

Advent Spiritual Exercise

Gospel Contemplation

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word
was with God, and the Word was God.*

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...
We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son,
who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

JOHN 1:1,14

Jesus is the Living Word of God. He is the Word made flesh. Jesus reveals himself to us through the written and authoritative Word of God, the Bible. The Holy Spirit not only inspired the writers of Scripture but is also at work applying the truth of the Bible into our lives as readers and hearers. In this spiritual exercise we place ourselves fully within a story from the Gospels. We use our imagination, knowledge and understanding of a passage to engage with God as we enter a gospel story. Gospel contemplation invites us to engage imaginatively with the whole story and scene. It's different from Lectio Divina which focuses on specific words or phrases.

Gospel contemplation helps us learn from the words and actions of Jesus. It helps us develop our personal relationship with him. As the story is read, we enter it. We watch Jesus' face. We listen to the way he speaks. We hear his words. We notice how people respond to him. We think about what it would have been like to be there with him. These imaginative details bring us to know Jesus more deeply. Jesus is with us and at work within us today. The purpose of this exercise is for us to encounter Jesus – to interact with him with all of our senses, rather than simply thinking about him.

1. Select a short passage from one of the Gospels.

(Luke 5:1-11, Matthew 14:22-33, etc.)

- choose a story with some movement, action or dialogue
- a parable or teaching can also work, but a passage that follows Jesus as he interacts with others works best.

2. Relax and settle into God's presence.

- become aware that God is with you.
- express your desire to have him reveal himself to you in a deeper way to you through his Word.
- remember you are not just reading a story; you are reading God's story.

3. Slowly, read the passage several times.

- repeatedly read the passage, aloud if circumstances allow.
- as you read the passage the first time, take time to let the scene come alive in your imagination.
- use all your senses: What are the smells? What do you see? What do you hear? What is the weather or the temperature? What is the time of day?
- pause after reading and reflect on what you have heard and perceived.
- as you read the passage a second time, notice any details which you may have missed. Think about what is going on in the background. Off to the side. Who else is in the scene?
- ask yourself: What does Jesus look like? How do the others react to him? How does the action unfold? What are the people saying to one another? What emotions fill their words?

4. Allow yourself to enter the scene.

- as you read the passage a third time or even a fourth time, let the Gospel scene totally saturate your mind and heart.
- draw closer. Assume the role of an observer or as an active participant, interacting with Jesus.

- think about the scene through the eyes of someone who was there.
- interact with the others in the passage, listen and reply to their words, take part in their activity, conversing with them, accompanying them, helping them in their occupations.
- let the details and emotions settle into your memory.
- reflect if there is a message that God has for you or how Jesus responds to you.
- the goal is engagement with God and the Word, not just knowledge but encounter.

5. Do not moralize or try and make your own application.

- as you reflect don't moralize (for example, "I should be more spontaneous like Peter when I am with my friends.") or draw theological conclusions (for example, "Notice how the three temptations of Jesus parallel the temptations of the Israelites.") or try to make clever applications ("It's amazing how the Pharisees are so much like the people I am working with.")
- simply spend this time with God. Let him use this scene to affect, influence and encourage you. Trust God and trust his Word.
- respond in prayerful conversation with God. Talk with him like a friend.

6. Reflect and review with God.

- review for a few minutes and reflect on what took place during this exercise.
- what stood out to you? What do you take with you from this time?
- is there something you should return to in a later period of prayer?
- specifically thank God for meeting with you during this time.