



Into the Silent Land

A Lenten Resource based on the book by Martin Laird, O.S.A.

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Welcome to our Lenten journey of contemplation for 2021

Each week in Lent, there will be excerpts from Martin Laird's book 'Into the Silent Land: A guide to the Christian practice of contemplation,' along with questions for reflection and an invitation to practice.

While contemplation has solitary aspects to it, our practice also draws us deeper into true community. Therefore, throughout Lent there will be opportunities to gather with others and explore this material in person. This will culminate in a retreat day at the church on Saturday March 27. More info on that as we go along.

I pray that this resource will guide you to discover the unfathomable reality and love of God that is always present in the depths of your heart.

Excerpts from *Into the Silent Land*, Introduction: 'God our Homeland.'

We are built for contemplation. This book is about cultivating the skills necessary for this subtlest, simplest, and most searching of the spiritual arts. Communion with God in the silence of the heart is a God-given capacity, like the rhododendron's capacity to flower, the fledgling's for flight, and the child's for self-forgetful abandon and joy. If the grace of God that suffuses and simplifies the vital generosity of our lives does not consummate this capacity while we live, then the very arms of God that embrace us as we enter the transforming mystery of death will surely do so. This self-giving God, the Being of our being, the Life of our life, has joined to Himself two givens of human life: we are built to commune with God and we will all meet death.

...God is our homeland. And the homing instinct of the human being is homed on God. As St. Augustine put it "we must fly to our beloved homeland. There the Father is, and there is everything."

...The practice of silence, what I shall call "contemplative practice" or simply "practice" cannot be reduced to a spiritual technique. Techniques are all the rage today. They suggest a certain control that aims to determine a certain outcome. They clearly have their place. But this is not what contemplative practice does. The difference may be slight but it is an important one. A spiritual practice simply disposes us to allow something to take place. For example, a gardener does not actually grow plants. A gardener practices certain gardening skills that facilitate growth that is beyond the gardener's direct control. In a similar way, a sailor cannot produce the necessary wind that moves the boat, A sailor practices sailing skills that harness the gift of wind that brings the sailor home, but there is nothing the sailor can do to make the wind blow. And so it is with contemplative practice, not a technique, but a skill. The skill required is interior silence.

There are two contemplative practices of fundamental importance in the Christian tradition: the practice of stillness (also called meditation, still prayer, contemplative prayer, etc.) and the practice of watchfulness or awareness. These contemplative skills are not imports from other religious traditions, and the Christian contemplative tradition has a lot to say about them.

...The specific focus of this book will be on the practical struggles many of us face when we try to be silent—the inner chaos going on in our heads, like some wild cocktail party of which we find ourselves the embarrassed host. Often, however, we are not even aware of how utterly dominating this inner noise is until we try to enter through the doorway of silence.

...While the discovery of this silent land is deeply personal, and no one can do it for us, it is at the same time deeply communal: paradoxically no one discovers the solitude of inner silence by oneself.

...This joy that is silent is already within us. Its discovery is precious beyond compare. R. S. Thomas expresses it with deceptive understatement:

But the silence in the mind
is when "we live best, within
listening distance of the silence we call God . . .
It is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins; that calls us out over our
own fathoms.

...Let us journey home, then, to the silence of our own fathoms by becoming still.

Questions for reflection

- + What feels new, and what feels familiar, in the reading above?
- + Is there a word or sentence that particularly caught your attention?
Underline it and ponder what calls to you about that word or sentence.
- + How does the image of God as the 'homeland' to which silence recalls us resonate with your experience?
- + What are you thinking and feeling on the basis of this introduction – does this seem like a journey you want to undertake? Is there any discomfort present in your response so far?

You may wish to keep a notebook and journal your responses to these questions and your 'field notes' from your practice of silence as the weeks of Lent pass.

Invitation to practice

You might find it helpful to make a place in your home where you can sit regularly in silence. In or near this place, perhaps place a candle, an icon, or a symbol on a small table, or shelf top. Let this be something that recalls you to your intention set aside time and space for your practice of silence, and that you find inviting.

If you don't already have an established practice of silence or contemplation, for this first week, the invitation is simply to sit – in a chair, on a prayer-stool, on the ground if you're flexible – and just 'be', uninterrupted, in silence, for 10 minutes each day with your eyes closed. Don't do anything else, like drink a cup of tea or listen to music. Don't say prayers in your head or try to imagine God. Just sit there and try to adopt an inner posture of openness. Notice what goes on in your head, without judgement or trying to force away distractions. Whatever comes, comes. There is nothing you are trying to achieve in this time, no experience you are expected to have. This is simply preparatory work. Your silence is just beginning.

You may want to explore methods of time-keeping, such as setting a timer, putting a watch where you can see it when you open your eyes briefly, or using a meditation app like 'insight timer' on your smartphone.

If you already have a committed practice of silence, feel free simply to keep following that, and perhaps try a few adaptations based on the suggestions that will follow in the coming weeks. See if this Lent you can work toward increasing the time or number of your 'sits', building to 20 minutes (or even half an hour), twice a day.