



Search Me, O God, and
Know My Heart
A Guide for Prayer Groups
LENT 2023

Search Me, O God, and Know My Heart

Our worship focus during this season of Lent takes its cue from a line from Psalm 139:23—"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts." The idea, first, is that the weeks prior to Easter morning are traditionally a time self-reflection—should be anyway—one that invites God to find us and to know us here and now, wherever or however that happens to be. Secondly, in the stories featured in the Gospel of John, some kind of soul searching is part of each encounter Jesus had with the characters in those stories—Jesus (with the tempter) in the wilderness, Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the blind man, Lazarus' sisters (Mary and Martha), the crowd in outside Jerusalem, and finally, on that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene in the garden. Encountering Jesus invariably leaves each character known and different, though how is not always clear. In a sense, this is true for Jesus himself: it is in the wilderness, in conversation with the tempter, that Jesus invites God to search his own heart. To be sure. And so it was.

Because the Gospel of John provides such detailed narratives of all these encounters, they offer us not simply a window through which to explore those who seek Jesus to know them, but also a mirror—to see ourselves reflected in their searching and to be prompted to do the same ourselves. A central invitation of this study is to offer ourselves to God through the Jesus we encounter in the Gospel, to bring before the Lord our self-interest, our fear, our uncertainty, our brokenness, our blindness, our sorrows, our disillusionment. To ask God to know our hearts is to acknowledge that our hearts need to be known—loved, reclaimed—by the heart of God. Then to trust God to do just that.

Best of any song
is bird song
in the quiet, but first
you must have
the quiet

Wendell Berry

GENERAL SESSION GUIDE

Think guide, rather than script. If you find something doesn't work, do something else. Generally speaking, you want to spend most of your time (1) attending to the Scripture passages, (2) sharing insights, and (3) spending time in prayer.

WELCOME

Take what time you need to welcome participants, make introductions as needed, and provide what orientation to the hour as you see fit. Be sure everyone has a booklet and encourage folks to bring along a Bible.

GATHERING PRAYER

A prayer from one of Paul's letters is provided for your use as a gathering prayer. Feel free to use your own.

ATTENDING TO THE WORD

Approach the week's Gospel passages meditatively. This *lectio divina* approach invites us into God's presence as we pay attention to the texts read aloud. The process: Hear the selected Bible passage(s) read aloud *three times* (preferably by a different reader). Consider this pattern for sharing responses:

- After 1st reading: What one word or phrase especially stuck in your mind or moved your heart?
- After 2nd reading: What personal struggle or longing or question in your life did the passage speak to?
- After 3rd reading: What is your personal invitation from God? What do you hear God saying to you through this passage/word/phrase?

This should be a prayerful reading—so take your time. Allow a minute or so of silence between each of the three readings. Then invite persons to share their responses, as they feel comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

An additional reading from a contemporary writer accompanies the Scripture passage. You may choose to read the selection aloud or have the group read it silently. Since the reading provides a brief gloss or comment on the week's Scripture, invite the group to talk together about what new or fresh insight the

reading offered. The reading may invite a return to the Scripture and more discussion about its meaning—hopefully so. Feel free to supply your own guided discussion prompt as well.

A READING

Don't panic. The poem in this section is intended to be a kind of pause. The intent is not to engage in literary analysis but to disengage the mind long enough to stir the imagination. The poems are so gently tethered to the week's Scriptures that hopefully they will invite a new avenue of exploration of faith in the season of Lent. Keep in mind that the meaning of a poem is not to be wrestled away or teased out. Let the poem be. Let the poem sound. That is sufficient. Feel free to talk about it together—or not.

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER

Again, this season of Lent takes its cue from a line from Psalm 139:23. Here that verse is printed to be spoken aloud in unison to signal that the psalmist's invitation is ours as well. The sentences and question that follow invite another opportunity to explore that invitation as our own.

Following that, close your time together in whatever way feels most appropriate: consider using the prayer list in the weekly worship bulletin as a guide (also available online in the church newsletter). **To aid your approach to God through this closing prayer time, create a playlist of meditative music for use each week.** Consider ending with the Lord's Prayer.

TO THE HOST HOME:

- Do what you can to lessen distractions. Ask folks to silence phones. Light a candle. Put up the dog.
- Determine in advance if your group will use music as part of its study and prayer time and have each week's music ready to play. Feel free to choose and play some of your own.
- Refreshments are optional. If you offer them, be simple, not stressful
- Trust your time to God's keeping.

WEEK 1 | Jesus Meets Satan

WELCOME

Welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

GATHERING PRAYER

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Romans 15:5-6*

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | Matthew 4:1-11

- After 1st reading: What one word or phrase especially stuck in your mind or moved your heart?
- After 2nd reading: What personal struggle or longing or question in your life did the passage speak to?
- After 3rd reading: What is your personal invitation from God? What do you hear God saying to you through this passage/word/phrase?

Share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

To take the Devil seriously is to take seriously the fact that the total evil in the world is greater than the sum of all its parts. Likewise the total evil in yourself. The murderer who says, "I couldn't help it," isn't necessarily just kidding. To take the Devil seriously is also to take seriously our total and spine-tingling freedom. Lucifer was an angel who even in paradise itself was free to get the hell out.

Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*

Share insights as people are comfortable.

A READING

The Coming
 And God held in his hand
 A small globe. Look he said.
 The son looked. Far off,
 As through water, he saw
 A scorched land of fierce
 Colour. The light burned
 There; crusted buildings
 Cast their shadows: a bright
 Serpent, A river
 Uncoiled itself, radiant
 With slime.

On a bare
 Hill a bare tree saddened
 The sky. many People
 Held out their thin arms
 To it, as though waiting
 For a vanished April
 To return to its crossed
 Boughs. The son watched
 Them. Let me go there, he said.

R. S. Thomas

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER

*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:
 And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

The wilderness can be a dangerous place. Spiritually speaking. It can be a place where, if we are listening, we will hear God calling us out of ourselves, away from our stingy self-interests (which occupy us hourly) and toward what could be a risky self-evaluation, and then toward a radically generous living out of our faith in the world.

What conflicting inner voices, maybe even a demon, might a search of your heart reveal today? Where is God inviting you to move in this season of your life?

WEEK 2 | Jesus Meets Nicodemus

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

GATHERING PRAYER

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. *1 Thessalonians 5:23-24*

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | John 3:1-17

- After 1st reading: What one word or phrase especially stuck in your mind or moved your heart?
- After 2nd reading: What personal struggle or longing or question in your life did the passage speak to?
- After 3rd reading: What is your personal invitation from God? What do you hear God saying to you through this passage/word/phrase?

Share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

What the whole thing boiled down to, Jesus told him, was that unless you got born again, you might as well give up. That was all very well, Nicodemus said, but just how were you supposed to pull a thing like that off? How especially were you supposed to pull it off if you were pushing sixty-five? A gust of wind happened to whistle down the chimney at that point, making the dying embers burst into flame, and Jesus said being born again was like that. It wasn't something you did. The wind did it. The Spirit did it. It was something that happened, for God's sake. "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked (John 3:9), and that's when Jesus really got going.

Jesus said, “I’m telling you God’s so in love with this world that he’s sent me down, so if you don’t believe your own eyes, then maybe you’ll believe mine, maybe you’ll believe me, maybe you won’t come sneaking around scared half to death in the dark anymore, but will come to, come clean, come to life!”

What impressed Nicodemus even more than the speech was the quickening of his own breathing and the pounding of his own heart.

Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*

Share insights as people are comfortable.

A READING

Flickering Mind

Lord, not you
it is I who am absent.
At first
belief was a joy I kept in secret,
stealing alone
into sacred places:
a quick glance, and away -- and back,
circling.
I have long since uttered your name
but now
I elude your presence.
I stop
to think about you, and my mind
at once
like a minnow darts away,
darts

into the shadows, into gleams that fret
unceasing over
the river’s purling and passing.
Not for one second
will my self hold still, but wanders
anywhere,
everywhere it can turn. Not you,
it is I am absent.
You are the stream, the fish, the light,
the pulsing shadow.
You the unchanging presence, in whom
all
moves and changes.
How can I focus my flickering, perceive
at the fountain’s heart
the sapphire I know is there?

Denise Levertov

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER

*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:
And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

What fears or uncertainties about faith—or about anything, really—might a search of your heart reveal today? Where is God inviting you to “come to, come clean, come to life?”

WEEK 3 | Jesus Meets the Samaritan Woman

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

GATHERING PRAYER

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his call, and may fulfill every good resolve and work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | John 4: 5-42

- After 1st reading: What one word or phrase especially stuck in your mind or moved your heart?
- After 2nd reading: What personal struggle or longing or question in your life did the passage speak to?
- After 3rd reading: What is your personal invitation from God? What do you hear God saying to you through this passage/word/phrase?

Share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

“I know that Messiah is coming,” she says, and he says, “I am he.”

It is the first time he has said that to another living soul. It is a moment of full disclosure, in which the triple outsider and the Messiah of God stand face to face with no pretense about who they are. Both stand fully lit at high noon for one bright moment in time, while all the rules, taboos and history that separate them fall forgotten to the ground. By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who he is. By confirming her identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens. The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are—the good and bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is—who crosses all

boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises—speaking to you like someone you have known all your life, bubbling up in your life like a well that needs no dipper, so that you go back to face people you thought you could never face again, speaking to them as boldly as he spoke to you. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.”

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Christian Century*

Share insights as people are comfortable.

A READING

If I were called in
to construct a religion
I should make use of water.

My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,

Going to church
Would entail a fording
to dry, different clothes;

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

Philip Larkin, “Water”

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER

*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:
And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

The woman came to the well thirsty for water in more ways than one. A search of her heart would have likely revealed some measure of pain and brokenness—which Jesus accepted and then responded by offering her his kind of water and God’s kind of worship.

What measure of pain or brokenness might a search of your heart reveal today? How might true worship “in spirit and in truth” be an invitation to healing and hope?

WEEK 4 | Jesus Meets the Blind Man

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

GATHERING PRAYER

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might. *Eph. 1:16-19*

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | John 9:1-44

- After 1st reading: What one word or phrase especially stuck in your mind or moved your heart?
- After 2nd reading: What personal struggle or longing or question in your life did the passage speak to?
- After 3rd reading: What is your personal invitation from God? What do you hear God saying to you through this passage/word/phrase?

Share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

There are a lot of astounding things that happen in this world that may or may not have anything to do with the power of God. They may have only to do with the power of the human imagination, or the power of suggestion, or, worse yet, with the power of darkness. What if something is not God and I believe that it is?

The answer is: I will get in trouble. My wrong belief will displease God and place my soul at risk. In official terms, I will become a heretic. But according to the story of the man born blind, there is something worse than wrong belief, and that is wrong disbelief. What if something *is* God and I *don't* believe that it is? That is the question the Pharisees forgot

to ask. Meanwhile, the man born blind, who was not sure about anything—he was the one who eventually saw the light. It was the one and only thing he was absolutely sure about: that he could see.

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*

Share insights as people are comfortable.

A READING

The Kingdom

It's a long way off but inside it
 There are quite different things going on:
 Festivals at which the poor man
 Is king and the consumptive is
 Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
 At themselves and love looks at them
 Back; and industry is for mending
 The bent bones and the minds fractured
 By life. It's a long way off, but to get
 There takes no time and admission
 Is free, if you purge yourself
 Of desire, and present yourself with
 Your need only and the simple offering
 Of your faith, green as a leaf.

R. S. Thomas

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER

*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:
 And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Spiritual blindness seems to be a condition that especially afflicts people of faith, at least according to Jesus. In Catholic catechumenate tradition, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, celebrates the “Second Scrutiny,” a time to acknowledge the human inability to recognize our own blind spots or fully see our own truths.

What symptoms of spiritual blindness might a search of your heart reveal today? What spiritual practices or what kind of “scrutiny” might it take for you to see better?

WEEK 5 | Jesus Meets the Sisters of Lazarus

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

GATHERING PRAYER

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy . . . *Colossians 1:9-11*

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | John 11: 1-45

- After 1st reading: What one word or phrase especially stuck in your mind or moved your heart?
- After 2nd reading: What personal struggle or longing or question in your life did the passage speak to?
- After 3rd reading: What is your personal invitation from God? What do you hear God saying to you through this passage/word/phrase?

Share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

When Lazarus died, Jesus didn't arrive on the scene until several days afterward, but he found the sisters still so broken up they hardly knew what they were saying. With one breath they reproached him for not having come in time to save their brother and with the next they told him they knew he could save him still. Then, for the first and only time such a thing is recorded of him in the New Testament, Jesus broke down himself. Then he went out to where his friend's body lay and brought him back to life again.

Recent interviews with people who have been resuscitated after being pronounced clinically dead reveal that, after the glimpse they evidently all of them get of a figure of light waiting for them on the other side, they are very reluctant to be brought back again to

this one. On the other hand, when Lazarus opened his eyes to see the figure of Jesus standing there in the daylight beside him, he couldn't for the life of him tell which side he was on.

Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*

Share insights as people are comfortable.

A READING

No, no, there is no going back.
 Less and less you are
 that possibility you were.
 More and more you have become
 those lives and deaths
 that have belonged to you.
 You have become a sort of grave
 containing much that was
 and is no more in time, beloved
 then, now, and always.
 And so you have become a sort of tree
 standing over a grave.
 Now more than ever you can be
 generous toward each day
 that comes, young, to disappear
 forever, and yet remain
 unaging in the mind.
 Every day you have less reason
 not to give yourself away.

Wendell Berry

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER

*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:
 And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Kat Bowler says “blessed are you right here, in between. At the end that comes before the beginning. Knowing that grief is a long story and maybe, somehow, you’re still in it . . . Where God’s great magic act of love begins.”

What darkness or sorrows might a search of your heart reveal in this season? Where can the promise of the Resurrection shed some light for you?

WEEK 6 | Jesus Meets the Crowd in Jerusalem

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

GATHERING PRAYER

It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | John 12:12-26

- After 1st reading: What one word or phrase especially stuck in your mind or moved your heart?
- After 2nd reading: What personal struggle or longing or question in your life did the passage speak to?
- After 3rd reading: What is your personal invitation from God? What do you hear God saying to you through this passage/word/phrase?

Share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Disillusionment is, literally, the loss of an illusion—about ourselves, about the world, about God—and while it is almost always a painful thing, it is never a bad thing, to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth.

Disillusioned, we find out that God does not conform to our expectations. We glimpse our own relative size in the universe and see that no human being can say who God should be or how God should act. We review our requirements of God and recognize them as our own fictions, things we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel safe or good or comfortable.

Disillusioned, we find out what is not true and we are set free to seek what is—if we dare—to turn away from the God who was supposed to be in order to seek the God who is.

Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain*

Share insights as people are comfortable.

A READING

Praying

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Mary Oliver

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER

*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:
And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

The writer Jonathan Merritt suggests that the greatest threat to our faith “is not doubting God but being disappointed with God.” Or as Barbara Brown Taylor observes in the selection above, being disillusioned.

What kind of spiritual disillusionment might a search of your heart reveal today? How might an honest appraisal of your (mis)expectations about God be in order?