



# Retreat

*three invitations*

*“TIMES OF RETREAT ARE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN THE RHYTHM OF OUR LIFE. They enable us to celebrate the primacy of the love of God above all else. Whenever we enter retreat we seek to be more available to God so that we may enter more fully into the divine life” (SSJE Rule of Life, Ch. 29, “Retreat”).* These lines encapsulate why we go on retreat: by setting aside the ordinary cares and patterns of our days, we hope to make ourselves more fully available to God.

Many different settings, structures, and shapes of retreat can meet this aim. After all, God is available to us everywhere; the question is simply where and how we can best tune our perception to become aware of God’s presence. The answer will not be the same for each of us, nor even for each of us in every season.

In these pages, three Brothers share three different visions for how one might shape a retreat experience. What framework might open your heart to God’s revelation at this season in your life? We pray that, however the Spirit leads you, your retreat will invite you to *“enter more fully into the divine life.”*

## Return and Rest

### *recalling God’s love on retreat*

Br. David Vryhof, SSJE

There are many ways of entering into retreat. At times we will want to use our time of retreat to listen and discern God’s purposes in our life, especially if we are in a place of confusion, conflict, or uncertainty. At other times we may be facing an important choice, and will find a period of silent retreat to be a helpful clearing space in which to weigh our options in prayer. At times, we will want to explore more deeply the nature of God, the person of Christ, or some aspect of our human condition. These are ways of using retreat to “advance” the spiritual life.

But as our Brother Curtis Almquist likes to remind us, most often “a retreat is not an advance.” Retreats invite us to return to the God we already know, to recall and to re-experience God’s

## **“In returning and rest you shall be saved.” – Isaiah 30:15**

love for us, to receive from God the gifts we need this day.

In the *Book of Common Prayer* there is a collect that summarizes this last type of retreat. We pray,

*O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The prayer is drawn from Isaiah 30:15: “*For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.*” It suggests that there are times when we need to return to God and find our rest in God’s presence, to draw from God’s strength in order to claim again the inner stillness and freedom that come from putting our trust in God’s wisdom and power rather than our own.

If you have ever watched young children playing on a playground you may have noticed how a child might from time to time interrupt his play in order to come over to his mother, sitting at the edge of the play area. She hugs him, tussles his hair, and rubs his back. He leans into her and receives her love. After a few moments, he pops up and returns to his peers to join again in their play. Retreat can be like that – a short break from the tasks of our life, during which we can lean into God to receive God’s love and affection, and hear God’s words of encouragement and support. Retreats can offer us this kind of refreshment and renewal, and can prepare us to re-enter the fray of our daily lives with new energy and hope.

How might we enter into such a retreat? I often encourage retreatants to begin their retreats by returning to a favorite passage of Scripture or to a favorite hymn, one that recalls for them God’s deep love and abiding faithfulness. Here are some possible starting places:

- Isaiah 43:1-9            “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”
- Psalm 23                “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not be in want.”
- Psalm 139              “it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”
- Romans 8:31-38        “Nothing can separate us from the love of God.”
- 1 John 4:7-21         “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us...”
- Hymnal 1982, 671      “Amazing grace! how sweet the sound”
- Hymnal 1982, 664      “My Shepherd will supply my need”

It will help if we remind ourselves that *prayer is a gift, not a task*. We come to prayer to offer God thanks and praise, and to receive the good gifts God has for us, gifts that God knows that we need. We do not come to achieve a goal or to produce a specific result. Nor do

“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there...

we come out of obligation, to fulfill a sense of duty. Christian prayer stems from a loving relationship. God has invited us into the Divine Presence in order to offer us love and strength, patience and courage, healing and wholeness. Prayer is the primary place where we receive these things. Therefore, we ought to approach our times of prayer or times of retreat not with a sense of duty, but in a spirit of receptivity and expectation. We are coming to meet the One who has created and redeemed us in love, and who reigns over all things, to receive all that we need from God’s heavenly storehouse.

The author of the First Letter of John writes, “*We love because (God) first loved us*” (1 John 4:9). The first thing (“we love”) is dependent on the second (that we have received and experienced God’s love for us). If we hope to be agents of God’s love in the world, carriers of God’s grace and ministers of God’s compassion, then we need to receive those gifts of love and grace and compassion from the hand of God. Only then can we offer them to others. Prayer is the place where these gifts are received. When I have experienced God’s unconditional love for me, I can offer that same unconditional love to others. When I have known God’s forgiveness, I can extend that same forgiveness to others. When I know that God accepts me as I am, without judgment, I can open myself to others and approach them with curiosity and interest rather than with suspicion and judgment. “*We love because (God) first loved us.*” This is the gift that God offers us in prayer and in retreat.

Begin your retreat, then, by returning to God, resting in God’s goodness and love, allowing God to restore your confidence in God’s protection and provision. God is at work in your life. “*Be still, and know that God is God.*”

...For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” – Psalm 139: 7-8, 13-14

## Practices to enrich your retreat

*Recall specific moments when you have known God's goodness and love in your life. How did you feel? What emotions spring up in you now as you recall those earlier times? Offer them to God.*

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*Write a letter to God. What do you wish to say to God? What does God need to hear from you? It could be words of love or heartbreak or doubt. Be as honest as you can. One of our Brothers, at the end of this meditative practice, likes to take up another pen in a second color and write the words he hears God speaking back to him.*

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*You might find it helpful to meditate with an image. I love to pray with Katherine Brown's image of the Good Shepherd, rejoicing as he holds his lost lamb. As you gaze at this icon, hear God welcoming you back home. You are God's beloved creature, the one for whom God would leave the ninety-nine, just to bring you back.*



“Without silence, words become empty.”

– SSJE *Rule of Life*, Ch. 27, “Silence”

## Sip and Savor

*reading sacred texts on retreat*

Br. Keith Nelson, SSJE

The spaciousness, silence, and freedom from distraction that retreat offers provide an ideal context for encountering Christ in scripture and sacred writings. Times of retreat free us from the obligation of assigned readings like the lectionary. They also beckon us away from the perpetual flow of the social media feed, headlines crafted to arrest us in our tracks, and images designed to hijack our attention. Unlike the reading we shoe-horn into a daily train commute or the spare, sleepy moments before bed, on retreat we are given the gift of genuine leisure to let our reading absorb, transfix, and even transfigure us. We can rediscover the grace-bearing potential of words by giving them our full and undivided attention. In the chapter entitled “Holy Scripture” in our *Rule*, we read: “*It is the Spirit dwelling within us who brings the revelation of Scripture into a vital encounter with our inmost selves, and brings to birth new meaning and life.*” When the texts we choose to take on retreat are selected with careful, prayerful discernment and approached with reverent expectancy, the living Word can open our deafness once more. Our lives may be forever changed by just a single phrase.

There are a few elements that can transform our engagement with printed words into *sacred reading* while on retreat. I’ll consider three: *what* we choose to read, the *pace* at which we read it, and the *space* we give ourselves to step away from our reading and rest in wordless silence. There is abundant literature on the classic monastic practice of *lectio divina* – a practice which I heartily recommend. Here, however, I will consider sacred reading practices a little more broadly.

How do we choose what texts we read on retreat? This is a fairly personal choice, but remember that your aim is *sacred reading*. I prefer to avoid texts which are primarily didactic – whose basic purpose is to instruct, inform, or set forth an argument. Instead, I choose texts which I trust will efface themselves and usher me gently into encounter with God, toward whom they point. I particularly relish reading poems on retreat, because a good poem can communicate directly to the heart what prose can take a volume to express! The writings of the ancient and medieval church, though sometimes difficult and obscure, never fail to reward my patient attention with gifts of grace. Some retreats have become like intimate conversations between Jesus, myself, and the saint whose holy friendship is offered to me through her or his writings. As a consummate bibliophile, I need to be ruthless in limiting the number of books I take on retreat and remind myself that this is not an opportunity to catch up on the six to eight books from the Monastery library begging for my attention. My hard rule is no more than two, plus a Bible. In reading scripture, I often aim to delve deeply into one book, or sometimes a single chapter, though I leave room for detours if they

“He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat...

are strong promptings from the Spirit. I must cultivate, again and again, a “less is more” approach.

Learning to read slowly and meditatively can take practice, but this is the pace and approach that our ancestors in the faith most strongly recommend. Just as timeless works of visual art or music communicate freshly to each generation of artists or musicians, texts that contain true wisdom repay an infinite number of readings. Each inwardly repeated sentence can midwife new insights or lift the eyes of our hearts to whole constellations of meaning that our initial reading passed over unawares. In the ancient and medieval worlds, the act of reading was an awesome privilege demanding intense mental and physical concentration. Receiving even a one-page letter was a singular event. The precious words on the parchment were read aloud, repeatedly. This way of reading rendered the author mysteriously and intimately present. The *Rule of St. Benedict* makes provision for each monk to receive *one* book from the monastic library as his Lenten reading. A whole book to absorb in meditative prayer over the course of a liturgical season was a sublime gift. On retreat, we can follow their lead. Rather than gulp, we sip and savor.

In the sustained, meditative reading of a sacred text we expect to be impacted or transformed in some way because we honor the text’s spiritual authority or authenticity, but we don’t pretend to know *how* the encounter may change us. We are open to the text’s points of difficulty and obscurity (think for example of the prologue to John’s gospel, or the poems of T.S. Eliot). The Spirit patiently teaches us that when the fist of the mind closes around the words to wrest away a manufactured, quotable insight, they inevitably become opaque. The doors of perception close. Yet when we are receptive and open, without the compulsion to comprehend each particular nuance, words and phrases take on a transparent radiance. In the words of Eliot, “*Every word is at home ... the complete consort dancing together.*” We are graced by a boundless, holistic, heart-centered way of knowing that can only be inspired — in-breathed by another power. In this moment, we close the book.

Then what? Nothing and everything may quiver expectantly in that moment. We may remain still for a time, resting in the Word. We may gather together a few words of humble gratitude. We may turn our attention to something very different: a long walk in the cold air, a cup of tea beside the fireplace, a luxurious nap, an hour with the blessed Sacrament. The Word has used words to bear us into the silence that is their Source, and to which they will return. We let the words be, planted in the dark, mysterious soil of our hearts. We entrust their growth to the Author of Life, until the next time we take up the text, our attention refreshed and renewed, hungry again for the grace that sacred reading bestows.

...He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.”

– Ezekiel 3:1-3

## Practices to enrich your retreat

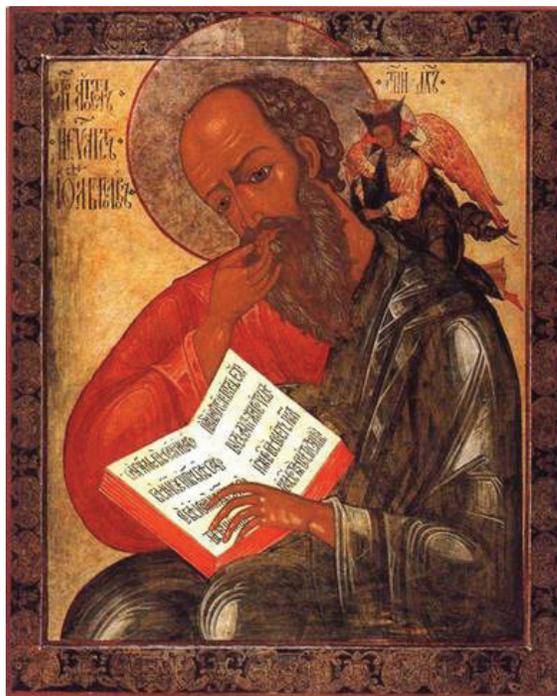
*Memorize a favorite passage from Scripture. Repeat the words aloud, slowly and meditatively. How do the words feel in your mouth as you “chew” them? After a while, let yourself become silent in the lingering presence of the Word. Trust that they have been written on your heart, and will be there for you when you need them.*

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*Gaze at the icon of St. John the Evangelist. Momentarily lay aside your analytical mind and simply receive the figures, colors, and shapes just as they are.*

*Now take a look at the angel hovering over John’s shoulder, whispering in his ear: a representation of the Word of God. The Word whispers to us through the printed words in front of us. But the same Word communicates in unexpected ways from the margins, or at the periphery of our vision – gently interrupting, inspiring, suggesting, or challenging.*

*What is it like to “read” the Word present to you in both of these places – or to allow the Word to read you in this way?*



“We must expect retreats to expose us to spiritual trial.”

– SSJE *Rule of Life*, Ch. 27, “Silence”

## Strive and Wrestle

*facing spiritual trial on retreat*

Br. Jim Woodrum, SSJE

Prior to coming to the Monastery, my experiences of retreat were of an extended time of sabbath with God, always in the context of community with fellow believers. While times of rest in community away from the familiar scenes, routines, and challenges of life were quite beneficial to me, it wasn't until I arrived at SSJE to test my vocation as a monk that I encountered a deeper and richer experience of retreat. As a novice, when I first studied the chapter entitled “Retreat” in our *Rule of Life*, one paragraph captured my attention: “Retreats will often be times in which we hear Jesus inviting us to be at rest with him. But we must expect retreats to expose us to spiritual trial. We may be tempted to tire ourselves or waste the time in busy work and preparation. We may find ourselves staying on the surface to avoid an authentic meeting with the living God. And the emptiness of retreat time may compel us to face painful signs of our need for healing which it was easier to overlook during our usual routines.” Spiritual trial!? Wasn't retreat time about spending ‘quality time’ with God? I had never considered retreat to be so venturesome.

This vision of retreat reminds me of a story from Genesis which I loved as a kid but never really understood until now: the story of Jacob and his encounter with a divine being. The author of this particular Genesis story says that Jacob is on a journey with his family and all his possessions when, at one point, he sends them ahead of him, while he stays behind. When he is completely alone, Jacob encounters a *man* who engages him in a struggle. The two spend the long hours of the night wrestling, and eventually Jacob overpowers the man. Before conceding defeat the man dislocates Jacob's thigh and exclaims, “Let me go, for day is breaking.” But Jacob perceives something about this man with whom he has been wrestling. Aware that this is no ordinary encounter, Jacob asks his holy opponent for a blessing. The man declares that he will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, “for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” The name Israel means “a man seeing God.” The story continues: “And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.”

This story resonates with me because it highlights the truth that any encounter which brings us into real intimacy with God will be costly. It will involve sacrifice, intention, endurance, and a desire and willingness to be changed. Jacob sacrificed all that he had, sending his family and possessions ahead unguarded while he withdrew to be alone with God. He intentionally engaged God in struggle, perhaps processing and working out the self-doubts that had plagued him. We know that Jacob had a less-than-stellar reputation in the eyes of

“There are many conflicts on the way into the experience of divine love. As the spirit exposes it to Christ’s healing touch in prayer we shall often have to struggle with our reluctance to be loved so deeply by God...

his family and was seeking reconciliation from his estranged brother Esau. He had to abide with God in a difficult struggle, perhaps wondering at times whether he would be able to endure God’s truth and judgment. He had to desire change and make that desire known to God. At the dawning of the new day, he asked God to bless him as he moved forward into new life. Jacob left that encounter with God, not only with the new name of Israel, but also bearing a wound of love, one that would be a constant reminder of God’s grace and blessing.

It may be helpful to you to pray with the story of Jacob’s encounter with God, especially on retreat, since a retreat may expose us to spiritual trial. We may enter into retreat with the intention of deepening our relationship with God, only to find ourselves distracted. We live in an age where we are constantly bombarded with advertising which promises a better life. And the lure of social media – with its premise to bring us connection – actually isolates us from real, meaningful relationships. God does not relate to us through Facebook and Instagram. Rather God is drawing us into silence, stillness, and solitude, in order to share the intimacy of adoring love with us. Like any relationship that we care about, our relationship with God requires us to put aside distractions in order to gaze into the face of our Beloved.

It seems appealing to search for God somewhere ‘out there,’ in exotic places worthy of God’s glory. However, the desert fathers and mothers of the fourth and fifth centuries taught that the kingdom of heaven begins within us: *“Strive to enter the treasure chamber that is within you; that way you will see the heavenly treasure. Both are one in the same. The ladder to the kingdom of heaven is in your soul ... there you will find the steps on which you can climb up.”* The Psalmist writes, *“Lord, I love the house in which you dwell and the place where your glory abides.”* You are God’s abiding place!

Most often Jesus enters into our lives through the cracks of our brokenness. We need not be ashamed of the fissures in our heart. Instead we must have the courage to bare them to Jesus, whose desire is to fill us with grace so that we may know the power of his love. Acknowledging our need for healing, our desire for happiness, and our longing for abundance is a sacrifice we offer to God. In return, God gives us a morsel of bread and sip of wine, the heavenly food of his own body and blood to sustain and nourish us as we begin our journey to healing.

Like Jacob, we need the courage first to let go of everything, to engage God and to ask God to reveal our true identity, the person God has created us to be. Retreat can be the perfect time for such challenging, rewarding striving with God.

...Christ himself will strive with us, as the angel strove with Jacob, to disable our self-reliant pride and make us depend on grace.”

– SSJE *Rule of Life*, Ch. 21, “The Mystery of Prayer”

## Practices to enrich your retreat

*What are you struggling with in your life – perhaps something in your past that has left you wounded? Do you share this struggle with God? Offer your wounds to Jesus in prayer, asking Him to transfigure the situation, that it might be a source of blessing to you.*

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*Before going on retreat, note the amount of time you spend on social media each week. During the course of your retreat, resist the urge to connect virtually. Instead make a list of those whom you hold in your heart. Remember them to God in your prayer. Our founder, Richard Meux Benson, explains the power of intercessory prayer in this way: "...in praying for others we learn really and truly to love them. As we approach God on their behalf we carry the thought of them into the very being of eternal Love, and as we go into the being of him who is eternal Love, so we learn to love whatever we take with us there." Carry those you love with you to God in prayer.*

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*In times of spiritual trial, you may find it meaningful to meditate with an image of Christ crucified, like the one below. Reflect on how Christ is willing to share with you in your struggle.*



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