
- *The World of the New Testament*, edited by Joel Green

SECOND READING

REVELATION 7:9-10

⁹ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

SECOND REFLECTION

KATHY KASTNER

Kathy Kastner is a professor of World Music and a regular part of our worship team. Kathy shares an imagination for renewing our hunger for God through the lens of musical cultures around the world.

The academic rhythm of my life begins in the fall with my World Music class, which I have taught for 25 years. Over those years I have come to see that class analogous to a spiritual journey, as we metaphorically travel the globe learning about the creativity of God’s handiwork in the musical cultures around the world. As the “travel guide,” I gain new insights every time I teach the class and my student’s eyes and ears are opened to see and hear people and sounds vastly different than their own. It is a marvelous journey that points to God’s creative work and the great variety of music — and people — found all over the world.

It is quite astonishing for most of my students to realize that there is a huge amount of music from around the world that sounds nothing like what they, as music majors, listen to and have studied in depth. They quickly discover that music is not a universal language, but rather a gift that God has given people and cultures all over the world in which they can express themselves and reflect the uniqueness of who God has created them to be.

The Old Testament gives us numerous examples of the importance of music long before there was any notion of a “western” musical system; in 1 Chronicles 23:5, we read, “four thousand are to praise the Lord with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose.” Furthermore, there are many references to music and musical instruments particularly in 2 Chronicles and the Psalms. Descriptions found in the Old Testament suggest that music was to be used in worship, in the service of God and for dedications, to name a few. As we read this, it is important to remind ourselves that the music that would have been heard in those days would be fairly unrecognizable to our western ears, as the music of that time emerged from a culture apart from the west.

As part of teaching various musical cultures around the world, we encounter the intersection of musical styles from the west and those of indigenous musical cultures at various points in history. One of these early intersections came from missionaries in England in the 1800’s who were following the words of Matthew 28:19: “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Those well-intended Christ-followers had no understanding of a world beyond their own — how could they at that point in history? So, they brought the good news of Christ cloaked in the western tradition of hymns. Time and time again, the missionaries encountered cultures with great singing traditions, but the musical vocabulary was often so different than that of hymn singing that the people could not even replicate the intervals they were being taught. Believing that their hymns were an essential part of the Christian message, the missionaries were determined that the indigenous people had to learn the hymns in order to know God. Sadly, that often resulted in the destruction of the indigenous musical culture, sometimes only temporarily until the missionaries left, but still, it was a devastating devaluation of the cultures that God had created.

But we must also look at the rest of the story. . . .as the world became more aware of the many cultures around the world due to the development of communication and technological tools at the end of the twentieth century, mission-minded servants developed new ways to learn, analyze and create indigenous

music and combine those melodies with translated scriptures. More recently there have been workshops in numerous parts of the world focused on bringing church leaders and musicians together to have them write their own songs for worship...so the Lord and his people are at work so that all may worship God in their own musical language!

So, what is the takeaway from this account? The beautiful description from Revelation 7:9 says it all: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." While this passage does not specifically mention music, it includes every feature needed to create music: people and language and it emphasizes the inclusivity of every nation and tribe. If one imagines the heavenly choir, it will include many voices from many nations, each singing their own heart music! My hope is that we would begin to grasp the bigger picture of God's work in the many cultures of the world.

SECOND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: MUSIC

What exposure do you have to world music, and in particular Christian music from other parts of the world? Research an unexplored style of Christian music using either the library's music collection or any of the various Internet music sources. As you listen, ask God to open your heart and mind to the variety of ways people praise and worship him. Allow yourself to sit with any resonance or dissonance you experience. What is something new you notice about God, his people and/or creation as you listen?

THIRD READING

PSALM 139:1-17

- ¹ You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
- ² You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- ³ You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
- ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.
- ⁵ You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
- ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
- ⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
- ⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
- ⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
- ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
- ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
- ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
- ¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
- ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
- ¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!

THIRD REFLECTION

SHERI ABEL

Sheri Abel is a French Professor, spiritual director, and the leader of our Intercessory Prayer Team. Here she shares her personal journey of bringing the whole person into prayer.

It is such a beautiful gift how God has designed us to experience life with our whole being. He created our minds and bodies to work together to process our stories, to live out our relationship with Him, and to internalize His Truths.

Throughout the years I've learned to bring my whole person into my times of solitude with the Lord. I do this by using the expressive arts — whether it be playing with words, with color and texture, a percussion instrument, or using movement. This has opened the way for me to know God's Truth in an experiential way.

What I love about the nature of the expressive arts is that it's not about skill. It's not about forcing a certain outcome. It is about process. It is about exploring, about being present to the moment, and for me, about relaxing in the truth that the Lord is always present, ministering to me.

I don't always have the words to express what I'm thinking or feeling and using a non-verbal medium such as color, texture, images, sound, and/or movement gives voice to it. And when I do have the words, the visual language adds another dimension, allowing me to notice even more what is going on within and grasp a truth more concretely.

I often begin my time with the Lord by lighting a candle, a visual reminder of His all-encompassing, affirming, non-anxious, and even fun presence. He desires to be all that my soul needs. The flame is also a reminder that He is the One Who longs to be with me as we explore Scripture, my life, or use the expressive arts to recalibrate, to relax in His presence and have fun. After lighting a candle, I continue to center myself by sitting in silence in His presence, or, if my nervous system isn't quite ready to settle down, I listen to how my body wants to move, allow it to move, then gently bring it into a place of stillness. I might journal, then I write a one or two sentence prayer, expressing my openness to hear from God and the grace I desire to receive during our time together.

One way that I incorporate expressive arts into my time with the Lord is by slowly reading a passage of Scripture and noticing the words that catch my attention or where I feel resistance. After sitting with the Scripture passage and the words that stood out, I may:

- 1) use color, shapes, lines, textures to express those words; or
- 2) use them to write a poem/prayer; or
- 3) use a percussion instrument to express their essence; or
- 4) use my body to express the words and notice what unfolds.

I often use several art forms as each one enriches the other. Using the example above, after I use color to express the words that stood out, I sit and look at what I created, then choose six to ten words to describe what I see or feel. I then write a poem/prayer using those words. Finally, I use my body to express the poem/prayer.

I end my time in silence, resting in the Lord's presence and committing to Him what arose during our time together. I thank Him that He is always at work in my soul whether I'm aware of it or not. Then, I blow out the candle. During my times of solitude, something new always arises, allowing me to experience on a deep and personal level the Lord's invitations as He speaks to me through His Word.

Another way I incorporate expressive arts is by using the body to internalize God's Truths. Movement can bring about a greater integration of body, mind, and emotion. When there is a biblical Truth or Fruit of the Spirit that I would like to experience in a specific situation, I use my body to help my soul internalize it. For example, if there is a situation that triggers fear and my desire is to trust God and be emboldened by His peace, I pause and acknowledge that emotion. Then, I ask myself:

- 1) Where do I feel the fear in my body? How would I describe what it feels like?
- 2) How does my body want to express that feeling of fear? Is there a gesture, movement, or pose that expresses it?
- 3) Once my body expresses the fear, I ask myself how my body would express the trust and peace I desire.

- 4) Then, I choreograph a series of movements, starting from that place of fear, then slowly letting that movement shift to express the feelings of trust and peace.

An alternative is finding a verse or song that illustrates the trust and peace I desire and then using my body to express it.

At any given time, I can reenact those movements from fear to peace, and the more I embody that “dance”, I find that at some point, the fear dissipates, giving way to the embodiment of God’s power, enabling me to stand tall as I trust Him and let His peace flow through me.

THIRD SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: WHOLE-BODIED ENGAGEMENT

What stirred in you as you read Sheri’s reflection? Take some time to sit with these stirrings and ask God what invitation he has for you therein. Then, set aside a chunk of time this week to practice either something Sheri described here, or something else that expresses this whole-bodied engagement with God in prayer.

NOTES

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Week One, Second Spiritual Practice (p. 8): Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 215.

Week Two, Second Spiritual Practice (p. 17): David L. Fleming, SJ, *What is Ignatian Spirituality?* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 57.

Week Two, Second Spiritual Practice, Matthew 18:1-5 (p. 18): New International Reader's Version (NIRV) copyright © 1995, 1996, 1998, 2014 by Biblica, Inc.®.

Week Three, Third Spiritual Practice (p. 29): Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 149.

Week Four, Third Reading, Psalm 131 (p. 35): New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

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