

Holy Texts

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher in the Lenten series
“Listen: Hearing that Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own”
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
March 31, 2019**

- Matthew 12:9-13 (text appears in the body of the sermon)
- 1 Corinthians 2:10-12 (Good News Translation): ¹⁰For it was to us that God made known his secret by means of his Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, even the hidden depths of God's purposes. ¹¹It is only our own spirit within us that knows all about us; in the same way, only God's Spirit knows all about God. ¹²We have not received this world's spirit; instead, we have received the Spirit sent by God, so that we may know all that God has given us.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: A spiritual approach to reading and contemplating Holy Scripture can be another way we become attentive to and receptive to the guidance and comfort of the “still, small voice” of God

In the worldwide Christian tradition, Presbyterians are among the denominations that emphasize the importance of *studying* the scriptures in order to discern the message they are trying to communicate. Most Presbyterians would agree that simply accepting a “surface” understanding of the Bible is insufficient and can be misleading. And so, like our Lutheran and Methodist and Catholic and Episcopal and Congregational colleagues, we Presbyterian ministers are trained in how to pursue an in-depth understanding of sacred texts. We do this using a study process called “biblical criticism.” “Criticism” in this case doesn’t mean putting down or pointing out flaws; it simply means applying systematic, critical analysis to the scriptures.

When we study the Bible we seek to understand issues like:

- What was the original Hebrew or Greek wording of the texts, how have those texts been translated into English, and how have English translations changed over time?
- What was the setting in time and place of the action described? And what was the setting of the writer writing some years or even decades removed from the action? Who was the audience the writer was writing for? What was their situation?
- What literary styles and techniques did the writer use, and why?
- How were those scriptural words understood by their original audience? How might that original meaning apply today, or is there a different but comparable meaning for modern readers?

As Presbyterians, not just the clergy but all of us are students of the Bible. We want to know how those originally intended meanings might apply to today – for us personally and for the Christian Faith.

But an intellectual, academic approach is not the only way of engaging with Holy Scripture. We can read the scriptures devotionally, seeking to set aside preconceived notions in order to enter into the scripture in a fresh, new way. In line with what we’re exploring during Lent, a devotional reading of scripture is yet another way to listen for what the Bible calls that “still, small voice” by which God claims our attention and offers direction. Approaching the scriptures devotionally rather than only intellectually can help us listen with an open mind and heart. We may discover that Holy Scripture speaks to us in ways we did not expect.

One way of reading scripture spiritually is through an ancient Christian practice called *Lectio Divina*, a Latin term meaning “a divine reading.” Maybe you’ve never heard of *Lectio Divina*, or maybe you have been exposed to it, perhaps at a church retreat. “It’s a way of developing a closer relationship with God by reflecting prayerfully on [God’s scriptural] words.”¹ It does not treat scripture as texts to be studied, but as the living word.²

Today I’m going to lead us in experiencing just a taste of *Lectio Divina*. I’m going to abbreviate the process for two reasons.

- First, most of us don’t want to take 15-30 minutes right now just for this.
- And second, frankly, some of you may find that this technique of approaching scripture is not to your liking.
 - You may not like it because it’s rather “laid-back” and doesn’t have a specific agenda to accomplish.
 - Or you may not care for the process of *Lectio Divina* because it’s not always comfortable just sitting with your thoughts.
 - For some it feels “unproductive” because you can’t know in advance what insight God may reveal or how God may choose to inspire you. *Lectio Divina* is the opposite of “Let’s jump into this, learn what we’re supposed to take from it, and get on with life.”

Part of the benefit of the experience comes from a relaxed, restful immersion in a short passage of scripture, perhaps just a few verses. *Lectio Divina* is not something you want to rush through.

So while *Lectio Divina* *can* be done by anyone, it’s not everyone’s “cup of tea.” That’s why this morning I’m just going to offer you a “sip” and you can decide later if this is something you want more of.

Let me give you an overview of the entire process, even though we’ll be doing only part of it. You would want to prepare by making yourself comfortable, noticing and relaxing any tightness you might find in your neck or back or legs, that sort of thing. Some people like to light a candle, sort of like a marker that this is a special, set-aside time. (We’ve done that for you already!). You might simply sit quietly for a while, breathing to relax and settle. Maybe you say a prayer as simple as “God, may I be here for *you*.”

Ordinarily, “in *Lectio Divina*, the chosen spiritual text is read four times in total, giving an opportunity to think deeply about it and respond thoughtfully.”³ Each step has a name, but those aren’t important now.

- I. You read the passage the first time just to familiarize yourself with it. Take notice of any words or phrases or images that catch your attention. You don’t need to force things; just wait patiently and see what God brings to your mind.
- II. After you read the passage the second time, you reflect on those words or phrases or images that seemed to jump out at you the first time. Then you reflect on what you believe God might be saying by bringing those words or phrases or images to your attention. Your reflection might include a prayer asking that you may be open to receiving whatever insight God offers you.
- III. After the third reading, you are encouraged to respond. Some people jot down thoughts in some sort of journal; others offer a prayerful silent conversation sharing with God what they’re perceiving. Remember to remain open to God’s response.

¹ Elizabeth Manneh, “*Lectio Divina*: a beginner’s guide” at <https://bustedhalo.com/ministry-resources/lectio-divina-beginners-guide> accessed 3/27/2019

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectio_Divina accessed 3/26/2019

³ Elizabeth Manneh, “*Lectio Divina*: a beginner’s guide” at <https://bustedhalo.com/ministry-resources/lectio-divina-beginners-guide> accessed 3/27/2019

- IV. The fourth step of Lectio Divina is when you simply rest yourself in the scripture passage and contemplate what you've experienced in this deep encounter with the written, living Word of our Holy God. If your mind starts to wander as you rest and contemplate—and it probably will, several times—be gentle to yourself: simply and quietly and calmly bring yourself back into contemplating that scripture passage.

So let's "stick our toes in the water." We're only going to read the passage twice, not four times, and each time we're going to have only a minute or two for you to engage with the passage instead of five to ten minutes. You can sit with your eyes closed or focus on something like a candle or the cross or the parament hanging on the pulpit.

The scripture passage for this experience is the one printed in the bulletin; it's in the box just below the sermon title. When Lectio Divina is done in a group setting like this, some people like the reinforcement of reading along as they hear it; others prefer just to listen to it being read—your choice. So to prepare to engage the scripture, slowly, gently draw in an easy, deep breath through your nose and then let it out.

⁹ Jesus left that place and went to a synagogue, ¹⁰ where there was a man who had a paralyzed hand. Some people were there who wanted to accuse Jesus of doing wrong, so they asked him, "Is it against our Law to heal on the Sabbath?" ¹¹ Jesus answered, "What if one of you has a sheep and it falls into a deep hole on the Sabbath? Will you not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² And a human being is worth much more than a sheep! So then, our Law does allow us to help someone on the Sabbath." ¹³ Then he said to the man with the paralyzed hand, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it became well again, just like the other one.

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Perhaps this brief "sip" of Lectio Divina has been an eye-opening, moving experience. Maybe the passage took on more depth than you'd ever noticed before. Maybe it spoke to you personally. Or maybe you found this experience painless but not especially meaningful. You didn't "do it wrong." Sometimes you're just not in the right frame of mind, and for some people this practice just doesn't fit their personality.

It's important to remember that Lectio Divina is not an end in itself or another spiritual practice to tick off our to-do list. It helps us hear specifically and individually from God through scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit, and deepens our relationship with [God].⁴

So this Lent we're exploring various ways we might listen for God. The first week we explored creating quiet in our lives. Last week we considered using our breathing to become aware of God's Holy Spirit around us and within us. Now we add to our spiritual tool kit a prayerful approach to reading and contemplating Holy Scripture. As we often affirm, "God works through different people in different ways." Lectio Divina is yet another way we might perceive and receive the guidance and comfort of the "still, small voice" of God.

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⁴ Elizabeth Manneh, "Lectio Divina: a beginner's guide" at <https://bustedhalo.com/ministry-resources/lectio-divina-beginners-guide> accessed 3/27/2019