

Okay. Be honest. In the last week, have you said or thought, “I want to get away from life for a while.” Are you daydreaming about a sandy beach somewhere? A hike in the mountains? A hammock on a sunny porch? I am. Every single day. It is easy to feel overwhelmed and disconnected these days. Between COVID-19 and coming face to face, once again with the violence of racism, and the depth of its embeddedness in our country, it feels like a “Calgon take me away” moment. Yes, I know. I just dated myself. Most of us are not in a position to get away from it all and, truthfully, the world, and especially our Black siblings, needs us to stay engaged and continue to insist on justice and equality, now more than ever.

Because we can’t just check out, I started looking for ways to retreat without retreating. I discovered a collection of wisdom sayings that spoke to my soul in a book called *Desert Fathers and Mothers: Early Christian Wisdom Sayings-Annotated and Explained* by Dr. Christine Valters-Paintner. In the pages of this book, I found ancient wisdom that is shockingly relevant to this time and place. The wisdom in the book has helped re-center me and re-connect me to the person I want to be and the God that, honestly, was feeling far away. Like Calgon in the 80’s, this wisdom has given me a place to rest and rejuvenate. I recognize that being able to rest is a privilege many people do not have. I also know scripture calls us to sabbath.

So, we are going to hang out with some monks.

For the next few weeks, we will see what we can learn from the sayings and ways of being of these early Christians who lived out their faith by leaving behind the world. The word “monk” means solitary or single. It is not meant to be a descriptor of someone’s living status, but instead, it describes the individual’s focus. Monks devote their full attention to their spiritual path.

Some of these early monks lived solitary lives as hermits, others lived communally, yet set apart from the rest of society. In the introduction to this wisdom collection, Valters-Paintner wrote, all of these “...spiritual seekers, who came to be known as the desert mothers and fathers, withdrew from a society where the misuse of human relationships, power, and material possessions ran counter to their sense of the sacredness of life”

(Valters-Paintner, Christine, *Desert Fathers and Mothers: Early Christian Wisdom Sayings-Annotated and Explained*, Skylight Paths Publishing, intro to first digital edition). That description of the ancient world got my attention and made me think this book might have something to say to us now.

In the 3rd-6th centuries, these early Jesus followers retreated to the desert, believing there must be things they didn't know, that if they lived more simply, were more intentional about spending time in prayer and examining their own hearts, they would encounter God in ways they hadn't in the midst of a society that was off the rails. From these solitary desert places came wisdom in the form of parables and proverbs.

The people who went to the desert were a diverse group. Some were rich, others poor. Some came from life in the city, others began as farmers. Some were highly educated, others were not. Yet, they all wanted the same thing. They wanted to know what living in true Christian community was supposed to be and in what ways they would have to change in order live into that.

Obviously, we cannot pack it all up and move to the desert, but we can turn our attention to our own spirituality even as we live in our cities, while taking care of families, while working in corporate offices, while fighting for justice, and even while pastoring a congregation. We can make the decision to attend to our own spiritual journey and, I believe, if we do so, we will change and if enough of us change, the world will change.

One of the important components of monasticism is the relationship between the monk and one or more spiritual fathers or mothers, which are like spiritual mentors. Think for a moment about the people in your life whom you have trusted with your important spiritual thoughts, questions, or doubts. When you have gone to them for help, have they helped by telling you what to do or what to think? My experience has been that the people I trust are not people who tell me what to believe, but rather, they are people who help me discover what I believe for myself.

The desert fathers and mothers were these people. The less experienced, sometimes younger, monks would go to them for wisdom, but not in the same ways we have become accustomed to seeking wisdom. There were no large lecture halls and no Google search bars. There were these deeply spiritual people who had spent time cultivating their own connection to God and who were willing to help others cultivate their own connection to God, which often began with cultivating a deeper connection with themselves.

In the coming weeks, I will be sharing some of the wisdom of these spiritual mentors in the form of their sayings which were handed down, like the Bible, from an oral tradition. They were originally in Coptic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin. Valters-Paintner writes, "The sayings were the spontaneous responses of wise elders to the concerns of those disciples who traveled to see them." Like the Bible, these sayings represent many different voices and so, at times, they seem to contradict one another. Each saying is the practical wisdom of someone's individual lived experiences.

There was some consensus among the desert fathers and mothers on a few key things, though. First, spirituality was about looking for God right in the midst of our own messiness and our own struggle to find ourselves. Cultivating a relationship with God was not meant to be set aside until we get our lives together. That relationship is meant to be our center. They believed God is always with us, even when we don't feel it and even when we experience discomfort as our understanding of who God is and how God works in the world is shaken. And, of course, they believed God loves us and is present with us. They affirmed that even in the wounded places of our souls, there is God.

You may be thinking this seems like an odd time for me to suggest we embark on this inward journey. I mean...the world is a mess. Now is not the time to focus on ourselves when there is so much suffering around us. I felt that way too, until I realized I was too exhausted and too filled with grief to be any good to anyone. I knew I had to do something other than just power through, like I usually do. The contemplative life is meant to help us to be more open to the people we encounter on our journey. As we spend more time in reflection, it becomes clear that sometimes we use our busyness, created by serving others, to keep us from addressing our own inner wounds. Eventually, we may find our compassion depleted. I've heard it called compassion fatigue. Conversely, what I've learned is that the more we learn about ourselves and care for our own souls, "the more we are called back to love the world and offer spacious compassion to others" (Valters-Paintner, intro).

So, in the days to come, I invite you to take some time to retreat and contemplate, right where you are. I invite you to make a commitment to slowing down, creating space between your inner being and the chaos of the world, and to pay attention to the divine spark that is in and around every living being. The

desert mothers and fathers do not offer up quick fixes for our lives. They acknowledge that life is weird and messy and it sucks sometimes. But their words and ways encourage us to draw comfort from our inner strength and our own connection to God who is always near.

As we embark on this quest for new wisdom from ancient words, I am reminded of this poem, written by spiritual director and author Joyce Rupp:

*You stand outside the door, reading
One more book about how to
Open the door. You note in your
Journal one more thought about
What it might be like. Yet the
Longings of your heart remain...
Let today be the day you open
The door of your heart to God.
(Joyce Rupp, *Open the Door: A Journey to the True Self*)*

Now we turn to the wisdom of two of our desert fathers. First, Abba Hierax:
*"A brother questioned Abba Hierax saying, 'Give me a word. How can I be saved?'
The old man said to him, 'Sit in your cell, and if you are hungry, eat; if you are
thirsty drink; only do not speak evil of anyone and you are saved.'"*

And then this from Basil of Caesarea:
*"A monk once came to Basil of Caesarea and said, 'Speak a word, Father'; and
Basil replied, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart,' and the monk
went away at once. Twenty years later he came back and said, 'Father, I have
struggled to keep your word; now speak another word to me'; and he said, 'Thou
shalt love your neighbor as thyself'; and the monk returned in obedience to his cell
to keep that also."*

The phrase "give me a word," and its variations, is common in the desert sayings. When learners approached one of the mothers or fathers and said, "Give me a word," they were not asking to be told what to think or do, but for something that would help them to become more connected to their true selves and to God. This tradition of asking one's spiritual mentor for a word was a way of seeking something on which to reflect. Sometimes the monks would reflect on the word

given to them for months or years, even a lifetime. In fact, the second story, from Basil, is an example of a word that was pondered for years. The seeker was not asking for a quick fix or one size fits all answer, but to simply grow.

In January, when we celebrated Epiphany (think of Epiphany in terms of God revealing God's love and people saying, "ah ha, we get it!"), anyway, on Epiphany, we were all given a star word in worship. It was just like it sounds; a word written on a paper star. I asked the ones present in worship that day to take the word home and put it somewhere they would see it and reflect on what that word said to them throughout the year. Who still remembers their star word? There is nothing magical about the star words themselves. I see them as an opportunity for us to slow down and ponder something from a different perspective than we normally would or to notice something we would usually overlook.

My star word is JOY. The star is hanging on my refrigerator where I see it, perhaps too often, each day. Its presence has reminded me to keep looking for joy in every day. In January, when I received the word, I had no idea how important the ritual of looking for joy would become in my life. At the time, I thought, I know what this is about...I'm supposed to work less and play more. That isn't really what has happened, yet joy and I are finding each other. We will all get new star words next Epiphany as we look forward to what 2021 will reveal. I hope you will take time this week to ponder, to reflect on your star word or what God may be saying to you in other ways. And I hope you will allow yourself the opportunity to draw near to the One who created you and loves you, and maybe, as you do, you will begin to find YOU.

This morning, I will leave you with this word from poet and activist, Maya Angelou, a shining example of Black Excellence. It is the last stanza of her poem, "On the Pulse of Morning."

*Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply*

With hope
Good morning.

May the meditations of our hearts and the words of our mouths be a delight to you, Holy One. Amen.