

Praise for **40 DAYS
WITH GOD**

"Kent Hickey is one of the funniest and most spiritual people I know. In this book, Kent has chosen a variety of Bible stories and brought them to life by providing context, Ignatian imagination, and thoughtful reflection. He then asks us to ponder questions pertinent to our times. Kent challenges us to look both within our lives and at moral dilemmas and Christian social teaching. I laughed out loud and cried a few times. It is a must read."

—**Carolyn Becic,**

President, St. Andrew Nativity School, Portland, Oregon

"Kent does a wonderful job of connecting seemingly distant scripture passages with our current world and then challenging us to consider how to make the message of each passage personal. What a great way to grow closer to God. *40 Days with God* invites and challenges us to discover our innermost selves."

—**Dr. Matt Barmore,**

Director, Ignatian Spirituality Center, Seattle

"Kent Hickey has a wonderful ability to make sense, motivate, and console. I strongly recommend this book to people of all ages."

—**Rev. Eddie Reese, SJ,**

President, St. Ignatius College Preparatory School, San Francisco

"This book is full of references to contemporary movies, literature, and current events. These connections allow each of us to find God in the ordinary events of daily life in ways that will surprise us and heighten our awareness of the movements of God's spirit."

—**Cindy Reopelle,**

Principal, Gonzaga Preparatory School, Spokane, Washington

Time Out to Journey through the Bible

40 DAYS WITH GOD

KENT HICKEY



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To My Mother and Father

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Introduction

40 appears in the Bible over 100 times. Noah got rained on 40 days and nights; the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years; Jesus went into the desert to pray for 40 days after he was baptized. Some biblical scholars theorize that 40 represents a time of trial and testing; others suggest that it refers to a long time. I think it simply means enough time to be with God.

How much time is enough for us to be with God? That depends. For students at our school who go on a four-day retreat called Kairos (“God’s time”), those four days are enough for them to feel how different that time is from ordinary time. For me, eight days on a silent retreat was enough time to sense the presence of God, especially as we opened each prayer session with, “God, this time is my gift to you.” Throughout the Christian world, the 40 days set aside for Lent are thought to be enough time to prepare for the Sacred Triduum.

Enough time is the amount of time it takes to be in God time.

Finding enough time to be with God, however, is only half of the equation. To journey with God, we also need to find enough space. In the Bible, those who spent a long time being with God were usually in deserted places. Most of us, however, live our lives in spaces that are anything but deserted—homes, offices, schools, cars, shopping centers, gyms. Even in distracting places, however, we can carve out enough room to be with God.

In my years coaching soccer, I would often talk to players about time and space. Players need both to do the things they

want to do with the ball, especially in front of the goal. If a player gets the ball in open space, opponents quickly converge, bottling up the player. Time is short and space is tight. Players need to acknowledge this reality but need not surrender to it. What is within a player's control is what she decides to do within that reality.

This book is about being with God in short time and tight spaces. The journey is taken through and with the Bible, 40 reflections based upon 40 passages from Scripture. Except for the final four chapters, the reflections are ordered in the sequence of their appearance in the Bible, starting with Genesis and ending with Revelation. The reflections can be read on their own, or with a Bible as a companion for deeper immersion into the passages. Regardless of how they are used, each reflection is designed to keep in mind a saying once popular in the rural South: "Let me sit with that."

Where and when to sit with these reflections? Within the rhythm of daily life. Try, for example, reading a reflection over a cup of coffee in the morning and then sitting with it during a commute. That's a way to fill those times—in the car, on the bus, riding a bike—with God. That makes those spaces God-spaces and those times God-times. In doing so, we make our daily journeys more like pilgrimages. With God, toward God.

40 DAYS
WITH GOD

day one
BREEZY DAYS

*When they heard the sound of the LORD God walking about
in the garden at the breezy time of day,
the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God
among the trees of the garden. —Genesis 3:8*

I believe that we can “find God in all things,” as the Ignatian saying goes. I just don’t spend a lot of time looking. I have my reasons, one of them being that if I try to find God it might make it easier for God to find me. I am often very different from the “very good” being God created, a source of embarrassment for me. I’m not sure that I want to be found.

We are, all of us, very good. It’s right there in the first creation story in Genesis, the one attributed to the anonymous writer that scholars refer to as the Priestly source. The Priestly author prized order, and that is reflected in the consistent pattern of days in his creation story. Key to that pattern was that God saw good in creation every day. This was especially true after God created humans, that final day when “God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good” (Gen. 1:31).

The Priestly creation story is followed by a completely different creation story, one written by another anonymous

author, designated as the “Yahwist” by scholars. God created goodness here too—in the forms of Adam and Eve. That pure goodness didn’t last long though, as symbolized by their decision to eat fruit from the forbidden tree. Later, when Adam and Eve heard God walking about in the Garden of Eden, they hid themselves behind a tree. They knew that God was looking for them, and they had no desire to be found, given how embarrassed (naked) they were after what they had done.

Hiding behind a tree when God is looking for me is often where I find myself. Many types of trees offer good cover—busy-ness, ego, sloth. Usually, though, the tree is of the “I’m not worthy” variety. That feeling of nakedness before God can come from any number of lowly interactions during the day, including the beginning of the day. I am struck, for example, by how often I eat forbidden fruit during my morning commute.

How low can I go? On my drive to work, I sometimes get stuck behind a small yellow bus that is picking up a child with special needs. The delay (because the process seems so inefficient to me) often leads me to curse under my breath. On one particularly grace-filled morning, however, I found myself transported by this sight: after the mother had placed her child in the bus, I was mesmerized by the hand of the father as he waved back and forth to his child from the curb. Peace settled into my heart in this very good moment . . . until the guy in the car in front of me honked his horn and flipped off the family. I was then reminded of the many mornings when in my heart I had flipped that same finger at that family.

One would think that I am better when I ride my bike to work instead of driving. If so, one would think wrong. Biking

in Seattle brings its own flip-off opportunities. I recall one especially bad day when my fellow bike commuters were particularly vexing, a lot of erratic riding and jostling. I was even cut off by some guy wearing disturbingly small, skin-tight bike shorts. I yelled at the guy, "That's a crime, man. A crime against nature!" (I may or may not have said "man.")

Right after that, I came upon a group of riders that slowed me down, all of them wearing shirts that read on the back, "Probably too old to be doing this." I thought that this was likely true as I finally started to pass them, annoyed expression firmly in place and preparing to flip a mental middle finger as I went by. Instead—to my surprise—as each of them smiled and waved at me, I found myself smiling and waving back to each of them.

Cringe-worthy moments like these pop into my head when I pray at the end of the day, and often a quotation from St. Ignatius follows: "I am an obstacle to myself." When feeling this way, I am more inclined to put up obstacles between myself and God, hiding behind a tree after the embarrassment of (once again) eating forbidden fruit. I don't want to look for God much at those times, and I certainly have no desire to be found.

What helps draw me out of hiding is the image that the Yahwist drew of God walking about in the Garden during the breezy time of day. I imagine God taking that walk every day, looking for Adam and Eve so that they could all walk together. Yes, their eating fruit from that tree hurt God, but perhaps their hiding hurt even more. It is the same with us when we find reasons to hide behind trees so that we won't be found. God doesn't care about any of those reasons, especially the I'm-not-worthy ones. What God does care about is us.

Does God still look for us? Yes. Every day. Feel the breeze from the gentle waving of a father's hand to his beloved child, and the cool waves of octogenarian bike riders. It's in those moments, and so many others, that God is looking for us, hoping that we'll let ourselves be found.

{ *What does it feel like to walk with God during the breezy time of day? Why hide?*

day two
THE CROUCHER

So the LORD said to Cain: “Why are you resentful and crestfallen? If you do well, you can hold up your head; but if not, sin is a demon lurking at the door: his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master.” —Genesis 4:6-7 (NAB)

The story is well known. Cain and Abel each gave offerings to God. Abel gave his best; Cain apparently didn't. Cain became resentful, lured Abel into a field, and murdered him. It's a big leap from feeling bad about a rejected gift to killing your brother. What explains it? We have some clues in the text.

First, there is the quality of the gifts. Abel's gift was one of the “best” firstlings of his flock. There is no qualitative word attached to Cain's gift—“from the fruit of the soil.” It's reasonable to infer from the lack of a descriptor—and from what we know about Cain—that his offering was likely a meager one, given with tight fists. Cain didn't have a generous heart, and his gift (maybe rotten fruit) reflected that.

God rejected Cain's gift, but tried to soothe Cain's hurt feelings with a little pep talk: *If you do well . . . because you just once again didn't do well . . . you can hold up your head. Earn it; stop whining.* That's not how Cain saw it, though. The rejection was an injustice, yet another injury in a long line inflicted by his

calculating brother. Cain needed someone to blame, because, as resentful people are inclined to do, he refused to look honestly within himself.

Finally, there is God's warning: *A demon is lurking at your door, and this demon wants you bad. But I know you can overcome it, Cain, if only you would try!* Cain's demon was resentment, a feeling he'd likely grown attached to over the years. His desire to have that feeling was stronger than his desire to master it, so he caved into it. At that point, murder came easily to Cain. Hands follow the heart.

The Hebrew for "demon" is "croucher." Evil crouches at the door of every heart, lurking, waiting for an opening. But, the croucher can't enter without being let in. That seems simple enough—just master the evil; keep the croucher outside. The problem is that the croucher is very attractive, and it can morph into whatever we are most attracted to. For Cain, it was resentment. For the rest of us . . .

I remember playing in a softball game when I lived in Milwaukee many years ago. The game was delayed because police cars and ambulances had converged outside a nearby apartment building. We found out later what all the commotion was about. Jeffrey Dahmer had been arrested and the contents of his freezer—human body parts—were carted from his apartment.

Monstrous, to be sure. But inhuman? That's another scary part of the story.

Dahmer's defense attorney and the prosecuting attorney were both graduates of the high school where I was teaching. After the trial ended, we invited the attorneys to speak with our senior class. The attorneys shared the same disturbing conclusion each had drawn about Dahmer—that he was in most ways like the

rest of us. In fact, he possessed many positive qualities: polite, thoughtful, and intelligent. What he knew about himself was that he had a perverse attraction to murder and engaging in deeply disturbing acts with the body. He didn't want to be that way, and so he tried to master the temptation. That went on for years. At one point, however, he began letting those desires into his heart. His horrific crimes followed shortly thereafter.

Thankfully, that is an extreme example, but it's also an illustrative one. All of us have demons crouching at the door that yearn to master us. They often seem harmless. Who is to fault Cain, for example, for feeling some resentment when what he had offered as a gift was rejected? How harmful can hurt feelings be? Very harmful if they morph into the kind of feeling that ends in murder.

And so it is with each and every one of us. Letting the croucher through the door can lead to murder, likely in our hearts or words, but murder, nonetheless. Even more worrisome, those demons can be anything, even healthy desires that devolve into unhealthy obsessions: pride to arrogance; passion to anger; loving to possessing. It is, as C. S. Lewis said, "the subtlest of snares."

What to do? Look to God's pep talk to Cain—the croucher can be mastered if we do well. Doing well here means following Abel's example: keeping our hearts filled with goodness, generosity, and the desire to do our best in God's service. Hearts full of those things have less room for hateful things, leaving little space for the croucher to enter and take up residence.

{ *What is crouching at the door of my heart?*