

iSOULation

Meditations for 21 Days

How to turn forced distancing into the most powerful, spiritual event of your life.

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What Will Your Perspective Be?

Isolation has a negative connotation. Generally speaking, most see isolation as a bad experience. It means to be separated away from others, to be alone. Isolation is a form of punishment or torture in prisons and internment camps. We discipline our children with isolation: *Go to your room!* or *Time out!* We even use the word in regard to singling out problematic issues; we often want to “isolate the problem” in order to fix it.

In stark contrast, “retreat” has a positive connotation. Even in the secular world, creative thinkers retreat, alone, from the hustle and bustle of life to allow their creative juices to flow. For centuries, Church Fathers and spiritual directors have preached the power of retreat and have practiced what they preached. Modern-day spiritual leaders encourage personal retreats, and some will espouse that even laity should take a personal retreat annually—time to remove oneself from others to pursue spiritual growth and rest for the soul.

Due to the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis in our world today, all Americans are finding themselves “quarantined” in one form or another. Forced social distancing is challenging our patience and propelling us out of our comfort zones. Most of us still have the comfort of family close by, although many may be very much alone from a variety of circumstances. Some have even been quarantined in a designated space for 14 days or more—completely removed from family and friends.

Whether semi-alone or very much alone, *what will your perspective be?* Will you see this period of forced distancing as isolation, a punishment? Or will you see it as a retreat, a gift? Given your perspective, this period of forced distancing could be the most powerful spiritual event of your life. Through a variety of approaches, this quarantine could bring peace and healing to your soul—perhaps when you didn’t even know it needed peace and healing. (Up to now, you have been too busy to notice.) With the Holy Spirit as your guide, it may serve as a period of reflection, examination, evaluation to reprioritize your values and redirect your daily living on the other side of the crisis.

This removal from others could be the combination of isolation and consolation. Isolation because you are alone—removed from others. Consolation because you can never be removed from God. The Psalmist declared, “*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?*” (Psalm 139:7). The word stem *con* means “together,” meaning your isolation could offer beautiful consolation *with* God. In the spirit of Shakespeare, we will create a word that encompasses this idea of isolation bringing consolation: ***isoulation!***

Silence and Solitude: Day One

My beloved spoke, and said to me: “Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.” Song of Songs 2:10

The poetic Old Testament book of the *Song of Solomon* is a portrayal of intense love and intimacy. It is often referenced as an analogy to the relationship of Jesus with His bride, the Church. Jesus is saying to us, *Rise up, my love, and come away*. He longs for that intimacy with us. He has beautiful words of love and consolation to share with us, but we are awfully busy, aren't we? As we are forced to shut down and remove ourselves from the norms of everyday living, we are discovering just how attached we are to the pleasures and busyness of this world. Although these distractions may not be sins, they can—and do—keep us from hearing our Lord whispering, *Come away!* Now is where the hard questions must be faced: will we use this time of forced distancing to hear that invitation and respond to it? Or will we choose to grapple with impatience, anxiety, and fear? Will we hug our electronic devices, working fiercely to maintain connectedness through social media? Will we frantically turn to those who are powerless to heal and save? Or will we embrace solitude in order to spend intimate time with the Lover of our souls?

Pray Psalm 63:1-8

*O God, you are my God;
Early will I seek You;
My soul thirsts for You;
My flesh longs for You
In a dry and thirsty land
Where there is no water,
So I have looked for You in the sanctuary,
To see Your power and Your glory.
Because Your lovingkindness is better than life,
My lips shall praise You.
Thus I will bless You while I live;
I will lift up my hands in Your name.
My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness,
And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.
When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the night watches,
Because You have been my help,
Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice.
My soul follows close behind You.
Your right hand upholds me.*

Silence and Solitude: Day Two

***He brought me to the banqueting house. And his banner over me was love.
Sustain me with cakes of raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am lovesick.***

Song of Songs 2:4

There are many sick among us in this surreal pandemic. We are concerned for friends and loved ones, and we are praying earnestly for those we know who are diagnosed with COVID-19. Perhaps our consolation will come through another diagnosis—the diagnosis of being lovesick for Jesus. When we embrace isolation and solitude with the purpose of seeking intimacy with Jesus, He will take us into His “banqueting house.” He will cover us in His love that will sustain us. The word “sustain” means to be supported or strengthened mentally and physically. Jesus said, “*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33). Go away with Him to His banqueting house. You will find a retreat and refuge from the troubles of this world. He will sustain and refresh you with His great love.

Pray Psalm 16:1-2, 5-11:

*Preserve me, O God, for in You I put my trust.
O my soul, you have said to the Lord,
“You are my Lord,
My goodness is nothing apart from You.”
O Lord, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup;
You maintain my lot.
The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;
Yes, I have a good inheritance.
I will bless the Lord who has given me counsel;
My heart also instructs me in the night seasons.
I have set the Lord always before me;
Because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices;
My flesh also will rest in hope.
For You will not leave my soul in the realm of the dead,
Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see decay.
You will show me the path of life.
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
At Your right hand are pleasures for evermore.*

“Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.” G. K. Chesterton

Silence and Solitude: Day Three

Draw me away! We will run after you... We will be glad and rejoice in you... We will remember your love more than wine. Song of Songs 1:4

“Fugitiva relinquere et aeterna captare”: to abandon transient realities and seek to grasp that which is eternal.
Saint Bruno of Cologne

This world is “transient,” meaning that it will last only for a short time. Jesus repeatedly reminded His listeners of this truth. During a pandemic, even the most optimistic of us must consider our vulnerability and mortality. There is a part of us, however, that isn’t mortal: our souls will live forever. Solitude and silence are paths to “abandon transient realities and seek to grasp that which is eternal.” When we are faced with the troubles and trials of this world, we should pause to ask, “What eternal truth does Jesus want to teach me through this?” For those who don’t know the superb Lover of souls, their response to the realization of humans’ fragility and mortality is one of fear, agitation, anger, and anxiety. But for those of us who know Jesus, that realization is an invitation to run after God through solitude; it is an invitation to sit at His feet in silence and learn what it is He wants to teach us. *Draw me away, O’ Jesus, Lover of my soul! I will run after you!*

Pray Psalm 119:105-108, 129-132, 142:

*Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.
I am afflicted very much;
Revive me, O Lord, according to Your word.
Accept, I pray, the freewill offerings of my mouth,
O Lord, and teach me Your judgments.
Your testimonies are wonderful;
Therefore my soul keeps them.
The entrance of Your words gives light;
It gives understanding to the simple.
I opened my mouth and I panted,
For I longed for Your commandments.
Look upon me and be merciful to me,
As your custom is toward those who love Your name.
Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness,
And Your law is truth.*

Silence and Solitude: Day Four

I sleep, but my heart is awake; it is the voice of my beloved! He knocks, saying, “Open for me...” Song of Songs 5:2

Picture yourself. In doing so, you immediately imagine the person you see in the mirror each day. We know that exterior person pretty well, don't we? We know the moles on our faces, the cowlicks in our hair, the flaws we hate, and the assets we preen. We are exterior people. We spend money—a lot of it—on purchases that will make us physically comfortable or enhance our exterior selves. Now—imagine your *interior* self. That deep-down part of yourself that God created with a yearning for Him. There are many layers to our interior; it's complex; it's not as easy to evaluate. Do you know the condition of your interior? Do you know the hurts that have been buried for years? Do you know why you react the way you do? Are you familiar with the scars sin has caused? Can you say with certainty that your interior is healthy and beautiful? There is a mirror that will offer the reflection you need to discover the condition of your interior self: solitude with God, silence in His presence. It's amazing what regular periods of silence do for our souls. Sometimes it's shocking to finally take time to assess the part of us we neglect the most. Silence, “far from the madding crowd,” is a spiritual necessity to allow God to show us the wounds He wants to heal, the motivations He wants to reveal, the fears He wants to soothe, the scars He wants to make beautiful.

Pray Psalm 139:1-7, 13-18, 23-24:

*O Lord, You have searched me and known me.
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off.
You comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O Lord, You know it altogether.
You have hedged me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is high, I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?*

*For You formed my inward parts;
You covered me in my mother's womb.
I will praise You, for I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
Marvelous are Your works,
And that my soul knows very well.*

*My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts
of the earth.
Your eyes saw my substance, being
yet unformed.
And in Your book they all were written,
The days fashioned for me,
Where there were yet none of them.
How precious also are Your thoughts
to me, O God!
How great is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they would be
more than the sand;
When I awake, I am still with You.
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.*

Silence and Solitude: Day Five

I will sing praise to my God while I have my being. May my meditation be sweet to him. Psalm 104:33-34

“Don’t Rush. Take time to think, think, think.” Winnie the Pooh

Imagine driving several miles away from your house only to realize you forgot your phone. A panic sets in because you know you’ll be late to wherever you are going if you return to the house to retrieve the precious instrument that directs so many moments of your day. But how do you survive the day without a phone—a *smartphone*? This was the norm for many of us 25 years ago: We left the house every day, walking away from the “landline” phones plugged into our walls at home. We drove miles and no one could reach us. Emergencies had to wait until we were in another building with another landline telephone. For some of you, it may be impossible to wrap your brains around this other truth: we would even go on road trips, driving hundreds of miles, without a phone. If the car broke down, we either had to walk to the closest gas station or hang a white handkerchief (a cloth tissue for those of you who may be puzzled by the word) on the car’s antennae to alert a passing police officer we were in trouble. Just 20 to 30 years ago, people would experience long periods of “white space,” blank periods of time in which our thoughts could wander. We pondered as we waited for our ride to pick us up from school or church events. We pondered as we rode our bikes or drove in our cars. There wasn’t a device buzzing in our pockets or hands every few seconds interrupting our thoughts. We weren’t receiving MSN’s “breaking news” every five seconds. We were free to think. Combine this ability to think with thoughts about God and/or Holy Scripture, and it adds up to very powerful, spiritual moments—holy moments that offer an abundance of benefits to living in a world inundated with temptations and suffering. Today, so many of us ask Alexa or Siri questions throughout the day. What spiritual insight or growth might take place if we asked the big questions to a big God throughout the day? What practical steps do we take to find this white space for thinking and meditating? We’ll address that in tomorrow’s devotion. In the meantime - ***think about it.***

Carefully read Psalm 1. Ask God to help you be that person:

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither;
And whatever he does shall prosper.*

Silence and Solitude: Day Six

By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him. “I will rise now,” I said, “And go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek the one I love.” I sought him, but I did not find him. The watchmen who go about the city found me; I said, “Have you seen the one I love?” Scarcely had I passed by them, when I found the one I love. I held him and would not let him go.” Song of Songs 3:4

We humans are clever and persistent. We work diligently and shrewdly to attain what we want. We cajole, manipulate, and argue to get what we want. We rearrange schedules and go long distances to get what we want. We save every dime we can to buy what we want. It’s amazing the creativity employed by dating couples when they want to find time and ways to be together. That’s why excuses of why we can’t find time to spend with the Lord just don’t fly. The fact is, if we are passionate about our Lord, we **will** find time! Today’s Scripture passage from the *Song of Songs* is beautiful when made analogous to one’s intense desire to find God. If your desire is that strong, you will find a way to carve out space in your day for solitude with your Lord. There is always an hour earlier on the alarm clock. Do you get up at 5:00? Set the alarm for 4:30. There’s always an hour later. Do you go to bed at 9:00? Stay up later than your family and spend time with God. (You’ll get the best sleep of your life.) If you’re married with children, help each other. Dad, watch the kids for 30 minutes so your wife can go somewhere to spend time alone with God; Mom, return the favor. Is there a church with unlocked doors close to your workplace? Slip in on your lunch hour or on your way home. (If you have to make a choice, an hour with God will benefit your life way more than an hour at the gym!) We could brainstorm together and make a list a mile long. First, we have to ask ourselves, is Jesus **really** “the one I love?” Do I love Him more than all the other things that take my affection? Do I love Him enough to relentlessly search for Him “about the city, in the streets, and in the squares?” Can you say, I sought the One I loved and walked away from the television program; I sought the One I loved and turned off my phone; I sought the One I loved and rose at dawn to find Him; I sought the One I loved and went to my “prayer closet” after my family was asleep? There is so much to be found when you search for Him! No good thing will He withhold from you!

Pray Psalm 42:1-4; Psalm 84:2; 10-12:

*As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul for You, O God.*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
While they continually say to me, “Where is your God?”
When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me.
My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord.
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.*

*For a day in Your courts is better than
a thousand...
For the Lord will give grace and glory;
No good thing will He withhold from
those who walk uprightly.
O Lord of hosts,
Blessed is the man who trusts in You!*

“To fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek Him, the greatest adventure; to find Him, the greatest human achievement.”

St. Augustine of Hippo

Revisiting the Sabbath: Day Seven

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work. Exodus 20:8-11

What a commandment! We could argue that it is the most challenging of the ten. Moms read this commandment and immediately think, *No work? Sure—I won't cook, clean, change diapers, bathe kids for an entire 24-hour period. Really, God? What were you thinking?* Men read it and think, *Oh yeah! I'd like to see my lawn after weeks of not mowing on the one day a week I have off work.* Most of us have grappled with this commandment. Finding it difficult to obey, we simply push it to the back of our minds hoping it might go away if we don't think about it. So what do we do with such a command from God? We first remember that God is love and His commandments are designed to make our lives protected and good. Then, we need to accept the challenge to set a day aside that is different from the work days of the rest of the week. This takes planning. The commandment says, "**Remember** the Sabbath..." If we don't remember the Sabbath through the rest of the week, then that day becomes a "catch all" day instead of a "holy" day of rest to worship God and be with our families. For those of you isolated at home more than usual due to COVID-19, this is a good time to evaluate how to revive a weekly Sabbath... Discuss it as a family and evaluate what chores you normally do on the Sabbath. Could some of those chores be tacked on to another day of the week? Would an extra load of laundry six days of the week keep you from having to do laundry on your Sabbath? What preparations can you make ahead of time? Parents, you'll still have to change those diapers, but planning for a day that can be more restful than the others is an important part of following God's perfect plan for our lives.

Pray Psalm 119:1-16:

Blessed are the undefiled in the way,
Who walk in the law of the Lord!
Blessed are those who keep His testimonies,
Who seek Him with the whole heart!
They also do no iniquity;
They walk in His ways.
You have commanded us to keep your precepts
Diligently,
Oh that my ways were directed
To keep your statutes!
Then I would not be ashamed,
When I look into all Your commandments.
I will praise You with uprightness of heart,
When I learn Your righteous judgments,
I will keep Your statutes;
O do not forsake me utterly.

How can a young man cleanse his way?
By taking heed according to Your word.
With my whole heart I have sought You;
Oh let me not wander from your commandments!
Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You.
Blessed are You, O Lord!
Teach me Your statutes.
With my lips I have declared
All the judgments of Your mouth.
I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,
As much as in all riches.
I will meditate on Your precepts,
And contemplate Your ways.
I will delight myself in Your statutes;
I will not forget Your word.

Revisiting the Sabbath: Day Eight

Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:28-29

Have you ever thought about a Sabbath for the soul? Sometimes our souls need rest. There are times when we think, *I'm so tired—on the inside!* Trying to keep our chins up in spite of challenging times—whether it be COVID-19 or the trials that life throws at us in the best of times—is wearying. Pushing down anxieties and fears takes emotional energy. Spreading ourselves super thin to meet the needs of everyone and everything can wear us out, not only on the outside, but on the inside, too. For some of us, our jobs are more emotionally draining than physically draining, but that emotional drain can exhaust us inside and out. Jesus, so in tune with humanity's struggles, recognizes this, and offers a Sabbath for our souls—rest for our souls. In the middle of crises, anxieties, and demands, we must look inward to keep our souls healthy and rested. How can we do that? Since Jesus offered such a rest, we must go to Him. Even for a few seconds, when feeling overwhelmed, we can turn our faces to a corner and whisper, “Jesus, I need your rest, I need your peace.” If you have given the Prince of Peace the throne of your heart, you can look inward at any moment on any day and ask Him to restore your emotional energy and speak peace to your soul. Looking to Jesus, we can have a Sabbath for our souls at any time; we can spiritually transcend the hurry, the emotional drain, the anxieties, and the bad news by thinking about reassuring Scriptures and whispering short prayers. Simply whispering His name—*Jesus*—you will be surprised how He rushes to your aid, to help you carry the heavy burdens of life.

Pray Psalm 40:1-5; 11-13;16-17:

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
And He inclined to me,
And heard my cry.
He also brought me up out of a horrible pit,
Out of the miry clay,
And set my feet upon a rock,
And established my steps.
He has put a new song in my mouth,
Praise to our God;
Many will see it and fear,
And will trust in the Lord.
Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust.
Many, O Lord my God, are Your wonderful works
Which You have done;
And Your thoughts toward us
Cannot be recounted to You in order;
If I would declare and speak of them,
They are more than can be numbered.*

*Do not withhold Your tender mercies
from me, O Lord;
Let Your lovingkindness and Your truth
continually preserve me
For innumerable evils have surrounded me;
My iniquities have overtaken me,
So that I am not able to look up;
They are more than the hairs on my head;
Therefore my heart fails me.
Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me;
O Lord, make haste to help me!
Let all those who seek You,
Rejoice and be glad in You;
Let such as love Your salvation say
continually,
“The Lord be magnified!”
But I am poor and needy;
Yet the Lord thinks upon me.
You are my help and my deliverer;
Do not delay, O God!*

Revisiting the Sabbath: Day Nine

And He said, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” Exodus 33:14

God chose Moses to lead a mass exodus of Israelites from their bondage in Egypt and take them hundreds of miles, by foot, to an unknown “promise land.” The number of Israelites! The miles to be covered! The hardships anticipated! Oh my! I think we can all imagine how overwhelmed Moses must have felt. At one point, he prayed for God to show him how Divine grace would cover him during this daunting leadership role. God’s promised proof may surprise you: *My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.* God didn’t say, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you supernatural power,” or “My presence will go with you and I will give you supernatural wisdom.” A key sign of God’s Divine favor on Moses was rest! And come to think about it, that is pretty miraculous. How in the world could Moses find rest with the daily physical, emotional, and mental demands? How could he rest his mind enough to sleep? How could his heart be at rest with the intimidating task in front of him? God promised to miraculously give Moses rest. We’re not sure what that looked like, but we can be assured God fulfilled his promise to Moses. He wants you to have rest, too. God knows the human need for rest—rest for our weary bodies, minds, and souls. You not only have permission to rest, it is commanded of you by your Creator—the One who knows what we need more than anyone. God works all things together for our good. If you are in the camp of Americans who have been forced to shut down, God will use the distancing and slowing down to give you a much-needed rest, an extended Sabbath. If you are in the camp of Americans who are busier than ever because of COVID-19, whisper a prayer to the Rest-Giver and receive the miraculous gifts of His presence AND rest.

Pray Psalm 23:

*The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Revisiting the Sabbath: Day Ten

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6

Observing the Sabbath—a day of rest—has a lot to do with trust. It's trusting that God will provide time for you to complete all the necessary weekly tasks in the other six days. It's trusting that God will protect your job if you choose to turn off the phone and computer one day a week. It's trusting that God will provide for you and often promote you when you choose to put Him and His commandments first in your life. God bestows the most unique blessings on our lives when we submit ourselves to His will. Many have testified how much more rested they feel when they wake up an hour earlier to pray. They are getting one hour less sleep yet feel more rested throughout the day. Similar testimonies emerge when families take a step of faith and start tithing. Previously, they barely had enough money to pay the bills, but when they started tithing, the remaining 90% stretched further than the 100% did before tithing. The same type of blessing takes place when we choose to take God at His word and protect a day of rest each week. He blesses your trust in Him. He gave this commandment to set aside one day of rest each week for a reason; we should find the freedom in trusting that He knows what is best for His children. He will go to work on our behalf the moment we sit back to honor His command—trust Him!

Meditate on Psalm 37:3-6; 23-26:

*Trust in the Lord, and do good;
Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.
Delight yourself also in the Lord,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the Lord,
Trust also in Him,
And He shall bring it to pass.
He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light,
And your justice as the noonday.
The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord,
And He delights in his way,
Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down,
For the Lord upholds him with His hand.
I have been young and now am old,
Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken,
Or his descendants begging bread.
He is ever merciful and lends;
And his descendants are blessed.*

Revisiting the Sabbath: Day Eleven

And He [Jesus] said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27

Collin Kartchner started the grassroots movement #SAVETHEKIDS. Kartchner’s TED talks give us pause to think about the current cultural influences on families and children. In one of them, *Can Flip Phones End Our Social Media Addiction*, Kartchner candidly shares the story of his usually compliant tween daughter going through a period of being very detached and difficult at home. Finally, his daughter blurted out the truth of the matter: Mom and Dad were on their phones all the time. She felt ignored, pushed aside, unloved. When the phones went off, they were more present to their daughter, and she became the happy, contented girl they had known before their smartphone addiction. A Sabbath day reminds us about the importance of loving God and our families. In Jewish tradition, an evening meal jumpstarts the 24-hour Sabbath with family gathered around the table. Fathers give verbal blessings to their children. This is a sacred time for families to push aside all of the demands of work and outside forces. What a gift God gave us through the Sabbath! Jesus reminds us that the Sabbath was made for us. That doesn’t mean it is a “me” day; the commandment clearly states this is a day “unto the Lord;” however, it is a gift from our heavenly Father to restore and heal. Once established and honored, it is a day everyone—young and old alike—look forward to throughout the week, a sweet refuge of slowing down, focusing on what is really important, praising God for His faithfulness, sharing delicious meals around a table, turning off the noise from work and hurry, and turning on the love of God and family.

Rejoice in Psalms 127 and 128:

*Unless the Lord builds the house,
They labor in vain who build it;
Unless the Lord guards the city,
The watchman stays awake in vain.
It is vain for you to rise up early,
To sit up late.
To eat the bread of sorrows;
For so He gives His beloved sleep.
Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord,
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
So are the children of one’s youth.
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them;
They shall not be ashamed,
But shall speak with their enemies in the gate.*

*Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord,
Who walks in His ways.
When you eat the labor of your hands,
You shall be happy and it shall be well with you.
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine,
In the very heart of your house.
Your children just like olive plants,
All around your table.
Behold, thus shall the man be blessed
Who fears the Lord.
The Lord bless you out of Zion,
And may you see the good of Jerusalem,
All the days of your life.
Yes, may you see your children’s children.*

“Most of the things we need to be most fully alive never come in busyness. They grow in rest.”

Mark Buchanan, *The Holy Wild: Trusting in the Character of God*

Revisiting the Sabbath: Day Twelve

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit,” whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.” James 4:13-15

Winnie the Pooh: What day is it Christopher?

Christopher Robin: Today.

Winnie the Pooh: Oh, that is my favorite day! Yesterday, when there was tomorrow, it was too much day.

Striving: making great efforts to achieve or obtain something; struggling or fighting vigorously. We do a lot of striving. We strive to obtain money, love, recognition, a better job, a better position, a better house, an annual vacation, affirmation, success, beauty, degrees, retirement. There is nothing sinful about striving to achieve a better life, but striving will exhaust us, especially when our striving is coupled with anxiety or fretfulness—and it often is! Jesus spoke of a more peaceful existence, one free from worry or striving, one filled with peace and rest. A Sabbath day will give us a day “off” from some of the striving, but what if we applied Jesus’ teaching and took a lifetime Sabbath from striving? Jesus said, “*Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on...For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things*” (Matthew 6:25; 32-34). Striving is always about tomorrow. During the corona shut down, some of us have been forced to stop striving. In spite of the adjustment, we have realized just how much we spin our wheels during normal times. This pandemic event may create a paradigm shift in all of us; a shift that will help us see more clearly through God’s eyes. He wants us to rest in the now, to not miss the now. There may be many holy moments we miss throughout a day because we are striving for tomorrow. Take a Sabbath from striving!

Pray Psalm 103:1; 11-19:

Bless the Lord, O my soul;

And all that is within me,

Bless His Holy name...

For as the heavens are high above the earth,

So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;

As far as the east is from the west,

So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

As a father pities his children,

So the Lord pities those who fear Him.

For He knows our frame;

He remembers that we are dust.

As for man, his days are like grass;

As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.

For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,

And its place remembers it no more.

*But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting
to everlasting,*

On those who fear Him,

And His righteousness to children’s children,

To such as keep His covenant,

*And to those who remember His commandments
to do them.*

The Lord has established His throne in heaven,

And His kingdom rules over all.

Simplify: Day Thirteen

And Jesus answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:41-42

Simplifying our lives does not really seem like a holy act or a spiritual goal, does it? Sure, it may be a very healthy approach to have. We may see deep quotes on Pinterest about simplifying. We may even see articles by psychologists and life coaches about simplifying. But there isn't a commandment that states, “Thou shalt simplify!” So why include this theme in a group of reflections intended to help us grow spiritually? We will find part of the answer in an encounter Jesus had with two sisters from a family he hung out with from time to time: *Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.” And Jesus answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her”* (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus may not have told Martha to “simplify,” but being “troubled about many things” does not seem to connote simplification. “Troubled about many things” brings to mind layers, complexities, and crowded thoughts. Martha, scurrying around the kitchen with a long to-do list on her mind, resented the fact that her sister was just sitting at Jesus' feet—hanging on every word He had to say. On the other hand, Mary's focus was singular at that moment—not scattered. She wasn't trying to do ten things at once; she had simplified. She was doing ***one thing***—interacting with Jesus. Jesus said Mary chose the thing that was “***needed***—the good part—which will not be taken away”—the eternal part! ***Simplifying our lives may not be a great spiritual event in itself, but not simplifying our lives will keep us from great spiritual encounters!***

Pray Psalm 27:4-5; 14:

*One thing I have desired of the Lord,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life.
To behold the beauty of the Lord,
And to inquire in His temple.
For in the time of trouble
He shall hide me in His pavillion,
In the secret place of His tabernacle.
He shall hide me;
He shall set me high upon a rock.
Wait on the Lord;
Be of good courage,
And He shall strengthen your heart;
Wait, I say, on the Lord!*

Simplify: Day Fourteen

For they loved the praise of men rather than the praise of God. John 12:43

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. Galatians 1:10

If you want your life to be anything but simplified, be a people pleaser. Trying to please a whole lot of people will complicate and confuse your existence faster than anything else. Whether it's because of peer pressure or the need for approval from a loved one, friend, or boss, trying to make everyone happy will cause confusion, fretfulness, unhappiness, and sometimes even sin. The first verse of the day is referencing rulers who wanted to confess Jesus but were worried the Pharisees would disapprove. St. John says they loved the praise of men rather than the praise of God. Wanting to please everyone in your life may start with good intentions—you want everyone to be happy. Or, your need for approval may have its origin in serious dysfunction that needs to be rooted out with the help of a spiritual advisor or counselor. Whatever the initial cause, it will pull you in a million directions until you are like pulled taffy being torn apart. And whether or not we want to admit it, tirelessly working to please people dethrones God. The following prayer has been attributed to St. Therese of Lisieux: ***Jesus, help me to simplify my life by learning what you want me to be and becoming that person.*** We can simplify our lives in this area by seeking to please God. Seek ***first*** to hear His voice on the many matters of your life. Read His word and pray for discernment and wisdom. If you are hearing two or more voices that contradict each other—find a way to shut them out and seek to hear the voice of God. Certainly there is balance. We cannot use this as an excuse to do whatever we want, no matter who it hurts, but if we are truly seeking God with sincerity of heart, selfishness will not be a problem. Learning what God wants us to be and becoming that person gives us confidence in knowing who we are and *Whose* we are—it's just that simple.

Pray Psalm 100:

*Make a joyful shout to the Lord all you lands!
Serve the Lord with gladness;
Come before His presence with singing.
**Know that the Lord, He is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.**
Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,
And into His courts with praise.
Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.*

Simplify: Day Fifteen

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Matthew 6:24

Let's go back to the prayer from yesterday: *Jesus, simplify my life by learning what you want me to be and becoming that person.* This should apply to our whole person; our entire existence; our rising up and our sitting down; our work; our relationships; our home life; our thought life; our choices; and our money. Yes, money. Money is a pretty huge part of our lives. In this pandemic crisis, some of us have been laid off—some indefinitely. Perhaps it's a good time—even a Providential time—to evaluate our approach to money. Making money isn't a sin; loving it, idolizing it, obsessing over it, serving it is. It doesn't matter where you find yourself economically, money can become your master. Those of us who do not have a lot of money often shrug off Bible verses about money because we feel they are for the greedy rich; however, the principles about money are applicable no matter where we are in life. Sometimes, we are most obsessed and fretful over money when we don't have much of it. In our desperation to attain the stuff shoved in our faces from advertising and the stores we pass on every corner, we make poor choices spending money we do not have, complicating and stressing our lives even more. Especially in the area of money, we should ask Jesus to simplify our lives by learning how He wants us to approach it and having the discipline to apply the godly approach. This will look different for each of us. The single mom's choices and approaches may look different from the upper middle class family's choices. Take a good look at the Scriptures for this day's focus. They are powerful and impossible to ignore. Are your priorities confused? During this time of social distancing, quiet, and solitude, ask God to guide your thoughts and give you the righteous gumption to obey His voice.

Pray Psalm 62:5-12:

*My soul, wait silently for God alone,
For my expectation is from Him.
He only is my rock and my salvation;
He is my defense;
I shall not be moved.
In God is my salvation and my glory;
The rock of my strength,
And my refuge is in God.
Trust in Him at all times, you people;
Pour out your heart before Him;
God is a refuge for us.
Surely men of low degree are a vapor,
Men of high degree are a lie;
If they are weighed on the scales,
They are altogether lighter than vapor.
Do not trust in oppression,
Nor vainly hope in robbery;*

***If riches increase,
Do not set your heart on them.
God has spoken once,
Twice I have heard this:
That power belongs to God.
Also to You, O Lord, belongs mercy;
For You render to each one according
to his work.***

Simplify: Day Sixteen

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Timothy 6:10

St. Paul's letter to Timothy informs us that loving money is a centuries-old spiritual problem. How does one "wander from the faith" because of money? It usually begins with complicating our lives to make money and attain more stuff or a certain lifestyle. ***It begins by doing the opposite of simplifying.*** There are many scenarios we could imagine that would be examples of complicating our lives to have more money—to pursue more money. This is truly a personal evaluation because of the many different contexts and family dynamics. What we all need to examine is our time, our values, our expenditures. Do we spend so much time making money that we have none left for the spiritual pursuits that keep our hearts close to Jesus? Do we have an eternal perspective when it comes to our "treasure?" Jesus said where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also (Matthew 6:21). Do we spend so much that there is nothing left for giving—giving to Kingdom work, giving to the poor—to Jesus (Matthew 25)? Do we spend too much time fretting over money or thinking about how to attain more? We can fill our lives to the brim chasing after the material world until we stop chasing after God. Holy Scripture warns us we can wander from the faith—because of money and what it buys—money and things that will mean nothing on the day we face eternity. During this time of a forced pause, let's examine our time, our focus, our "eager" pursuits, our hearts.

Pray Psalm 146:

*Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord, O my soul!
While I live I will praise the Lord;
I will sing praises to my God
While I have my being.
Do not put your trust in princes,
Nor in a son of man
In whom there is no help.
His spirit departs, he returns to the earth;
In that very day his plans perish.
Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help,
Whose hope is in the Lord his God,
Who made heaven and earth,
The sea and all that is in them;
Who keeps truth forever,
Who executes justice for the oppressed,
Who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord gives freedom to the prisoners.
The Lord opens the eyes of the blind;
The Lord raises those who are bowed down;*

*The Lord watches over the strangers;
He relieves the fatherless and widow;
But the way of the wicked He turns
upside down.
The Lord shall reign forever -
Your God, O Zion to all generations
Praise the Lord!*

Simplify: Day Seventeen

But He answered and said, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Matthew 4:4

We've heard or seen the word “essential” way too much: “Stay home! Essential trips only!” We instantly try to decide what “essential” really means. Some of us are convinced that choosing a new paint color for the bedroom at Lowe's is definitely “essential.” The dictionary defines it as “a thing that is absolutely necessary.” So if we're really honest with ourselves, essential means an income, food, toilet paper (oh yes—the toilet paper), soap, laundry detergent, prescriptions—those items that keep us alive and clean. As much as we Americans are whining these days, the truth is, even in quarantine, we are living with way more than the essentials. We still have the internet. We still have closets full of clothes. We still buy restaurant food to carry out. We still have television. We still have books and games. We still shop online. We still visit with friends and loved ones via Facetime, Zoom, and Skype. What if all we had were the *essentials*? It's interesting how our minds go to “things” when we think of essentials; but there is so much more to “essential” than things. Harking back to the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus said, “One thing” is needed—and Mary had found that one thing. She was sitting at Jesus' feet, taking in something that could *not be taken away*. Something that would last forever. Godly leaders suggest that a benefit in fasting food is that it reminds us of our true sustenance—*man does not live by bread alone* [Matthew 4:4]. During this time of isolation, let's turn our thoughts away from worldly essentials and lean into spiritual essentials: *iSOULate!* .

Pray Psalm 27:8-11; 13-14:

When You said, “Seek My face,”
My heart said to You, “Your face Lord,
I will seek.”
Do not hide Your face from me;
Do not turn Your servant away in anger;
You have been my help;
Do not leave me nor forsake me,
O God of my salvation,
When my father and my mother forsake me,
Then the Lord will take care of me.
Teach me Your way, O Lord,
And lead me in a smooth path.
I would have lost heart, unless I had believed
That I would see the goodness of the Lord,
In the land of the living.
Wait on the Lord;
Be of good courage,
And He shall strengthen your heart;
Wait, I say, on the Lord!

Slowing: Day Eighteen

Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 4:6

Catholic author Chris Hazell addresses the spiritual problem of busyness in his article, *Is Busyness Jeopardizing Our Souls?* Jesus asked a similar question: *What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?* And certainly we are trying to gain something in all of this busyness. Isn't that the start of it, at least? Approval of a new boss, approval of family or friends, approval of teachers and coaches, approval of colleagues, approval of the organization that voted us to the board. We put forth extreme effort to be a super mom, a super wife, a super dad, a super daughter, a super son. We live in the car taking our kids to school clubs, sports, and anything else that keeps them just as busy as we are. (And doesn't our children's busyness validate our super parenting?) Our intentions are often pure. But the treadmill starts going faster, faster, *faster* until we're sweating, and panting, and fearful that we'll fly off this frantic treadmill of life—and then what? And *for* what? At this point, we forget what those pure intentions were. And we find ourselves in a trap—the trap of busyness—and our time with God is whittled down to playing an audio devotional while we put on our mascara or shave or rush the kids to school. We often hit replay because we realize that our minds are wandering to our mental to-do list, and we aren't even hearing what the voice coming from our electronic device is saying. During this time of isolation, when most of us have been forced off the busy treadmill, we should reflect on our lives. ***What can we change to save our souls?***

Pray Psalm 90:1-3;8-10; 12:

Lord, You have been our dwelling
Place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
Or ever You had formed the earth and the world.
From everlasting to everlasting, You are God.
You turn man to destruction,
And say, "Return O children of men."
You have set our iniquities before You,
Our secret sins in the light of Your countenance.
For all our days have passed away in Your wrath;
We finish our years like a sigh.
The days of our lives are seventy years;
And if by reason of strength they are
Eighty years,
Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow;
For it is soon cut off and we fly away.
So teach us to number our days,
That we may gain wisdom.

Slowing: Day Nineteen

Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. I Peter 5:7

Many of us respond to hurt, loss, and emotional pain by staying busy. If we are busy, then we do not have to think about the losses or pain that could easily engulf or beset us. In fact, some have even achieved great success, working furiously hard to escape the gnawing wounds festering beneath the surface. Now, due to an unexpected shutdown, we may find ourselves more often alone with our thoughts, memories, regrets, failures, grudges, hurt, pain, and loss. The whole idea of looking inward and evaluating our interior selves causes our breathing to change and our pulse to race. We have worked too hard to bury the sad memories or unhealed wounds; the last exercise we want to do is examine and evaluate them. God, on the other hand, may want to use this period of isolation to force us to face our demons once and for all. With the great Comforter holding our hands through the process, digging deep to determine what issues still haunt us can bring healing, peace, and freedom. There is a picture that has circulated on the internet of Jesus walking with both arms full of suitcases and baggage. The byline says, "I've got this." What a great image! Perhaps busyness is our way of carrying all the painful baggage, but Jesus wants us to give it to Him. He cares about us. He wants our load to be lighter. He's got this!

Pray Psalm 116:1-9:

*I love the Lord for He has heard
The cry of my appeal;
For He turned his ear to me
In the day when I called Him.
They surrounded me, the snares of death,
With the anguish of the tomb;
They caught me, sorrow and distress.
I called on the Lord's name.
O Lord my God, deliver me!
How gracious is the Lord, and just;
Our God has compassion.
The Lord protects the simple hearts;
I was helpless so he saved me.
Turn back, my soul, to your rest,
For the Lord has been good;
He has kept my soul from death,
My eyes from tears and my feet from stumbling.
I will walk in the presence of the Lord,
In the land of the living.*

Slowing: Day Twenty

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10

“If the devil cannot make us bad, he will make us busy.” Corrie Ten Boom

A young priest went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land anticipating the Bible to come to life before his very eyes. One day, he saw a herd of sheep being driven through the streets of a small town he was visiting. He was very excited because he was going to see the interaction of a shepherd with his sheep; he could visually make an analogy with Jesus, the Good Shepherd. To his surprise, however, the shepherd was walking behind the herd—not leading it. He was yelling at them and beating them. The priest turned to the tour guide and asked him about it. “No, no, you misunderstand,” the guide explained. “You are not seeing the shepherd; he is the butcher. He’s driving the sheep to slaughter.” This story can apply to what stressful, relentless busyness will do to our lives. We are driven, driven, driven—and to what? Satan would love to use our busyness to drive us to slaughter. Busyness will distract us from godly pursuits and an imperative relationship with our Lord. It can become stressful, affecting our physical, mental, and emotional health. Satan would love to use our busyness to drive us to destruction. But the Good Shepherd has come that we might have life, and have it to the full! He leads us beside *still* waters—not stressful busyness. His example teaches us to remove ourselves from the crowd and find time for prayer and solitude with the Father. He wants us to not worry about tomorrow, but to live in today. He wants us to slow down and recognize the gift of Sabbath. Will the enemy use busyness to drive you to slaughter, or will you be led by the Good Shepherd?

Pray Psalm 143:8-10:

Cause me to hear Your
Lovingkindness in the morning,
For in You do I trust;
Cause me to know the way in
Which I should walk,
For I lift up my soul to You.
Deliver me, O Lord, from my enemies;
In You I take shelter.
Teach me to do Your will,
For You are my God;
Your Spirit is good.
Lead me in the land of uprightness.

Slowing: Day Twenty-One

But now ask the beasts, and they will teach you; and the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you; and the fish of the sea will explain to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this; in Whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind? Job 12:7-10

People are going outside more during this surreal corona crisis. It's one of the few activities available to us. In areas that have kept state parks open, young and old alike are hiking, picnicking, and exploring. And many are discovering—or rediscovering—that nature restores the soul. The rhythmic, certain change of the seasons reassures us. The unhurried pace of changing leaves reminds us that tasks can be accomplished without rushing. The survival of birds and woodland creatures through harsh winter comforts us. Most of all, nature teaches us there is still God—despite everything—there is still God. St. Paul points to creation as proof of a God: *For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead...* (Romans 1:20). In his poem *The Peace of Wild Things*, Wendell Berry, farmer and poet, wrote, “*When despair grows in me/And I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound/in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be/I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds/I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with the forethought/ of grief. I come into the presence of still water...*” Wild things do not “tax their lives with the forethought of grief” like we do. They instinctively trust their Creator. Oh that they will teach us to do the same!

Praise with Psalm 148:

Praise the Lord!
Praise thee Lord from the heavens;
Praise Him in the heights!
Praise Him, all His angels;
Praise Him, all His hosts!
Praise Him, sun and moon;
Praise Him, all you stars of light!
Praise Him, you heavens of heavens
And you waters above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
For He commanded and they were created.
He also established them forever and ever;
He made a decree which shall not pass away.
Praise the Lord from the earth,
You great sea creatures and all the depths;
Fire and hail, snow and clouds;
Stormy wind, fulfilling His word;

Mountains and all hills;
Fruitful trees and all cedars;
Beasts and all cattle;
Creeping things and flying fowl;
Kings of the earth and all peoples;
Princes and all judges of the earth;
Both young men and maidens;
Old men and children.
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
For His name alone is exalted;
His glory is above the earth and heaven.
And He has exalted the horn of His
people,
The praise of all His saints-
Of the children of Israel,
A people near to Him.
Praise the Lord!

iSOULation

ABOUT THE AUTHOR... Mardena Detamore is a high school English teacher, wife of 41 years, mother, and grandmother of 11 grandchildren. She and her husband, David, were on staff at a large, multicultural Assemblies of God church on the northeast side of Indianapolis for 25 years before converting to the Catholic Church in 2014. During their stint in Protestant vocational ministry, they served together as Children’s Pastor, Youth Pastor, and Assistant Pastor overseeing small group ministries and various religious education programs. Since joining the Catholic Church, they have been active parishioners at St. Matthew Parish in Indianapolis, serving on the Spiritual Life Commission and Parish Council. In the past few years, Mardena has written several studies for Lent, Advent, and other special focuses to support the Spiritual Life Commission’s contribution to St. Matthew. She has been involved in “church work” and religious education her entire adult life. Her experience has included supervising various religious education programs, designing and overseeing college and career ministry, writing curriculum for Christian education classes and small group Scripture studies, teaching classes of elementary-age children, high school students, and adults. David and Mardena together were actively teaching and serving when their lives took a significant turn toward the Catholic Church. She says, “It has been quite a journey and we are continuously reminded that life with Jesus is an adventure!”

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