"In the ecosystem of the post-Conciliar spirituality, the ancient practice of *lectio divina* is surely one of the unearthed treasures that can flow out of our liturgical spirituality and feed back into it, as well as be sustaining private practice. Kathleen Cahalan does a masterful job of exposing the many facets of this form of prayer for anyone interested in deepening their spiritual life through a vibrant relationship with the Word of God."

—Cyprian Consiglio, OSB Cam, secretary general of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

"The fruit of a long career of study, teaching, and personal prayer, Kathleen Cahalan's *Pressing In On the Word of God* is a comprehensive introduction to prayer with Scripture. Beginning with reflection on a story from her own experience, Cahalan shows the reader how Scripture itself was created. She places contextual study of the Word in relationship with the goal of prayer and then leads the reader through myriad examples of how to engage in different kinds of prayer with the Word. Drawing on theological reflection skills she has honed, she skillfully demonstrates how to interact with text, life, Scripture, and nature. These are the smart reflections of a well-integrated guide. Her personal way of communicating makes this book a warm, contemplative read, but Cahalan is also a consummate pastoral educator, and writes helpfully about the development of the lectionary, principles of Scripture study, and the changes of Vatican II. Cahalan provides a beautiful example of how by following these practices, one can become permeated with the Word."

—Jeana Visel, OSB, dean of School of Theology programs, Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology

"This is a remarkable and timely book that offers both a scholarly and highly readable analysis of this ancient contemplative practice. Cahalan provides the kind of genuine insight and creative wisdom that can only come from a career dedicated to both the teaching and practice of Christian spirituality. I would recommend this book not only to those working in the field of spirituality and their students but to all those seeking enriched insight and practical guidance for a deeper life of meditation, contemplation, and prayer."

—John J. Markey, OP, professor of theology and spirituality, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas

"Both the theory and practice of *lectio divina* are well known today. What Kathleen Cahalan's book offers is a deeply personal account of how this practice can have a creative impact on the whole of life, drawing from everyday experience and helping to contextualize it in a prayerful life. This will be for many readers an intelligent, well-informed, and practical guide to *lectio divina*."

—Michael Casey, OCSO

"Kathleen Cahalan approaches *lectio divina* with vulnerability, wisdom, and spiritual depth—the hallmarks of her beloved practice of daily *lectio* on the Ritual app. In this new book, Kathleen explores how Scripture, creation, and our own life experience can serve as the foundations for an ongoing conversation with God. Whether you've practiced *lectio* for years or you're curious about how an ancient practice can help you stay grounded in modern life, this book is an essential guide."

—Connor Toohill, co-founder and CEO of Ritual

Pressing In On the Word of God

The Practice of Lectio Divina

Kathleen A. Cahalan



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
litpress.org

Cover art: *Spirit* by Br. Martin Erspamer, OSB, a monk of Saint Meinrad Archabbey, Indiana.

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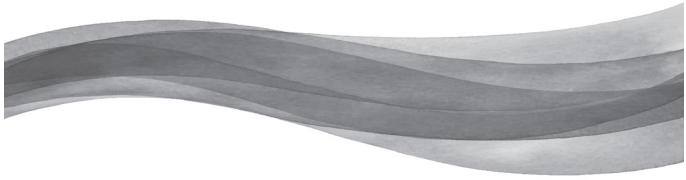
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Cahalan, Kathleen A. author
Title: Pressing in on the word of God : the practice of lectio divina / Kathleen A. Cahalan.
Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, [2026] | Includes bibliographical references. | Audience term: Christians | Summary: "The ancient practice of lectio divina has attracted believers for centuries, but many struggle with getting started or are unsure if they are doing it "wrong." In Pressing In to Hear the Word of God, Kathleen Cahalan offers engaging stories of her personal lectio experience-rooted in a historical, theological, and practical approach-to draw us closer to the word, to listen, and respond"-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2026028970 (print) | LCCN 2026028971 (ebook) | ISBN 9798400802928 trade paperback | ISBN 9798400802935 epub
Subjects: LCSH: Bible--Devotional use | Prayer--Christianity | Spiritual life--Christianity
Classification: LCC BS617.8 .C34 2026 (print) | LCC BS617.8 (ebook)
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026028970
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026028971

To

Mary Margaret Funk, OSB

From first-base-line seats to the Saint Enda Retreats,
my deepest gratitude for passing on the teachings



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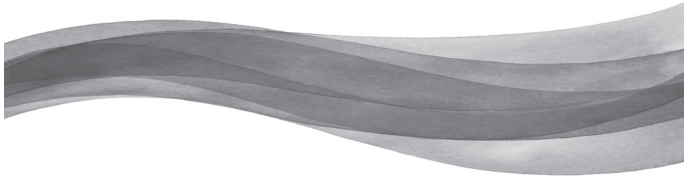
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Preface

Once while Jesus was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God . . . (Luke 5:1).

I have been pressing in on the word of God—practicing some form of *lectio divina*—since sixth grade. As a child I had the desire to read the whole Bible. I do not know how I came upon such an idea, but my hunch is it was partly a desire that "the spirit of the Lord began to stir" in me (Judg 13:25). The desire was also part of our formation in the Liturgy of the Word at Saint Columbkille's School as teachers ushered in the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

I started reading at the beginning with the book of Genesis, but knew the first few stories. I wanted something I was not familiar with and decided on Ecclesiastes. As you might guess, I did not get far. The text was so strange, and I could not understand what I was reading. My attempt faltered, and I never read Ecclesiastes or the whole Bible.

I must have learned about the daily lectionary in school and discovered that during the weekday, the readings covered a whole book, or so I thought. The only problem was I needed access to the daily readings. Because I was often

in the church after school practicing the organ, I decided to borrow a missalette, take it home, copy down the readings for each day, which were listed in the back pages, and return the missalette the next day. At some point I realized I wanted my own Bible (we had one at home stored in the hallway closet, complete with a crucifix, oil, and candles to be used for the anointing of the sick but it was rather foreboding and not the most inviting to use). One day I took the bus downtown and purchased *The Jerusalem Bible* at a religious bookstore. That is when I began to pray the Scriptures each day by following the lectionary. I had a sense that people around the world were hearing these same texts proclaimed at liturgy.

When I was sixteen years old, I read Henri Nouwen's book *Genesee Diary*, the story of his nine months living at a Trappist monastery. His diary was the first spiritual book I read, and I knew nothing about Trappist monasteries even though two were down the road from where I lived. During his stay, Nouwen learns to pray the Liturgy of the Hours and what it means to immerse himself daily in the Scriptures. He is especially struck that at Compline (the last hour of the day, meaning "to make the day complete"), the prayers were always the same, and no one needed a book because everyone knew them by heart.[1] He writes, "I start realizing that the psalms of Compline slowly become flesh in me; they become part of my night and lead me to peaceful sleep."[2] From Nouwen, I learned that there was both a way of praying with Scripture that structured the day and a way to pray outside those times by memorizing the words. I looked up Compline and decided to memorize the psalm that shapes the hour, Psalm 4, and began to say it at bedtime.

As a teen I was eager to learn more about prayer and I bought a copy of the book *You: Prayer for Beginners* by

Mark Link, SJ. *You*, a little how-to book, taught the reader how to pray with Scripture in a simple format: read a passage slowly, savor a few words or phrases, and reread the passage two more times. He also invited the reader to recall a word from the reading at the end of the day. Though Link did not mention his sources, I realized later he had combined the four-part method of *lectio divina* taught by the medieval monk Guigo II (d. 1188 CE) with Saint Ignatius's (1491–1556 CE) examen.

I have practiced *lectio* for most of my life but not always in the same way. While Guigo's four-part reading is the most common method used today, especially for group practice, I have discovered other ways of "reading God" that have helped me through times of discernment, health challenges, transitions, grief, and the joys of daily life. For me, *lectio* is any approach in which we have a dialogue with God through a text over time. Whether it is the daily lectionary readings, or memorizing a psalm, or a slow reading of a gospel, or repeating short phrases, Scripture is a primary text. But so too are creation and your life experience: these are "books" to read and discover God's word.

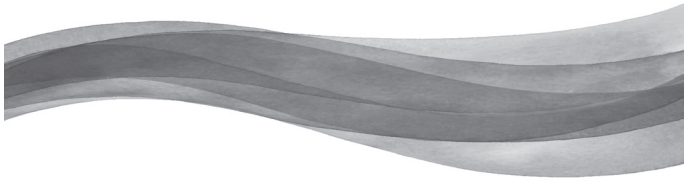
At the beginning of Jesus's ministry, Luke tells us that the crowd is eagerly attempting to be near Jesus, a new teacher and healer in the area. They want to press in on the "word of God." Drawing near to the word of God is the touchstone of *lectio divina*, taking time to press in on the word to discover God's message for us today so that we might "hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). This word of God is not just letters on a page that we read silently, but rather the dynamic life-giving message of God pressing in on us.

In part I of this book, I explore three approaches to *lectio* with three texts—encounters, Scripture, and creation. Part II explores three dimensions to "reading" biblical texts:

understanding the context, encountering the symbols, and discerning God's summons. The context, what has been called the "literal," aims to understand the history and context of the text. The symbolic helps us uncover the meaning of metaphors and symbols within a story and across books. The third is reading to listen for what God is inviting me to hear today and respond to, a calling as it relates to my life, which is our primary aim in this practice. Reading the context and exploring the symbolic are in service to a deeply personal conversation with God through the text.

Part III explores five ways Christians have practiced reading God through Scripture as *lectio divina*: following a lectionary, memorizing passages, employing a short arrow prayer against afflictive thoughts, reading a text multiple times, and staying with and rereading the same text.

Perhaps you have never tried the practice of *lectio divina*, or you have attempted and it did not catch for you. Or maybe you have practiced for many years and are compelled to try a new way; or you could just use a jump start on your prayer. By exploring many approaches and ways to practice, I hope you are stirred by the Spirit of the Lord and discern one that helps you draw near, pressing in on the word of God.



Abbreviations

All Scripture texts are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ, 2021) unless otherwise noted in the text as follows:

NABRE *New American Bible, revised edition* (Washington, DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 2010).

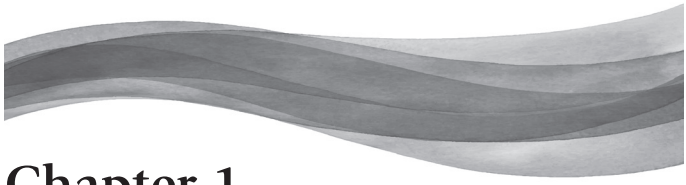
HB *The Hebrew Bible, Vol. 1. The Five Books of Moses*, trans. Robert Alter (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

KJV *King James Version*

EGP *The Ecumenical Grail Psalter* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2015).

PART I

Lectio Divina as Reading the Sacred



Chapter 1

Lectio Divina with Sacred Encounters

The first time I visited Saint John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota, I fell into the lake. I looked out over Lake Sagatagan on a late March afternoon, and I thought, "There's probably a trail that goes around." From the edge of the water, the lake appeared large and round. Confident in my hiking skills, I took off to the right in search of the trail. I first walked over a grassy lawn, which led to some woods, but I found no trail. I headed onto the road, which ran alongside the lake, but I could not see a path. At a fork in the road, I kept to the side of the lake by bushwacking through some trees and grasses. No trail opened, but I kept on. I soon realized there were extensive backwaters, and that the lake was much larger, not round as I initially thought. The easiest way to find a trail on this side of the lake, it seemed, would be to cross over a small ice-covered bay. Confident in my winter trekking ability, I set off gingerly—until close to the opposite side of the bay, the ice broke, and I plunged into the water.

My feet hit bottom, and I was standing chest deep. I am alive, was my first thought. I would not drown, but I needed to get out of the frigid water. I tried to climb onto the ice, but

kept breaking through, until finally I raised myself up on my knees and crawled to shore. Now, a choice. Do I turn back or keep going? Remaining certain that there was a trail ahead, I kept on, but more iced-over back water appeared between me and what I took to be the main shore. I had to traverse the ice again, but this time I checked to make sure it was secure. I inched out from shore, stood to move ahead, and yes, the ice cracked, and I broke through again. I crawled out and stood up only to realize I was on a small peninsula and the other side was yet another small bay covered with ice.

I had to face a terrible truth. There was no trail around the lake, at least not one that I could find. I had stupidly gotten wet not once but twice, and I needed to get safely back to my room and out of my wet clothes. I decided to turn around and head back the way I came (avoiding the ice this time), trudging through the woods, onto the road, and back to a dormitory on the edge of campus where I was staying as a guest. I hurried down the road dripping wet. I was not known to anyone on the campus outside the small group of conference attendees I was with, yet I desperately wanted to hide my foolishness from everyone, even strangers. I got to my room unnoticed, peeled off my soaking wet Gore-Tex parka, hiking boots, and jeans, jumped into a hot shower, and dove under the bed covers, warm and hidden from view.

❖❖❖❖❖

The "falling into the lake" story is not an easy story to tell. And I did not tell anyone at first. But I did know that the event was not just an embarrassing mishap, but something significant that I needed to reflect on for myself. I wondered too what God could be telling me, for clearly, I had been saved from the "mighty waters" that day (Ps 18:16). In using a significant story from my life as a text for *lectio divina*, I am

bringing the story to God in prayer. I am using the story as a text for reading God in my experience. I know what happened, but I need to listen to what God might be telling me through such an event and what it could mean for my life.

To show how I prayed with this story over many years, I want to introduce some distinctions that can help us tease out what God possibly could be revealing to us through what has happened in the past and how that experience continues to be revelatory over time. Over the past thirty years, God has invited me to read, reread, and reconsider the meaning of the afternoon I fell into the lake.

What is happening in real time I will refer to as an encounter, which is the event, situation, occurrence in the present moment. I fell through the ice. An experience is what we do with the encounter, the meaning and the interpretations we make of what is happening or has happened.[1] At first, I was frightened, scared, panicked, but when my feet hit the bottom of the lake, I felt relatively okay. I was not in over my head. I realized instantly, too, that I was alone, on someone else's land, far from family or friends, and if something serious, like drowning, did happen, no one would know me in this place. My mind leaped into overdrive to get out of the water. Well, you know the rest.

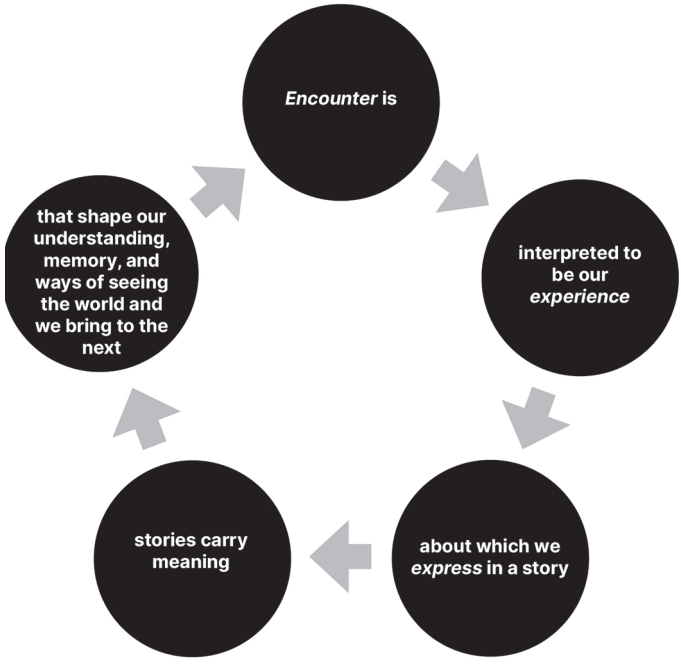
I realize we commonly use the word "experience" to mean "this happened to me," but I am pointing to an essential way we make meaning: encounter + interpretation = experience. As theologian Denis Edwards explains, "There is no real experience of another unless we become aware of the encounter. We must interpret to ourselves the person we encounter by way of images and concepts."[2] We have an encounter with someone or something and we interpret it through our previous experiences, which are formed by our familial, social, religious, and cultural formation. The way

we see the world, inherited and reconstructed over time, shapes how we understand what is happening and what it means. We engage in rapid mental processing as our brain cells sift through past encounters and experiences to convey ways to identify and name the situation. We are always interpreting, in other words, whether we are conscious of it or not. Our memory is a storehouse of interpretations from which we draw: "I am a good hiker and know what I am doing" and "I can get hypothermia fast and need to get out of this lake."

Experience unfolds into a story we tell about the encounter. We bring our experience to "expression," which is the words, images, emotions, and concepts we draw upon to create a narrative. Through language we make sense, making encounters into experiences, and express experiences through storytelling. Stories, both personal and cultural, become, over time, components of our social and personal identity. Stories are the primary ways we express who we are and what we mean. Stories of significant life events, like Scripture, carry a "surplus of meaning." Stories can be filled with multiple meanings and when read at different times invite us to hear new things. A sacred text bears repeating.

We use the primary stories we remember to interpret an encounter today. We receive an encounter through experience-shaped stories. Stories, in other words, act back upon and shape our experience and therefore our encounters. As Denis says, "The interpreting self precedes the encounter, enters into the encounter, and reflects upon the encounter."[3]

Here, then, are the building blocks of our interpreting, meaning-making, story-telling selves:



You can tell a lot about a person by the stories they tell, but also about the meanings and interpretations that help them make sense of what happens to them. I could interpret falling into the lake through any number of stories and images. I felt like Amy in *Little Women*, who follows Jo and Laurie out to the pond to skate and she falls through the ice (after burning Jo's book manuscript and Jo is not speaking to her); or the scene in the movie *Breakthrough*, when the ice cracks on Lake Sainte Louise and three fourteen-year-old boys survive after falling through, one staying under for fifteen minutes (true story); or in the Battle of Hogwarts when Neville Longbottom and several others fall into the lake when the Covered Bridge collapses, are saved, and the bad guys perish. The three stories are part of my culture, and I use them to shed some light on my situation. Because

I practice *lectio divina* with Scripture, I also connect it to my story. The psalmist who took a headlong fall too says: "He drew me up from the desolate pit, / out of the miry bog, / and set my feet upon a rock, / making my steps secure" (Ps 40:2).

Over time, falling into the lake was a revelatory encounter for me as I discovered new meanings and interpretations of what happened. As the event returned to me, I asked God to help me understand what happened. I wanted to know what God wanted me to see. Several insights emerged in the days and years following, which suggest how praying with an encounter invites us to "read God" in the stories of our lives.

In the immediate aftermath, I was overcome with thoughts about what would have happened if I had gotten hurt or drowned. Who would have found me? How would they know it was me? I was a stranger at Saint John's, and the men who lived in the Abbey at the other end of the lake were unfamiliar to me. I could not shake the sense that I had done them wrong, that I had somehow violated their hospitality by taking a stupid risk. I began to glimpse my own arrogance as I stood on the lake's edge assuming I knew there would be a trail around it as well as the size of the lake, neither of which I possessed evidence for. And I continued mulling over my stupidity of walking on ice in March, which could have had a deadly outcome.

As I made my way back to the dorm and in the hours and days that followed, I knew that I had encountered God's saving help, and I was deeply grateful. But something nagged at me. I kept reliving the event, telling myself the story repeatedly, and I sensed that God was trying to tell me something more.

As I ruminated about what happened, something painful began to emerge. With a gentle prick to my conscience, the Spirit helped me realize that I needed to say, "I'm sorry," to God and the people whose land and lake I had violated. I confessed my sorrow to the divine forgiver, begged for mercy, and promised to do better in the future. (I never did apologize to the monks, though.) And not just for this one foolish course of action, but for other times when I assumed I was right, only to stumble and fall. (In other words, there's more than one story here.) I had to see and understand a bigger picture and pattern of behavior. I had more to confess: the sin of hubris and pride, but also admitting what I did not know. In this sorrowful place, I also sensed that despite my failures, abundant divine mercy and love was being showered down upon me.

A few years after this encounter, I accepted a job teaching at Saint John's University and moved to Collegeville, Minnesota. Here I was, back on the same shoreline but on a different path, you might say. Who was I going to be? If my life had been "saved" and given back to me in this place, what was I to do with it here? I was making a new start; I had a new job, home, and community. What could I leave behind and who did I want to become?

I went back to the story and asked God: what do you want me to know now, five years later, as I stand on this shoreline? I knew I did not want to be the arrogant person who thought she could walk on (frozen) water; rather, I wanted to be more awake to what God was calling me to in this place. I had left important work, high-pressured and challenging, where I felt status mattered, and my productivity was a mirror of my importance. With this new start, I wanted to drop that pretense, boasting "I'm so busy!" Early on, I noticed that when students would knock on the door of my office,

they would say, "I'm sorry, I know you're busy. I just have a quick question." And I was busy with lectures to prepare, papers to grade, committee work to accomplish, and I did not like being interrupted (status and productivity mattered here too). But I could see students were nervous when they knocked on a professor's door. Here was my chance. I would now say, "I'm not busy at all. Come on in." I wanted to become someone who had all the time in the world for the people I was called to serve.

A few years later, March 30 landed on a Saturday, the day before Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. I had not made the connection, but this was the same day and time of the liturgical year as my plunge through the ice. I heard my story in a new way through the readings and rituals of the liturgy. I saw that my immersion into the "mighty waters" was connected to the sacrament of baptism, which is a kind of drowning. We proclaim baptism as death to the old self, and the emergence of the new self in Christ.

Here was Jesus's path, dramatized in the days of Holy Week and culminating on Holy Saturday in light, fire, and water when we recommit to our baptismal promises—to turn from our former ways (pride) to a new way (humble, grateful, merciful). Following means taking the path through death, relinquishing the grip we have on our lives, and letting go in trust. Jesus asks his disciples, "Are you able to . . . be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). My fall into the lake was meant to wash away the old and raise me up to the new. Baptism had prepared me for this kind of dying and rising, following Christ into the saving waters again.

I brought to this encounter, over time, several interpretive frameworks that shaped the experience: some movie scenes, my reading of Scripture, and participating in the sacraments

and liturgy. I connected the fall with psalms, since I was not the only one to fall in a pit. And my formation in the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation gave me the language of failure and responsibility, the importance of saying "I was wrong," asking for forgiveness, and receiving grace abundant. And third, baptism held forth a powerful way of understanding what immersion in water really means. God's word came to me, offering several interpretive lenses, by which to identify the encounter, make meaning and experience, and now tell the story.

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I have introduced the practice of *lectio divina* through a common theological starting point: to see encounter and experience as revelatory, meaning there is a point of contact through which I intuit that something is of God here. It is as if God is trying to tell me something and I need to pay attention. The phrase "word of God" signifies that the Holy One is making something happen.

The word of God serves as a root metaphor in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, conveying several meanings pertinent to our practice, including Scripture as the word of God and Jesus as the Word of God.[4] Prior to how we came to use the phrase in these two ways, the first meaning of "word" or *dābhār* (in Hebrew) is God's self-revelation encountered as divine presence, as an encounter *with. Dābhār* is used about 240 times in the Old Testament. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and later Moses and the Israelites, come to know Yahweh when God reaches out to them with a message. These are our primal stories of encounter.

For the prophets, too, their stories begin with the phrase, "the word of the Lord came to . . . ," used a little over 100

times in the Old Testament.[5] God's revelation, encountered as word, is directed to a particular person in a particular place. Take, for example, the prophet Jeremiah:

> The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom *the word of the Lord came* in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. (Jer 1:1-3, emphasis mine)

From these opening verses we learn the prophet's name (which means "Yahweh exalts"), the family he belongs to and his tribe, where he lives, the rulers during his service, and for how long the word came to him, about thirty-nine years (627 to 587 BCE). In addition to the familial, social, and political context, in the next verse Jeremiah tells us that the word came to him personally in the form of a calling: "Now the word of the Lord came to me 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'" (Jer 1:4).

Other prophets also experience the word of God coming to them, some as speech like Jeremiah (Ezekiel 1:3; Hosea 1:2; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1) and others in a vision (Isaiah 1:1; Amos 1:1; Obadiah 1:1; Micah 1:1; Nahum 1:1; Habakkuk 1:1), meaning that the word is both heard and seen. However, language is by far the primary way people encounter Yahweh, perhaps because God does not permit being seen. As the Lord tells Moses, "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."

The Israelites are warned not to make images or worship them as other people do (Exod 20:4-5). Rather they are to listen to the word God speaks to them: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" (Deut 6:4).

When the prophets hear God's word, they are not words telling them about God, but the word was perceived as the divine presence itself.[6] According to Edward Schillebeeckx, "The word was the full manifestation of a person or a thing."[7] When Yahweh "speaks," the word is heard and understood to be God revealed. Speaking is expressed as a "mode of being."[8] In hearing Yahweh's word, then, we encounter the divine presence.

Dābhār also refers to action. The word that is revealed is enacted. As God says "let there be . . ." in the creation story, so it is. All of creation comes into being through the word and breath of God (Gen 1:2; 7:15). All there is has this one source, and everything we are and have has come from God's word (Deut 8:3). In this sense, the divine message, presence, identity, and action are one event.

Before any word is written down, then, revelatory encounters are brought to language, their meaning is interpreted and shared in stories. Whatever Moses encountered at the burning bush, his interpretation and the story he told, became a foundational way of knowing God for the people that kept telling that story down through the generations. In the telling and retelling they interpreted its meaning to make sense of what happened to Moses in the past and how the burning bush encountered them. As revelatory events that shaped a community, these stories narrate the Israelites' identity and way of life. Over time the telling of stories shapes a community's character and their subsequent encounters. And while it is lost to us what exactly happened to Moses (we cannot retrieve his original encounter), we

do have the experience (interpretation) in the stories that have been told, retold, and re-interpreted over time. Such retelling and reinterpretation happen in Scripture too. For example, the author of Deuteronomy retells the story of Moses leading the people to the promised land: Moses remembers the Exodus, tells of the wilderness experience, and prepares the people to enter the promised land, a place he does not reach. The stories, first recounted in the books of Exodus and Numbers, are retold and reinterpreted as "the second law," from a different historical vantage much later during Josiah's reforms in 621 BCE.

The stories eventually become written texts. Over at least a thousand years of storytelling, from the patriarchs to the Israelites' journey of liberation through the Exodus, the forming of the covenant at Sinai, to the years of temple-building and king-making, and emergence of prophets who told stories of disobedience and salvation, a definitive written text emerges in the fifth century BCE. Interestingly, the exile to Babylon, around 587 BCE, and their eventual return to the land and the building of a second temple, is what urged people to collect various writings and make them the definitive story of people's encounters with God. Tragedy, even exile, are times of intense meaning-making and storytelling, as people strive to make sense of suffering and loss, hope and new beginnings.



As we can see, the word of God heard, received, and shared is much older than the written text. The word of God moves across history from encounter to experience to story and then to text. All of these constitute God's word as revelation to and in us. And the same dynamic marks the

New Testament; it just did not take Christians as long to write down the stories of Jesus.

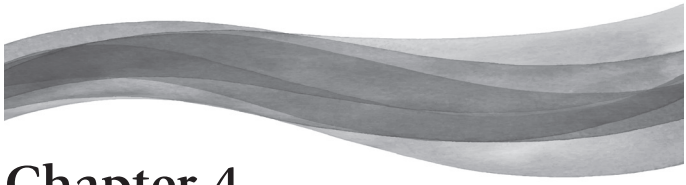
The Bible is layers of experience, of interpreted encounters, interpreted repeatedly, by multiple authors, editors, and redactors (those who compile texts) into stories with images and metaphors echoing across time. As people encounter the Holy One in their lives, their encounters are interpreted through the stories and language of Scripture. Their experience is drenched in the word of God.

Take, for example, the faithful Jews we meet in Luke 1–2 and Matthew 1–2 (four chapters called the Infancy Narratives). Each encounters God's word as a directive for their lives, a word making something new, and they understand what is happening to them through images and stories from the Torah and Psalms, which were the only texts they knew.[9] In the first two chapters of Luke's gospel, divine communication and events happen in many ways. Both Zechariah and Mary receive a message from an angel (Luke 1:11-20, 26-38), as do the shepherds (Luke 2:8-14). I presume that Elizabeth hears from Zechariah the message he received from the angel, and perhaps she has an encounter, which is not recorded, that she shares with him. I presume that Mary tells Joseph about Gabriel's announcement and Joseph confirms the message she received by telling her about his dreams (Matt 1:18-25). Their encounters are stories they share and make sense of together.

While some receive a message in speech and others as a vision or dream, all hear and interpret it through the sacred story of the Israelite people found in their Scripture. Their experience emerges in relationship to others' stories of encounter. Zechariah and Elizabeth's childlessness mirrors that of Abraham and Sarah; when Mary sings her hymn of praise, she draws on Hannah's song for her son Samuel;

when Zechariah's lips are opened, his prophesies echo several psalms (Ps 18:1-3; 92:10-11; 132:17-18); Simeon presses in on the words of Isaiah to rejoice upon seeing the Christ child (Luke 2:29-32; Isa 52:10; 42:6; 49:6); and though her words are not recorded in the gospel, Anna shares the message of God's promise of salvation (Luke 2:36-38). Each person has the words of Scripture on their lips in response to what happens, and they pass it on to others. God's word is encountered, interpreted by way of the Jewish Scripture, and shared in the stories they tell others.

By intentionally reading God through the Scriptures, we bring the sacred stories to bear on our life encounters and experience, connecting and linking the stories of the past with the events in our lives today.[10] The stories become the interpretive lens through which I listen to my story as well. In this way, we draw upon a great cloud of witnesses to help us make sense of our lives.



Chapter 4

Understanding the Context

When I sit down most mornings to pray, I start with morning prayer and I practice *lectio divina* with a reading from Scripture. I do not study the text. I may look at the footnotes if the passage or a word does not make sense, but generally I am focused on having a conversation with God through the text I am reading. I make room for contextual reading at other times. If I do not find help in the footnotes for figuring out the meaning of a word or the context, I look up my question in a commentary, book, or online resource. When I read a whole book of Scripture, I set aside time to study a commentary. My purpose is to gain greater understanding about the author and their audience, the type of literature I am reading, the key themes, and what can be discerned about the author's purposes for writing. If you do not have access to commentaries or books, a good study Bible has essays to introduce each book and footnotes that offer helpful explanations.

The contextual level refers to reading a text in its context, understanding its history, author, and the community that received it. At least as much as we can know. As I noted, Christians in the early church used the term "literal" to mean receiving the text as it is written.[1] But the word "literal" today is too easily associated with "literalism," which

confuses the text as it is written with facts, often missing the literary character of a story (e.g., a poem or parable) and reading metaphors and symbols as historical events. For example, Jonah is a parable, not a historical account of a man, a city, and a fish. Many fundamentalist readers would take the story at face value. So as not to confuse reading the context with reading literally, I will use the terms "context" and "contextual reading."

In today's church, we have an abundance of resources for understanding the history and literary context of the Bible. Since the rise of historical criticism during the Enlightenment, the "biblical books are subject to analysis such as one would use for determining the meaning of other ancient literature," according to Raymond Brown, a leading Catholic biblical scholar of the twentieth century. "While the biblical 'word of God' is inspired (and thus *of* God and not merely about Him), every *word* of it comes from human beings and is conditioned by their limitations. Because of the human element, one needs scientific, literary, and historical methods to determine what the ancient authors meant when they wrote."[2] (If biblical criticism is new to you, there are many good resources available today.[3])

But if literalism is one danger of approaching the text, the historical-critical readings can pose another dilemma for the reader, what Walter Brueggemann calls the "tyranny of the academy." He notes that while historical critical readings of the Bible saved the text from the "tyranny of the church," which often used Scripture to reinforce dogmas and doctrines, the academy reads Scripture as only history and is not concerned about the word of God. As one who loves to study Scripture, I take Brueggemann's point. There is much to learn about the Bible, both from scholars who

serve the church and those who do not. But it is only one way of reading the text.

Lectio divina is neither Bible study nor an advanced seminar; studying the text is not an end but is in service to the spiritual life. Jean Leclercq, OSB, a scholar of medieval monasticism, writes that:

> Christian reading of Scripture is not primarily an intellectual exercise resulting from the correct use of a scientific method. It is essentially an experience of Christ, in the Spirit. Within this experience there is, of course, room for method, science and use of instruments of work and study, the knowledge of philology, archeology and history. But these alone will never result in *lectio divina*, a Christian reading, a reading in the Spirit, a reading of Christ and in Christ, with Christ and for Christ.[4]

When we study to understand the context, then, we are making room for what we can learn about the text; it should aid in our understanding and prayer and not detract from our primary purpose: to read with Christ for our lives.

How can studying the Bible support our *lectio* practice and not detract from it? First, it can help us understand what biblical scholars call "the world behind the text," what authors "meant."[5] By understanding something of the writer (and editors and redactors), the time and place a text was written, who received it and how it was used, we honor the storytelling tradition that began with encounters, informed people's experience and interpretations, and became paradigmatic stories for a community. Second, tools for studying the Bible can help us understand a difficult passage, something that is so foreign and odd to us we cannot make sense of it. Third, understanding the context keeps us from falling

into the age-old problem of eisegesis, reading into a text something that is not there. Is there a cruel innkeeper who rejects Mary and Joseph before the birth of Jesus? Sorry, but no. Christians have read that innkeeper and his meanness into the text for centuries. But he is not so named.

The fourth reason to study is to learn about the "world in front of the text." This is where we stand as readers and interpreters—what it means today. The meaning of these stories far surpasses what an author meant because, if Scripture is the word of God, the Spirit works through the text to bring insight, guidance, and hope to your life today. In this chapter we will look at a few examples of how Christian scholars read and interpret from their context. Broadening our horizons of interpretation can help us discover new cultural insights and meanings that can inform our own.

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When we listen to a person speak, or read a book, or attend a play or concert, we are interpreting, seeking to understand what is being communicated. Interpretation is embedded in experience from the start, as I noted before. Humans are interpreting creatures, seeing and hearing through the multiple lenses of personal and cultural experience. When we encounter a creative work, we want to know about its creator—what was *meant* by Paul when he wrote to the Thessalonians, or Paul McCartney in 1965 when he wrote "Yesterday," or Paul Schrader when he wrote the 1976 film "Taxi Driver." Interpreting also includes what the work *means* to the person reading, viewing, and listening to the work.[6] The distinction between "meant" and "means" is readily used by Scripture scholars (I do not know about music and film critics): what authors *meant* and what it *means* for the reader are two different but related questions.

The biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders uses this distinction to discuss three aspects of reading and interpreting Scripture. First, there is the "world behind the text," what can be known about a text in terms of its history, context, author, and audience—what it *meant* (e.g., Mark was composed before 70 CE when the second temple was destroyed by the Romans). Second, there is the "world of the text," what kind of literature it is and how to approach with a close reading (e.g., the book of Jonah is a parable), which connects with reading on the symbolic level in the next chapter. Third, there is the "world in front of the text," what it *means* as readers, students, and worshippers (how am I like the stubborn disciples in Mark or like the obstinate anti-prophet Jonah?). Of course, this is where we sit in our *lectio* practice—seeking God's message for our lives today. I will explore this level of reading in chapter 6.[7]

If a text is unfamiliar and we do not know much about it, a good place to start is answering the five "Ws," a common technique employed by journalists. (Actually, it was first suggested by Aristotle, followed by Aquinas, so we are in good company with this approach). We seek answers to five questions in relationship to a text: Who wrote it? What is it? Where was it written? When? and Why (the audience and author's purpose)? We can also include the "H" for "how" to ask: How was the text read, redacted, and used in its community and subsequent ones in history? I will use the story of Jesus's baptism in the Gospel of Luke to explore these questions and how a contextual reading helped my *lectio* practice.

Who is Luke and what do we know about him? (Most scholars agree the author is male, though some suggest

that a woman wrote the gospel.) Early Christians associated this gospel with someone called Luke,[8] and the gospel is likely the first volume of a two-volume work, with the Acts of the Apostles identified as the second volume. The style and language of both books are similar, and they both are addressed to the same person, whose name is Theophilus, which means "Lover of God" (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). A person called Luke is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 1:24), indicating he is a companion of Paul and most likely a physician. If this Luke is the author of the gospel, he is most likely a Gentile, the only non-Jewish writer of the New Testament. Scholars note that the author's style points to a native Greek speaker, which is worth noticing because he stands in relationship to the Jewish tradition in a different way than, say, Paul or Matthew, who know the faith from the inside. Biblical authors brought a variety of cultural and religious interpretations to the stories they are telling. They interpret through current events and are influenced by the cultures they are part of: Greek, Roman, Persian, Babylonian, and of course Jewish. We can know some things about Luke because of what he draws upon: the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) and Greco-Roman literary forms and historical figures.[9]

Luke is an interpreter of a tradition that is being given to him, and he is handing it on to others. Luke tells us he is not an eyewitness to the events he describes (Luke 1:1-4), which means he is a second-generation Christian. Since the death and resurrection of Jesus, stories have been shared and are beginning to be written down by those who did not know Jesus personally.

Schneider offers a helpful distinction between these layers of history. Regarding Jesus, she distinguishes between

the "actual Jesus," the person who lived in the first century (but no longer exists), the "historical Jesus," the person the gospel writers tell us about that is constructed from people's stories and memories, and the "proclaimed Jesus," the Christ, the Risen One, the Living One who exists with and for us today. Luke is composing stories about the historical Jesus from memories passed down through the community's "paschal imagination" that proclaims Christ as Lord. Much of biblical scholarship is aimed at understanding how Luke constructed the "historical Jesus" from the memories and stories about the "actual Jesus." The point is that there are layers under the text we are reading, and the "actual" history is not always evident or available. But that is not the author's main point. Luke's purpose is to help us understand how Jesus of Nazareth is the savior of the world (Luke 2:11)—for every "lover of God," Jew and Gentile alike.

Where and when did Luke compose the gospel? Early Christians believed Luke was a native of Antioch in Syria; scholars have also indicated cities such as Ephesus, Caesarea, and other Roman cities. He does not tell us, nor does he tell us how he came to be a Christian. What seems clear is that the author is a Greek-speaking urban man who is a Gentile Christian.[10] The date for the writing of the gospel is around 80 CE. He uses Mark's gospel, which was written around 65-70 CE, he indicates knowledge about the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 CE (Luke 21:5-24), but he does not seem to know that Christians were persecuted under Domitian, who ruled from 81-96 CE, nor of the controversies between the church and synagogue in the later part of the century, which are central to John.

What is Luke? We call it a "gospel," meaning "good news," which we associate with a written text, but for the first followers it meant an oral proclamation. Only as Christians

began to write down the stories did "gospel" come to mean a written text. Like the other gospels, Luke is filled with stories of Jesus's teachings, mostly in terms of parables, healing stories, and stories of his death and resurrection. Scholars compare similar biblical stories, especially among the three synoptic (parallel) gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They share common material, but each author shapes it for their purposes and audiences. For example, in Mark the baptism scene is the opening moment intended to tell the reader who Jesus is at the outset. But in the first two chapters of Luke, called the "Infancy Narratives," Jesus is identified as "Savior," "Lord," "Messiah," "Son of David" and "Son of God." Because Luke has answered the question of who Jesus is through these stories and names, his baptism scene emphasizes Jesus's anointing by the Spirit. Jesus is born of the Spirit and anointed as the Messiah at the outset of his ministry (Luke 4:18). In Acts, Peter proclaims that Jesus's ministry begins with "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:37-38). And, similarly in Acts 1:5, the risen Jesus promises the community they will "be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Luke does what Mark does at the outset of his gospel, establish Jesus's identity, but through a different set of stories.

By comparing the three synoptic gospels, scholars conclude that Luke has three sources at his disposal: the Gospel of Mark (he uses about half) ; an unknown source scholars call "Q" for *Quelle* (meaning "source" in German), which Matthew also has access to; and his own special materials and sources, which contain some of the most cherished stories such as the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. Even though he is not Jewish, he is able to draw on the Hebrew Bible as a source, though sometimes he is not always accurate about Jewish observances. For instance, in Luke 2:21-24,

his knowledge of Jewish purification laws is incorrect.[11] He is considered an exquisite writer and master storyteller who uses many interesting literary devices. For example, Luke tells stories using pairs of people (Zechariah and Elizabeth, John and Jesus, Simeon and Anna, Mary and Martha, two disciples on the road to Emmaus). So, heads up: when there is one person, there is usually a second (e.g., he offers an interesting spin to the story of the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus. They have a conversation about their guilt and Jesus's innocence; one mocks Jesus but the other seeks salvation, which Jesus gladly welcomes [23:33]).[12]

Why is he writing a gospel? He tells us his purpose at the outset: He is writing to fellow Gentile Christians because he wants to "write a well-ordered account" (Luke 1:3), which says he has a historical interest in discovering facts about Jesus so that Christianity is appealing to his readers. But not only facts, he is offering his interpretation, a theological reading, a witness and testimony to who Jesus is. In other words, he is not writing a biography but a "gospel," a story of good news to be believed and followed.

Luke weaves several prominent theological themes throughout the book. Most significant is the role of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit seems to be the main character in Luke and Acts, mentioned in seventeen references (compared to six in Mark and twelve in Matthew), and in Acts the Spirit is the "main protagonist," not any of the apostles, according to Justo L. González. Some say that "Acts is the Gospel of the Spirit."[13]

The Spirit is at work in every person. Each person in Luke 1 and 2 is filled with the Spirit. While Jesus is conceived and filled with the Spirit in a distinctive way, the Spirit is in everyone. Other important themes include the universal Christian message which includes Jews and Gentiles, as

well as special attention to the poor, outcasts, and women; a threefold view of salvation history; great joy; incredible reversals; and prayer.

In the short, two-sentence baptism scene, the themes of the Holy Spirit and prayer are foremost. At the baptism, the Spirit, "like a dove," descends on Jesus, and in Acts 1, this same Spirit descends on the disciples. Jesus is empowered numerous times by the Spirit—conception, baptism, and transfiguration. Luke's understanding of the Spirit is parallel to the phrase "power of the Most High," a power that overshadows people with divine presence. One commentator notes that Luke could be drawing from Isaiah 32:15: "until a spirit from on high is poured out on us."[14]

Prayer is central in Luke's gospel, more so than the other gospels. At critical moments characters are praying. In the infancy narratives we have three great prayers, one proclaimed by Mary (Luke 1:46-55), one by Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79), and another by Simeon (Luke 2:29-32). Jesus is shown to be "at prayer" at the baptism (Luke 3:21), when he takes up his ministry (Luke 5:16); calling the disciples (Luke 6:12; 9:18); the transfiguration occurs while Jesus is praying (Luke 9:28-29); he prays at Gethsemane (Luke 22:41) and on the cross (Luke 23:46). Furthermore, he prays with his disciples and instructs them about prayer (Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-14). After his baptism, the Word of God is listening in prayer for God's word.

Why does all this matter for my practice of *lectio divina*? Do I need all this background information to pray with just two verses in Luke? Honestly, no. But yes, it helps.

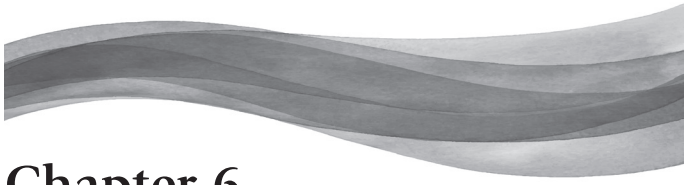
First, sound explanations (exegesis) lead to deeper understanding, which helps us interpret more keenly, and "hear the word of God and obey it!" (Luke 11:28). I find it helpful to know something about what I am reading, in this

case what Luke "meant." I have always loved learning about Scripture, which for me began with a wonderful high school teacher (Sr. Mary) followed by two college instructors (Sr. Mary and Sr. Mary, no kidding). The Bible finally made some sense to me when I could understand what the authors were trying to convey through their language, images, and context. In fact, it contributes to my faith and does not threaten it. I do not have faith in Luke, but in the Spirit who guided Luke to convey the meaning of Jesus's life for his audience.

My understanding of who Jesus is has grown, and of who the early Christians were who followed him, and who handed on these stories. What it *meant* does inform what it *means* when I sit with the text. Learning that the Holy Spirit and prayer are two main emphases for Luke helped me understand what he is doing in telling the story of Jesus's baptism this way. I sit up and take notice when the Holy Spirit is descending on someone, or Jesus is at prayer, in this gospel. Luke helped me reflect on my baptism too, what happened, what it means now, and how deeply connected it is to the life of prayer. I remember: when I sit to read God, I am sitting with Christ, who at the moment after his baptism listens in prayer.



A second reason to explore the contextual level of the text is because reading the Bible is not always easy. You can come across a difficult passage that makes no sense. While writing this chapter I have been reading Deuteronomy for my *lectio*. This is a strange book with some hard but also amazing passages. Take this appalling command:



Chapter 6

Discerning the Way

When I began memorizing Psalm 1, I was stumped by the first few verses: "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked." *What does this have to do with me? I do not really follow any wicked ways. I am not a wicked, wicked person.* "Or take the path that sinners tread . . . " *I am not on a path of utter sinfulness or destruction*. I could not think of anything in my life that fit the first two lines. They did not seem to apply to me personally.

And then I read the third part of verse 1: "or sit in the seat of scoffers." Ugh! My heart was pierced by that line. I had to look up the word "scoffer" to make sure I understood what it means. A scoffer is someone who has scorn, derision, or contempt for another. One who mocks. God's word condemned me right there in the third clause of verse 1. In fact, a particular action and setting in my life fit with sitting on the seat of scoffers: the lunch table. The folks who ate there had, over time, become a company of scoffers. And I scoffed with the best of them. I liked to be in on the gossip, point out the curiosities and quirks of others, and laugh at their expense.

When I read and reread this text, I realized how seductive sitting on the seat of scoffers was for me. I had indeed taken the wrong path, one that led me to tear apart my community.

My scoffing was like chaff that the wind drives away (Ps 1:4). I felt compunction for my actions, but what, besides repentance, did God want me to do? Initially I stopped eating lunch at that table, which put me outside the group and fair game for attack. I ate alone in my office for several weeks.

But I also found a beautiful symbol in the text that gave me direction: rather than chaff, be like a tree that is planted beside streams of living water that bears fruit in its season. I heard the call to be and to do something that is life-giving and fruitful for my community. I did not like eating lunch alone and decided to ask two colleagues who were serving on a committee with me if they wanted to work over lunch. I told them what had happened at the lunch table, that I was sorry for what I had done, and I wanted the work that I was doing for our school to be life-giving, to build up the Body of Christ. Thankfully they heard that calling too.

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As I noted above, *lectio* is a way of reading God to discern God's callings in our lives—listening and responding to God's word is the center of our practice. We follow Jesus's instructions to "go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matt 6:6). We sit before the Word to listen for what God is calling us away *from* and what God is calling us *to*.[1] *Lectio*, then, is a personal practice of discernment when we ask: *What does this text mean for me today, in my circumstances? What is God inviting me to see, hear, and know? What is the way for me to live out this word? What is my response?*

The third dimension of the text is the voice of conscience, calling, and discernment. On the one hand, God is calling me to leave behind ways that impede me from following the way of Christ as well as ways of life that have changed

or come to an end. On the other hand, God is calling me to new life in Christ, to Christ-centered ways for others, to a Christ-consciousness that guides my choices. Every day, in every reading of the text, the dynamic of leaving behind and taking up is offered.

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In the gospels, Jesus meets all kinds of people whose lives are broken by illness, social rejection, and harsh judgment, and to these he offers the way of healing and wholeness. And to those living a dishonest way of life, who have taken a sinful path, a selfish focus, he invites to leave that way behind and embrace forgiveness and freedom. Consider his first words in Mark's gospel, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Stories about the Samaritan woman at the well, Zaccheus in the sycamore tree, tax collectors and landowners, as well as Judas and Peter, demonstrate that to follow Christ, each of us must repent of that which keeps us from the ways of God. A classic view of sin is that sin is a kind of brokenness, a warping of the self that breaks relationships, with God, others, and ourselves. Yes, it is about our actions, but first it is about our intention to turn away from God and toward our own self-made path. Sin is not listening, turning a deaf ear to God's way. Sin makes the bold declaration: "Thanks, but I can do this on my own."

At baptism, and the Easter Vigil when we renew our baptismal vows, we renounce walking in the "way of the wicked" and recommit to walk in the "way of the righteous" (Ps 1:6). But renouncing sin is not just an annual practice, certainly not if you practice *lectio* on a regular basis. *Conversation morum,* the radical call to conversion prescribed by Saint Benedict, is, as Mary Margaret Funk explains, the

"lifelong labor to actualize the fundamental renunciation of baptism by a daily dedication to change our habits and patterns of living: to shift from being generated by the ego, or self-constructed self, to being generated by the Spirit of Christ that became the intentional source of our existence in the rite of baptism."[2] Every time we sit to practice *lectio*, we listen for Christ's call to conversion: turn back, turn around, and come along the way of life and freedom.

St. Paul, who knows about walking the wrong path and being converted to the new way, writes that the Ephesians have been taught "to *put away your former way of life*, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24, emphasis mine). When I read this text for my *lectio,* I winced at the language of "corrupt and deluded by its lusts," but I could see his point. My desires can get so twisted around that they are aimed at my gain, more money or things, fame or glory; my way is so central that I will run over others to get what I want and deserve. And forget the way of the Lord. I had to ask myself: *What am I doing and how am I living that is my "old self" and that I want to put behind me? Where am I deluded? What's corrupted in me? What stands in the way of growing into the likeness of God, of clothing myself in Christ, of being renewed by the Spirit's movements to be a "new self"? What is God inviting me to leave behind so that I might live my callings more fully to serve God and others? What do I need to be free from and free for?*

Continual practice of *lectio* with the Scriptures will be a continual remaking of our lives and stories. This third way of reading God gets down to particulars. Listen: through the text God may be offering you a probing question, a pro-

found comfort, a hard judgment, a bountiful forgiveness, a pressing challenge, a healing touch, an incredible truth, a generous invitation, or a new direction. The message is worth paying attention to; it can save your life.

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Paul names one kind of "former life" that must be left behind, but there is a second way to think about the call *from*.[3] Take, for example, Christians in the early church who discerned the call to leave their current situation and go out into the desert to seek the way of Christ. They voluntarily left behind marriage, wealth, ownership, good food, friends and family to embrace a radical call to discipleship. They had to let go of relationships, places, and things—to renounce their former way of life so they could live out this new calling. Like these disciples, we can be called from good relationships, places, or work for something more. What we leave behind becomes a "former way of life." Most likely it was a calling at one time, but now it must be left to follow another way. A struggle often ensues if we think we must figure out what God is calling us *to* before we can take up and leave. Callings *from* entail radical trust as well.

One model of radical renunciation is found in the first call stories in the New Testament. In Mark's account, Jesus calls some fishermen to follow him, and James son of Zebedee and his brother John "left their father Zebedee in the boat" and followed immediately (Mark 1:16-20). The story symbolizes the sudden and harsh move away from the familiar, ordinary, and former ways to something radically different and new. They must drop it all, not cling and clutch to what they had, the familiar and good, but leave empty-handed so they can receive what's next. Jesus will be leading them to a boat, but the disciples have no idea what kind of

boat they are getting into or where it will take them. They will learn to fish in new ways. The abrupt departure and embrace of this new way demanded radical trust.

We may experience callings away from people, places, or situations that have been good and nourishing. The call may emerge abruptly (as in Mark's story) or more slowly, as in Luke's version, where the disciples decide to follow only after witnessing the power of Jesus (Luke 5:1-11).[4] A call may be chosen or thrust upon us. All life transitions, whether unexpected or not, begin with an ending.[5] When something ends, there is loss, and with loss is grief. You get married, you leave the single life behind; you have your first baby and you and your spouse leave behind "the two of us"; you are diagnosed with arthritis, and you leave gardening behind; your spouse dies, you leave the married life behind; you move into a care facility and leave behind home-owning. Such transitions are normal and part of a well-lived life, and if you live a long time, you will experience many losses. How might we listen to God calling to us through these transitions, as we grieve and leave behind what we loved? And search for what is next, what is possible, what is of God.

As we pass through a transition, we enter a wilderness time of unknowing. Normally we feel impatient at not knowing where we are headed. Listening is harder during major life transitions. For me, I can only hear all the worries crowding into my thoughts. I like to have things all figured out about what lies ahead before I leave behind what is familiar. As if that ever works. I have found that staying with my *lectio* is crucial, for surely the way opens more easily if I trust through the unknowing and let go of my controlling ways. God's way will open as I listen.

Transitions are a good time to practice *lectio* with our experience and to ask: *Where are You calling me in this*

transition? What parts of my life are ending here? What do I have to leave "in the boat" as I go? How can I grieve the loss? What is coming forward with me? How do You want me to serve in this new time and place?

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Before the COVID pandemic, I had been anticipating the transition into retirement as parts of my professional life had ended and become a former way of life, and other parts were easing down. When I happily returned and settled back at work after the two-year crisis, I felt God nudging me to leave behind this part of my life and begin a new chapter. I could see continuity with my present callings—I wanted to continue writing and teaching, making a life with my husband, and being available to my aging parents—but there was a clear calling to a deeper contemplative life that would require more time. Lacking a clear blueprint for how it would play out, the leaving seemed more "right" than staying as an employee, and I decided to move ahead slowly. I entered a three-year period of "phased retirement" and began working part-time. Initially I felt so happy, but in the second year of the arrangement, something did not quite fit.

I attended a retreat that fall, which just happened to focus on transitions. The leader used the symbol of wilderness to tease out the meaning of a transition, from recognizing what is ending, to wandering around helplessly in "no man's land," and to finding a new beginning. I read the story of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness in Mark's gospel for my *lectio* that weekend. "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1:12-13). I made notes about what was ending as I moved from full-time to part-time

work, and eventually from part-time to no paid work in another two years. I explored the wilderness I was wandering around in: a sense of being alone (I was working differently now, and I knew I was not part of the future); I was encountering the "wild beasts" of fear, anxiety, judging others, self-righteousness; but I was also curious and excited. I imagined what the new time would be like: What would I do with even more time (more reading and writing, rest and prayer, walking and making a home?). What new things could I explore (an art class, chaplaincy, taking a class)?

I realized that the Spirit had driven me to take the first step of easing back, but I felt something strong and urgent again. I heard, "Cut it in half again." *What?* The message did not make sense since I had already cut back my work. *Did I hear that right? Cut back more? Give up another half is that the way You are calling me?* At that moment instead of confusion, I felt a flood of relief, yes, like a spring of water in the parched desert wilderness. Like an angel was ministering to me. Over the next few weeks, the way became clearer. The next semester would be my last; I decided to leave at the end of the school year.

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Giving up a former way of life is not easy—we may look back with longing and want the familiar back. Leaving behind bad habits, afflictive thoughts (see chapter 9), destructive patterns, and burdensome addictions can be difficult. We may have to renounce our sinful ways several times. Some people cannot tolerate not knowing what is ahead, so, they stay in place, unable to leave. Or after a transition, some cannot tolerate the emptiness and loss, and long to go back to what they knew so well (Num 14:3). Transitions are hard because we leave behind the known and move toward an unknown.

When Jesus told his followers and the Jewish leaders that he is the bread come down from heaven and that if they eat this bread they will live forever, they replied, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" (John 6:60, NABRE) He could not convince everyone and "As a result of this, many [of] his disciples returned to *their former way of life* and no longer accompanied him. Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" (John 6:66-67, NABRE, emphasis mine).

The former life will always be attractive, especially during times of suffering and struggle, in times of loss and grief. After Jesus's death, Peter announces, "I am going fishing." The others say, "We will go with you" (John 21:3-4). They do not seem to know what else to do, even though they have encountered the risen Jesus (John 20:19-29). They do not know a way forward and return to the former way. They get in their boat (former place), take up their nets (former work), and fish (former identity)—something they know so well but had been called away from when they met Jesus. Jesus meets them fishing (again) and calls out to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" (John 21:5). "Children" seems a good symbol for their innocence, the fact that they have not yet grown into resurrection faith. Jesus tells them to cast the net over the right side, and they pull in so many fish the nets are not torn. Why an untorn net? A good symbol, right?

The untorn net is the call to wholeness, to abundance, to being part of Jesus's ministry on the other side of his suffering and death—to live in the power of his resurrection. And look, Jesus has prepared a feast for them, inviting them to bring some of the fish they caught. And they recognize him (John 21:12)—as one who sets the table, invites the guests, and serves all. The Risen One breaks through their old former ways and invites them, again, into the new way. Peter is invited to lead this new way of fishing, but first he

is forgiven and loved—he is the "new man" dining at the feast (John 21:15-19).

The spiritual journey is a dance, the continuing movements of putting away the old and taking on the new. We continually move away from ourselves toward God, away from sin toward grace, away from the old to the new. Something must be let go, left behind, even renounced, to make way for something new to be grasped, taken up, and embraced. Peter realizes he cannot leave Jesus because "You have the words of eternal life," he exclaims (John 6:68).

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In every *lectio*, every time we read God, there is a calling. I do not mean "A Calling" as in "A Vocation," although it might be, or will be at some point.[6] I mean that each day God is calling out to us with a word, sometimes quite specific, other times more general; at times clear and compelling, and at other times vague and confusing; the word can be life-changing, or quotidian; sometimes it helps us make a decision (do this, or do not do that) and other times points out who we are to be (more patient; trusting) or not (be less grouchy; do not look back). By listening to, dialoguing with, and reading God through the texts of *lectio*, our callings will become clearer. Note: I did not say they will be easier.

Because being in conversation with God each day allows me to listen to what God is calling me to, I can figure out "A Calling." The major callings in our life cannot be discerned without being in the conversation. On the one hand it does not matter what personal spiritual practice you find for nurturing a relationship with God over time. If it is *lectio*, wonderful. If not, you might find the rosary, reciting the Jesus Prayer, sitting in adoration, centering prayer, walking in the woods, or singing psalms to be your practice.

The point is to find some way of *listening* and *sharing* and *discerning* with God daily. And to stick to it.

The same goes, of course, for communal practice, committing to a community of worship, learning, and service that nurtures the life of faith. The community's practice is the container for our personal practice, but it is also our first and primary calling. Through baptism we are called to share our lives together in Christ, to be one Body, to be a community of disciples. Our first and primary calling is the vessel sustaining our personal, individual callings. We are called to board this boat, allow this vessel to move us along, and be the company we keep.

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I think most people give up on spiritual practice (communal and individual) because they do not "hear" anything right away, or they do not like what they hear, or they do not know how to get in the conversation, or do not feel worthy. Hence the temptation to reverse course.

The language of calling is often misunderstood, or often the search begins in the wrong place with the wrong question. We think calling has to do with nailing down "A Vocation" that will be good, right, and perfect for our whole lives. Commonly we use "vocation" as a singular noun: it is one thing, static, and complete. And when we go searching for this kind of vocation as a young person and in adulthood, it can be hard and frustrating because we want God to make the call clear and irrefutable. For example: "Become an engineer, marry Adrian, have four kids, make a home in Cincinnati." Done. The problem is we are fishing on the wrong side of the boat if we think our life is ready-made before we even live it. Discerning vocation is often much messier, takes time, conversations with trusted friends, family, and mentors, and some trial-and-error. The way emerges over time.

We can experience calling as "A Vocation." I certainly have. But I had to first grasp the nature of calling as a verb, an action: to enter a relationship where God calls out to me through the word, and I am invited to call back. Calling, in this sense, is about a dynamic, ongoing, and changing relationship. In the movement of listening and responding, asking questions and speaking truthfully, prayer becomes an engaging dialogue, where both parties converse honestly. Through *lectio,* God is speaking to us through the word. We need patience and trust, but if we let the Spirit be the driver, our life commitments and major directions will be clearer.

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Callings are communal first and particular to us second. The Holy Spirit is the agent of calling, first calling the church into being (Acts 2:1-4), and sustaining it through history, especially when it veers off the path. The Spirit also is the agent of particular callings by way of our context and stories. Paul saw that the Spirit moves through each person by way of charisms (grace), which we have often termed "gift." Some people are good singers, gardeners, parents, clerks, or physician's assistants. But the gifts, the charisms and graces we each have received, are given not for our advancement, but for building up the community (Eph 4:12). When Paul speaks of charisms, he seems to be saying that some callings are lifelong and some shorter, and that most come to an end at some point (1 Cor 12:4-11). Callings are multiple (we have many during our life) and they change over time because the community's needs change too.

When we read Scripture for our *lectio* practice, our focus is interpreting the meaning of God's word for me today in