

Making Life Decisions: Journey of Discernment

Forty Individual Reflections

with

Seven Group Studies

A Process of Discernment Guided by Down-to-Earth Biblical Principles

An Online Book at this Internet Address:

<http://makinglifedecisions.blogspot.com>

by

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About 'Making Life Decisions'

Dr. Geoff Pound's *Making Life Decisions: Journey in Discernment*, is a workbook, a tour guide or a travel journal for people wanting to make a forty-day journey in discernment.

Forty Individual Studies

The book, which draws on down-to-earth biblical principles, is written for Christians, for seekers and specifically for those at the vocational crossroads. The forty short chapters are not designed to be read in one sitting but they are intended as daily guides and reflections in a deliberate period of seeking and discovery.

Group Studies

Making Life Decisions also contains seven group studies for people who want to make this journey in discernment with another person or with a small group.

Integrated Learning

This book can be used as a resource, for those who wish to try or those who have already experienced the benefit of their church exploring a theme for a six week period by means of an integrated process of personal reflection, small group studies and worship services.

You may have experienced the benefits of 'Forty Days of Purpose' or some other integrated study series. This book is an invitation to you, your group and your church to take another journey—'A Journey in Discernment'.

Responding to the One Big Question

This book is the author's response to the one question he has been asked more than any other in thirty years of local church, denominational and seminary leadership: 'How can I know God's will for my life or in this situation.'

This is the book I wish I had been able to give every person that asked that question, to help them make their own journey.

This book is not only for study. It is a workbook to get you moving on a journey.

Geoff Pound

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About The Online Edition

Online Publishing

I may choose at a later time to publish *Making Life Decisions* in a traditional book format but I am now publishing this book online for several reasons:

It is Accessible

It is a fast way of making information available to millions of people in all parts of the world, even in places where it is difficult to send books or take them personally.

It is International

This text is in English but online translation programs are constantly being improved, thus potentially opening the insights of this book to huge numbers of people who possess first languages other than English.

It is Popular

An increasing number of people are choosing to get their news and articles through online 'readers' delivered to their computer desktop.

It is Inexpensive

Traditional publishing is getting very costly. 70% of novels published in the United States sell fewer than 500 copies. Generally, publishers and authors don't make any profit until their fifth book. In contrast, online publishing is relatively inexpensive so that this book is being made available to readers at no cost.

It is Environmentally Friendly

Printing words for screens saves many trees from being sacrificed, although it is recognized that readers may wish to print pages for writing, reflection and group study.

It is Expandable

In this online edition there is no opportunity for readers to add comments. Instead you are encouraged to go to the Resource Page (final page) to find new books, articles, resources and web links being added. The Resource Page also links to a related site called, [Discernment Resources](#), upon which new stories about discernment are being posted and suggestions of resources, questions and comments can be added by readers.

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Copyright and Download

This book contains a treasure trove of stories, quotations and prayers. Wherever possible I have noted the reference details. Should readers possess the page and publishing information for unnoted quotes, I would be glad to include these in any future edition of this book.

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Whenever it is indicated that these writings have drawn on the work of others, acknowledgement is required.

Download

In addition to all the chapters being separately posted on the web site site, all chapters and sections have been joined together into one document and is available for download.

Furthermore, all the Group Studies have been formed into one document and also made available for download from this page.

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Author and Acknowledgements

As a young person growing up in New Zealand I remember repeatedly asking my parents the question, “What am I supposed to do in life?” They took me to Careers Nights put on by the school but I agonized for years over this vocational question.

After I embarked on theological training and began to serve as a church pastor, the question continued to confront me and, while I was acquiring a sizeable bank of experience and a rich treasury of guidance principles, the elusive challenge of discernment has never been easy.

I would be rich if I had been given \$50 for every time someone asked me the question (or a variation of it): “How can I discover God’s will for my life or in this situation?” As a pastor, this is the question I have been asked more than any other. Sharing the weight of this question and its consequences has been a significant part of the privilege of being a pastor.

When my vocational journey took a new twist in which I served as a consultant with Australian Baptist Churches, I came to see that the issue of corporate discernment is pivotal to local churches and denominations in discovering their unique personality and mission.

My path turned later in the direction of training and leadership, first as a lecturer and then as Principal of Whitley College, the Baptist College of Victoria, and I discovered that student interviews and course planning were vitally connected with matters of discernment.

In recent years I have relocated with my wife to the Arabian Peninsula and I am testing out new vocational directions. Daily we are being confronted with questions of discernment. This book, therefore, does not come as a last word on discernment because one never actually nails it as one might solve a Sudoku puzzle. The issues of discernment change from time to time and from person to person because they are about the dynamic way that God relates to each individual in their uniqueness.

This sketch of some of the main stages of my life is provided not only to give some background to the author but to acknowledge my gratitude. To my parents who loved me into life, to congregations who nurtured my faith and trusted me, to my wife Lyn and our son and daughter, Mark and Bronwyn, with whom I have shared the journey, to the Whitley and Baptist Union of Victoria communities who provided much of the context in which my calling has been shaped and to those involved in my current, freelancing and borderless vocation, I am deeply grateful.

Making Life Decisions is offered with the hope that your journey will be one of adventure and delight as “you discern what is the will of God—what is good, acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12: 2)

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How to Use this Book

Introduction

A man was walking down the street when he spied in the front of a shop a weight and fortune telling machine. The sign on the machine read: “Your weight and fortune told for only \$5.00.” The man stopped and decided to put his money in the slot. In an instant, a slip of paper was spat out of the machine. The paper read, “Because you have such great abilities and talents, you will go far and will always be successful at everything you do.”

The man was thrilled with the news and he shared it with his wife. She listened without comment and then asked if she could see the piece of paper. She read it and handing it back she said, “Just as I thought. It got your weight wrong, too!”

There is a great interest in knowing the future and many will spend a fortune to get an answer about what they should do in a particular situation.

This book is not of the ‘penny in the slot’ variety but it is a guide book as you take responsibility and grapple with the hard questions. Instead of being a quick fix manual, this book recommends that readers, especially those at life’s crossroads, take forty days to engage in a journey of discernment.

Forty Days of Discernment

There is nothing magical about forty days but in the Bible the number ‘forty’ suggests a significant period. Jesus spent forty days in a desert before commencing his public ministry (Matthew 4: 2-11). It may not be possible or advisable for you to take forty days out of your schedule to be full time on the work of discernment but it would be good to think of how you might carve out a special forty days so that within this period you invest considerable time in walking this journey. As Jesus gave up eating and drinking to devote himself to this task, what might you give up to clear the decks and the diary for action?

Journey Together

This is not a *Lonely Planet Guide* to discernment. One of the insights of this book is that discernment does not have to be a solo endeavour and, like other forms of travel, discernment is best enjoyed with others. This book may be used individually but couples or groups might decide to embark on a journey of discernment together.

In making a collective decision to take this journey there may be some things people will do together and other things they will do on their own. Decide if and with whom you might make this journey. Even people scattered in different parts of the world might still unite together through this period and share their reflections by phone or email.

Daily Discernment Structure

This book offers a chapter for each day of intentional discernment. Use the book flexibly especially if you want to linger longer with a particular theme or extend the journey. How long you spend each day and what time of the day you do this is over to you. Meditating on the Scripture and reflecting on its implications is something that should not be rushed. Spending a lot of time in silence might be difficult if this isn’t

your custom but learn to extend this important time each day. Each chapter offers these parts:

Approach: This is the time to draw near to God, to collect our thoughts and tell God that we are present. There is a suggested prayer to enable us to focus our lives before God.

Scripture: This is normally a short passage but the suggestion is to read it slowly, repeatedly and meditatively, in such a way that it stays with us through the day.

Silence: With the Scripture echoing in your mind, spend a significant time listening to what the Spirit of God is saying to you.

Reflection: This provides brief comments related to the Scripture theme and often a story to illustrate some aspect of the practice of discernment.

Journal: It is suggested that you record your changing ideas, concerns and discoveries. You might also find your experience of journaling to be like author, Joan Didion's who said, "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear."¹

Don't see this like writing an examination answer! This is for your eyes only. Get yourself a special notebook or create a discernment file on your computer if you find this method easier. You might want to work through this book at a later time and what you write this time round may be quite different from what you write on a subsequent journey. You might find it useful to doodle or draw as well as to write words.

Selecting a Souvenir: Tourists love to buy souvenirs from the places they have visited. They remind them of a person, a place or an occasion. A souvenir is something that causes us to remember or literally "to come to mind." Each day on this journey in discernment there is an opportunity to select a souvenir—some word or image that might bring your earlier reflections to mind for further contemplation. For instance the reflection on Day 1 records the habit that Jesus cultivated of weekly worship. The souvenir you select on that day might be the succinct statement, "As was his custom." Or on the same day you might be taken with the story of *The Little Prince* and select the souvenir statement of "readying the heart to greet" God. Or on Day 14 when the reflection is about Moses and the burning bush your souvenir could be a thorn (to remind you of the ordinary way that God often appears) or a sandal (to bring to mind the holiness of every place).

Prayer: A short prayer provides a springboard for your own conversation with God and with others. Prayers are often expressed with the 'we' rather than the 'I' as some may wish to experience these daily times with a friend or partner. If so, take turns and share the different tasks—the leader of the day, the Scripture reader or the leader in prayer.

Commission: At the end of your prayer time, sense God sending you forward afresh on the journey of discovery and service.

¹ Joan Didion, 'Why I Write', *New York Times*, 5 December, 1976.

Check List for the Journey

Hear are some questions for pondering, discussion and decision. You might have some more:

Will these daily reflection and prayer times be a solo journey or will you do this with someone else?

When will you make time each day to walk the journey of discernment?

How much time each day will you devote to the journey?

Where will you meet?

What specific things will you give up to make time for your journey?

Group Sessions and Format

Seven group studies, entitled *Making Life Decisions: Journeying Together*, are included in the back of the book for those who would like to come together once a week for the duration of this forty day journey in discernment. Print off the studies from this web site or download the PDF file which has the entire book in one document.

It is suggested that you meet as a group for *Week 1: Ready for the Journey* and that your personal discernment times—*Day 1: A Time and Place to Greet God*—commence the day after. There are seven group studies so if your group meets on the same day each week the final study will serve as a wrapping up of this special discernment process. On the day of the group meeting and study individuals may also undertake their personal discernment exercises for that particular day. Each of the group studies flexibly picks up on some of the themes from the previous daily reflections but it is recognized that groups cannot always meet according to a strict timetable and each group will have to construct their own meeting schedule.

Group Questions

Your group might be an existing group that chooses to use these studies or it might be a new short-term group, especially drawn together to study this theme.

Some of the questions that each group might need to discuss include the following:

1. How will your group be lead and who will do this? Will you have different leaders or the same leader each day?
2. Where will you meet? The same venue or will the venues change?
3. When will you meet? What day of the week? What hour will you start and finish?
4. When will the intentional journey commence and conclude? It might be wise to get out a calendar and plot the journey, days and group sessions.
5. Will you have refreshments when you meet, and if so, at what time of the proceedings will you do this and who will make the arrangements?

6. Preparation is encouraged prior to each group study, especially in the way of reflecting on the Scripture reading and pondering the questions for group discussion.

7. Are there other questions or issues that you need to discuss?

Integrative Learning

Many churches have found benefit in challenging their people to make a short-term commitment to studying a topic together. This might involve existing groups foregoing their usual pattern to be part of this wider exploration, in this case, a series called *Making Life Decisions: Journeying Together*. A short-term approach gives people not part of an ongoing group, the chance for a communal experience.

In addition to individuals engaging in the daily discernment exercises and such people also coming together for the weekly group studies, *Making Life Decisions: Journeying Together*, it could be marvellously unifying for weekly worship services to be adopting discernment themes. Perhaps the sermons over this period could be focused in the readings designated for the weekly discussion groups and enriched by the preacher's daily discernment reflections. Such an integrated process is effective educationally but it would also signal the important ministry of discernment and help weld the church together in a stronger bond of solidarity.

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Day 1 Time and Place to Greet God

Approach

‘Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.’²

Intentional God,
your work of creation,
your sending of Jesus Christ and
your gift of the Holy Spirit
did not happen by accident but by careful design.

Show us how we might be intentional in coming near to you this day and in these days of special discernment.

We bless you for your promise and look forward to experiencing your movement towards us in personal and surprising ways.

We make this prayer with the help of Jesus, our Companion on the way.

Amen.

Scripture

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

(Luke 22: 39-46)

Silence

Reflection

The gospel writer Luke records Christ's habit of corporate worship who, “went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, *as was his custom.*” (Luke 4:16) Later, in the above passage, Luke reveals Jesus' custom of regular prayer in a solitary place which became his lifeline in a day of crisis.

Could it be that as we adopt these holy habits and prepare for regular times of prayer that God is getting ready to greet us?

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's classic, *The Little Prince*, sounds this theme of the value of having regular times and places for meaningful encounters so that hearts might be readied:

“What must I do, to tame you?” asked the little prince.

“You must be very patient,” replied the fox.

² James 4:8.

“First you will sit down at a little distance from me like that, in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day...”

“The next day the little prince came back.

‘It would have been better to come back at the same hour,’ said the fox. ‘If, for example, you came at four o’clock in the afternoon, then at three o’clock I shall begin to be happy. I shall feel happier and happier as the hour advances. At four o’clock, I shall already be worrying and jumping about. I shall show you how happy I am! But if you come at just any time, I shall never know at what hour my heart is to be ready to greet you.’

‘Goodbye,’ he said.

‘Goodbye,’ said the fox. ‘And now here is my secret, a very simple secret:

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.’³

Journal

Jesus frequently went to a garden before sunrise to meet with God. Creatively consider how you might make a special appointment in a special place of meeting. You might build in a daily walk for reflection to symbolize your journey of discernment.

Record your thoughts and your specific intentions in this space.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Loving and approachable God,
bless the place where we shall meet together.
Bless the time when we shall join together.
Reveal to us how we might ready ourselves to greet you,
with patience,
in silence and
with joy.
We hope in your promise that you will draw near to those who draw near to you.
Amen.

Commission

Lord God,
as we have sensed your nearness in the Scriptures and in prayer,
so keep us mindful of your strengthening company,
each step of the journey.
Amen.

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³ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1945), 65-66.

Day 2 Journey Without Tracks

Approach

All knowing God,
like children we are bursting with questions:
'Where are we going?'
'How long will it take?'
'When are we going to get there?'
Save us from the unwillingness to move before we have all the facts.
Set us free to follow with the One who called himself 'The Way'.
Through Him we pray and journey.
Amen.

Scripture

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.
(Matthew 4. 1-2)

Silence

Reflection

Retreating to the desert for a significant period is a common biblical theme. In a stark description the travel journal of the Israelites says of Moses in the Sinai Desert, "He was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water." (Exodus 34. 28) Elijah spent the same 'forty days and forty nights' period around Mt Horeb. (1 Kings 19:8) Similarly, the Gospel writer says that before Jesus launched out in his ministry he went into the wilderness where "he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished." (Matthew 4: 2)

Today the desert is still the major geographical feature of the Arabian Peninsula. The sealed highways are suitably signposted and well lit for night driving but away from the major roads there are few tracks, the signposts are scarce; it is dark at night and stifling during the day.

The task of discernment is like a journey into the desert. There is no dune bashing with a guide in an air-conditioned four wheel drive. Cell phones and satellite navigation instruments don't operate in this wilderness. It is a trek into the unknown without maps. The unfamiliarity can be terrifying and uncomfortable as it confronts our need to be in control, challenges our need to know and lays bare our temptations.

If the desert strips us of our comfortable props, what will we have for support, sustenance and security on this untravelled way?

In 1939 when Britain had entered into the dark, unknowingness of the Second World War, King George VI quoted in his Christmas message this excerpt from a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins:

I said to the man
who stood at the gate of the year,
"Give me a light that I may tread safely

into the unknown.”

And he replied,
“Go out into the darkness
and put your hand into the hand of God.
That shall be to you
better than the light
and safer than a known way!”⁴

Journal

Note your feelings and questions about leaving and launching out on this journey of discernment.

Formulate some affirmations about travel, trust and your Guide.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Lord, as we begin this journey of discernment
and enter into the desert,
Enable us
to let go,
to place our hands in the hand of God and
to trust the Spirit to sustain, lead and surprise us.
Amen.

Commission

With Christ as our Way,
the Spirit as our Leader and
the hand of God to love and keep,
we step forward on our journey of discernment.
Amen.

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⁴ This poem was written in 1908 by Minnie Louise Haskins. It was used at the funeral of Her Majesty the Queen Mother on 2 April 2002. Her husband, King George VI, started his Christmas address to the nation in 1939 with it as well. Source: < <http://www.ntu.edu.sg/home/hblim/passages/ManAtGate.htm>>

Day 3 Journey of Discovery

Approach

Desert-Dwelling God.

We ask for a program but *you* give us your presence.

We seek an itinerary but *you* grant us your voice.

We want insurance but *you* promise us your intimacy.

Help us to unpack our bags of all that is superfluous
and prepare ourselves to encounter you today.

Amen.

Scripture

Jacob came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

(Genesis 28: 11-17)

Silence

Reflection

The desert can be a foreign existence and without the usual props sometimes we can wonder if God is present and if so, where God is. In this place of unknowing we can doubt the presence of God with us.

Our feeling or sensing is not the crucial test of the presence of God. Carl Jung became so convinced of the truth and wonder of the presence of God that he had engraved above the front entrance to his house in Switzerland this affirmation: 'Called or not called, God is always present.'⁵ Even when we do not call out, God is nonetheless present.

The nocturnal discoveries that came to Jacob when he was alone and asleep suggest the value of disengagement and illustrate the desire of the Divine desert dweller to beam into our lives the consciousness of God's eternal presence and care.

⁵ While Carl Jung popularized this quote, he discovered it among the Latin writings of Desiderius Erasmus, who declared the statement had been an ancient Spartan proverb.
Carl Jung Wikiquote http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Carl_Jung

Journal

Note down the aspects about the personality and character of God that might reassure you on this new journey of discernment.

Turn these aspects *about* God into your own prayer *to* God.

Selecting a Souvenir**Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ,
forgive our blindness to your presence.
Open our eyes that we might be alert to you
and to all the many ways that you will show yourself to us
this day.
Amen.

Commission

You are the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
But you are *our* God.
Eternally present.
Ever to bless.
Longing to keep.
Yearning to guide.
Through the steps of this day.
Amen.

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Day 4 The Desert Skies

Approach

Lord God,
sometimes the heavens seem silent and closed.
At other times we hear you speaking,
We sense you are with us.
We know your delight.

Whatever be our experience of you,
enable us to trust your loving presence.
We pray through Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Scripture

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was open, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."
(Luke 3: 21-22)

Silence

Reflection

Jesus shows us not to take our primary cue from the people around us or the tracks below us but to look to the heavens, to scan the skies for the signs of the Spirit and to bend our ears to the Divine Voice.

There will be days when the heavens are silent, the skies are dark and the Spirit seems to be absent. During such a time in the Second World War a person scratched these hopeful words onto a wall in a Warsaw ghetto:

I believe in the sun, even if it does not shine.
I believe in love, even if I do not feel it.
I believe in God, even if I do not see him.⁶

The bleak forces of oppression, war, misery and hunger can erode our belief that God is present and at work. Faith involves hanging on in the dark to what we have been shown in the light.

Thomas Merton discovered his vocation in a life devoted to prayer. Secluded in the hills of Kentucky one could readily think that prayer would be easy and direction would always be crystal clear. However, Merton went through times of dark depression and in one difficult period he penned the following prayer:

"Our Lord God, we have no idea where we are going.
We do not see the road ahead of us.
We cannot know for certain where it will end.

⁶ Author unknown.

Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so.

But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing.

We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire.

And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road though we may know nothing about it.

Therefore will we trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone.

Amen.⁷

Journal

How much clarity do you have about the direction in which you are going?

Express your desire to please God and to know God's pleasure.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

We trust in your presence to be with us always.

We trust in your pardon to forgive us when we go astray.

We trust in your promise to direct our paths.

You are our God. In God we trust.

Amen.

Commission

Our God in heaven.

We will walk today seeking to be conscious of the resources that you supply.

We will walk today seeking to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

We will walk today seeking to be open to the touch of your Holy Spirit.

Walk with us Creator, Saviour and Spirit.

Amen.

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⁷ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958), 83.

Day 5 The Desert—A Place of Solitude

Approach

Lord Jesus Christ,
in following you we walk alone but we also walk with others.
You call us to be people of the way but yours is also a narrow way.
Help us to recognise the benefits of having good companions on the road and let us
also be attentive to the downside of being part of a crowd.
Amen.

Scripture

Beware of practicing your piety before others to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven... And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you are praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.
(Matthew 6: 1, 5-7)

Silence

Reflection:

In his book, *The Light Within You*,⁸ John Claypool poses the penetrating question, “Who is your audience?” In a confessional style Claypool records his reactions to reviews of his writings and addresses. He found that some negative reviews did not bother him at all because they were written by people who did not matter to him. But there were other people whose words of approval warmed him and their criticism cut him to the quick. Claypool concluded that each of us has our select audience before whom we play out our lives. It may be only one person or a small group, yet what they think exerts an enormous influence over our daily actions.

Journeying into the desert is a deliberate effort to withdraw from people, especially our audience of significance. It is an intentional closing of the door on people’s opinions so that the divine audience becomes the only thing that matters.

Thomas Merton tells us that in the American desert there is a variety of cactus whose flower is rarely seen. The flower opens only once and when it does, it opens only in the darkness. The petals are a pearl white and they have a waxen quality as if they had been polished. In the heart there is a deep nest of gold filaments that in their tiny curls have the texture of foam. These surround the stalk of the same shape that rises from the flower like a horn.⁹

What an amazing creation, a night flowering cactus, a plant that blossoms forth in this hidden, unseen event of the desert darkness. For Merton this cactus became the

⁸ John Claypool, *The Light Within You: Looking at Life through New Eyes* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1983), 49-50.

⁹ Thomas Merton, *Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1967), 126.

symbol of his calling. This night flowering cactus might become a symbol of our journey of discernment and the call to live directly towards God.

Journal

Be mindful of those who make up our ‘select audience’ and how we play our lives before others.

Meditate on the image of the ‘night flowering cactus’ and write about how God might increasingly become our ‘significant audience’.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

To you alone Lord God,
we open up our love, our life, our weaknesses, our strengths, our all.
Take us and all that we are,
transforming us by your truth and loving friendship.
Amen.

Commission

Lord Jesus Christ,
Send us forward on our journey,
living our lives to the only audience that ultimately matters.
Send us in solitude.
Send us with soul mates.
Send us with your word.
Send us by your Spirit.
Amen.

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Day 6 The Desert—A Place of Stillness

Approach

Waiting God,

perhaps our preoccupation with speed and noise, schedules and strategies are the outward expressions of our restlessness and unease.

Teach us now to be still that we might know you.

Amen.

Scripture

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.”

Be still, and know that I am God!

(Psalm 46: 1-3, 8-10a)

Silence

Reflection:

In her poem entitled, *Self-Improvement Program*, Judith Viorst recites all the new activities she has taken on in an effort to become successful—needlework, guitar lessons, advanced Chinese cooking, primal scream therapy—and dozens of other things. And then with a sigh she concludes, “And I am working all day and I am working all night to be good looking, healthy and wise and adored and contented and brave and well-read and a marvellous hostess and bilingual, athletic, artistic—and then she cries out, “Won’t someone please stop me?”¹⁰

The desert is a place to slow down, stop and ‘be still’. This does not happen immediately if we have been running at a great pace. This does not happen easily as society often grades us on the basis of what we do, how much we achieve and according to key performance indicators.

The invitation to stillness is a wonderful gift. The Psalmist infers that stillness is valuable not only for the rest and freedom it offers but for the time and space it creates to know God’s strength, God’s help, God’s presence, God’s protection or simply, to know God.

Journal

Reflect on the pace of your life. Who is setting it?

¹⁰ Judith Viorst, *How Did I get to be Forty & Other Atrocities*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), 40.

Write to God about your timetable and ask God to help you live out of a centered and satisfying dynamic.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Slow us down Lord.

Still the inner momentum that drives us to perform and parade.

Still the fury and fears of our warring world.

Still us that in peace and quietness, we may truly come to know that you are God.

Amen.

Commission

God of work and rest.

God of order and rhythm.

Send us forward and grace us with the gifts that we see in Jesus:

Composure, poise, beauty and serenity.

Amen.

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Day 7 Seeking Discernment Pleases God

Approach

God, you are the creator of this great universe,
yet, you are a personal God and we can know you.
We thank you for the gift of freedom that you grant us.
We are amazed to think that you not only speak but you await our responses.
We are honoured that you not only ask us questions but you value our answers.
In such a relationship we yearn to remain and to grow.
Amen.

Scripture

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said, "...give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked..."

(1 Kings 3:5-6, 9-13)

Silence

Reflection

In one of John Birmingham's books for children he poses these provocative questions¹¹:

"Would you rather your house was surrounded by snow or a jungle?"

"Would you rather an elephant drank your bath water or a hippo slept in your bed?"

"Would you rather be covered all over with jam or be pulled through the mud by a dog?"

"Would you rather have supper in a castle or tea on the river?"

"Would you rather be made to eat spider stew or drink snail cordial?"

"Would you rather jump in a thorn bush for \$5 or swallow a dead frog for \$20?"

"Would you rather play the drums or blow the trumpet?"

"Would you rather be crushed by a snake or sat upon by a rhinoceros?"

Young readers of this book would rather not have to answer these questions at all. And it seems that age doesn't always make people any better at taking the hard decisions. These are all fun questions but they remind us of how difficult some decisions really are.

At the point of assuming political leadership, Solomon is praised by God because he asks for the right gift, he seeks discernment from the best source and his prayer is ultimately motivated by his compassion towards the people that he has been appointed

¹¹ John Birmingham, *Would You Rather* (London: Jonathan Cape Children's Books, 1978).

to lead. From children starting out on life to politicians commencing a new appointment the prayer for ‘a wise and discerning mind’ is a prayer God longs to hear people pray. The promise from the letter of James might do much to bolster our confidence: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” (James 1:5)

Journal

Jot down the discernment question that you think God might be asking you at this time.

Focus the discernment question that you are longing to ask God today.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Generous and ungrudging God,
grant us an understanding mind to work with people,
the ability to discern what is right
and the courage to live according to your way.
Amen.

Commission

God of the journey,
walk with us through this day,
in silence and in conversation,
to encounter,
to engage,
to enjoy.
Amen.

Day 8 Discernment is a Gift

Approach

Merciful God,
your mercies—so undeserved but lavishly given—
are new every morning.
Give us an eye to see your mercies this day,
the faith to take hold of them
and the heart to truly appreciate you.
Amen.

Scripture

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

(Philippians 3: 4b-11)

Silence

Reflection

These confessions from the apostle's letter remind us that a journey of discernment is not dependent on our background, our pedigree, our education, our religious devotion, our acts of service and any other feats we might have notched on our belt. On the contrary! Our dependence on such achievements may become the very barriers that blind us to the gift of faith and knowledge.

In his book *To a Dancing God* Sam Keen tells with searing honesty about his quest for satisfaction. He thought his deep thirst would be quenched by securing a Ph.D. but when finally people called him 'Doctor' and 'Professor' he knew he still hadn't found what he was looking for. He pursued many popular pathways but these only intensified his disillusionment. Finally in desperation he cried out, "What can I do that will give dignity and meaning to my life?" Then, one night he awoke with the answer: "Nothing, nothing at all." It dawned upon him that there was nothing to do to give meaning and dignity to his life for these are given and received out of God's grace. There in the night Sam Keen realized that he had been "riding on an ox, looking for an ox."¹²

¹² Sam Keen, *To A Dancing God*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 17.

Journal

Write down the achievements and qualifications that you sometimes use to assert your importance.

Write and pray a prayer that is both a way of putting out your 'rubbish' and a means of making room to receive more of Christ and His gifts.

Selecting a Souvenir**Prayer**

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden;
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name,
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.¹³

Commission

God of light and love,
journey with us this day,
pointing out the gifts with which you have already blessed us,
as we walk knee deep in your mercies.
Amen.

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¹³ *Book of Common Prayer*, Web Address: <<http://www.commonprayer.org/pb/pb1549.cfm>>

Day 9 When the Stones are Shouting

Approach

Penetrating God,
give us the courage to unlock our defences,
to lower the drawbridge and
to welcome your loving presence into our lives.
We need to be won again and again by your love
that counters apathy and cultivates the expectancy,
that life can be new and different and adventurous.
Amen.

Scripture

As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."
(Luke 19:37-40)

Silence

Reflection

In an after-service discussion on the theme of discernment an Australian man shared this experience that happened when he was visiting a Quaker community in the United States of America. On the first night of his visit, the friends of the community gathered to pray about America's entry into an international war. As they joined in silent prayer this man sensed that the group was being gathered by a cord of prayer.

After entering into a deep silence some people stood and spoke words that they felt were prompted by God. At one point in the service this man said he had a strong impulse to stand up and say some words that were clear and urgent in his mind. However, he reneged because this was his first day with the group and he was self-conscious about his accent that, at his arrival earlier in the day had marked him out as a foreigner. He persisted in his determination not to speak but some time later another person stood and said exactly the words he had previously felt prompted to share.

The man talked with a person following the meeting about his experience and was told by this seasoned Quaker that this often happens. When the Spirit of God desires to say something and meets with resistance the Spirit will often move somebody else to say the words that need to be declared.¹⁴

God is more determined to speak than we are to hear, so much so that if we refuse to be the mouthpiece then God will cause even 'the stones to shout out'.

¹⁴ I heard this story in a discernment seminar I led in Melbourne, 2003.

Journal

Write some words that welcome God's Spirit into your stillness.

Be open to ways that you might be resisting the Spirit. As you become aware of these ask God to help you to 'lift the lid' and begin exploring what is underneath.

Selecting a Souvenir**Prayer**

God, enable us to wait, to be silent and to be responsive to the urgings of your Spirit. When we hear your promptings give us the courage to respond with gladness. Whether your word is communicated by creative beauty, voiced by a stranger or shouted by stones, help us to listen to your voice and to welcome your Spirit with joyous abandon.
Amen.

Commission

Now, we continue on our journey of discernment,
walking by the Spirit,
stepping out in the Spirit and
treading in the Spirit's love, joy, peace and freedom.
Amen.

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Day 10 Awareness

Approach

God of truth and love,
give us the courage to welcome your scrutiny,
the humility to admit that we might be wrong and
the capacity to see the world and our lives the way it really is.
Through Christ our Saviour and Lord.
Amen.

Scripture

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

(Revelation 3: 1-3)

Silence

Reflection

Twice, in this letter to a church that has a reputation of being ‘alive’, the Lord says, “Wake up!” This group is resting on its laurels, thinking it is doing well because of its record of service but it is oblivious to its deadness and vulnerability.

Becoming people of discernment involves being fully awake—informed, conscious, vigilant, with all our senses switched on to the activity of God.

One day a traveller begged a monk for a word of wisdom that would guide the rest of the journey. The monk nodded affably and, as it was their day of silence, he took a sheet of paper and wrote on it a single word, ‘Awareness.’

“Awareness?” the traveller said, perplexed. “That’s far too brief. Couldn’t you expand on that a bit?” So the monk took the paper back and wrote: ‘Awareness, awareness, awareness.’

“But what do these words mean?” the traveller insisted. Finally the monk reached for the paper and wrote, clearly and firmly, ‘Awareness, awareness, awareness means . . . Awareness!’¹⁵

Journal

Write down what it might mean for you to ‘wake up’ to God.

¹⁵ Joan Chittester, *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 68.

Reflect on what you might be when you are fully alive.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

God be in my head and in my understanding.
God be in my eyes and in my looking.
God be in my mouth and in my speaking.
God be in my heart and in my thinking.
God be at my end and at my departing.¹⁶
Amen.

Commission

Lord, send us afresh on our journey of discovery.
Enlighten our way.
Encourage our hearts.
Energize our resolve.
For the glory of Jesus Christ alone.
Amen.

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¹⁶ From the *Sarum Primer*, 1538.

Day 11 Tuning Out and Tuning In

Approach

Persistent God,
we thank you that even when
we are dull to your voice,
blind to your presence and
strangers to the spiritual,
you come to us again and again and again.
So accept our thanks and strengthen our efforts to meet with you now.
Amen.

Scripture

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' and he ran to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, 'Samuel!' Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call, my son; lie down again.'

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

(1 Samuel 3: 1-10)

Silence

Reflection:

To develop in our awareness of God and spiritual things we need to learn how to listen. This essential art requires us to be able to tune out certain sounds and tune in to the various ways in which God might speak. Like young Samuel we are in a learning process in regard to distinguishing the voice of God from the many other sounds around us.

Most people these days can't bear to turn off their cell phones. Despite the 'Cell Phone Free Zone' signs and public announcements, a never-ending variety of ring tones still sound in classrooms, concert halls, libraries, at the movies and even at funeral services.

Brenda Goodman, in a *New York Times* article, says there's a new epidemic afflicting humans today. It is called 'ringxiety' or 'fauxcellarm'.¹⁷ We might be taking a shower, blow-drying our hair or watching an ad on television and we think our cell phone is ringing. These phantom phone rings are an audio illusion and they're a symptom of the saturation of the air waves. With cell phones becoming like an extra limb sprouting from our ears, most people are in a constant state of telephone vigilance.

Our ears become attuned to certain sounds like the crying of a baby and the ringing of a phone. The vital thing is that we practice the discipline of silencing the familiar sounds and conditioning our ears to listen to the still, small voice of God.

Journal

Spend some moments contemplating this God who is seeking to get through to you and keeps calling your name.

Pray repeatedly and reflectively the prayer of Samuel: "Speak Lord, your servant is listening" and then jot down some of your reflections.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Calling God,
you keep calling until we become aware
and then you speak to us the things we need to know.
Grant us the same determination to seek you,
until we find you
and are transformed by your words and your friendship.
Amen.

Commission

Lord,
we have encountered you in reading and reflection,
now let us encounter you through people that we meet
and the experiences we share along the way.
We walk forward in your peace and in your truth.
Amen.

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¹⁷ Brenda Goodman, 'I Hear Ringing and There's No One There. I Wonder Why', *New York Times*, 4 May 2006. Web site address:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/04/fashion/thursdaystyles/04phan.html?ex=1147406400&en=6d2ed8a8b702517e&ei=5070&emc=eta1>

Day 12 Listening To God's Voice

Approach

Lord,
help us now to come
with a full voice,
a thankful heart
and offering all that we are,
to you, our God.
Amen.

Scripture

O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed. O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah.
(Psalm 95:1-8)

Silence

Reflection

At a Marriage Enrichment conference in New Zealand, the facilitators were speaking about the common tendency for people to tune out when the other is speaking, to talk over one another and to quickly cut people off.

The facilitators illustrated this point with a beautifully carved Maori stick called the 'tokotoko'. At a Maori gathering an elder of the tribe will often be seen wielding a 'tokotoko' and the custom is that when someone has a 'tokotoko' in their hand everyone must be quiet and give that person their undivided attention.

At the practical session that followed, partners experimented with the 'tokotoko' (usually symbolised by a pen or a chocolate stick). When one person had the 'tokotoko' in their hand, the other had to be silent and give them their full attention. At the reporting time, many people commented about the difficulty of holding their tongue, the blessing of truly hearing people and the joy of being heard.

One couple introduced the 'tokotoko' during their family discussions. This family was comprised of five children, all of whom were extroverts, except for one little guy who never got a word in at the family forum.

The parents commented that when the little fellow got the 'tokotoko' in his hand he had so much delight; in his hand it gave him great power and it evoked from him some things that that family had never heard before.

In response to the longing of God that we might listen to God's voice, it might be good to practice with a 'tokotoko'. As we cultivate the discipline of listening we might hear things we have never heard before.

Journal

In today's Scripture reading the people appear to be hard of heart, distracted and astray. With what words would you describe your relationship to God at the moment?

Ponder and write down how you might listen more attentively to the voice of God.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

'O that today you would listen to God's voice!'

Enable us God to hear your longing to speak and be heard.

Save us from a relationship that is stale and help us to eagerly await your words this day which come like freshly baked bread.

We offer to you our attention to receive all that you want to beam into our lives.

Amid the cacophony of sounds teach us to distinguish your voice and respond in ways that please you.

Amen.

Commission

As we have come into your presence to worship,

now let us go out with your presence to walk,

with joy,

with gratitude and

a deep consciousness,

that you will be with us each step of the way.

Amen.

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Day 13 Expecting a Personal Response

Approach

God of grace, your love stretches out to all people, regardless of who they are and what they have done.

God of compassion, you are already seeking us out before we call upon you.

God of concern, there is nothing about us that slips your attention.

Come to us in our need of your grace, mercy and care.

Amen.

Scripture

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable:

'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.'

(Luke 15:1-7)

Silence

Reflection

An airline passenger was on board an international flight and at lunch time she opened her pre-packaged meal only to discover, right on top of her salad, an enormous cockroach. She promptly called for the steward who attempted to calm her down. When she got home she wrote an angry letter to the director of the airline. A few days later a reply arrived not by ordinary post but by special courier. The director was all apologies. His letter read:

"Dear Ms. Smith, This was very unusual, but don't worry. I want to assure you that that particular plane has been completely fumigated. In fact all the seats and the upholstery have been stripped out. We've taken disciplinary action against the steward who served you and he may even be fired. It's highly probable that this aircraft will be taken out of service. I can assure you that it will never happen again. And I trust, Ms. Smith, that you will continue to fly with our airline."

Ms. Smith was greatly impressed by this response until she turned the letter over and noticed something strange. The letter she had written had accidentally stuck to the director's reply. When she looked at her own letter again, she saw a note that the director had scrawled for his secretary. It read, "Please reply with the regular cockroach letter!" That is a fairly common trend these days with word processors spitting out standard letters to look like they had been personally written.

In contrast, Jesus declares that God is like a good shepherd who goes after the one sheep with a love that is personal. If God relates to us as unique individuals, there is nothing too trivial for us to name and nothing too shameful for us to disclose.

When we seek God's discernment we should expect no pat answers and be aware that God already knows us and will respond in ways that are tailored to our situation.

Journal

Write in detail the issue that concerns you most at this time and entrust that to God.

Bask in the knowledge that the Good Shepherd risks all to find you out and seeks to restore you to an experience of pure joy.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer of St. Augustine

Good, all-powerful God, who cares for every one of us, as if you care for us alone; and who cares for us all, as if all were but one!

O God, our parent, supremely good, beauty of all beauty, to you will we entrust whatever we have received from you, and so shall we lose nothing.

You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

Amen.¹⁸

Commission

We walk now in the knowledge that God's eye is upon us,
that God is shepherding us each step of the way and
that God is working to bring joy to all on earth and in heaven.

Amen.

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¹⁸ This prayer is a modification of a prayer by Augustine (354-430 A.D.)

Day 14 God in the Ordinary

Approach

God,
call us to attention now
as we read your word,
reflect on your truth and
ready ourselves to discover you.
Amen.

Scripture

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.
(Exodus 3:1-6)

Silence

Reflection:

It is good to reflect on the truth that God appeared to Moses while he was keeping the flock and as he was going about his daily work. God spoke to Moses not in a chapel but in the workplace.

The author Richard Foster says: "The only place that God can bless you is right where you are because that is the only place you are. Do you remember Moses at the burning bush? God had to tell him to take off his shoes. He did not know that it was holy ground. If we can just come to understand that right where we are is holy ground and it is there that we build a history with God and learn to walk confidently with God."¹⁹

Jesus said that God would cause even the stones to shout. Here God is expressing this same determination to catch the attention of Moses with a bush that burns but is not consumed. Only when God has Moses' attention does God speak about the misery of the Israelites and the plan that Moses might be involved as a prophet and liberator.

Many commentators have emphasized God's appearance in the ordinariness of a bush. Rabbi Joshua puts it succinctly when saying, "God spoke from the thorn bush to teach us that there is no place where the Divine Presence is absent, not even in a thorn bush."²⁰

¹⁹ Richard Foster, 'Living Confidently in God', *30 Good Minutes* Program #4315, 16 January, 2000. Internet address: <http://www.30goodminutes.org/csec/sermon/foster_4315.htm>

²⁰ Joan Chittister, 'Faith: The Dispeller of Darkness', *30 Good Minutes*, Program # 4706, 9 November 2003. Internet Address: <http://www.30goodminutes.org/csec/sermon/chittister_4706.htm>

Journal

What will it mean for you to become more aware of meeting God in the ordinary times and places?

Jot down ways you might be more present to the Divine Presence in your work, recreation and home life?

Selecting a Souvenir**Prayer**

You are with us living God in the ordinariness of this day.
Keep us attentive to the flickering signals of your presence
that call us to take off our shoes and await your divine voice.
Grant us the courage to follow your call wherever you might lead us.
Amen.

Commission

God,
you have warmed our hearts as we have studied your word.
Keep us alert to the many ways you will continue to speak to us,
through the ordinary things in life.
Amen.

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Day 15 For This Reason I Have Come

Approach

God of life,

You call us to enjoy a friendship with you that is vibrant and changing,
a relationship of growth and challenge.

Jolt us out of ways of approaching you that are tired.

Liberate us from understandings of you and our vocation that are old and musty.

Catch us by surprise,

as we seek to be present to you now.

Amen.

Scripture

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’?”

No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”....

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

(John 12:27-28, 32)

Silence

Reflection

The statement in this reading is part of a theme in the Fourth Gospel in which Jesus expresses in different ways who he was and why he came:

“I am the bread that came down from heaven.” John 6: 41, 51.

“I am the light of the world.” John 8:12.

“I am the good shepherd.” John 10:11.

“I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” John 10:10

“I came from God.... I came from the Father.” John 16:27-28

“I came into the world to testify to the truth.” John 18:37

These affirmations do not indicate a change of mind but represent an unfolding of new facets of Christ’s vocation. An examination of the context in which these statements appear often suggests a clue as to how the original setting or the needs of the audience evoked from Jesus an appropriate insight.

The large sandstone rock in central Australia, known as Uluru or Ayers Rock, is sacred to the aboriginal people and is one of the nation’s most recognizable landmarks. One of its amazing features is the way it appears to change colour as the different light shines upon it at various times of the day and year. Approaching Uluru from a distance in the middle of the morning it takes on a translucent pink. Closer up and during the afternoon it turns into a brilliant yellow. At dusk, with hundreds of tourists gazing and cameras clicking, the sun sets it ablaze in a rich ochre glow. Before sunrise Uluru stands as a black mound in the stillness of the desert. At breakfast time it turns a dull brown and on those rare days when it is raining the rock acquires a silvery-grey appearance streaked with black algae. Photographs prove what you can see with your eyes. This rock is alive! This rock is continually changing. No wonder Uluru has tantalised people for centuries.

The Gospel story presents Jesus in a variety of different lights. He makes bold statements and adopts different images to reveal new facets of his character and his

calling. Jesus is like a beautiful and mysterious rock that is constantly changing. We turn and take another look and he has changed.

Similarly, our calling is dynamic rather than static. Different experiences bring forth new gifts and over time we come to see our vocation in another light.

Journal

Express your yearning to God that you might discover more and do that for which you have been created.

Are there some words or an image that might encapsulate your calling at the moment?

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Creator God, we long for a greater clarity about why you have made us: the reason for which we have come into this world.

Save us from trying to be like somebody else or wrongfully seeking to fulfil the dreams of others.

Transforming God, as we realize your wonderful intentions for us, may we discover the loveliness of Christ living within our life.

Amen.

Commission

Guide our steps this day,
that we embrace further the purpose of our lives,
for the service of others and
the honour of your name.

Amen.

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Day 16 Listening to the Still, Small Voice

Approach

Lord,
Wherever we are now and
whatever situation we are in,
let your word come to us,
in love and truth.
Amen.

Scripture

Then the word of the Lord came to him saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

God said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him...
(1 Kings 19: 9b-13a)

Silence

Reflection

God spoke to Elijah at significant times in his life. Sometimes God uttered words of commission and at other times God asked a question to bring him to attention. When it was necessary, God’s message and manner brought to Elijah a renewal of his vocation and the strength to pursue it. It is interesting to consider why God presents a display of rock-splitting wind with deafening earthquakes and startling pyrotechnics. Was it emotional fanfare to grab Elijah’s attention and to build his excitement for the main event? Or was the drama to provide a contrast and underscore the truth that the voice of God is not to be found in the noisy and sensational but in ‘the sound of sheer silence’.

The word ‘vocation’ is increasingly being rediscovered and used. In an interview with Miles Franklin Literary Award winner Frank Moorhouse and his publisher, Jane Palfreyman, Moorhouse said, “The big thing we share is that we both see our work as a vocation. She sees publishing as her calling, the way I see writing as mine.”²¹

In the sixteenth century Martin Luther encouraged people to understand their God-given work as a vocation no matter how menial their occupation. At the root of the word ‘vocation’ is the word ‘call’ or ‘voice.’ This means that our vocation is discovered not so much by setting goals but by hearing a calling. Instead of imposing

²¹Janet Hawley, ‘Two of us’ *Good Weekend: Melbourne Age*, 14 July, 2001, 14.

our plans upon us, our vocation clarifies when we listen for God speaking about who we are and what we are becoming. While sometimes we might hear God clearly and at other times we might be confused, central to the idea of listening for the voice is a relationship that needs to be nurtured regularly.

Journal

What new insights are you gaining about your vocation?

In what areas are you seeking God for clarification about your calling?

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer of John Greenleaf Whittier

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways!
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives your service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

Drop your still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of your peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
your coolness and your balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!²²
Amen.

Commission

Lord,
through the noise that bombards and the activities that call for our attention,
help us to create a space of stillness,
within which we might come close and hear your 'still, small voice'.
Amen.

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²² Hymn of John Greenleaf Whittier, 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind' Public Domain, 1872.

Day 17 This is my Vocation

Approach

Liberating God,
lead us not only to know the truth
but to act upon the truth
that will set us free.
Amen.

Scripture

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.
(Romans 12: 1-2)

Silence

Reflection

After eleven solid chapters, in which the apostle Paul outlines his understanding of Christianity, he declares what is required in responding to God's gift of Jesus. In the first paragraph, this statement appears, "...so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

The will of God is not intended to be kept a secret. It is God's hope that we might discover and enter into it. Furthermore the will of God is not a bitter pill to swallow. On the contrary, it is described as "good and acceptable and perfect." Wrapped up in these three descriptors is the truth that discerning and entering into the will of God for our life will lead to a state of well-being and groundedness.

Glenn Hinson tells of taking some seminary students on a field trip to a monastery in the hills of Kentucky. His primary purpose was to help these history students become aware of the communities that developed in the Middle Ages, not to learn about a life of prayer. The host, Thomas Merton, gave the class more than they expected. After talking about the rise of the monastic life, Merton asked if there were any questions. One student asked a question that Hinson feared the most. The student inquired, "What's a smart fellow like you doing in a place like this?" Hinson said that he expected Merton to respond in anger or frustration that he'd not been heard, but Merton responded very simply: "I am here because this is my vocation. I believe in prayer."²³

Can you hear Merton's sense of goodness and acceptance? When we live out our vocation we can experience a similar anchoring in the midst of questions and doubts about our fitness or the usefulness of what we are called to do.

²³Glenn E Hinson, *Spiritual preparation for Christian leadership* (Nashville, Upper Room Books, 1999), 151.

Journal

“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Meditate upon this appeal and then make your response.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Ponder what is being asked of you and write about your formation.

Selecting a Souvenir**Prayer**

Lead us merciful God, beyond the talk and theory of belief to actually engaging our faith in you and experiencing your power to transform our lives.

Lead us into the certainty and rightness of knowing that we are doing your will.

Amen.

Commission

Depart now

in the fellowship of God the Father,

and as you go, remember:

in the goodness of God

you were born into this world;

by the grace of God

you have been kept

all the day long,

even until this hour;

and By the love of God,

fully revealed in the face of Jesus,

You are being redeemed.

Amen.²⁴

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²⁴ This was a much loved benediction of Dr. John Claypool (1930-2005), a Baptist and Episcopalian pastor in the USA. Source: Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky. Web Address: <http://www.crescenthillbaptistchurch.org/oldsite/claypool.htm>

Day 18 Follow Me

Approach

Lord Jesus Christ,
you were born in Bethlehem but you are living in our time and our town.
You were a carpenter in Nazareth but you are building and beautifying our lives.
You were a teacher in Galilee but you are speaking to us in our work and play.
Enable us to hear your call and to follow.
Amen.

Scripture

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately, they left the boat and their father, and followed him.
(Matthew 4: 18-22)

Silence

Reflection

A journey in discernment is an invitation to follow Jesus. The Gospel writers depict with stark simplicity the calling of fishermen and the repetition of the word ‘immediately’ highlights the appropriate response of trust and obedience. Throughout the story Jesus keeps on calling his disciples to follow which indicates the need for an ongoing response of all that we are. Discerning the way is a dynamic process of discovery rather than receiving a once and for all blueprint. It is usually about discovering the next step not obtaining a full itinerary. Stepping forward often produces a vital change in our attitude or as Richard Rohr claimed, “We do not think our way into a new kind of living. We live ourselves into new ways of thinking.”²⁵

The theologian Karl Barth was once asked to outline what he would do if, in the light of past experiences, he was only now beginning his work as a theological teacher. Barth graciously declined, saying his method had never been to work to programs but rather his thinking and writing and speaking had issued from living encounters with people and conditions that spoke to him. Barth said he felt like a man in a boat which must be rowed and steered diligently but which flows in a stream that he does not control. It glides along between new and often totally strange shores, carrying him toward the goal set for him, goals which he sees and chooses only as he approaches them. He said, “As I see it now, my theological career has been a succession of present moments.”²⁶

Journal

Enter with Christ into this present moment and enjoy in the silence, this eternal now.

²⁵ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, Revised updated ed., 2003), 20.

²⁶ Karl Barth, *The Christian Century Reader: Representative Articles, Editorials, & Poems*, edited by Harold E. Fey & Margaret Frakes, (Manchester: Ayer Publishing, 1972), 102–5.

What appears to be the step before you where you are being called to follow?

As you contemplate being asked to follow Jesus today, write down the qualities you will need to respond well.

Selecting a Souvenir

Albert Schweitzer wrote a book about the life and work of Jesus and in his conclusion he crystallises an encouragement to those making their own journey today. His words are slightly adapted to turn them into the following prayer.

Prayer

You come to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake, you came to those who knew you not.

You speak to us the same words: "Follow me!" and you set us to the tasks which you have to fulfil for our time.

You command, and to those who obey you, (whether we be wise or simple), you will reveal yourself in the toil, the conflicts, the sufferings which we shall pass through in your fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, we will learn in our own experience who you are.²⁷

Amen.

Commission

Lord, you have gone before us and
you go with us.

Our destination,
our guide,
our companion,
each step of the way.

Amen.

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²⁷ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 403.

Day 19 In Step With The Spirit

Approach

Creator God,
the heavens declare your glory,
the Word declares your wisdom,
Jesus Christ declares your grace.
Work creatively in our lives,
that we may join the chorus in declaring your love.
Amen.

Scripture

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.
(Galatians 5: 22-26)

Silence

Reflection

In making a journey in discernment, we are offered the companionship and guidance of the Spirit. Walking with the Holy Spirit involves a stepping into love, joy, peace, patience and those other distinctive marks when the Spirit makes its influence on us. Paul, in his letter to the believers at Galatia, implies that this does not always happen with those who take the name of Christ. Nearing his conclusion, he calls the Galatian Christians to “be guided by the Spirit” or to “keep in step with the Spirit.”

Consider the many deviations, side alleys and distractions that will be avoided if we keep in step with the Spirit. Discernment is a process of discovery that may well take much longer than we think or desire. Discernment with the Spirit as our guide is like slow cooking in which we discover the benefits of letting things simmer.

The need to keep in step with the Spirit is beautifully expressed by the French writer Teilhard de Chardin in this letter to his cousin, Marguerite:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are, quite naturally,
 impatient in everything to reach the end without delay,
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way
to something unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made
by passing through some stages of instability...
...and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually;
 let them grow, let them shape themselves,

without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on, as though you could today
what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own goodwill) will make tomorrow.
Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit of your believing
that His hand is leading you, and of your accepting
the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense
and incomplete.²⁸

Journal

Are you a hare or a tortoise when it comes to your journey of discernment?
Express your feelings to God concerning the pace of your discovery and progress
toward the destination.

Meditate upon the fruit of the Holy Spirit listed in the reading (Gal. 5:22).
Write to God the Holy Spirit, about the fruit that you sense is particularly needed in
your life at this time.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Holy Spirit, our guide, we step out with you on the journey of this day.
Quell our impatience, our anxiety and incompleteness with the thought that new
twists and turns will enlighten us and further space and time will develop our
thinking.
We believe that your hand is leading us so we put our trust in the slow work of God.
Amen.

Commission

Lord Jesus Christ,
pioneer of our faith,
pace-setter of our journey,
passionate friend on our way,
we are glad to join you on our pilgrimage.
Amen.

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²⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Making of a Mind: Letters from a Soldier-Priest 1914-1919* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 57.

Day 20 The Divine Umpire

Approach

Lord,
You have given us so much,
Give us one more thing—
Give us a grateful heart.
Amen.²⁹

Scripture

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of God dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

(Colossians 3: 12-17)

Silence

Reflection

Like a commentator at a fashion festival, Paul is highlighting the distinctively stunning range of garments that come from 'the House of Christos'. He urges people to put on the rarely seen clothes of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness and especially love.

Switching images the apostle then says, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." This means that in joint decisions where there is division or uncertainty, allow Christ to be the arbitrator. Or, in personal circumstances where you are unsure, let the peace of Christ be the umpire.

Some people have allowed the peace of God to be the umpire in this way. When they have been confronted by a crossroads and have pondered which direction to take, they have written down on paper their provisional response—the decision or direction that seems right to them at that time. They have then sealed it in an envelope, left it on their desk for a week and specifically asked God to give a sense of peace on this direction or to create unease, with spanners in the works! This period gives time for divine umpiring and further cogitation while poised to move in a certain direction. At the end of this time they will either move in the direction that is confirmed by peace or, lacking this confirmation, they will tear up their letter and move in another way.

This similar process of appealing to the umpire can be adapted for groups and corporate decisions. This will mean slowing down and taking more care with

²⁹ George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, John Tobin, ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 115.

decisions. It may involve introducing an issue at a meeting and agreeing not to make a decision there and then. Instead, the initial discussion might involve a surveying of the area, an exploration of the possible options, a putting of the facts on the table and an identification of the questions. Then comes the time to go away, mull over the matters and when the group reconvenes, to make a decision when they have a sense of peace.

Journal

From the wardrobe described in the Scripture reading, ponder the ‘grace garment’ that you need and, with the Spirit’s help, put it on.

If you are considering a decision that needs to be made, hold it before the divine umpire for adjudication. Record what you are sensing—a rightness, an unease or something else.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep guard over our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

And our God will supply all our need according to his riches in Christ Jesus.

To our God and Father be glory forever and ever.³⁰

Amen.

Commission

We have clothed ourselves in the garments that the Spirit has provided,

we will walk now in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,

we will be forever grateful to you O God, our Father.

Amen.

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³⁰ Phil 4: 7, 19-20.

Day 21 Too Deep for Words

Approach

‘Wide, wide is the ocean’ of your love O God
and yet you are as near as the waves edging up the beach.
‘Deep, deep, as the deepest sea’
and yet you approach us as the water laps around our feet.
Lord, meet us at the level of relationship that we can manage,
but then increase our capacity and trust,
as we go deeper in your love.
Amen.

Scripture

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.
(Romans 8: 26-28)

Silence

Reflection

On her popular web site, Mrs Betty Bowers, who claims to be ‘America’s Best Christian’, gives many outlandish statements about how close she is to God:
‘So close to Jesus, he brings people back from the dead, so I can have the last word.’
‘So close to Jesus. We have joint check in.’
‘So close to Jesus, communion tastes like leftovers.’
‘So close to Jesus, he’s given me his loaves and fishes recipe.’³¹
With pin pricking satire, Betty sends up those who claim to be so close to their Creator that they know exactly all God’s ways.

In stark contrast, the apostle Paul in his letter to the believers at Rome admits, “We do not know how to pray as we ought.” He says not to feel defeated in such a situation, as our weakness creates the freedom for the Spirit to help us. When we cannot articulate our prayers and it all seems bamboozling, we are to be aware that the Spirit is at work interpreting our groans and desires that are deeper than words.

When Monica found out that her wayward son, Augustine, was thinking of leaving Africa and heading off for the bright lights of Italy, her heart sank and she prayed: “O God, please don’t let him go to Italy.” Augustine went to Italy but there he came under the influence of Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan and he discovered God in a profound way. Monica’s exact words were not answered but God responded marvellously to the deep cries of her heart.³²

³¹ Mrs Betty Bowers, ‘America’s Best Christian’, Internet address: < <http://www.bettybowers.com> >

³² Augustine writes: “But you, in the depth of your counsels and hearing the main point of her desire, regarded not what she then asked, that you might make me what she ever asked.”
Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. E B Pusey, Book 5.8.15
Internet Address: <<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/Pusey/book05>>

Journal

Where is the point of struggle in your prayers at the moment, where words are inadequate and sighs and groans begin?

The Spirit's intercession on our behalf is not a reason for mental disengagement. On the contrary, ask for the Spirit's help, pray with the Spirit from the heart and note down any new insights that come to mind.

Selecting a Souvenir**Prayer**

Come to us Spirit of God in our weakness and unknowing.

Be our Helper in our life of prayer.

Intercede with us and for us and all your people.

Search our hearts and sift our hopes and desires through the filter of your perfect will.

Amen.

Commission

Lord,

you call us on a journey of stretch and growth,

so lead us in trust and confidence,

to experience something more of your grand adventure.

Amen.

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Day 22 Listen to Your Motives

Approach

God,
you speak the truth in love.
Give us the grace to receive and deal with the truth,
in the love with which it is wrapped.
Amen.

Scripture

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious and it does not cease to bear fruit.

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.
(Jeremiah 17: 7-10)

Silence

Reflection

When author, Frederick Buechner, was asked to summarise what he has been trying to say throughout his vocation as a preacher and a writer he said, “Listen to your life; pay attention to what happens to you.... If God is concerned with the world.... If God is really involved with the world, then one of the most powerful ways God speaks to us is through what happens to us, which means keep your ears open, keep your eyes open for the often hidden, elusive word of God.”³³

In the imagery of trees in the desert, the prophet Jeremiah is calling people to “listen to your life.” In particular, to be in tune with where our faith is focussed, to be attentive to our fears and anxieties, especially in the seemingly unproductive times and to be honest about how deceitful and perverse we can be.

In his confessional style, Parker Palmer shared an experience in which he failed to listen to his life. He had been sounded out and had almost accepted the offer to become the president of an American College when he remembered that in his Quaker tradition there is a practice of calling a ‘clearness committee’ to seek God’s direction and peace through others. In his heart, Palmer had already decided the outcome of this process but he went through the motions because it gave him a chance to brag about the job offer. After some predictable questions, things got tough for Palmer who later gave this report and analysis:

They said, “What would you like most about being a president?” Palmer said, “The simplicity of that question loosed me from my head and lowered me into my heart. I remember pondering for at least a full minute before I could respond.” Palmer tried to

³³ Frederick Buechner, ‘Whistling in the Dark’, *30 Good Minutes*, Program #3305, 29 October, 1989.
Internet Address:<http://www.30goodminutes.org/csec/sermon/buechner_3305.htm>

give a glib answer but, with persistent questioning, silence and humour, his deceitful motives were exposed to the group and to himself. Palmer concluded that his desire to be president had “much more to do with his ego than with the ecology of his life.” It was so obvious that when the clearness committee ended, he called the College and withdrew his name from consideration. He concluded, “Had he taken that job, it would have been very bad for him and a disaster for the school.”³⁴

The task of discernment involves being attentive to our deceit and our ego. Because of the games we play, we desperately need others in trust and in truthfulness.

Journal

As you reflect on what you are being called to do, what is your life saying to you, in terms of your fears, joys, anxieties, and peace?

What safeguards are you establishing to combat your self-deceit and to ensure that you are listening and responding to your life with clarity and balance?

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Loving God, help us to trust you, not only in times of ease but in periods of dryness.
Let your creative guidance stave off our anxieties and fears.
Enable us to listen to you speak through what is happening to our lives, to be honest and to receive your truth in love.
Amen.

Commission

Lord,
let your light and truth guide us.
Let your friendship cheer us.
Let your love challenge us.
On the way.
Amen.

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³⁴Parker J. Palmer, *Let your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 45-6.

Day 23 Discerning Our Thoughts

Approach

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,
from the laziness that is contented with half truth,
from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O Spirit of truth, deliver us.
Amen.³⁵

Scripture

But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.” Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”
(2 Samuel 11: 27b-12:1-7)

Silence

Reflection

In our last reflection we saw how Parker Palmer was spared the discomfort of taking on an ill-fitting job. In a similar story, which again values the scrutiny of others, management guru, Warren Bennis, tells how he accepted an invitation to head up a university but realized later that he had done it for the wrong reasons.

Bennis was delivering a lecture at Harvard University. He was a seasoned speaker and he loved the thrill of working a crowd. At the open time to follow, a question came from the Dean of the School, who was a respected figure in education. Bennis thought his experience at responding to questions was sharpened to a fine point after so many years of teaching and media work. His secret conceit was that there was not one question that he could not respond to in a convincing and winning way.

The question came “like a long, high lob floating lazily over the audience and masking its astuteness in that self-effacing (and deceptive) mid-western drawl of his. “Warren,” he asked, “Do you *love* being the President of the University of Cincinnati?” Bennis said he did not know how many seconds passed before responding. The room was suddenly so quiet he could hear his heart beating. Finally, he looked up at his questioner and haltingly said, “I don’t know.” Actually, that was the moment he knew the answer but had not yet told himself. The truth is that he did not love it and did not have the passion for it. He wanted to *be* a University President but he did not want to *do* university presidency.

³⁵ This is an ancient prayer of uncertain origin that is sometimes thought to have come from Kenya.

A question from an interested observer had made Bennis aware that administration was not for him. It was this epiphany that led to his calling as an adviser and coach to leaders in corporate, government and academic life.³⁶

The biblical story concerns the wrongdoing of King David, that is followed by denial and the emergence of a blind-spot. In order to get through to David, God sends a courageous counselor whose story serves as a mirror to the truth.

Often by a question or a story (invited or uninvited), another person can help us discern our thoughts and trawl through our motives so that we may admit our mistakes and discover our genuine passions. To welcome and submit to regular, loving scrutiny is a key discipline in the ongoing pursuit of one's call.

Journal

Do you really *love* what you're doing?

Ask God to search your mind and test your motives as you explore your vocation.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Lord,
in patience you wait for us.
In love you pursue us.
In wisdom you confront us.
In grace you deliver us.
Amen.

Commission

All searching God,
your knowledge of us is intimate,
your love for us is complete,
your vision for us is expansive.
Send us forward in wisdom, compassion and hope.
Amen.

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³⁶Warren Bennis, *Managing the Dream: Reflections on Leadership and Change*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus, 2000), xxv-xxvii.

Day 24 Our Expectations

Approach

All knowing God,
come to us now in your wisdom and love,
seeking us out,
searching our hearts,
and saving us to become all that you have in mind for us to be.
Amen.

Scripture

Now the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, I am only a boy; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

(Jeremiah 1: 4-10)

Silence

Reflection

One of the crushing challenges we may confront is dealing with our own expectations amidst the prospect of undertaking some new service. Jeremiah expected that he needed to be older, to have more experience under his belt and to be an effective communicator. Perhaps he had his heroes in mind who had set a high standard and Jeremiah was thinking that he did not shape up to the model of what a prophet should do and be. The heroes of the faith can inspire and warm our hearts but it is crippling to try and mimic them.

Robert McAfee Brown was frustrated by the little he felt he was accomplishing when protesting against the United States’ military presence in Vietnam. He was sharing a motel room with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Hershel, one of the few Jewish leaders who were in the front ranks of Vietnam protest. Brown said that to his expressions of inadequacy... [Herschel] put his hands on my shoulders and said, “My friend, let me tell you a story. . .”

“When the great Rebbe Zushya,” Hershel continued, “was on his deathbed, he lamented to his friends how little he had accomplished in his lifetime.” And so someone asked him, “Rebbe, are you afraid of the judgement soon to come?” And the Rebbe almost said ‘Yes,’ but he paused before doing so, and then he said, ‘No.’ For when I appear before the Almighty—may the Divine Name be forever blessed—I will

not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' I will only be asked, "Why were you not Zushya?"³⁷

Journal

'Why were you not Moses?' How might the example of other people inspire, rather than cripple you?

God responded to Jeremiah's diffidence by touching that part of his being where he felt most vulnerable and inadequate. Where do you need God's touch?

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

O God, you are our creator and you are our redeemer and you have brought us to this place where we are now.

Inspire us through the life of Jesus and others who have served you in different times and places.

But enable us to listen out to your unique call to us, to serve you in our time and in our place with all the resources that you gift us with.

Amen.

Commission

Commissioning God,
send us forward to fulfil our calling,
confident in the adequacy of your resources,
and open to discovering more
of all you are asking us to be and do.

Amen.

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³⁷Terrence W. Tilley, *Story Theology*, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, 1985), xiii-xiv.

Day 25 Expectations of Others

Approach

‘I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.’ (Jeremiah 29: 11-13)

Lord, help us now to search for you wholeheartedly,
to seek you persistently,
and in finding you,
discover more of your plans of goodness and hope,
for our future.
Amen.

Scripture

They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3: 26-30)

Silence

Reflection:

An American playwright told how his parents scrimped and saved to give him everything. They bought him new clothes three times a year. They bundled him off to private schools. They paid for his university education. From time to time his mother would say to him: “Everything we've got is wrapped up in you!”

It is an easy thing to focus our hopes on a country, a church, a business and on our loved ones. Even if it is not expressed in words, children often hear the message: “Everything we've got is wrapped up in you.” It is harder to deal with the heavy and unfair expectations of those who have nurtured and invested much time and money into us.

John the Baptist found that those closest to him monitored the growth of his ministry and made him the focus of their dreams and identity. They had blessed him with their allegiance but found it difficult when John’s vocation and ministry were turning in an unexpected direction. John has a clear sense of his ever changing call and he lovingly challenges the false expectations of those close to him.

The novelist Chaim Potok faced this pressure over many years. From a very early age he had always wanted to become a writer but when he went to university his mother said: “Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but I have a better idea. Why don't you become a brain surgeon. You'll keep a lot of people from dying; and you'll make a lot of money.” Chaim replied, “No, mama. I want to be a writer.” This conversation was

rehearsed every vacation until finally his mother exploded: “Chaim, you are wasting your time! Be a brain surgeon. You'll keep a lot of people from dying; you'll make a lot of money.” Chaim exclaimed angrily: “Mama, I don't want to keep people from dying; I want to show them how to live!”³⁸

Journal

While being appreciative of the way that your parents, teachers and friends have encouraged and supported you, in what ways are you being pressured to follow the dreams of others?

What impact are these false and unrealistic expectations having on you and how are you dealing with them?

‘I am not.... but I have been sent...’ As you consider the shifts in John the Baptist’s role, reflect on the changes to your calling and any movement that you sense before you.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

We are grateful to you living God for those who have loved us, prayed for us and nurtured us in so many patient and creative ways.

Grant us the insight to see when we are wrongfully living out the hopes of others. Give us wisdom and sensitivity to manage these expectations.

Set us free that we might truly become ourselves and develop into all that you have in mind for us to be.

Amen.

Commission

Lord,
send us forward to do your will,
in the power of the Holy Spirit and
for the glory of Christ, alone.

Amen.

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³⁸Rosemary Dibben, ‘Chaim Potok: Report of an Interview’, Southern College, Cal., March 1986.
Internet: <http://www.puc.edu/Faculty/Rosemary_Dibben/English11/Chosen/PotokInterview.shtml>

Day 26 Embracing Fullness of Life

Approach

Lord of Life,

we thank you that you don't call us merely to step over the starting line,
but to run well and finish the race.

You don't call us simply to an hour of decision,
but to a lifetime of discipleship.

Lord, deliver us from engaging with you superficially
and immerse us into the depths of the adventure you intend for us,
Amen.

Scripture

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

(John 10: 1-10)

Silence

Reflection

Jesus used the imagery of shepherds to contrast the difference between sheep stealers, who are out to get everything for themselves, and the good shepherd who is totally committed to caring for the flock. In this story Jesus spells out a vision for his life and ours: “I came that you might have life: life in all its fullness.”

The author and management consultant, Charles Handy, wrote about his realization that he was failing to live up to the unexplored possibilities within him. Soon after he was married and working for the oil company, Handy's wife engaged him in conversation that went like this:

‘Are you proud of your work?’ she asked.

‘It's all right, as work goes.’

‘What about the people you work with, are they special?’

‘They're all right.’

‘So, the company, is it really a good organization doing good things?’

‘I can't complain, it's all right.’

She looked hard at Charles and then said, “I don't think I want to spend the rest of my life with someone who is prepared to settle for ‘all right.’”

Handy said, “It was an ultimatum of sorts and I resigned from the oil company the next month, but the conversation has always rung in my ears. ‘All right’ is not enough. I agree. We have only one life, we need to do more with it than merely survive.”³⁹

Journal

Meditate with the Holy Spirit and seek to identify the signs and causes of any drifting or unintentional half-heartedness.

The early Christian Irenaeus captured the impressive sight of a person who is forever growing when he said, “The glory of God is seen in a person who is fully alive.”⁴⁰ What will it mean for you today to embrace more fully this vision?

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

We ponder loving God your vision for life,
that we may live life in all its fullness.
Wake us up from mediocrity.
Deliver us from blandness.
Motivate us by the possibility of venturing further into life.
Amen.

Commission

Good Shepherd,
because of your great care for us,
we step out with confidence and joy,
toward your vision of fullness of life.
Amen.

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³⁹ Charles B. Handy, *Myself, and Other More Important Matters* (London: William Heinemann, 2006), 1.

⁴⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (Lib. 4, 20, 5-7; SC 100, 640-642, 644-648). Also viewed at Internet site: <http://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/library_article/149/Man_Fully_Alive_is_the_Glory_of_God___St._Irenaeus.html?PHPSESSID=875fde1ee82500750ed617b2c8a4d924>

Day 27 Empowered for Much More

Approach

To you, God of heaven and earth,
we bow our minds and all our thinking.
We bow our ears and all our listening.
We bow our eyes and all our dreaming.
We bow our hearts and all our loving.
We bow our knees and all our worshipping.
Amen.

Scripture

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

(Ephesians 3: 14-21)

Silence

Reflection

Paul's prays for the Ephesians that they will be aware of the new dynamic within and that they will explore more deeply the dimensions of their experience. He prays "that they may be strengthened in their inner being with power", that they might "have the power to comprehend...the love of God" and that "by the power at work within them they might be able to accomplish so much more..."

One day a young man spotted a motorbike for sale and when he went to view it, the owner wasn't home but his mother said, "Take it for a test drive." For the next ten minutes the man took this motorbike through its paces and when he returned he said to the woman, "Has this motorbike only got three gears?" She said, "I don't know much about them but yes, I think that BSAs only have three gears." They negotiated the price and motorbike was purchased. However, three days later when the new owner was getting acquainted with his new transport, he went to change from second gear into third and his foot slipped on the gear lever. Not knowing whether he had made third gear or not he pulled in the clutch again, gave the lever another kick and to his surprise, he discovered he had another gear! This was exciting! Here was a whole new capacity opened up to him!

In so many ways we can move through life thinking, "This is it. I have reached my potential. I have arrived at the limits of my capabilities." We don't expect any more because this is what we're accustomed to and others don't seem to be going much better. God's word is an invitation to discover the 'much more' and move into a new gear that we'd never dreamed were possible.

Journal

Assess your expectancy levels regarding God's work within you and write an appropriate response.

Meditate on the idea of God wanting to do 'so much more' within you.
Dare to dream and ask to be open, aware and prepared for some new venture or to see new significance in what you are already doing.

Selecting a Souvenir**Prayer**

Empowering, adventurous God,
challenge our complacency that settles too easily for the status quo and makes us think that we have arrived.

Open our eyes to discover what more you want us to experience
and bolster our confidence in your strengthening Spirit.

Amen.

Commission

Now to him, who by the power at work within us
is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations,
forever and ever.

Amen.

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Day 28 Daydream Believers

Approach

Your word calls us to ‘delight yourself in the Lord’, so we come,
to bask in your presence,
to grow in our appreciation of who you are,
to enjoy our friendship and
to receive a fresh infilling of your Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Scripture

This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

(Acts 2: 16-18)

Silence

Reflection

In his sermon on the birthday of the church, Peter declared that the Holy Spirit had come in a new way. In his phrase, “even upon my slaves”, he emphasizes that one of the amazing signs of the Spirit was that people, regardless of their age, gender and social standing, would see visions and tell dreams of a future about which God was yearning. There is no excuse for anybody not to dream. People coming alive in the Spirit are those who have dreams and are working towards their realization.

On the 20th July, 1969 the first lunar module touched down on the moon near the Sea of Tranquillity. When stepping down the ladder onto the dusty surface, astronaut Neil Armstrong voiced those memorable words: “This is one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.”

While the path toward this step appeared to have started seven years earlier, when Armstrong entered the space programme, in reality it began much earlier, for Armstrong said that from the time he was a child growing up in the 1930's in the American state of Ohio, he always knew that he would do something significant in aviation history. As a boy, he had a vision that he would be someone important and it was this vision that sustained him and spurred him on literally to those very great heights.

A few years after that momentous event, Neil Armstrong made an interesting observation. He said that of the fourteen men who had gone to the moon at that stage, eight of them had had a nervous breakdown after they had returned. When asked to explain he said: “One of our biggest problems is that it takes so many years for astronauts to train. We live the space programme and we breathe the space

programme then we do it and after we've done it there's nothing left! Your vision has been accomplished.”⁴¹

Reaching toward a grand vision can be a marvellous sustainer for individuals and groups but the returning astronauts illustrate the peril of having nothing to reach toward when one's vision has been fulfilled. Even worse, is the inertia, the meaninglessness and the whiff of death that surrounds those who have never been possessed by a significant vision. As the wise teacher warned, “Without a vision, the people perish.”⁴²

Journal

Ask God for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will help you to dream and catch a clearer idea of your vocation.

What are you dreaming about?

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us living God,
that we might envisage a new way of living and serving.
May your Spirit stimulate us with creativity, and unite our energies
so that our divinely inspired dreams might take shape.
Amen.

Commission

Lord, three things we pray,
to see you more clearly,
to know you more dearly,
to follow you more nearly,
day by day.
Amen.⁴³

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⁴¹Gordon Moyes, *Be a Winner: How to Create a Positive Personality* (Melbourne: Vital Publications, 1982), 56.

⁴²Proverbs 29:18.

⁴³This is a thirteenth century prayer attributed to Richard of Chichester, England.

Day 29 Delights and Desires of the Heart

Approach

We are grateful for this time, Loving God,
to be still,
to be intentional,
to focus on you,
alone.
Amen.

Scripture

Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him. (Psalms 37: 1-7a)

Silence

Reflection

A dialogue between comedians, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, proceeds like this:

Dud: I think St. Paul's got a lot to answer for.

Pete: He started it, didn't he?

Dud: All those letters he wrote.

Pete: To the Ephiscans.

Dud: You know, 'Ah, dear Ephiscans, ah, stop enjoying yourself, God's about the place'.

Pete: 'Signed Paul'. You can just imagine it can't you? There's a nice Ephiscan family, settling down to a good breakfast of fried mussels and hot coffee and they're just sitting there and it's a lovely day outside, they're thinking of taking the children out, y'know, for a picnic, by the sea, by the lake and have a picnic there and everything's happy, the sun coming through the trees, birds are chirping away.

Dud: Boats bobbing on the ocean.

Pete: The distant cry of happy children.

Dud: Clouds scudding across the sky.

Pete: Naturally, Dud – in fact an idyllic scene is what you call it, when suddenly into the midst of it all – tap, tap, tap, on the door.

Dud: What's that?

Pete: You know what it is?

Dud: No.

Pete: It's a messenger bearing a letter from Paul. They rush to the door to open it, thinking it may be good news – perhaps grandfather's died and left them a vineyard. They open it up and what do they discover? 'Dear George and Deirdre and family, stop having a good time, resign yourself not to have a picnic, cover yourself with ashes and start flailing yourselves'.

Dud: 'Til further notice.

Pete: ‘Signed Paul.’⁴⁴

This is Pete and Dud in their inimitable style, expressing a popular perception of God as the great killjoy. Those who have begun a relationship with God can easily waver in their commitment for fear that going further might result in the loss of life’s joys.

The Psalmist captures the tendency to look enviously at others who seem to be having the time of their lives. The call to delight in God, however, is an invitation and a promise to experience the deepest desires of our hearts. Such a prospect provides us with the spur to commit our way to God, with peaceful trust and patience.

Journal

Reflect on your image of God. To what extent does your God appear as a killjoy?

What comes to mind when you hear the invitation: ‘Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart’?

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

O God, overcome our tendency to look back or to look at others by enlarging our vision of who you are.

Teach us to delight ourselves in you.

Bolster our confidence in your goodness as we experience the desires of our heart.

Amen.

Commission

Lord,

we commit our way to you afresh,

eager to enter more fully into your goodness,

and be of service to you.

Amen.

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⁴⁴ William Cook (ed.) *Tragically I was an Only Twin* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 123. This dialogue has been shorn of a couple of expletives to make the reflection palatable to a wider readership.

Day 30 Losing and Finding Our Lives

Approach

Lord God,

we thank you that we are part of the growing company who are following Jesus in the way of the cross.

We praise you also that your call to us is unique.

Speak to us today as people of 'the Way',

yet single us out, that we might hear your personal word.

Amen.

Scripture

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

(Mark 8: 34-36)

Silence

Reflection

The Holy Week meditation depicting the arrest, trial and death of Jesus of Nazareth was reaching its conclusion. Scripture readings and silence had been interspersed with the placement of objects on the communion table—a basin of water, a purple robe, a crown of thorns, a bottle of vinegar, the scattering of dice, some nails and a sword.

Worshippers turned their heads in unison when they heard the knocking of wood near the back of the room. A hefty man dressed in overalls had entered the building and was struggling to lift onto his shoulder a solid length of wood. After several paces down the aisle he stumbled before he and the beam crashed to the floor. Slowly he carried the wood to the front of the church where he laid it down and attached a cross-piece. The noise was deafening. Every blow was felt by the people. The man then put down his hammer and with all his might he lifted the cross and placed it behind the table.

Jesus made no secret of the truth that following him is costly. To carry the cross requires one's whole attention and strength. It is rough, rugged and inconvenient to carry, for there is "no handle on a cross."⁴⁵ Asking people to take up their cross is a call to suffering and quite possibly death.

Superficially it may appear that joining Jesus involves doom and gloom, however, the genuine followers of Christ come to experience the truth of the paradox, that when they lose their lives in his cause they save them.

⁴⁵ This phrase comes from the title of the book by Kosuke Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1977).

Journal

Note down the different ways you are experiencing the costs and the joys of being a follower of Jesus Christ.

In what ways do you sense you are being called to take up your cross?

Selecting a Souvenir**Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ,
your calling involved acceptance and rejection, pleasure and pain, joyous adventure
and utter abandonment.

And you call us to follow you with our cross.

Grant us courage and the faith to believe that the pursuit of your call will bring
enrichment to others and the discovery of who we are meant to be.

Amen.

Commission

Lord Jesus Christ,
send us forward to take up our cross and follow you.

Send us in fellowship to lose our lives for your sake.

Send us in freedom that others might experience your transforming touch.

Amen.

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Day 31 Deep Gladness and Deep Hunger

Approach

Wind-like Spirit,
sometimes your call is like a hurricane—loud and dramatic.
Sometimes your call is like a gale that blows and pauses.
Sometimes your call is like a gentle zephyr that is scarcely noticeable.
Wind of God, blow upon us as you will.
Be the refreshment and the driving force in our lives.⁴⁶
Amen.

Scripture

Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”
(Amos 7: 14-15)

Silence

Reflection

Despite not having the right lineage, the recognized training or membership of the prophetic association, Amos had a strong sense of being taken off the land to become God’s prophet to people. Often, we cannot attest to such a dramatic tug which causes a change in our vocation and the challenge involves sifting different possibilities for their perceived worth and significance.

A television interview with the actor Gregory Peck was followed by questions from the audience. One man said, “My name is the Rev. Thomas Jones and I have observed, Mr. Peck, that you have played many times in films, the role of a priest. Did you ever contemplate the possibility of becoming a clergyman?” Gregory Peck said, “I grew up a strict Catholic, attended mass every week and at the age of seven or eight I felt a call to be a priest. But,” he said, “I quickly recovered from that and I found my vocation as an actor.” After the audience expressed its amusement, the clergyman was given a chance to reply and he said, “Pardon me for saying this Mr. Peck, but I believe that God has blessed us more through your vocation as an actor!”

How does one weigh up the worth of the different paths to walk? How does one know which vocation to embrace amidst the various options that might beckon? Frederick Buechner helpfully addresses this question when he says:

“There are all different kinds of voices calling to you, all different kinds of work and the problem is finding out which is the voice of God, rather than that of society, say, or the super-ego or self-interest. By and large, a good rule for finding out is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to, is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do, and (b) that the world most needs to be done.”

⁴⁶ I heard the activities of Holy Spirit likened to a hurricane, a gale and a zephyr in a conference address by the Rev Wynford Davies, Auckland, New Zealand, circa 1971.

“If you really get a kick out of your work, you’ve presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you have missed requirement (b). [Buechner’s example suggests that he does not think deodorant serves a significant purpose!] On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leprosy colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you are bored and depressed by it, the chances are you’ve not only bypassed (a) but you probably aren’t helping your patients much either.”

“Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do.” Frederick Buechner concludes, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁴⁷

Journal

What do you see yourself doing vocationally when you contemplate ‘your deep gladness’?

Reflect on the place where ‘your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet’.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
creator, carpenter, community builder, crucified Christ, commissioning Lord.
Throughout the shifts and stages of *our* life,
give us the sensitivity to hear your voice,
the freedom to let go of the old and
the courage to embrace the new.
Lead us to discover at this point on our journey,
what is our deep gladness and
the place where we can best serve the needs of our world.
Amen.

Commission

Lord our God,
You call us to follow Jesus so let us follow Him today,
in obedience, joy, courage, truth and love.
Amen.

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⁴⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.

Day 32 Three Dollar's Worth of God

Approach

Almighty God,
we seek to worship you.
To allow our conscience to be quickened by the holiness of God,
to feed our mind with the truth of God,
to let our imagination be purged by the beauty of God,
to open our heart to the love of God,
to devote our will to the purpose of God.
Amen.⁴⁸

Scripture

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and perfect.
(Romans 12: 1-2)

Silence

Reflection

We return to this pivotal passage in the letter to the Romans to consider the apostle's appeal "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Picking up on the familiar worship practice of sacrificing the life of a bird or animal, the Roman believers are called to offer themselves as a 'living sacrifice'. This is an ongoing presentation rather than a one-off gift.

The offering of our lives is not only an appropriate response to the mercies of the God who has given us all but it is a prerequisite for discernment—"so that you may discern what is the will of God." Discernment cannot be divorced from discipleship. Discernment is not an artificial leg that can be strapped on and taken off when convenient. Discernment is integrally connected to the offering of all that we are to God.

Wilbur Reeves sums up a popular attitude to God when he says, "I would like to buy three dollars worth of God please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of God to make me love a black person or pick crops with a migrant. I want ecstasy not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ This is an adaptation of Archbishop William Temple's definition of worship. In William Temple, *Hope of a New World* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1940), 30.

⁴⁹ Tim Hansel, *When I Relax, I feel Guilty* (Elgin, IL: David C Cook Publications, 1979), 49.

Journal

Examine yourself to identify and explore any reluctance or fear about presenting your life fully to God.

If dedication is best motivated as a response to all that God has given, what might it involve for you to grow in your understanding and appreciation of God's generosity?

Selecting a Souvenir**Prayer**

Lord,
we are no longer our own but yours.
Put us to what you will.
Put us to doing.
Put us to being.
Put us to suffering.
Let us be employed for you or laid aside for you.
Let us be full,
let us be empty.
Let us have all things,
let us have nothing.
We freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to you
for we love you Lord and need to give ourselves.⁵⁰
Amen.

Commission

Holy God,
we seek now to discern your will,
that we may do your will,
with the confidence,
that your way is good and
your will is perfect.
Amen.

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⁵⁰ This is sometimes called 'The Consecration Prayer', the source of which is unknown.

Day 33 Seeking and Stumbling

Approach

Lord Jesus Christ,
you call us to 'seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness'.
May this objective be supreme,
as we draw near,
to worship you and study your word.
Amen.

Scripture

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.
(Matthew 13: 44-46)

Silence

Reflection

The twin parables of Jesus are about two main ways in which people discover and joyfully sacrifice to embrace the realm of God. They are stories that illustrate the various ways that people discern their vocation. Some will exclaim, 'Eureka!' after a long search while others will stumble over their passion like a farmer striking a treasure while ploughing a field.

Melbourne actor, Terry Norris, describes the way he stumbled upon his vocation: "I don't know what it was; it was my Damascus experience, I suppose. I was walking along Exhibition Street [Melbourne] on a rainy Saturday afternoon and I stopped outside Her Majesty's Theatre pondering my fate; you know, get a job at Rosella's sauce factory or Ansell's rubber works. There was a live show on, *Rose Marie*. The cinema was my dream factory, where I forgot my worries, but there I was outside a flesh-and-blood theatre and it drew me in. I had never been to live theatre. It was one shilling and a penny to get in, more than twice what it was for the cinema. The curtain went up and I saw colour for the first time. I remember that vividly. I was enraptured, my mouth dropped open and I wanted to be part of that magic. I never wanted to be on the stage, I just wanted to be part of the action."⁵¹

Sometimes the stumbling approach to discernment is important when we have developed a prejudice towards a certain pathway or have consciously or subconsciously rejected a particular direction. This was the experience of author, Charles Handy who said: "Some stumble on their passions. After my dreadful schooling the last thing I wanted to be was a teacher. Then by chance *Shell* made me one, but of willing adults, not reluctant schoolboys. I loved it, and what you love you are often good at. So, to those who have not found a passion, I now find myself

⁵¹ Interview by Chris Beck, 'What I've Learnt: Terry Norris', *The Age*, 6 September, 2003.

saying, 'Experiment, try anything that takes your fancy, but until it turns into a passion don't make it the centre of your life, because it won't last'.⁵²

Journal

Stand back and look at your life. What is it that you are striving for?

What might it mean to experiment or to give some new possibility a 'test drive' in order to discover whether or not you have the aptitude and passion?

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Loving God,
thank you that your call to us is personal and
the way you reveal yourself to us is absolutely unique.
Help us to be intentional in seeking you and the pearl of great price.
Keep us also alert to the treasures that we might stumble over in our ordinary routines,
this day and every day.
Amen.

Commission

Lord,
let us be single-minded yet spontaneous,
seeking first your Kingdom,
yet surprised by joy,
at all that we unexpectedly discover.
Amen.

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⁵² Charles Handy, *The Elephant and the Flea* (London: Hutchinson/Random House, 2001)

Day 34 Open and Closed Doors

Approach

God, our guide and leader,
enlighten our minds to know the direction,
encourage us when we are perplexed,
energise our steps when we are tired and
keep us joyful in your way.
Amen.

Scripture

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of the holy one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens: I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.
(Revelation 3: 7-8a)

Silence

Reflection

There are times when we approach a fork in the road, where some decision has to be made about the direction to take and this choice, for better or for worse, dramatically affects the circumstances and the quality of our lives. Film makers have picked up on our fascination with this question of, 'What if?' Krzysztof Kiewslowski in 'Blind Chance' (1981) and Peter Howitt in 'Sliding Doors' (1998) both present the different possibilities that a life might take by simply missing or catching a train.

A variation of the open and closed doors theme happened in the life of Nathaniel Hawthorne. As a young man, he worked at the Customs House in Salem, Massachusetts, in a place that he loathed and in work that he detested. As a way of salvaging some joy in life, he began to do some writing in the evenings. As a boy, he had puzzled over his vocation and in a letter to his mother he wrote: "I do not want to be a doctor and live by people's diseases, nor a minister to live by their sins, nor a lawyer to live by their quarrels, so I shall have to be an author!"

Hawthorne's first attempts at writing were met with only meager success but some years later he lost his position at the Customs House. He was dejected but his wife was elated. She exclaimed, "Your opportunity has come at last! Now you can be an author by profession!" He seized a manuscript that he had written, took it to a publisher and soon this book, 'The Scarlet Letter' was coming off the presses and being greeted with acclamation by readers around the world.⁵³

The scriptures offer a faith perspective in which we understand the living Christ with keys in hand, opening doors of new opportunity and closing other doors. To the first hearers at the church of Philadelphia who were experiencing insecurity and hopelessness, this letter would have given them hope and confidence.

⁵³ The story of Nathaniel Hawthorne is told by F W Boreham, 'Dazzled by the Glare', *Hobart Mercury*, 26 September, 1953.

As a way of rounding out the dilemma, in the next letter Christ pictures himself standing and knocking at the door of the church hoping that the Laodiceans, who have locked him out, will give him hospitality. We are called to both trust the divine doorkeeper and enter the doors when the opportunities are knocking.

Journal

Focus on your experience of closed doors and then look at them again through the filter of faith.

‘I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut.’ Reflect on this truth for your life, identify your feelings and seek to understand how you are being called to act.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

God of possibilities and protection,
grant us wisdom at the crossroads,
confidence to entrust to you our lives,
vision to see new avenues,
courage to walk through new doors,
patience when doors appear to be locked and
hope in the mystery of life’s doorways and timing.
Amen.

Commission

Lord of the way,
bless our coming and our going,
from this time forth and
forever more.
Amen.⁵⁴

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⁵⁴ This prayer is inspired by the words in Psalm 121:8.

Day 35 All Our Heart and All Our Ways

Approach:

Faithful God,
you keep your promise to be always with us,
to comfort, to provide, to guide and befriend.
Save us from seeking you only in times of misfortune and emergency.
Cultivate our loyalty, deepen our love and foster our intimacy.
Amen.

Scripture

My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you. Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.
(Proverbs 3: 1-6)

Silence

Reflection

The compiler of the book of Proverbs underscores the importance of knowing and trusting the scriptures as the solid foundation from which life's directions might be discerned and tested. The warning about reliance on human understanding is reinforced by the call to acknowledge God in all decisions. God may not always reveal things in the same way and some of the paths we are called to take will defy reason and logic. Here are two biblical examples of discernment by extraordinary means.

As the early church was being established, the apostles were seeking a replacement for Judas. The biblical reporter says, "And they cast lots for them and the lot fell on Matthias." (Acts 1:26) Australian theologian, Graeme Garrett, says, "In the light of contemporary managerial practice, that process looks pretty dodgy. Who'll we induct into the ministry chaps? Well... let's roll the dice, toss the coin, draw the straws." Garrett goes on to emphasize that the community had strict selection criteria (it needed to be someone who knew first hand the story of Jesus and its meaning) but there were two people who could do the job well. Only after praying did the dice come out. Recalling the casting of lots throughout the Bible as a traditional way to break a deadlock of human choice, Garrett says, "When they had done all they humanly could to discern the way they should go, these early believers pause, deliberately, and make a kind of 'space' in the proceedings where the hand of God can manifest itself, and thus the will of God finds genuine expression in the final outcome. The 'lot' is that theological space."⁵⁵

A second unusual method of discernment occurred on a missionary journey. Paul, Timothy, Luke and others sense "they are forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the

⁵⁵ Graeme Garrett, 'And the lot fell on Matthias', Sermon preached at Canberra Baptist Church, 21 August 2005. Internet address<<http://www.canbap.org/sermon-20050821.html>>

word in Asia.” They attempted to travel into Bithynia “but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them,” however, during the night “Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over and help us.’” At these crucial crossroads, the travellers received a divine nudge, a closed door when they tried to proceed in the way that seemed right and then a vision to one of them that was confirmed the next morning by the group who said, “We immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.” (Acts 16: 6-10) The early believers displayed a trust in God, a flexibility to change course and an openness to ways of receiving discernment that transcended human knowledge and understanding.

Journal

“When they had done all they humanly could to discern the way they should go, these early believers pause, deliberately, and make a kind of ‘space’ in the proceedings where the hand of God can manifest itself.” Consider the different ways you are seeking discernment and then make a space for God.

“In all your ways acknowledge him...” Act on this injunction and revel in the promise that follows.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Lord, our God, you provide us with so many resources to help us as we travel through life—the scriptures, wise teaching, the prayerful deliberation of others, the witness of your Spirit, open and closed doors and visions of new opportunities.

Help us to keep trusting you with all our heart, to acknowledge you in every way and so prove the reality of your promise.

Amen.

Commission

God of the road,
companion with us this day,
guide our steps and
inform our minds,
that we may not only know the direction to take,
but understand what you are calling us to be and do.

Amen.

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Day 36 O for a Jethro!

Approach

You are the God of new birth, new creation, new wine and a new commandment.
You plan to make a new heaven and a new earth where all things will be new.
Free us for the transformation you are longing for our lives.
Save us from being possessive about our life and ministry.
Deliver us from being precious about our style and our ways.
Our life is yours, our ministry is yours and our gifts are yours.
We offer ourselves to your scrutiny and your suggestions.
Amen.

Scripture

The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. When Moses' father-in-law [Jethro] saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, 'What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?' Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God.' Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you!'

(Exodus 18: 13-19a)

Silence

Reflection:

The visit of Jethro brought about significant changes in the work and lifestyle of Moses and thus highlights the value of welcoming spiritual guides into our lives. As a priest, Jethro would be experienced in listening to people and listening to God. Not being an Israelite would have given him a helpful distance. Despite being part of the family (how much did Zipporah breathe into her father's ear?), Jethro brings to Moses objectivity, penetrating questions, a deep concern for the wellbeing of Moses and his family, a God-ward focus and a down-to-earth creativity. Jethro fulfils well an essential qualification of a spiritual companion in being able to "speak the truth in love."⁵⁶

There are many benefits that a trusted companion can bring to us, particularly in the special periods of discernment. Umberto Eco's book *Baudolino*, describes the telling of Baudolino's story to Niketas. The rare gift of a listening friend who evokes new insights is underscored in Baudolino's tribute: "You have become my parchment, Master Niketas, on which I write many things that I had forgotten, as if my hand proceeded on its own. I think that one who tells stories must always have another to whom he tells them, and only thus can he tell them to himself."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ephesians 4:15.

⁵⁷ Umberto Eco, *Baudolino* Trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage Books, 2003), 207.

Trusted and truthful friends help by making us reflect on our life in a focused fashion. They also contribute by pointing out our strengths and weaknesses as it is usually easier to see the passion and the lethargy in others than to find it in ourselves.

Journal

Read the Scripture passage again and note the number of straight questions that Jethro asks of Moses. How open are you to ongoing scrutiny and new suggestions about your life, work and ministry?

Jethro and Niketas have different styles but they are both listeners, sounding boards, parchments and companions. Reflect on your current needs for someone with whom you can share your journey of discernment.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

God of truth and love, gift us with a 'Jethro' who will be the right match at the right time in our life.

Give us the grace to welcome their scrutiny of our life and work,
to accept the truth,

to value their perspectives and
to work out the implications of their counsel.

Help us also, to be a trusted listener to others,
especially to those who are seeking discernment.

Amen.

Commission

Lord,

You send us forth by name but
you send us in community.

Bless those with whom we share the journey today,
that we might be blessed,

and be a blessing to others.

Amen.

Day 37 Lifting Up Our Eyes

Approach

Lord,
maker of heaven and earth,
deliverer from all that is dangerous,
shade against all that is harmful,
keeper of all that is precious.
We entrust ourselves to your creativity and care.
Amen.

Scripture

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

(Psalm 121: 1-8)

Silence

Reflection

The 121st Psalm appears to have been chanted by pilgrims making their way to and from Jerusalem. Down through the years it has often been called ‘The Traveller’s Prayer’ as it addresses the dangers and fears of those on the move, away from home and venturing into uncharted territory. It is therefore appropriate to reflect on the great truths and rich promises of this Psalm for our journey in discernment.

Six times there is the assurance that God will *guard* or *keep* us! The care is so intimate that God will prevent us from making a slip-up or taking a wrong path. Often our anxieties seem magnified in the middle of the night but the Psalmist reassures us with the news of God’s insomnia and round the clock vigilance.

The ‘lifting of the eyes to the hills’ provides a clue on how we might regain perspective. With our eyes constantly on the road and concerned about the route, we can become downcast and submerged in the details. To get a break from life’s pressures by taking regular time out, heading for the hills or enjoying the sea can be ways of lifting our horizons and finding renewal of our trust in the Creator.

F W Boreham tells how he was strolling among some tulip beds in the Rosherville Gardens at Gravesend.⁵⁸ He loved the ‘riot of colors’ as he admired one flower bed after another. On leaving the gardens he climbed a cliff path and when he got to a landing he looked down and saw the flower beds again, spread out beneath him. He could no longer see the individual flowers but he could survey the entire design of the garden and lawns. Looking down at the floral scene he observed that the tulips had been arranged in an elaborate pattern and across the centre of the gardens the

⁵⁸ F W Boreham, *A Late Lark Singing* (London: The Epworth Press, 1945), 153.

colourful flowers spelt out the words, 'God Save the King'. Sometimes we are tyrannized by the details of finding our way and walking the journey that we cannot comprehend the full picture. It is a helpful thing to regularly distance ourselves from everyday life in order to discern life's beauty and meaning.

Journal

'I lift up my eyes'. In recent days, where are your eyes being drawn?

'I lift up my eyes to the hills'.

Feast your eyes on the creative works of God that bolster your faith.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Travelling God,
walk with us along the road, from the old and into the unknown.
Be the keeper of our lives and the guard over our thoughts.
Into your hands we commit ourselves and all that we are.
Amen.

Commission

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling,
and to make you faultless before the presence of his glory,
with exceeding joy,
to the only wise God our Saviour,
be glory, majesty,
dominion and power,
before all time, now and forever.
Amen.⁵⁹

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⁵⁹ Jude 1: 24-25.

Day 38 Burdens and Pain

Approach

God of justice and compassion,
open our eyes to the needs of the people to whom
you are calling us to show
your love and care.
Amen.

Scripture

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”
(Matthew 9: 35-38)

Silence

Reflection

The discerning of one’s vocation does not always take place in solitude, nor sitting at the desk crafting a mission statement. Today’s biblical episode reveals that our important work often emerges when we are out and about with people—looking, listening or like Ezekiel, just sitting with the desperate. (Ezekiel 3:15) This engagement with people also requires the gift of spiritual sight if we are going to see the ‘harvest’, recognize the right timing, be undaunted by the magnitude of the task and believe that the ‘Lord of the harvest’ will call others to share in the work and supply all the resources to get the job done.

The gospel writer also highlights the importance of a burden, for “when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9: 36) Out of this burden Jesus called others to join him in the huge task of meeting people’s needs. Down through the years many significant movements have commenced with a burden; a sustained sadness for people suffering from injustice, oppression, discrimination and poverty.

The leadership guru, Stephen Covey, illustrates how acquaintance with people’s pain, often provides the catalyst for service. He was travelling on a train one Sunday morning in New York. People were sitting quietly and it was calm when suddenly a man and his children got on board. The children were loud and they instantly shattered the peace. The man sat down next to Covey and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. Covey could not believe the man could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild so finally he lent across and said: “Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn’t control them a little more?” The man lifted his gaze and said: “Oh you are right. I guess I should do something about it. We have just come from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.” Covey suddenly saw things differently, he thought differently, he felt differently and he behaved differently. His irritation vanished and his heart was filled with the man’s

pain. “Your wife's just died?” he said, “Oh I'm sorry. Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?” Understanding the man’s pain resulted in a desire to come to his aid.⁶⁰

Journal

For whom do we weep? Is there a person, a group of people or some cause about which we have a sustained burden?

Thank God that you are sensitive enough to feel the pain. Consider the way this burden might become the catalyst for some new direction in your life.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Weeping God,
sharpen our sensitivity to people’s cries.
Open our eyes to people’s sorrows.
Fill our hearts with a deep compassion for those who are troubled.
We cannot do everything but we ask that you would show us our part
in your mission of deliverance and hope.
Amen.

Commission

You have told us what is good,
and what the Lord requires of us:
to do justice,
to love mercy
and to walk humbly,
with our God.
Amen.⁶¹

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⁶⁰ Stephen R Covey, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1989; this edition Pocket Books 2004, an imprint of Simon and Schuster UK Ltd; London, 30-31.

⁶¹ Adapted from Micah 6:8.

Day 39 Desiring, Discerning and Doing

Approach

We approach you in the words Jesus taught his followers:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil,

for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory,

for ever and ever,

Amen.”⁶²

Scripture

Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.

(Luke 6: 46-49)

Silence

Reflection

This passage is one of many in which Jesus illustrates the folly of hearing His words and not acting upon them. Calling him ‘Lord’ and not following through on what Jesus is asking is an unholy contradiction.

The journey in discernment begins with a desire to know God’s will for our lives. Discerning the pathway and purpose for our lives but not taking this any further is as risky as building a house without foundations. The whole point of discernment is to act upon it and do what God is asking of us.

A young man who was keen to become a policeman arrived one day to do the entrance examination. It was a rigorous process with medicals and physicals but one of the sections was an interesting test of the man's initiative.

On uncovering the paper he began to read the scenario: “You have been called to a scene and on arriving you are jostled by a panic stricken man. You find a crowd gathered round two men who are clearly intent on killing each other. As you look behind them you see a burglar breaking into the house of one of the spectators. The panicking man now manages to get through to you that his wife is about to give birth to a baby, that the ambulance officers are on strike and that his own car has just broken down. As you are taking all this in, you notice that across the street a fire is rapidly spreading through a block of flats and a woman is shouting for help from a top floor window!

⁶² Matthew 6: 9-12.

Then came the inevitable question: “If you were a member of the police force what would you do?” The young police applicant thought about this for some time then he took up his pen and wrote: “I would take off my uniform and merge with the crowd!”

The story does not record how the man scored or whether he was recruited but how often do we want to do just that? Under the pressure of conflicting demands and in the confusion of competing priorities, it is a temptation to opt out of involvement.

It is unlikely that we will ever discern the will of God for our lives if we have no intention of ever doing it. Living out our vocation will be demanding and often bamboozling but usually it is a matter of taking the next step that lies before us.

Journal

What is the biggest challenge in your journey of discernment at the moment? Not knowing? Paralysed by the options? The difficulty of deciding? Knowing but lacking the courage or desire to act? Something else?

What is the next step for you in this journey?
Ask God for the grace to take that step.

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

God of mercy, forgive us for saying and singing ‘Lord, Lord’ when our actions deny our words.

May our works praise you as we enter into your good, acceptable and perfect will.

Amen.

Commission

Lord, you do not send us forth without protection and provision,
so send us now,

in the power of the Holy Spirit,

with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and

in the love of God our sustainer.

Amen.

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Day 40 Psalm for All Seasons

Approach

Faithful God,
you stick with us through all the stages and turns of life.
Help us to be loyal to you, today, whatever the season,
to be open to your mercies and responsive to your calls.
Amen.

Scripture

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

(Psalm 23: 1-6)

Silence

Reflection

We have arrived at the last reflection on our special journey in discernment. Some of our questions may be answered while new queries will surely have sprouted. In a very real sense, our discernment of God's will is a daily challenge and a lifelong quest.

The twenty-third Psalm is an all-weather prayer which captures the changing moods and seasons on such a journey. A man was ill in hospital and as time would tell, he was in the final days of his life. A doctor stopped at his bed and asked the usual questions to test his level of consciousness: 'What is your name?' and 'When were you born?' The doctor then asked, 'Where are you now?' to which the patient replied, 'I'm living in the twenty-third Psalm.' Conscious or not, ill or in good health, young or old, the twenty-third Psalm is a good place to stay.

Pastor and counsellor, Charles Allen, writes about how to make this Psalm our permanent address. A man who had climbed from the bottom of his company to become the president appeared to be successful yet he had become tense, worried and sick. Finally, one of his physicians suggested that he talk with a minister. He approached Charles Allen who describes the essence of his counsel:

"We talked of how his physicians had given him prescriptions and he had taken them. Then I took a sheet of paper and wrote out my prescription for him. I prescribed the twenty-third Psalm, five times a day for seven days. I insisted that he take it just as I prescribed. He was to read it the first thing when he awakened in the morning. Read it carefully, meditatively, and prayerfully. Immediately after breakfast, he was to do exactly the same thing. Also, immediately after lunch, again after dinner, and, finally, the last thing before he went to bed. It was not to be a quick, hurried reading. He was to think about each phrase, giving his mind time to soak up as much of the meaning as possible. At the end of just one week, I promised, things would be different for him."

Allen concludes, “The twenty-third Psalm is one of the most powerful pieces of writing in existence and it can do marvellous things for any person. I have suggested this to many people and in every instance which I know of it being tried it has produced results....The twenty-third Psalm is a pattern of thinking, and when a mind becomes saturated with it, a new way of thinking and a new life are the result... One could memorize it in a short time... But its power is not in memorizing the words but rather in thinking the thoughts.”⁶³

Journal

Meditate on the twenty-third Psalm until a phrase impresses you with new power or a truth seems to come with your name and address written upon it.

What is the Shepherding God calling you to do today?

Selecting a Souvenir

Prayer

Good Shepherd, accompany us every day and through every circumstance.
Enable us to draw on your rich provision and prove the truth that with you, we have everything that we need.
Thank you for your presence throughout our journey in discernment,
Enable us to follow your leading in all the days ahead.
Amen.

Commission

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us,
all the days of our lives.
And we will live in the house of the Lord,
forever.
Amen.

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⁶³ Charles L Allen, *God's Psychiatry: Healing for the troubled heart and spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H Revell Company, 1984), 13-14.

Making Life Decisions: Journey of Discernment

A Process of Discernment Guided by Down-to-Earth Biblical Principles

An Online Book at this Internet Address:

<http://makinglifedecisions.blogspot.com>

Making Life Decisions: Journeying Together

Seven Studies for Small Groups

by

Dr. Geoff Pound

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Group Study 1: Ready for the Journey

Introduction

We are all taking a journey in discernment. This involves some personal, daily steps but we are also choosing to enjoy some times together. These group times are not for telling each other what to do but to give encouragement, support and prayer for one another.

In these weekly Discussion Group Notes questions are provided to stimulate our talk and to keep us on track. Don't feel bound to answer all the questions but let your group conversation take its own course. Write down some of your reflections and the thoughts of others in the spaces provided and keep this as your travel log.

Travelling Companions

How well do you know each other? It might be good to go around the group sharing your answers to these questions:

What is your name?

[Write down the names of your group members]

What is the most enjoyable travel experience you have undertaken?

Sustenance for the Journey

Decide how you will read the following Scripture and conclude the reading with a sustained period of silent reflection.

Reading: Luke 10: 1-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. 2 He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. 3 Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves. 4 Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. 5 Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' 6 And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. 7 Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. 8 Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; 9 cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' 10 But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 11 'Even the dust of your town that clings to your feet,

we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' 12 I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

13 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. 14 But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 15 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades." 16 "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" 18 He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightening. 19 See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. 20 Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Silent reflection

Traveling Company

In Luke 10:1 we find Jesus sending the disciples out in pairs on their mission journey. What are some of the benefits of making a journey of discernment together?

Leaving

Sometimes when we get ready to go on a major holiday and we've had to make arrangements for stopping the mail, looking after the pets, notifying our friends and family about our contact details and the 1,001 other things, we wonder whether the break away will compensate for the hassle of leaving. What arrangements are you making and how are you clearing the decks and carving out the time to invest in this journey of discernment?

Packing

Toothbrush, passport, credit card, tickets... Have you ever gone on holiday and forgotten to take an essential item for the trip?

What are the essential items you need to take with you on this journey of discernment?

Jesus said to his disciples “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.” (Luke 10:4) Our journey might have a different purpose than that of the first disciples whose baggage allowance was nil but what might it mean to be traveling light and what will this involve for our journey?

Fears

Jesus likens the departing disciples to “lambs in the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3) and this was only the start of his travel briefing about leaving the familiar, depending on others, encountering inhospitality, wiping the dust off the sandals and experiencing raw rejection.

What are your greatest fears as you make this journey in discernment?

Hopes

Jesus spoke to his disciples about reaping a harvest (Luke 10:2), bringing peace to homes (Luke 10:5), curing the sick (Luke 10: 9) and generally expressing the character and work of the Kingdom of God (Luke 10:10-11).

What are your greatest hopes as you launch out on this journey of discernment?

Prayer for One Another

It might be encouraging and supportive to pray for each other now as you contemplate the journey ahead.

Commissioning

Twice in the Scripture reading the Gospel writer refers to Jesus sending the disciples out on the journey. It would be encouraging at the beginning of this journey to know that Jesus is sending you.

It would be good to stand in a group and say together the following words to each person:

“..... [Insert the name of a person present], knowing your fears and hearing your hopes, the Lord Jesus Christ now sends you forward on a journey of discernment. God bless you [Name]. Amen.”

Blessing

After serving as the representatives of Christ and sending one another forward it might be good to conclude the group meeting by looking at each other and saying together this blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon you,

and give you peace.

Amen.⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ Numbers 6: 24-26.

Group Study 2: The Revealing God

Welcome

Remembering Why We Have Gathered

We pause on our journey of discernment to open ourselves up to God.

We bolster our faith in this promise of God:

“I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;

I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”

(Psalm 32:8)

Read this promise together and then enjoy some silent brooding upon its truth.

Open Prayer

Some members might like to lead the group in some short, spontaneous prayers.

Group Prayer

Creative God,

down through the centuries you have communicated in many different ways:

Through a burning bush, through life-giving water, through dreams, woollen fleeces, broken bread, the reading of a book, the crowing of a cock and the faces of the poor.

Save us from creating formulae that prescribe the way that you will speak.

Let us be open to the unique way that you will reveal yourself to us.

Through Jesus Christ, our teacher and guide, we pray.

Amen.

Scriptural Sustenance

Decide how you will read the following Scripture and conclude the reading with silent reflection.

Reading: Psalm 99

The Lord is King; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! 2 The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. 3 Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he! 4 Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. 5 Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

6 Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them. 7 He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them.

8 O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. 9 Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy.

Silent reflection

Divine Audience

What features about the divine king, described in Psalm 99, are pertinent when we are seeking God for discernment?

What does this Psalm suggest about the attitude of our mind and the posture of our body if we are to listen out for the word of God?

Sound Barriers

In this last week the daily readings and reflections have focused on the art of listening to God. We have seen some of the sound barriers which have included self-righteousness (Paul), delusions that we think we are fine (church at Sardis), the common tendency to be quick to speak and slow to listen, a lack of familiarity with God's voice (young Samuel) and noise saturation.

What is the greatest barrier to you hearing the voice of God?

How might you develop greater sensitivity to the voice of God?

Words To and From God

The daily readings and reflections recently included the episode in which God asked Solomon to request anything that he desired.

What discernment question do you have for God?

What discernment question do you think God has for you?

Travel Highlights

Share a question or insight with the group that has arisen out of your journey in discernment this week.

Prayer for One Another

This is an opportunity for spontaneous prayers for each other.

Pray together this prayer from the conclusion of Psalm 99:

“O Lord our God, you answered them;
You were a forgiving God to them,
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

Extol the Lord our God,
And worship at his holy mountain;
For the Lord our God is holy.”
Amen.

Commissioning & Blessing

Let us go forward with confidence in God who is the great King.
Let us also go forward with joy, knowing that God cares for each person,
as we make our unique journey.
Amen.

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Group Study 3: God Calling Me

Welcome

Remembering Why We Have Gathered

We believe that God has called us on this journey of discernment.

We believe that this is a personal journey of discovery and becoming.

We believe that this is a journey with others who have heard Christ's call, 'Follow Me'.

We meet now as fellow travelers to share insights and encouragement.

Open Prayer

Some members might like to lead the group in some short, spontaneous prayers in which we thank God for calling us and gathering us together.

Group Prayer

God of the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost sons,

how can we doubt your personal concern for us?

If we are distant from you

because of the carelessness of others or the choices we have made,

thank you for the truth that we are never outside the orbit of your love,

a love that searches and welcomes and calls us to follow.

Amen.

Scriptural Sustenance

Decide how you will read the following Scripture and conclude the reading with some silent reflection.

Reading: Luke 1: 26-40.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

Silent reflection

God Visiting Us

The visit of God's representative (Luke 1:26) to a humble woman living in a rural town is part of the good news that God comes to us despite our feelings of insignificance and ordinariness. How does this truth make you feel?

Unexpected Visit

It is not clear where the visit to Mary takes place but God sometimes visits us in the most unexpected places and at the most unexpected times. How can we foster an expectation that prepares us for meeting God in the ordinary places and everyday experiences of life?

Stages in a Heady Encounter

Note the following stages in the encounter that Mary experienced:

Preoccupied and perhaps unaware of God's calling (26)

Awareness of God coming to you (27-28)

Perplexed and pondering (29)

Increasing in understanding (31-33)

Questioning and resisting (34)

Open to further understanding (35-37)

Surrender (38)

Sharing with others (39-40)

Which stage point best describes where you are now in your journey of discernment?
Why?

The Virgin's Vocation

Mary received some measure of understanding of what she was being called to do even though it left her with fear and questions.

What insights are you getting into the task that God is calling you to do?

One Step at a Time

Mary's vocation and her understanding of it were growing within her day by day. What might increase our confidence to respond positively and move forward?

Sharing the Story

Mary went 'with haste' (39) to share her story and stay with Elizabeth. From this Judean episode, what are the most valuable ways we can assist each other to understand and follow our divine calling?

Prayer for One Another

This is an opportunity for spontaneous prayers for each other.

Pray together this prayer from Mary (46-49)

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
Amen.

Commissioning & Blessing

Lord God,
you have come to us.
Here we are: the servants of the Lord.
Let it be with us according to your word.
Now let us go with you, to love and serve the Lord.
Amen.

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Group Study 4: Stages in the Journey

Welcome

Remembering Why We Have Gathered

We are pilgrims on a journey of discernment.

We do not have a map or itinerary.

We do possess the life and words of the one who said, ‘Follow Me.’

We have the Word of God to inspire our faith and strengthen our resolve.

We are gifted with each another to share, to support and to speak the truth in love.

We gather today to learn and encourage each other on our journey.

Open Prayer

Some members might like to lead the group in some spontaneous prayers in which we thank God for calling us and gathering us together.

Group Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,

you have been a pioneer on the way;

you now partner us on our journey.

Enable us to encourage each other in the challenges of discipleship.

Help us to respect the uniqueness of each other’s calling.

Equip us with wisdom, discernment, faith and hope.

Amen.

Scriptural Sustenance

Decide how you will read the following Scripture and conclude the reading with some silent reflection.

Reading: Hebrews 11: 1-3; 8-12.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

Silent reflection

Exercising Faith on the Journey

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews gives a definition of faith (1-3) and then tells some stories as stirring illustrations of faith.

What are the actions and attitudes of faith exemplified in the story of Abraham and Sarah and what might they mean for us in our story? (8-12)

Stages on the Journey

The different, overlapping phases of the journey of Abraham and Sarah are sketched:

Hearing the call

Leaving the familiar

Setting out

Not knowing

Living with the strange and foreign

Looking forward to what shall be

Experiencing God's provision amidst that which is humanly impossible.

At what stage/s are you?

How are you finding it? Difficult? Exciting? Tedious? Other?

'He set out, not knowing...'

There are different experiences of 'not knowing' in a journey of discernment:

Not knowing the timetable

Not knowing the right way

Not knowing what to pray

Not knowing your mind and motives

Not knowing your adequacy

Not knowing _____ (fill in the gap).

With what experience of 'not knowing' is your current challenge and what might it mean to 'set out, not knowing', in this dimension of the journey?

‘But the Spirit...’

Abraham and Sarah’s experience of not knowing has often been echoed down the years by people of faith. Even the usually confident apostle Paul admits this lack of knowing when he writes: “For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” (Romans 8:26) How are you glimpsing the grace and strength of God in your ‘not knowing’?

Prayer for One Another

This is an opportunity for spontaneous prayers for each other.

Pray together this prayer of a man who discovered God answering in surprising ways, despite his ‘not knowing’:

I asked God for strength that I might do greater things – I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things – I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy – I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of people – I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life – I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for but everything I’d hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am among all people most richly blessed.

Amen.⁶⁵

Commissioning & Blessing

Gift-giving God,

with you, we will walk by faith.

With you, we will walk in hope.

With you, we will walk in love,

discovering and enjoying your most excellent way.

Amen.

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⁶⁵ The origin of this prayer is unknown, although it is sometimes attributed to ‘an American confederate soldier’.

Group Study 5: Resisting and Responding

Welcome

Remembering Why We Have Gathered

We gather together in the presence of God,
to encourage each other in the journey of discernment,
to share our common pathways,
to respect our individual approaches,
to hear God's word and discuss its application,
to listen sensitively to each other's concerns and
to pray for God's activity within us and our world.

Open Prayer

Let some of the above reasons be a springboard in leading the group in some spontaneous prayers to God.

Group Prayer

Stand and while looking at each other, pray this ancient prayer:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all.
Amen.⁶⁶

Scriptural Sustenance

Decide how you will read the following Scripture and conclude the reading with some silent reflection.

Reading: Exodus 3: 7-14; 4:1-2a; 10-17.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you...'"

⁶⁶ 2 Corinthians 13: 13.

4:1 The Moses answered, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’” 2 The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?”...

4:10 But Moses said to the Lord, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” 11 Then the Lord said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” 13 But he said, “O my Lord, please send somebody else.” 14 Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, “What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. 15 You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. 16 He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. 17 Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.”

Silent reflection

The Calling God

What do you see in the statement (Exodus 3: 7-10) about the nature of God that engages people like Moses in mission?

An Open and Closed Case

On the Mt. Horeb Scale, in which 0 is very resistant and 10 is highly responsive, Moses rated an exceedingly low score of 0! Your response will depend on the specific request and a host of factors but how would you score your general response when you are asked to do some new and challenging assignment? Explain.

‘But, but, but...’

The factors that were uppermost in restraining Moses included the following:

Leaving the familiar (routine? home?) and moving to the foreign

Work ties

Security matters

Family considerations

Personal inadequacy: ‘Who am I?’ (3:11)

Issues from the past—Moses had murdered an Egyptian

Theological knowledge deficiencies ‘What if they ask me...what is His name?’ (3:13)

Fear of failure: ‘But suppose they do not believe or listen to me.’ (4:1)

Some leadership lack/s: ‘I have never been eloquent.’ (4:10)

Passing the buck: ‘O my Lord, please send someone else.’ (4:13)

Other _____

Which of the above are pressing issues for you if God is calling you to some new and daring assignment?

Explain how the dynamics work out within you.

Divine Responses

Scan through the conversation between God and Moses and pick out the good news responses of God.

What divine words or resources might you take hold of when doubts and fears threaten to overwhelm you?

Hearing the Cry

As we are reminded of the God who ‘hears the cries’ (3:7) it is good to realize that often our call arises in the context of the people for whom we feel great pain.

Share with each other the concern/s that break your heart and the people for whom you weep in your community.

Prayer for One Another

This is an opportunity to pray spontaneous prayers for each other about concerns that have arisen through this discussion.

Pray together

God who observes the misery of the world,
touch our eyes to see the ordinary things glow with your presence.

Touch our ears to hear your voice and the cries of people.

Touch our hearts to feel into people’s pain.

Touch our fears and envelope them within the knowledge of your provision.

Touch our minds to understand the causes of oppression and the means of your deliverance.

Touch our hands to offer our skills and resources for the work to which you call us.

Amen.

Commissioning & Blessing

Let us go on our way,

to love and serve the Lord.

And may the blessing of God our creator,

the love of Jesus Christ our Savior
and the strengthening friendship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all.
Amen.

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Group Study 6: Cries and Confirmations

Welcome

Remembering Why We Have Gathered

There are times when life is plain and ordinary.

There are other times when we sense we are finishing a chapter or standing at the crossroads.

We meet to claim together the promise of God to ‘direct our paths’, to acknowledge our dependence on God, to receive the resources that God provides for our journey, especially the gift of guides and the encouragement of one another.

Open Prayer

Let some of the above reasons and resources be a springboard in leading the group in some spontaneous prayers to God.

Group Prayer

Calling God,
through the illumination of your word,
the teaching of your Holy Spirit
and the faith and insights of one another,
we seek to discover more of who you are and
what you are leading us to be and do.
For the glory of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord.
Amen.

Scriptural Sustenance

Decide how you will read the following Scripture and conclude the reading with some silent reflection.

Reading: Nehemiah 1: 1-11.

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, 2 one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped captivity, and about Jerusalem. 3 They replied, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.”

4 When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. 5 I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. 7 We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. 8 remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; 9 but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at

which I have chosen to establish my name.’ 10 They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!”

At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

Silent reflection

Responding to Great Need Nehemiah 1:1-4

Nehemiah is greatly concerned at the news of his homeland and his people.

To what extent does our deep concern indicate that this is a cause that is requiring our involvement?

‘Take it to the Lord in Prayer’ Nehemiah 1:4-11

Reflecting on Nehemiah’s statement to God, what are the key ingredients in a prayer for human need, particularly one which seeks discernment regarding our involvement?

Closed and Open Doors

The statement, “At the time, I was cupbearer to the king” (Neh. 1:11) suggest that there are things that could easily have kept the door closed for Nehemiah. However the story indicates that short-term leave is granted and the door is opened for Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem. (Neh. 2: 1-10). How important are open and closed doors in discerning our call and its timing?

What have been the factors that have confirmed directions for you and served as anchors when you have doubted or faced difficulties?

Gifts for the Task

The wine waiter needed more than a broken heart, a prayerful spirit, leave of absence and a visa to become a wall builder. This entire story illustrates Nehemiah's leadership skills as assessor, planner, visionary, enlister and delegator.

At what stage in a discernment process should there be a stock take to see whether we have the gifts to carry out the job?

What are some good ways we might ascertain whether we have got the gifts and attributes for what we think we are being called to?

Prayer for One Another

This is an opportunity to pray spontaneous prayers for each other about concerns that have arisen through this discussion and the journey of discernment.

Pray together

Loving God,
thank you for the many signals by which you point us in the right way.
Thank you for people who question and encourage us.
Thank you for signs that confirm and reassure us.
Thank you for all the resources that we fail to recognize yet which keep and sustain us.
Accept our thanks and your friendship along the way.
Amen.

Commissioning & Blessing

Send us forward, Lord of dreams and doorways.
Be in our tears and in our feeling.
Be in our minds and in our planning.
Be in our decisions and in our knocking.
Be in our timing and in our waiting.
Be in our friendships and in our loving.
Be in our conflicts and in our healing.
Amen.

Group Study 7: Reflecting on the Journey

Welcome

Remembering Why We Have Gathered

Over these weeks in which we have been personally engaged in a journey of discernment we have also met as a group,
to listen out to God together,
to read the signposts,
to share our insights and
to encourage one another.
For this purpose we meet today.

Open Prayer

Let some of the above reasons and resources be a springboard in leading the group in some spontaneous prayers to God.

Group Prayer

Lord,
you are the Alpha and the Omega,
the A and the Z,
the beginning and the end.
Thank you for your promise to be with us always.
Wherever we go,
whatever we do,
keep us conscious of your loving and abiding presence.
Amen.

Scriptural Sustenance

Decide how you will read the following Scripture and conclude the reading with some silent reflection.

Reading: Psalm 139: 1-24.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes

beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. 17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! 18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me— 20 those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil! 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? 22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. 24 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Silent reflection

Insights into Your Life Psalm 139: 1-6

The journey of discernment involves not only our discernment of God's will but God's discernment of us—our thinking and motives.

What important insights have you received in these last few weeks into your life, your thinking, your questing and your journeying?

Insights into Your Relationship with God Psalm 139: 7-12

As you reflect on the Psalmist's resistance (7-12), what insights have you been getting into your tendency to flee from God's presence and purposes?

Insights into the Nature of God Psalm 139: 13-19

What aspects of God's character and care provoke the Psalmist to wonder?

What new insights about God, during these last few weeks, have caused you to wonder?

Insights into the Evil in Society Psalm 139: 19-22

The Psalmist displays a brutal honesty, to the point of praying for the destruction of the wicked.

What new insights have you received into the evil and injustice in the world?

Insights into the Freedom of Forgiveness Psalm 139: 23-24

The Psalmist's judgment of others leads to self-examination and a plea for renewal. Enter into a period of searching and confession and pray the following prayer together when the leader says 'Let us pray':

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.
Amen.

Thanks and Blessing

At the end of these group sessions it is good to take the opportunity to express our thanks to God and to one another.

Think about what you are grateful for and when it is your turn, say to the group, in the presence of God:

“One thing I am especially grateful for is _____.”

After each person shares their gratitude, it would be good for the group to offer that person a blessing for the way ahead in these words (adapted from Psalm 139: 7-10):

“_____ (name),
wherever you go,
God's hand will lead you;
God's right hand will hold you fast.”
Amen.

Commissioning & Blessing

Lord our God,
you have journeyed with us and
you will continue with us in the days ahead.
Keep searching our hearts as we keep discerning your will.
Dismiss us with your peace and
guide us in the way everlasting.
Amen.

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Resources

Resources and Interaction

Another web site has been created where further stories and resources on the subject of making life decisions and discernment may be posted and comments and suggestions invited by other people.

Check out and contribute to this site which is called [Discernment Resources](http://discernmentresources.blogspot.com/) and is at this Internet address: <http://discernmentresources.blogspot.com/>

Listing Resources

This page is intended to be added to over the months ahead with books, articles, multi-media resources and links to web sites on the theme of making life decisions and doing the work of discernment.

Especially requested are resources in other languages.

Books and Articles

Peter Kreeft, [Discernment](http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics/discernment.htm) : <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics/discernment.htm>
Parker J Palmer, Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2000)

Links to Web Sites

Practicing Our Faith: [The Practices: Discernment](http://www.practicingourfaith.org/prct_discernment.html)
http://www.practicingourfaith.org/prct_discernment.html

Other Resources

[40 Days of Discernment](http://40daysofdiscernment.org/): A Congregational Program for Choosing a Way Forward, especially when in a crisis. Designed by Episcopal Church leaders in Virginia, USA.
<http://40daysofdiscernment.org/>

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If in doubt, choose life.

John L'Heureux,
from 'The Miracle' (2002)