

# EXPLORATIONS



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**Inside this Issue**

*Praying the Psalms*  
 Joe Gill

*Pondering the Purpose  
 of Prayer*  
 Suzanne Farnham

*Joy in the Depths*  
 Mike Croghan

**Praying the Psalms**

**Joe Gill, Trustee President  
 Baltimore, MD**

Among the more familiar prayers said aloud are the Psalms. Beginning in childhood, I read, with the congregation, assigned Psalms during Sunday liturgy. Except for the familiar, “The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want” (Psalm 23), the verses left no impression. Saying the Psalms was recitation, not prayer.

My view of the Psalms began to change when I was helping to write *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. Then I came across Psalm 32:8: “I will guide you in the ways you should go.” The words struck a chord. They expressed what I had always believed: *God guides us*.

Around this time I began to experience the Psalms, not as a set of words composed thousands of years ago, but as a prayer. Other examples of verses become prayers emerged. Drawing from the Psalms, *Listening Hearts* discusses conditions that help us discern God’s call.<sup>1</sup> They include trust, prayer and patience:

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act (Ps. 35:5);

Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually (Ps. 105:4);

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently. . . . (Ps. 37:7).

I found that in saying each verse aloud, slowly, recitation becomes prayer.

In my middle years, I stumbled upon Psalm 51, verses 10-15 and began to say them each morning. The verses are below, but not in the order in which they are actually written. Somehow—I don’t remember how or why—I rearranged them. Notice the power of the verbs *open, proclaim, create, renew, take not, give and sustain*:

Open my lips, O Lord  
 And my mouth shall proclaim your praise.  
 Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
 And renew a right spirit within me.  
 Cast me not away from your presence,  
 And take not your Holy Spirit from me.  
 Give me the joy of your saving help again,  
 And sustain me with your bountiful spirit.

*(Continued on p. 2)*

<sup>1</sup> Farnham, Suzanne, et. al., *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed.*, Morehouse Publishing, 2021, p. 25

Years passed and Psalm 51 dropped from my daily practice. For a time, I worked as a volunteer helping to lead a non-profit building project run by a group of churches. At times, the organization naturally worried that it would not have enough funds to finish the work. I remember placing faith in Psalm 127:1: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”

The practice of saying the Psalms as prayer came to me recently, after reading *The Rule of St. Benedict*. Written circa A.D. 530, the *Rule* is a guide for communal monastic living. Its instructions are wise and practical, and at times almost tongue-in-cheek:

- “The arrangement for Sunday Vigils should be followed at all times, summer and winter, unless—God forbid—the monks happen to arise late. In that case, the readings or responsories will have to be shortened.
- An hour before meal time, the kitchen workers of the week should each receive a drink and some bread over and above the regular portion, so that at meal time, they may serve their brothers without grumbling or hardship.
- At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose age keeps him from roaming about.”

The Psalms are central to monastic life. At the monastery, monks prayed seven times each day, a practice that itself came from the Psalms: “Seven times a day have I praised you.” (119:164). Benedict prescribed which Psalm should be said and when, so that all 150 Psalms were said each week. Each day begins at *Vigils* with the verse “God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me” (Ps. 70:1) and ends at *Compline* with Psalms 4, 90, and 133. *Lauds* or morning prayer on Monday begins with Psalms 5 and 35; on Tuesday with Psalms 42 and 56, and so forth.

Why did Benedict order the Psalms the way he did and why—especially—were some prayed more than others? What Psalms would I say more often than others—Psalms that, when I read them, are not recitation, but prayer? There is no specific Psalm but instead selected verses that mirror my experience of the expanse of the universe; of the brief time I have here on earth; of the words I want to carry; of the God who travels with me; and of the gratitude I have for being here:

When I look at your heavens, the work of  
your fingers, the moon and the stars that  
you have established; what are human  
beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?

(Ps. 8: 3-4).

\*

The days of our life are seventy years,  
Or perhaps eighty, if we are strong . . .  
So teach us to count your days that we  
may gain a wise heart. (Ps. 90: 10,12).

This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Ps. 118:24).

\*

Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light to my path. (Ps. 119:105).

\*

Let the words of my mouth  
and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

(Ps. 19:14).

Happy are those who consider the poor. . .  
(Ps. 41:1).

\*

(Continued on p. 7)

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*(Continued from p. 2)*

Be still and know that I am God. (Ps. 46:10).

Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep  
of his pasture. (Ps. 100:3).

The Lord is my shepherd,  
There is nothing I shall want. (Ps. 23:1).

\*

O give thanks to the Lord for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures forever.  
(Ps. 107:1).

Amen.

### **Pondering the Purpose of Prayer**

Prayer can be divided into three levels: verbal, imaginative, and contemplative.

The most basic is verbal—using words and possibly guttural sounds. We can recite verbal prayers from memory. We can write verbal prayers. We can read them. We can say them silently or aloud. We can pray them in solitude or in small groups or in large gatherings. Verbal prayers are common to every religious tradition, drawing participants into relationship with God.

While verbal prayers are addressed to God, curiously, God already well knows the thoughts of our hearts as well as the best way for us to move forward. So what we are actually doing in verbal prayer informs God of nothing new. Instead, we are opening the way for our own wants and needs to rise to consciousness within ourselves. This does not diminish the value of such prayer, which leads our minds to new perceptions.

A second level of prayer engages the imagination. This includes communing with nature, which can be sitting in silence at a water's edge—or quietly gazing at a sunset or majestic mountain. It includes prayerful engagement with a painting, a piece of sculpture, or a stained-glass window. Chanting, singing hymns, and listening to instrumental music can also qualify as meditative prayer, as does sacred dance.

### **Suzanne Farnham, Founder Baltimore, MD**

Scenes from theater and literature can induce meditative engagement. And analogies in specific areas of particular interest to one's self such as sports or cooking or business—in fact, any area of personal interest—can be fodder for triggering parallels that spark new insights if we make a habit of engaging with them.

A third level of prayer is contemplation: wordless prayer in which one lets go of all thoughts and feelings, allowing them to simply hover at the periphery. In true contemplation a person asks nothing of God. The objective is to be as an empty vessel immersed in God's presence. Contemplation is perhaps the ultimate way to open oneself to God's guidance, which provides neither a blueprint nor a roadmap. Contemplation is about releasing oneself to the flow of the Spirit—to be carried in the direction that God would have us move—trusting that through good times and bad, Love and Truth will bring peace and joy. Amen.

*“Lead me, guide along the way,  
For if you lead me I cannot stray.  
Lord, let me walk each day  
with thee  
Lead me, oh Lord, lead me.”*

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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.

*Spiritual discernment . . . involves becoming still, open to God, and not clinging to anything (personal relationships, material possessions, thoughts, feelings, opinions, convictions, or concepts of God) in order to become supple in God's hands and open to the action of the Holy Spirit. It is essentially contemplative prayer, surrendering all to the flow of the Holy Spirit.*

*– Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, p. 179*

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### Joy in the Depths

I felt broken.  
My choices, and those of others  
had left me empty of hope,  
empty of faith.

Yet somewhere within me,  
I felt words stirring.  
No, not words, but groanings  
too deep for words.

And these prayers  
(were they mine,  
or from something divine  
within me?) helped me see—

helped me sink deeper  
to a place where I was open  
to inspiration from  
sunlight, sculpture, squirrels, song,

open to dropping into something new,  
into silence, unencumbered  
by thoughts and feelings—  
open to the Spirit's joyful flow.

*– © Mike Croghan, March 2026*