



The Sacred is Calling... are we picking up? In the silence of our hearts God calls out to us. In the patterns and beauty of nature God calls out to us. In music, and art, and craftsmanship God calls out to us. In the midst of suffering, on dark and lonely roads - God is calling out to us. Sometimes when we least expect it ordinary places, signs, actions, gestures, objects and sounds become something more... something that points us to something bigger, a glimpse of divine justice, mercy and grace. Of a story that tells us that this all matters and that we are loved and that we belong. These experiences are sometimes easier 'felt than telt'. How do we find a vocabulary to describe them? This month we are searching for the sacred. And in doing so we discover that the sacred is looking for us! We are restless for God and God is restless for us!

So, where are we encountering the sacred? How are we recognising God's voice? How are we cherishing it? And how are we changed by encountering it? What is a day-to-day expression of faith *like*? While we find the sacred in expected places: in the words of the Bible and the actions of the sacraments - the sacred also catches us off guard in careless and carefree moments. The Holy Spirit is always moving and transforming everyday life into lines of poetry or colour that speak of God's endless love. For God is continually communicating with us. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking God speaks to us only occasionally, or only cryptically and mysteriously, or only through fantastical, supernatural displays. But through the Holy Spirit God speaks to us constantly through nature, through our imaginations, through creativity, through quiet, through our memories, even in the midst of our suffering and trials. So this month may we open our eyes, hearts, and souls wide as we search for, recognise, cherish and reflect on those moments when we encounter the sacred. The moments that draw us evermore into God's embrace.

This month let's expand our appreciation of prayer as something that goes beyond words. Prayer comes in many shapes and sizes. Simply sitting quietly can be a prayer. Taking time to stand in nature can be a prayer. Lying down with the headphones can be another type a prayer. Taking the time to kneel wordlessly in the midst of our suffering, in the midst of everything else going on, is a prayer. Prayer happens not primarily on the lips, but in the heart.

Week 1: A Voice in the Silence, Prayer

Sequences of the Sacred. The sacred often calls to us not in the noise, but in the stillness. This week focuses on quietness, solitude, and listening for the whisper of the divine. God knows the wordless language of our hearts and it is often through our emotions, our imaginations, our memories, our friendships and slow observation of the world around us that we hear from God. Just as we often need peace of mind to concentrate, it can sometimes be in the 'peace of heart', when we step out of the daily noise and concerns of life that we can focus on prayer — speaking honestly *with* and listening humbly *to* God.

1. Withdrawing to pray — Luke 5: 12-16

- **Theme:** Taking time out to pray.
- **Context** Jesus regularly found a place to pray and commune with the Father. He understood the importance of both community and solitude. This is a vital model for us today to counteract the relentless burnout of modern life and all its expectations
- **Discussion Questions:**
 - During a busy week what are some of the obstacles that get in the way of us finding time for quiet prayer?
 - Can you share any wisdom as to how a busy life need not stop you from having a quiet pray time? What does a realistic rhythm of prayer look like for someone with a demanding schedule?
- **Personal Reflection:** What are the distractions or commitments I need to re-assess in my life to connect with God in silence?

2. The soul finds rest in silence — Psalm 62

- **Theme:** The struggle with being overstimulated, overworked and/or overwhelmed.
- **Context:** The psalmist suggests from experience that quietness is healing for an anxious soul. This is relevant as we think of today's non-stop 24-hour news cycle and the digital invasion of screens into our lives.
- **Discussion Questions:**
 - Why is finding peace of heart or peace of mind harder than finding physical quiet?
 - How difficult do you find it to sit in silence with a friend? What are the outcomes when we do it with God in mind? And how can our small group or community help each other quieten the external noise of modern life? (See verse 8)

- **Personal Reflection:** Where is my soul currently striving or seeking security outside of God's quiet presence?

3. Waiting quietly -- Lamentations 3: 19-28

- **Theme:** Waiting seems irrelevant in a culture addicted to instant gratification. Yet it is in quietness and rest that we find our true relevance.
- **Context** Waiting can be frustratingly annoying, yet the Bible continually warns us to trust God's unfolding plan.
- **Discussion Questions:**
 - What does it practically do to us to "wait quietly" rather than grumbling or forcing outcomes? Are there spiritual and even physical improvements to our wellbeing from pursuing disciplines that practice stillness and waiting on God?
 - Has your experience of waiting ever changed your perspective on God's timing, for good or bad?
- **Personal Reflection:** What delayed answer to prayer in my life is God inviting me to trust Him with?

Week 2: A Voice in the Wind, Nature

Sites of the Sacred. Creation is a living sanctuary. This week, we listen for the sacred calling through the natural world — the earth, the sky, the waters, and the wild. God does not occasionally use nature to communicate with us — God continually uses it to communicate with us! There are lessons and challenges and invitations all around us!

1. Trees clapping their hands — Isaiah 55: 8-13

- **Theme:** Our faith is not in opposition to the natural world; it is fully embedded in it.
- **Context:** Isaiah presents a vivid picture of nature itself worshipping God. The water cycle becomes a theology lesson offering a way of understanding God's continual connection with us. God's word doesn't come as an occasional interruption to our lives, but instead is an essential part of the ecosystem we live and breathe in.
- **Group Discussion Questions:**
 - What does a tree clapping its hands look like? How about a mountain or a hill bursting into song? Have you ever walked in the hills and felt like the hill could just burst into song at any moment as a vibrant hymn to God?

- Where do you see joy, life, and celebration expressing itself in your favourite places? Do you have a favourite tree you see clapping its hands? A favourite river, forest, park, moor?
- **Personal Reflection:** Think of your favorite place in nature to go. How could you use the sights, sounds and smells of that place to shape a time of prayer?

2. Birds and lilies — Matthew 6: 25-34

- **Theme:** Living in the moment like a flock of birds or a vibrant wildflower meadow...
- **Context:** Jesus uses readily accessible little pictures from his followers' everyday life to lead them to the big picture of faith. Jesus' instruction to stop worrying about tomorrow and to root ourselves in the here and now by quietly observing the natural world is sound mindfulness advice two thousand years before our current preoccupation with mindfulness!
- **Discussion Questions:**
 - How can spending time in nature change our perspective on our worries and anxieties?
 - Do our churches and faith groups place enough importance on the power of the natural world to calm, restore and inspire us? Or does the natural world play second fiddle to the upkeep of buildings?
- **Personal Reflection:** Where is somewhere you could go this week to quietly observe small wild things with Jesus?

3. The voice over the waters — Psalm 29

- **Theme:** Transformation in our world and in our lives.
- **Context:** Here we return to a water metaphor but this time to show the transformative power of God. Humans have always been in awe of the power of water to utterly change the world around them and so it makes for a compelling metaphor for the incredible, life-giving power of God.
- **Group Discussion Questions:**
 - What words stand out to you in this psalm, how do they make you feel?
 - Where do you long to see the transformative power of God break, change cleanse, move and reshape things in our society and the wider world?
- **Personal Reflection:** Where are we asking God for the sacred to rush and flow through our personal lives, through those of our friends and family?

Week 3: A Voice in the Melody, Creativity

Sacred Surprises. God is the ultimate creator, and the sacred continually calls to us through art, song, rhythm, and our imaginations. This week explores the sacred expressed through making and beauty, through artistry, surprise and wonder. The quiet, emerging and incomplete can be more beautiful than our false ideas of the perfect image.

1. Music brings refreshment -- 1 Samuel 16: 14-23

- **Theme:** Refreshment for the soul!
- **Context:** David's harp brought peace to Saul's troubled spirit, highlighting how God uses creativity and music to heal emotional pain and restore our mental health today.
- **Group Discussion Questions:**
 - How have you experienced music or art acting as a surprise antidote to anxiety or emotional heaviness in your own life?
 - Why do you think God designed creative expressions like art and melody to help soothe our human pain? How can we better recognise and appreciate the everyday role that the creative arts play in our lives? Discuss how much poorer our lives would be without writers and poets and the creative arts at all kinds of levels.
- **Personal Reflection:** What creative or musical outlet do I need to invite back into my week to help refresh my spirit?

2. Wonderfully made — Psalm 139: 1-18

- **Theme:** You are fundamentally of enormous value!
- **Context:** God's intimate craftsmanship begins in the hiddenness of the womb, reminding us of our inherent dignity and unearned worth.
- **Discussion Questions:**
 - Why is it often easier to see God's intricate beauty in creation or others than to accept it in our own unique design? Could the things we think of as our personal limitations, be markers for a different kind of worth?
 - How does viewing your body and mind as intricately crafted by God change how you treat yourself during stressful seasons?
- **Personal Reflection:** What internal critique or comparison with someone else do I need to jettison in order to embrace how wonderfully made I am?

3. Beauty in its time — Ecclesiastes 3: 9-14

- **Theme:** Rethinking beauty.
- **Context:** Scripture points out that true beauty includes the raw, and real, the unfinished seasons; the work in progress, rather than defined perfection. This offers a refreshing counter-narrative to today's filtered, image-obsessed culture.
- **Group Discussion Questions:**
 - In what ways can sharing our unfiltered struggles help foster deeper authenticity and community relationships?
 - Where have you unexpectedly recognised beauty or grace in the middle of a very messy situation. It might have been in novel or a film?
 - Why is that perfectionism can rob us of recognising God's delight in a well-intended failure?
- **Personal Reflection:** What messy or unfinished part of my life might God currently be weaving into a picture of quiet beauty?

Week 4: A Voice in the Trial, Suffering

Sacred Seasons. Even in pain, grief, and confusion, the sacred speaks. Sometimes louder than normal. This final week looks at how the deepest calls often come from the heart of our struggles — from the one who loves us and never abandons us.

1. The valley of the shadow — Psalm 23

- **Theme:** You are not alone.
- **Context:** This beloved psalm gives a timeless picture of what it means to be accompanied through danger and turmoil by someone who will never abandon us.
- **Group Discussion Questions:**
 - When the psalmist walks through dark valleys how are they aware of God/The Shepherd's presence? When it's too dark to see the Shepherd how does the sheep know they are near?
 - The psalmist does not say that they will never go through dark valleys or face evil, just that God is with them throughout. As Christians do we sometimes give people the impression that following Jesus means never going through dark valleys, when really it means not being alone if we go through dark valleys?

- **Personal Reflection:** What is your heart's reaction to verse 4? Take time to pray for those who feel alone, that they might feel accompanied by God's presence.

2. Walking through the fire— Isaiah 43: 1-3

- **Theme:** God is with you.
- **Context:** This reading does not tell us that God's people are invulnerable to flame or flood. What it tells us is that we cannot be burnt up or swept away without trace. This passage was not originally addressed to individuals but to a nation, a people in fear of extinction. Whatever happens, whatever we face, God is with us through it, we are held by God even when in the darkest times.
- **Discussion Questions:**
 - How can these verses inspire us to be more compassionate?
 - What is our prayer today for nations, countries, communities, organisations and cultural groups who live in fear of extinction, oppression and erasure?
- **Personal Reflection:** Who could you come alongside and support this week? Gently and perhaps even nonverbally, someone you could support with practical gestures of love and care.

3. Nothing can separate us — Romans 8: 31-39

- **Theme:** No barrier can get between us and God.
- **Context:** In this incredibly moving passage Paul emphatically and exhaustively lists all the things that cannot get between us and God. It's a radical form of universal inclusivity — all are loveable, all are loved, we cannot fall outside that love.
- **Group Discussion Questions:**
 - What words stand out to you in these verses? What are the key phrases in here that need to be shouted out in wider society?
 - As we explored in the first week, quiet and solitude can be an important dimension of our faith to clear away the distractions and listen to God; but it is also true that extended isolation and loneliness can harm our sense of self and belonging. The themes of this reading, that nothing can get between us and God, can be harder to believe when we feel cut off or walled off from others. As Christians how can we remind our friends and family (Christian or not) that their suffering does not cut them off? That we are united in our joy and our sorrow, our celebrating and our mourning?
- **Personal Reflection:** Who in your life do you need to reach out to? To remind that they are not alone?

Kingdom Bearers, A Prayer:

by Amanda MacQuarrie

Eternal Surpriser,

Thank you for the new ways you continue to speak to us or touch our lives,

And for those around us whom you use in our lives:

Helping us, teaching us, smoothing our rough edges and loving us with your everlasting love.

Enable us to see the treasures of your Kingdom in the stuff of everyday,

And to recognise you in the folks around us.

Amen