
Spiritual Life Retreat

A day-long retreat for Elders

Prepared by Keith Boyer, Mission Consultant, The Synod of Toronto & Kingston

This retreat may be adapted to suit your situation.

1. Introductions and welcome
2. Retreat overview (appendix A)
3. Building your group (appendix B)
4. Singing and praying the Psalms

Read the following as an introduction to reflection on the Psalms:

The Psalms, with few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity-gathered over a long period of time, but a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity. It speaks of life the way it really is, for in those deeply human dimensions the same issues and possibilities persist.

— Walter Brueggemann

The Psalms are an anatomy of all parts of the soul.

— John Calvin

The Language of Faith

The language of faith is poetry and story. It is speech that is liberating, creative and dangerous. It is dangerous because it envisions change. It assumes that God will in fact respond. It is speech which sets us free to see new beginnings.

Praying the Psalms

When we link the Psalms with prayer we will likely be brought into the "rawness of life." Most of the Psalms reflect human experiences that demand addressing God. Those experiences may be reminders of the precariousness of life or they may be rare moments of spiritual ecstasy. The Psalms do not "cover-up" real life. On the contrary, they express such honest, human emotions as fear, anger, rage, vindictiveness, sadness, grief, jealousy, trust and joy.

Do the following reflective exercises on these Psalms:

Psalm 42-A Psalm of spiritual yearning (appendix C)

Psalm 137-A Psalm of dislocation

Psalm 23-A Psalm of hope

Lunch

5. Exploring "Soulscapes" of the Bible (appendix D)

Introduction: The labyrinth as a model for the journey of faith

The Wilderness: The soulcape of encounter

The Mountaintop: The soulcape of tradition

The River: The soulcape of transition

Closing

Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall rise up on wings as eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint,
Help us Lord, help us Lord, in your way.

Isaiah 40

Appendix A: Retreat Overview

Welcome. This is not a session meeting. It is not about some issue or program or task. There will be no votes taken, but some decisions may be made. We are not here to develop a five-year plan, but some planning may happen.

This is a **spiritual retreat**. It is a **retreat**.... We are away from our common and usual surroundings. I would like to say that we are away from the phone, but this is probably not so. Many places in our lives come with defined roles and familiar scripts-home, office, church, golf course. Each is like a set on a stage with its own unfolding drama.

This new and different setting allows for new and different roles and scripts.

This retreat is **spiritual**. It has to do with God, you and God, me and God. It has to do with the basics-of existence, or life, and mystery and meaning, the crux of the matter. Many spiritual retreats are designed to be **solitary** in nature, involving personal meditation, prayer and study in total silence.

In this retreat, both the morning and afternoon sessions will include some time for individual reflection and some time for group discussion. There will be two **seasons for silence**. For some, silence is a luxurious gift. For others, a few minutes of silence seems like an eternity. Help! I need to **talk** to somebody!

The retreat is in two parts. In the morning we will be **singing and praying the Psalms**. After lunch we will make a spiritual pilgrimage into several **soulscapes of the Bible**.

To begin, let's set the context for the retreat by doing a personal time-check by asking the question: **What time is it?**

Appendix B: Building Your Group

Have some fun together as a group. Invite everyone to work together for a common purpose by building a group machine. Select one of the following machines and ask each person to be part of it: old-time wringer washing machine, auto assembly line, computer, sausage-making machine, helicopter, car wash, diaper-changing machine, steam train, grandfather clock, jukebox, vending machine, lawn mower, pipe organ.

Appendix C

Psalm 42

Phrases in this Psalm that touch my life

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say continually to me
"Where is your God?"

These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for again I shall praise,
my help and my God.
My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, and from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.
By day the Lord bestows steadfast love,
and at night God's song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my Life.
I say to God, my rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?"
Like a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me
while they say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for again I shall praise,
my help and my God.

Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon-
There we sat down and there wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

My version (paraphrase) of part of Psalm

Step 1

Complete individually and discuss

Seeking to live as a person of faith in these days, I am reminded that I am living in a *strange or foreign* land when:

How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.
Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said,
"Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!"
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Blessed shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Blessed shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

Step 2

Envision and discuss strategies for engagement with the numerous *powers* and *principalities* that you encounter in your day-to-day living-work, marketplace, popular culture, government policies.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures,
leads me beside still waters,
restores my soul,
and leads me in right paths
for the sake of the Lord's name.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I 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 overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for the length of my days.

Discussion

Step 1 The 23rd Psalm is among the best known scriptures of the Bible. You may be familiar with its King James Version of 1611. The above text is as it appears in The Book of Psalms of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and is based on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. What differences, if any, stand out for you? Do they change the meaning of the Psalm for you? In what way?

Step 2 This ancient song of faith and hope, based in an agrarian society, describes God using the metaphor of "shepherd." As a person living in a modern, secular, technological, and urban environment, what metaphors for God would you use for our time and context? Make a list and discuss.

Step 3 Select the line or phrase that you find to be most meaningful, reassuring, or hopeful. Explain your choice to others in the group.

Appendix D

Read aloud to group:

All of us are familiar with the word "landscape"-an expanse of scenery. Today we will use the landscapes in our memories to expand our *inner* landscapes through three journeys. We'll call each of these short journeys "soulscapes."

Before we start, let's locate those soulscapes in our minds by using some guided imagery. Make yourself comfortable, relax, breathe slowly in and out.

(Leader speaks very slowly as she/he reads the following.)

As you breath in and out, enjoy the smell of moist earth after a spring shower. Feel the soft breeze on your skin. Hear the birds singing.

You are in your favourite wilderness spot. It is a place you love. It is a place that you look forward to visiting. There is no one to bother you. There is no cell phone. No traffic. You are comfortable in your solitary place.

You walk around a corner. There, in front of you is a mountain. You climb...up...up...for two hours you climb until you are at the top. What is it like at the top of your mountain? But you can't stay up on the mountain long.

As you descend, you come to a shallow river. It is a warm day and you walk through the stream to the other side. You have left behind a rocky hillside and now stand in a meadow of green grass.

It is time for you to come back into the group but, just for a moment, you stand looking back at your favourite wilderness place, the mountain you have climbed, the river you have crossed. Please open your eyes and join the group.

The wilderness: The soulscape of encounter

The stories in the soulscapes are those of Keith Boyer. As leader, you may wish to substitute your own stories.

"Go find a solitary place, out of view of everyone else. But don't go any further than five minutes. And if you become disoriented coming back, stop and wait, and we will come and find you." Those were the precautionary instructions to those of us who were members of the Pilgrimage and Spirituality course at St. George's College in Jerusalem. (Distribute or project wilderness pictures)

We were at the edge of the Negev desert, beginning three days of wilderness experiences which included sleeping in a Bedouin encampment, and a mountain climb. It was near this unforgiving area that Anglican Bishop James Pike lost his way and his life in the 1970s. We were to be alone in the wilderness for an hour. I had never felt silence as I did in that hour. I could hear my body in a way I hadn't ever before. Each participant was given a straw mat. We were told to consider it to be an altar on which we would sit before the presence of God.

In the Bible, several of the most formative moments occurred in desolate places. In many respects, biblical faith was born in the wilderness. It was into the desert, near Beersheba, that Abraham sent his slave/concubine Hagar with his son Ishmael with one bag of water. It was a sentence of certain death. But God sent an angel to intervene, provide water, and a route to safety. Moses saw the burning bush in the wastelands of the Sinai. There he met the One known as *I Am Who I Am*. Later, it was in the mountains of that same wilderness that he received the Torah, the Ten Commandments, the law of God. And, of course, it was during those forty years in the wilderness that the Hebrew people, long conditioned to a life of dependent servitude in Egypt, complained bitterly about the manna and the quails, but also encountered God, learned to trust God, and were transformed into a nation.

Perhaps the most dramatic story of the wilderness encounter occurs in the gospels. Can you picture Jesus leaving the Jordan River following his baptism? Walking up into the Judean wilderness, a god-forsaken place, a place of danger in every form, to be tempted by the Evil One. "Turn the stones to bread." "Jump from the high pinnacle of the temple." "Worship me, and you can have it all."

Are you ready for a desert encounter? (You might want to dim the lights or, alternatively, provide a spot light to simulate the desert sun.) We cannot possibly duplicate the environment or the silence. Plugging your ears might help. (Provide cotton balls or ear plugs.)

Assignment: When Jesus entered Jerusalem some of the religious leaders complained that his followers were making too much noise. His response was that if his disciples were silent, the stones by the side of the road would take up the song. Take a stone as a meditative object. Listen for God. Experience a solitary silence. Be open to some surprising encounters. (Provide basket of stones, one for each participant.)

The mountaintop: The soulscape of dislocation

"I may not get there with you but I fear no one. I have been to the mountaintop. I have seen the Promised Land." Two days later, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Perhaps he had a premonition of what was to come, because what turned out to be his final sermon alluded to the story of Moses on Mount Pisgah, overlooking the Promised Land.

The Bible describes many mountaintop experiences: Noah at Mount Ararat and a beginning following the flood, Moses encountering God on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah, Elijah on Mount Carmel, the agent of a demonstration of the power of God and the impotence of the baalim, the pagan gods.

And then there is the mountain of transfiguration. Tradition holds that it was Mount Tabor in central Galilee. Others argue for the much higher Mount Hermon. There we see Jesus, with Peter, James and John. The three disciples observe an awesome mystery. Jesus, bathed in light, is joined by Elijah and Moses. Little wonder the three disciples wanted the experience to last forever. "Let's pitch a tent and stay up here."

But mountaintop experiences come to an end. They must. And, like Peter, James, and John, it is necessary to return to the more mundane realities of daily living. But thank God for the times that have such quality and meaning or joy, or peace that we feel we have had a glimpse and experience of heaven.

May I share a few personal mountaintop experiences?

On August 23, 1963, I was in Washington, D.C. with 250,000 other people who had come to march and stand together, peacefully, non-violently, in a common cause for justice, envisioning with Martin Luther King a vision of racial harmony and an end to the evil of segregation. "Free at last . . . free at last . . . thank God almighty we will be free at last," he declared. And we sang in front of the Washington Monument, "We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome some day. Yes, deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome some day."

July 1, 1967 the arena in Dalhousie, New Brunswick was filled for what had been billed as a bilingual ecumenical worship celebration for Canada's centennial. Dalhousie was 70 per cent francophone. It had deep cultural and religious divisions. Some were scandalized when they heard I visited a priest in his office in a Catholic Church. It had somehow fallen to me to be the co-ordinator/planner for this event. (I was the new guy on the block.) Thanks to Pope John 23rd and the Vatican Council a new climate of cautious co-operation was possible. I was able to get the other four Protestant ministers and the French and English Roman Catholic priests to take part, but the mountaintop moment for me came when the leaders of the Richelieu Club, the Knights of Columbus, the Orange Lodge, and the Masons led responsive readings and prayers in French and English. Being in that arena was like being on Mount Pisgah.

More recently, in 1996, I carried a cross through the old city of Jerusalem, up the Via Dolrosso, the street of sorrows, to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, up some narrow stairs to a rock that since the third century has been the traditional site of the crucifixion. To be honest, I'd seen such processions on T.V. and was not particularly impressed. But as I walked the final steps I found I was shaking, nearly weeping, moved beyond words, to be enacting the most holy drama in history. Carrying the cross to Calvary . . .

The mountaintop is a place of elation. Sometimes it is like a spiritual high. But however you describe your mountaintop experience, it is a universal truth that we must always come down. There is one truth about having been to the mountaintop: we will never be the same. Life goes on, but with a different perspective, and a profound appreciation for the brief time on the crest of the mountain.

Sing Hymn # 185 *Jesus on the Mountain Peak*, The Book of Praise

Assignment: Share some mountaintop experiences

The river: The soulscape of transition

The river is the soulscape of transition. It is the place of before and after. The river is the place for healing and cleansing and new possibilities. Elijah sends Naaman the Syrian to wash in the Jordan and Naaman is cured. Centuries later, crowds come to see and hear John the Baptist. He challenges them to enter the river for a repentance baptism. Hundreds step into the murky stream and step back onto the riverbank as renewed and forgiven. There is Jesus, insisting that John baptize him. There in the river he receives confirmation of his identity and vocation. The heavens open. He hears a voice: "You are my beloved son." The remainder of his life is purpose driven. Faithful to his calling, he sets his sights on Jerusalem, and makes the journey to a Good Friday death and an Easter resurrection.

Rivers are also for crossing. Joshua leads the Hebrews across the Jordan to claim their Promised Land. The river is a symbol of crossing boundaries from old life to new life. And from death to resurrection . . .

Sing: *I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, comin' for a carry me home . . . a band of angels, comin' after me, comin' for to carry me home . . .*

And in Ezekiel and Revelation, the river is described as a healing stream that transforms everything it touches (Ezekiel 47). As we approach the end of our time together, let us come to the river as the soulscape of transformation.

(Design and assign discussion topics and/or, if you can find a desk top water fountain, give people some reflection time near it.)