

ON SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN A TIME OF QUARANTINE

(Some Thoughts from Rev Mark)

In looking ahead—and by that I mean, imagining several more weeks of social distancing and attempts at virtual gathering—I thought I would offer some thoughts on how we might devote some of our time to the work of spiritual formation. One thing that our present situation has alerted me to is the truth that we are all, both as individuals and as community, responsible for our own spiritual well-being. The ongoing development of our faith lives should never be dependent solely on what happens in church facilities (rooms, sanctuary space, etc.) or what is offered through church-based programming. So now, in the absence of facilities and programming, what to do?

Well, in addition to the plain and simple suggestion to crack open your Bible and read for yourself (or even better: read aloud to someone else, virtually or in person), here are some other recommendations.

For those of you who would like your personal Bible study with a side of scholarly insight:

- **Bible Odyssey (www.bibleodyssey.org)**

This wonderful web resource comes from the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). The website includes brief encyclopedic entries on a range of Bible related content, short video lectures from biblical scholars, as well as a Facebook page, and a Twitter feed to follow, a Pinterest page, you name it. You can “Ask a Scholar,” access a Bible dictionary, check a citation in several Bible versions, or just search the entire site by keyword.

- **Pete Enns (www.peteenns.com)**

Happens that Pete’s a friend of mine and a fine Old Testament/ Bible scholar. He has become a fairly recognizable name recently thanks to a couple of well received books that have made it to the general reader. His website features a number of his articles you can access right there, as well as a list of his books you can purchase. His *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* is good one to purchase for your personal library. He also hosts a super fun podcast—“The Bible for Normal People” (www.peteenns.com/podcast).

- **The Great Courses (www.thegreatcoursesplus.com/)**

You may know this already, but the Great Courses folks have been offering college level courses for the general population for some time. And most recently they are offering streaming video content. The Philosophy and Religion category has some good offerings, one of the Old Testament courses features Amy-Jill Levine, from Vanderbilt Divinity School. And right now you can get a month’s free trial—woohoo!—time’s a-wasting to take advantage of free biblical learning content!

(FYI: There's even a brand new under 15-minute video by the GC folks on the coronavirus hosted by a medical doctor from Emory (watch it for free at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seq0_n6xzik&list=PL3EDD8D756C75A052&index=2&t=247s) For anyone interested in getting a new Bible (you've been home long enough now to see your old one is, er, old), you might consider . . .

- **The CEB Lectio Divina Prayer Bible (www.cokesbury.com)**

While I'm not a big fan of the CEB translation, I am a big fan of the *lectio divina* (meaning, prayerful and meditative) way of reading Scripture. Here's what the publisher says: *For every chapter of the Bible there is: (1) a recommended passage for slow and thoughtful reading, (2) questions for reflection on the meaning of the text, (3) a prayer, and (4) some suggestions for putting new insights into action.* Seems like a useful Bible edition for personal devotional practice and worth a look.

For those looking for devotional resources deliverable in a variety of formats:

- **The Upper Room (www.upperroom.org)**

There's now even an app from your mobile devices. So in addition to the daily messages you can have show up in your email or the printed material you can have show up in your mailbox, now you can have your daily devotions appear with a swipe of the thumb.

- **My Utmost for His Highest | Oswald Chambers (www.utmost.org)**

Still one of the most beloved devotional writers of all time, this early 20th century Scottish evangelist continues to be a thoughtful guide to the spiritual life. His writings are available as daily messages coming via email or mobile app.

- **Center for Action & Contemplation (www.cac.org)**

This is the place to sign up to receive meditative thoughts and reflections from Fr. Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest, founder of the Center, and widely read writer in the areas of contemplative practice and social action. His meditations are available in his many books and as daily emails. Sign up right from the Center website.

- **The Ignatian Examen (www.ignatianspirituality.org)**

St. Ignatius of Loyola (b. 1491) was the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and a contemplative who wrote one of the most influential books on the spiritual life. Out of that book comes his "daily examen"—an ordered practice of prayerful reflection on the events of the day designed help Christians seek God's presence and discern God's direction. The website, a service of Loyola Press, offers a daily examen mobile app—search your preferred app store by the keyword, EXAMEN.

- **UCC Daily Devotional Resources**

www.ucc.org/feed_your_spirit & www.ucc.org/daily_devotional

This denominational site has a couple of daily devotionals, the opportunity to subscribe to a daily email service, and a small group discussion component for use with others, based on the devotionals.

- **Our Daily Bread (www.odb.org)**

The Our Daily Bread devotional guides have been around since early in the 20th century and remain one of the most widely distributed, non-denominational devotionals around. In addition, the website offers short inspirational videos, a daily email thought, and a mobile app.

- **Renovare' Spiritual Resources (www.renovare.org)**

If you are familiar with the spiritual writer, Richard Foster, much of what is at this site will also be familiar. This publishing resource community is his baby. The community's mission is to "*imagine a world in which people's lives flourish as they increasingly become like Jesus.*" To that end the site offers spiritual seekers a range of books, articles, talks and teachings on video, a podcast, guides for spiritual formation groups, and even online courses.

For those who have an interest in the intersection of faith and the arts and how art might inform and enliven our spiritual disciplines:

- **Jan Richardson (www.paintedprayerbook.com)**

Jan is an artist, author, and United Methodist minister, and director of The Wellspring Studio, LLC. Widely known for her distinctive intertwining of word and image, she has a blog called, **The Painted Prayerbook**, which explores the intersections of writing, art, and faith.

- **Art & Theology (www.artandtheology.org)**

This site's curator, Victoria E. Jones, says this about her purpose: "The mission of *Art & Theology* is to help the church rediscover its rich heritage in the visual, literary, and musical arts and to open it up to the activity of contemporary artists, whose giftings can enable us to see God in new and different ways. Art can enhance our spiritual perception, enrich our prayer lives, stimulate renewed engagement with the Bible, make us more empathetic, challenge our beliefs in a healthy way, and bring us into more intimate contact with the world. Art testifies; it questions; it holds accountable; it stirs and reveals." And it makes for a wonderfully imaginative devotional experience.

- **A Sanctified Art (www.sanctifiedart.org)**

Here's a newly discovered resource—for me anyway. This team of Christian artists purports to "create multimedia resources for worshiping communities of all shapes and sizes . . . to work collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more . . . and to provide spiritual nourishment for church leaders and the communities they serve." Take a look. Most of the site's offerings are for sale; but

hey, their offerings are many and varied—coloring sheets, devotionals, poetry, videos and films, retreats, and a blog to follow.

- **Praying in Color (www.prayingincolor.com)**

The site is an offshoot of Sybil MacBeth's book, *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God*. In addition to books and videos to buy and a blog to follow, the site offers handouts for teachers and parents who want to teach children the principles of praying in color. Well worth a look.

And while you're looking for ways to enhance your own faith life, make a point to invite some others to do the same. Build accountability and community into your personal faith development. Social distancing need not mean spiritual distancing.

Ora et labora. Prayer and work.