

# LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

# EXPLORATIONS

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## Listening with Others

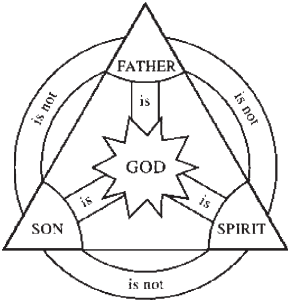
**The Rev. Canon Scott Slater**  
**Baltimore, MD**

We all filter what we hear, sifting through and interpreting the sound waves that our ears take in. Our brains and hearts make thousands of judgment calls in everyday listening. The deeper listening of spiritual discernment involves stepping outside and looking beyond—reading between the lines for a deeper message. How is the Spirit at work in this kind of listening?

In my new position as Canon to the Ordinary in the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, I attend meetings on behalf of our bishops, as well as meetings with vestries and advisory boards in congregations. Much of the time, my role is primarily to listen to concerns people have and to discern with them what God is calling them to do. I serve as someone gathered *with* the community but not *part* of the community. As such, I can listen with a greater objectivity and a clearer perspective.

My role involves listening for that deeper voice that struggles to be heard amidst the din of anxiety and uncertainty. Just as in Listening Hearts discernment, I tend to ask questions in these settings. Questions are the tools of the Spirit. I help groups open a space so they can identify more clearly what the Spirit is saying to them. My questions help create new filters for them. It is as if I were an optometrist placing various lenses before a congregational group's eyes. Number 1 or 2? Number 3 or 4? Which vision is most true?

On one recent occasion, I was meeting with a vestry that was deciding between two finalists for their spiritual leadership. They thought their decision was between Candidate A and Candidate B. There was a great deal of angst over one candidate in particular and I suspected that there would not be enough votes to elect that particular candidate. If that were indeed true, then the decision boiled down to electing the other candidate or electing neither and starting over. Identifying that dynamic helped move the conversation in a different direction. You could almost feel the anxiety dissipate for many of them. It was as if we heard the Spirit saying there is a different way of choosing, beyond the narrow choice you have set for yourselves. When we listen in discernment, our decision making can become both broader and more precise.



There is a peculiar Christian symbol for the Trinity that conveys this framework of listening for me. It is a circle with three spokes and the name “God” in the middle. The three titles “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” are at the ends of the spokes. On each spoke is the label “is,” as in “God is Father.” But on the circle, between each spoke is the phrase “is not,” as in “Jesus is not Spirit.” The symbol distinguishes God’s three natures. It separates the three persons of the Trinity while showing how they are connected. The theology of the Trinity opens our understanding of God, so we can see things more clearly.

For me, discernment is about distinguishing where God is and is not part of the voices we hear and filter as part of our sacred conversations. God is the ultimate filter for our listening, and discernment teaches us to pay closer attention to this particular filter rather than the many others that can keep us from hearing the deeper voice. I am grateful to Listening Hearts for better equipping me to listen for that deeper voice in the new settings to which my ministry now takes me.

*The Rev. Canon Scott Slater is an Episcopal priest serving the Diocese of Maryland as Canon to the Ordinary (an assistant to the bishop). He loves to work with groups of people in a variety of spiritual contexts.*

## A Day with Rituals

**Suzanne Zoole  
Spartanburg, SC**

Every Thursday morning in my mountain retreat, I wait for the light. I watch the sun ease over the Blue Ridge Mountains and light up the leaves and branches. I sit facing the window and adjust the direction of my comfortable chair according to the season—a bit left for summer and a bit right for winter. This morning I noticed I had to shift right, making an adjustment for fall. Once the sun is up, I search for the psalm of the day and begin my ritual of the morning readings.

Watching for the sunrise began at the beach, where I return every winter for a watercolor workshop. It is a personal ritual that I wouldn’t normally do at home but one that is easily incorporated into that week away. Every morning I feel an excitement as I hurriedly pull on my sweats. I wrap up in my winter parka and rush down to the ocean’s edge. God’s light has so much space at the beach—no trees or buildings to crowd it. And clouds, which we so often associate with grimness or dreariness, add to the glory of the sun’s rise in such wondrous and spectacular ways.

Recently, my Listening Hearts group spent some time considering God’s light. We used an exercise from *Heartlinks*, the Listening Hearts meditation blog. All three of us are “outdoor people,” so we left the building and arranged ourselves on the grass. We spent our time of silence with the suggested scripture: “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). As the sun shifted, so did we, to soak up the nourishing warmth of the October sun. As I opened my eyes from time to time, I relished the sight of my friends’ faces, full of reflected light and eagerly turned up toward the source.

Notions of light stayed with me when I returned to my mountain retreat, and a new ritual found me. I begin by setting three votive candles on the porch mantel, lighting them in the dark, and letting them burn for about an hour. When the day’s activities are over, I bundle up in my heavy coat and, with flashlight in hand, go out to the porch. I settle myself on the daybed and read Compline out loud.

With these small gestures the day feels completed, rounded out. I feel I have acknowledged God and my gratefulness to Him.

This mountain retreat of mine offers a setting in which I can pay closer attention to my spiritual life. I go alone and have the luxury of being uninterrupted and undistracted. I believe that small rituals of praying, reading, and meditating add something meaningful to the space—something that clings to the atmosphere. When I return each week to my cabin, I step inside and sense something good and right.

Rituals bring meaning to the place and the moment; they offer me comforting structure and stability. “You strengthen me more and more; you enfold and comfort me” (Ps. 71:21). I want to do God’s will, and these rituals remind me of my deep desire to please Him. I cling to the Psalmist’s words: “Teach me to do what pleases you, for you are my God” (Ps. 143:10a).

*Suzanne Zoole is an award-winning watercolorist. She paints in her home studio in Spartanburg, SC, and in her cabin retreat in the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains. She has been part of a local Listening Hearts group for seven years. Suzanne’s work can be seen at [www.suzannezoole.com](http://www.suzannezoole.com).*



Suzanne Zoole, from *Morning Light*

## Baking Bread in Great Tranquility

**Meagan Howell**  
Annapolis, MD

*The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament.*  
—Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

I love to cook, and I love to eat. I swoon at the sight of shiny eggplants at farmers’ markets in July. I like to curl up on the couch with a new cookbook after the children have gone to bed. Whenever I felt stressed in the past, chopping vegetables invariably soothed my frazzled spirit. The simple tasks of cooking still clear my head. The only problem is that dicing onions with a toddler wrapped around my leg and a nearby five-year-old desperately asking for the eighth time in a row, “when will dinner be ready?” doesn’t exactly result in tranquility. Maybe the monks at Brother Lawrence’s monastery weren’t quite as insistent as my children, but I suspect his conditions were essentially not so different from mine. Whether he chopped, cleaned, stirred, or sautéed, Brother Lawrence felt attuned to God’s presence in all that he did. He didn’t need a quiet, rarified space; he simply lived life with an open heart.

I thought of Brother Lawrence when I recently wrote and tested a *Heartlinks* meditation. I began by identifying a discernment issue. I was considering a volunteer opportunity that appealed to me but threatened to take up much time and energy. Could I find a way to fit it into my life? I meditated on a scriptural passage, reflecting on the words, breathing them in and out, until they became part of me. Then it was time for some prayerful baking.

Kneading proved meditative, emptying. I watched my hands turn and push, turn and push the dough that knit itself together under my pressure. When it looked glossy and I felt a sense of detached peacefulness, I suddenly looked up. My kitchen window was burning with abundant morning sunshine, making the curtains glow pink and filling the space with light.

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### MISSION STATEMENT

Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

*Seeking God through discernment is like tuning in: God may be sending us signals but unless our hearts are prepared, we do not hear.*

*—Grounded in God, p.27*

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It was breathtaking. I felt God's Spirit filling in all the space I had cleared within me. I smiled as I anticipated sharing with my family something made in awareness of God's overflowing presence. Sitting quietly near the warm oven, I was struck by the fact that I knew I would give the bread to *them*. I had become attuned to my heart's desires, uncomplicated by external pressures and internal worries. I felt my deep desire to feed my family—both materially and spiritually—as a form of response to God's call. And I began to see that it was okay to say no to more commitments, however worthy they might be.

That evening in the kitchen, as I assembled the other elements of our dinner, my daughter proudly sat down at my feet and begged me to watch her demonstrate her newly acquired shoe-tying skills. My son made guttural machinery sounds as he drove his dump truck around and around his sister and my legs. I can't say I was possessed of the reverent tranquility from earlier in the day, but I did feel a joyful confidence in God's embracing presence, holding us in the warm kitchen and extending out into the dark November night.

Brother Lawrence was onto something. When we invite God to bake bread with us—or to rake leaves or fold laundry or bathe a child—we open ourselves to the joy of an intimacy that can overflow into every part of our life, sweetening the noise and clutter. Dear God, give me the strength and courage to open my heart to you. Please come and cook with me again.

*Meagan Howell is Associate for Communications and Grants for Listening Hearts Ministries. She writes and manages Heartlinks at <http://blog.listeninghearts.org> and writes about family life at <http://homemadetime.blogspot.com>.*