

Listen! Hearing That Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own

Part 5: Finding A Word

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Scripture: Psalm 46

I. Lectio Divina

This morning, we're learning an ancient way of integrating prayer with scripture developed in the 5th Century CE by St. Benedict, called *Lectio Divina* ("Divine Reading"). *Lectio Divina* cultivates the ability to listen deeply, hearing "with the ear of our hearts" as St. Benedict wrote. The practice soon spread outside the monastery and has been practiced by Christians of one form or another for over fifteen hundred years.

Lectio Divina has been particularly popular in the Catholic Church, but in the last several decades it has become increasingly recognized as a helpful spiritual exercise within Protestantism. Surprisingly, the population that tends to be most enthusiastic about practicing *Lectio Divina* is young adults in their twenties and thirties!

The practice involves reading a passage of scripture four times, each time engaging with the passage differently. The object is to allow God's Spirit to touch you by turning your soul at different "angles" where God might find an opening to get inside and stir your inner waters.

The four stages of *Lectio Divina* have been likened to "Feasting on the Word," with each stage likened to a different act of eating: First, you take a bite (*Lectio*), then you chew on what you've bitten off (*Meditatio*). As you chew, you savor the essence of it (*Oratio*). Finally, you digest the "food" and make it a part of you (*Contemplatio*).

(1) Lectio (reading/listening – "bite"): This first moment consists in reading a brief Bible passage slowly, attentively, up to several times if necessary. The idea is to find a word or two, or verse, that sticks in your mind - for whatever reason. Many write down this word or verse.

(2) Meditatio (meditation - "chew"): *Meditatio* involves ruminating on the word/verse. The image of the ruminant animal quietly chewing her cud was used in antiquity as a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God.

Roll the word or verse around in your mind. Free associate with it. In other words, let images, feelings, memories and other words, arise without judgment. Don't worry if your thoughts or feelings seem "irreverent." The key is to engage the word or verse authentically, trusting that being authentic is more important than being pious.

(3) Oratio (prayer – "savor"): *Oratio* is understood as dialogue with God. This is a time for prayer focused both on the relationship between the word/verse and your life. Many people take the word/verse upon which they have been ruminating and hold it next to a life experience or question they are exploring or struggling with, allowing that word/verse to have a conversation with that experience or question. Some will also recite the word/verse as they contemplate or pray.

(4) Contemplatio (contemplation – "digest"): This is a time for simply enjoying God's presence without particular words or thoughts, strategies or questions. Some call this "free

prayer” – as in free and open to the inner conversation going anywhere it may. It is also time for making decisions about what to do with any insights received in the previous stages. Are there any next steps that are indicated? This is also a time for offering thanks and gratitude to God.

Note to reader: In worship, we spent the remainder of the sermon time interacting with Psalm 46 using this pattern. Then, we tried a variant form of *Lectio Divina*, in which one engages in the first two stages of *Lectio Divina* in the morning, then uses the rest of the day as the *Oratio* – allowing one’s experiences throughout the day to interpret the passage, and the passage to interpret one’s experiences. (To replicate a day’s experience, we played a couple film clips from *Magnolia*.) At the end of the day, one engages in *Contemplatio* before going to sleep, giving thanks for any insights or help received.

Why not try either the “standard” form, or its variant yourself, using Psalm 46 as a focus:

Psalm 46

- 1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*
- 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*
 - 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*
- 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.*
- 5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.*
- 6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.*
 - 7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*
- 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.*
- 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.*
- 10 "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth."*
 - 11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

II. Walking Meditation

Note to reader: Walking Meditation was not covered in worship. Instead, we covered the variant form of *Lectio Divina* described above.

There are two books that are especially helpful for prayer and meditation. The first is the Bible. The second is the Book of Creation (i.e., nature itself). Just as it can be helpful to identify a word or verse from scripture as a catalyst for contemplation and exploration of life’s important questions, you can also use objects from Creation this way as well. If all of Creation is an incarnation of God’s love, as the Celtic Christians believed (among others), then God’s Creation is capable of “speaking” to us in its own special and intimate ways. Using the technique outlined below – one of many that I use for walking meditation – you can turn a simple walk in the park into a powerful, inner-journey of self-discovery and revelation.

A *meditative walk* is one in which I go out for a walk after prayerfully discerning a question I could use some help with. While walking, I monitor my inner feelings about what I’m seeing, being especially aware of the objects that catch my attention. By “catch my attention,” I don’t simply mean that they necessarily strike me as interesting or pretty. They stand out because something in my gut says, “Oh! What is *this* telling me?” When I get that feeling, I start to contemplate the object or scene in relation to one of three basic themes:

(a) **Situation:** How does this object/scene help me better understand or frame my present situation with respect to the question I've asked?

(b) **Challenge:** What does this object/scene tell me about the challenge(s) I presently face with respect to my question?

(c) **Way Forward:** What does this object/scene tell me about moving forward with respect to my question?

Here's how it works: When I find my first object, I contemplate how it speaks to (a) above. For instance, I might notice a branch lying on the ground that has been torn from a tree in a recent storm. Some voice within me might observe, "This is how I'm feeling right now, like a branch torn from a tree." The reason why I felt this way may not be readily apparent at first, so I ask myself, "What does this branch tell me about my present situation?" After contemplating the branch a bit, I may realize that I'm feeling like I need to cut something out of my life that has been life-bearing in the past, but now needs to be cast off. Perhaps it's an obligation that was meaningful for me for a long time, but now feels like a burden.

As I continue my walk, I think about this obligation and why I feel like I need to be done with it. I keep pondering this obligation, and how I would cast it off until the next object grabs my attention. This could be one minute later or twenty minutes. One never knows. Once I find the next object, I move on to (b), asking, "What does this object tell me about what stands in the way of my casting my obligation off?"

Perhaps the object that caught my attention reminds me of a certain person, and I realize that the person who came to mind might feel hurt or angry if I were to cease my obligation. So I begin to think about how this person might actually feel (and how I can be so sure), and how I might respond to this person. I do this until the next object catches my attention and I ask, (c) what does this object tell me about the way forward?

Sometimes I encounter "false starts." That is, an object or scene grabs my attention, but when I start scratching around for connections to my situation, I simply come up with a bunch of nothing. Rather than hang on too tightly to something that's unhelpful, I mentally let go of that object/scene and look for others. I find this a helpful practice because lots of things in nature catch my attention but a much more limited number seem "significant" in terms of how they may speak to me.

I trust that my subconscious awareness, which tends to be more open to the Spirit because it has less guards up, is far quicker at processing what's before me than my conscious mind. If an object grabs my attention while I'm intentionally trying to be open to the Spirit, I figure there's a good chance that my subconscious has been in "conversation" with that object or scene well before I have been aware of it. But if I'm not "getting it" with respect to a particular object after several minutes of contemplating it, I simply move on.

Why not turn your next walk in nature into walking meditation? Find a question that is important to you, then go for a walk using the above three themes as a guide. You may never look at a tree, or a patch of grass, or a pile of leaves the same again!