



Practices to Bring Us Closer to God: Journaling

Journaling, or creative writing, can provide a powerful way of drawing closer to God, especially during the Lenten season.

In his book, *Writing: A Way to Pray*, Arnold B. Cheyney explained that he had learned this particular technique as a student at the Ohio State University in Columbus, OH. The professor encouraged his students to simply sit and think about a point or idea that had just been expressed. They were to then write about that point. Evidently Cheyney's professor believed that writing promotes thinking. Cheyney took this a step further when he adapted it for religious use. He suggested that the nature of the Person of God was revealed best through the Word. By beginning with Scripture, we can draw closer to God and to Jesus Christ.

Three things are needed for this spiritual practice of journaling: a Bible, a journal (as simple as a small lined notebook), and a writing implement, either pen or pencil. I usually prefer pen because the ink lasts longer, and I find it very helpful to go back later to read what I wrote about a particular scripture passage.

As in most of the spiritual practices, I usually begin with a period of prayer, followed by a time of meditation and listening. Sometimes this may help us choose the particular scripture we want to journal. Another way of choosing the scripture passage is to use the lectionary scriptures for the week. I use the Revised Common Lectionary, which you can find on the website, www.textweek.com.

Looking at the Gospel text for the week of March 1-7 (Luke 13:1-9), I found two separate parts to that portion of Scripture. The first five verses provide the setting of Jesus hearing about some cruelty perpetrated by Pilate, Roman procurator of Judea. The last four verses tell the parable of the barren fig tree. Using this parable as an example for Cheyney's method of writing as a way to prayer, my first steps would be to read carefully and prayerfully these four verses, and then begin to copy them, exactly as they appear, into my journal.

As I write the words, I think about what Jesus was saying in this parable and why. One of my first thoughts, which I would then write in my journal, is that I often am like that fig tree. God has given me so much, but I may not be using those gifts in the way which God wants me to use them. Another thought, which I would add to my journal, is that God is a merciful God, always giving me another chance to do what God wants me to do. And, that Jesus is the one who intercedes for me with God.

As I put these two thoughts into words in my journal, I would probably also begin to dialogue specifically with God. I might list the various gifts God has given me, and then begin to write my questions, as I try to discern how God wishes me to use these gifts for him and for others. I would also write my prayer of thanksgiving to Jesus for the ways in which he continues to intercede for me at various times in my life. When I had written all of this into my journal, I would stop to read it, and again, pray about it.

This entire process of *Writing: A Way to Pray* is a thinking-praying while physically copying the scripture passage into a journal, and then writing your thoughts, questions, and prayers. After you have done this, you can then go back to read what you have written, and write

a reflection on what you have learned from this passage. Finally, it is time to go on to another passage (probably on another day).

Another way of journaling with Scripture is called "Twenty Insights." First you select a scripture passage, read it prayerfully, and copy it into your journal (thinking and praying while you do this). Next you list twenty insights that you received during this time. While writing these twenty insights into your journal, you continue to pray that the Holy Spirit will open your heart and your mind to more insights.

Susan Annette Muto (Pathways of Spiritual Living) wrote, "Journaling is one of the most helpful exercises we can do to increase our capacity for meditation and prayer. Pausing daily or a few times a week to jot down our thoughts has a way of quieting and uncluttering our overactive, de-centered lives." And then she added, "Words allow our real concerns to well up, enabling us to find back our lost centers in Christ. A journal is not only a record of events that touch and transform us; it is a private space in which we can meet ourselves in relation to others and to God."

Journaling is definitely one of the practices that brings us closer to God.