

THE FORTY  
DAYS OF LENT



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THE  
**SONGS**  
OF OUR DECONSTRUCTION

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NOTES FOR CONVERGENCE  
DURING THE LENTEN SEASON 2014

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*You come to the Bible's great 'book of praises' through all the moods and conditions of life, and while you may feel like hell, you sing anyway. To your surprise, you find that the psalms do not deny your true feelings but allow you to reflect on them, right in front of God and everyone.*

*- Kathleen Norris from The Paradox of the Psalms, the Cloister Walk (blog)*

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*(it is an act of bold faith to use 'psalms of darkness') because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart.*

*- Walter Brueggemann, The Spirituality of the Psalms*

# The Language & Imagery of Lent

## Anticipating Newness

I am looking out from my warm living room, to see snow and sleet falling swiftly—blanketing our neighborhood. Our pipes are freezing, the cold seems unbearable. And yet, we are home with the kids for another wonderful snow day. All signs that winter has not loosened its icy grip just yet.

Lent will begin, this year, with forecasts of more winter weather. It's fitting for the chill to remain as Ash Wednesday approaches. We begin in a place of winter. The grayness that pervades our landscape, is the monochrome we desire to emerge out of, as a seed dies, breaking through the earth adding to the color and life of Spring. Lent beckons us to stop our mundane or harried lives and take assessment of the “deaths” we must incur in order to become fully aware of the life that is budding anew. Lent is an invitation into newness, but first, it is a recognition of the old—the tired—the withered—the lifelessness within us.

The process of Lent is what we make it to be. As a community, we value greatly the invitation that the church calendar offers. Together, we participate in common themes with the bigger, global, community of Christ followers. It is an invitation to live beyond a mere “spiritual” understanding of faith to the wholeness of life by connecting the seasons we experience to our contemplation of life. It is, finally, an invitation to internalize themes of the Good News of God that aren't always easy to face. The church calendar opens the doors to a life that embraces the burden, the brokenness, and the pain of life while also weaving with them the beauty of nearness, of hope, of light, and of life renewed, restored, and resurrected.

**WHAT WILL LENT BEGIN IN YOUR LIFE THIS YEAR? IN THE LIFE OF OUR COMMUNITY? OUR CITY?**

I love the the anticipation of such considerations. We can hope for newness—and we can let Lent be one way toward it.

*Before we fully engage in the theme of Songs of Deconstruction, let's consider the full picture of Lent in the general sense and what the season has meant to Convergence over the years.*

## **MEANING OF LENT**

Lent comes from the latin, quadragesima or “the fortieth day”. Lent also has its roots in the word, “spring,” which hints to the changes we are looking to encounter during the 40 calendar days of this season. Lent is a season of forty days preceding Holy Week (the week focused on Jesus’ final days before crucifixion). Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and runs until the Saturday before Palm Sunday.

## **SPECIAL DAYS**

**ASH WEDNESDAY** A day to face the reality of our mortality. God spoke these sobering words to Adam, “Until you return to that ground yourself, dead and buried; you started out as dirt, you’ll end up dirt.” We enter the Lenten Season through the doorway of awareness of our own frailty.

**FORTY DAYS OF LENT** Days of intentionally entering the broken and dark places of our life – that we might smash our current failed conceptions and be reoriented to an intimacy with God and others. These are days that may not be pleasant—but they have an outcome of great joy, relief, and peace.

**SUNDAYS OF LENT** Sundays are always a foreshadowing of the Resurrection of Christ. Therefore, we break our fasts to celebrate our coming renewal and restored state.

**GOOD FRIDAY** A final day of mourning. Meditating on the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. We recapture the moment of loss for those who stood and watched the horrid display of violence upon the Innocent One. We feel deeply Christ’s abandonment on the cross. His death leads us to mourning and sorrow for the place of sin in our lives and in our world.

**EASTER SUNDAY** Celebration that mourning isn’t forever, that death isn’t ultimate, and that brokenness and distance doesn’t define our way of life. God has made way for nearness with Him and one another. God has entered our deaths fully and has transformed them into true and everlasting life. Jesus our Savior. He is Risen!

## **THE STORY OF LENT WITHIN CONVERGENCE**

*Convergence has used a variety of language to process Lent.*

**WE HAVE GONE INTO OBSCURITY** - Getting more comfortable with the language that we have a limited view of the world, of our life, and of God--we considered we asked, ‘what does it mean to move into obscurity? And how do we move into this obscurity?’ Over the years I see a consistent trend with in my life and so many others around me--it’s one of being drawn to a more unfamiliar yet compelling way of viewing and engaging the world. Gerald May, in his book, *Dark Night of the Soul*, writes that the “dark night” is not a sinister or evil “darkness” but dark as obscure. For something to be obscured is to know that something is there--but incapable of seeing it fully or clearly.

**WE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT WE ARE BOUND** - We considered all that enslaved us, and all the ways we enslave others. We considered the question, ‘Are we seeking a freedom of the ego (living endlessly selfishly), rather than a freedom from ego (the way of Jesus)?’

*WE CONSIDERED THE IMPLICATIONS OF METANOIA* - The root word 'metanoia' is the New Testament Greek word meaning to change your mind, shift directions, change your course heading. The forty days of Lent are intended to "shed the blinders" and see life for what it is. The forty days are intended to expose our deepest sense of longing. The forty days of Lent are intended to lead us to metanoia - to "smash our current conceptions" - whatever they may be.

*WE WERE IMMERSSED IN THE IMAGERY OF THE BRIGHT SADNESS* - We considered the Orthodox description of Lent, "the bright sadness" allowing this imagery to lead us to a probing consideration of the tensions of light/darkness. We long for the sun-soaked brightness, but must navigate the darkest regions of our soul, our way of life, and even the systems we may be contributing to.

*Each of these emphasis are getting at the same thing--but with different language.* The forty days is a time for us to inject deep consideration of our lives. In this consideration, no matter how winter-like our struggle, with it's cold and isolating darkness; we move into the spring as we shed the skin of our protection and are laid bare in the light of the sun. Joseph Jaworski writes in his book Synchronicity,

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***"As my thoughts became clearer, I found myself spontaneously letting out my pain through deep, gut-wrenching crying. Maybe I was crying about the loss of my family-but I was also crying about the unreflective life I had led. And maybe I was releasing all the pent-up pain I had had over a number of years. But maybe it was just that for the first time, I was really allowing myself to feel."***

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We must never be okay with an unexamined life. This is the gift of Lent, to intentionally explore the distance of what is real about our life and what we believe (or falsely promote) about our life.

Lent is our mirror of examine.

**WRITE ABOUT YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES OF LENT. WHAT DO YOU CONTINUE TO CARRY WITH YOU FROM YOUR PAST JOURNEYS THROUGH THESE FORTY DAYS?**

## The Poet and the Song

Coming into the season, I've been captured by the language and life of poets. The importance of poetic language cannot be understated. While I'm far from being a poet or even really grasping poetry as a whole — I can be drawn in to feel deeply and ponder existence through a great poem or song lyric.

**ARE THERE ANY POEMS OR SONG LYRICS THAT YOU ACCESS FOR INSPIRATION, ENCOURAGEMENT, OR INTROSPECTION?**

Poetry is a gift. A gift that lights a path to see the world differently—more fully—through the eyes of another. Poetry is a gift to make space for honesty. Have you ever heard a song or read a line and you say, “that’s exactly how I feel” Sometimes we aren’t honest with ourselves—or maybe, it’s that we have been unable to find the words that give expression to what’s going on in our heart or head. We must say ‘thank you’ to the poets and songwriters for putting words to our inner most thoughts. What a relief, when we can share a song or poem with a friend—knowing that they will *get us* even more.

**WRITE IN YOUR OWN WORDS, THE GIFTS POETRY AND/OR SONGS HAVE GIVEN YOU?**

During the Lenten Season, we will be focusing on the great songs and poems of Scripture—specifically found in the book of Psalms. At least initially within these coming forty days, I would like for us to ask:

**WHAT INSULATES US FROM SEEING OURSELVES?**

*Then, as we move through the weeks of The Forty, consider the following:*

**WHAT VIEW OF THE WORLD NO LONGER FITS WITH MY EXPERIENCE OF LIFE?**

**WHO’S “VOICE” HAS GIVEN REVEALED MY UNDERSTANDING AS LIMITED?**

**WHAT IS GOD CALLING ME TO LET GO OF WITHIN MY UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AND LIFE?**

**WHAT AM I RELYING ON FOR FULFILLMENT, THAT WILL NEVER ACTUALLY FULFILL?  
WHAT COULD IT MEAN TO FEEL DEEPLY MY NON-FULFILLMENT?**

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***“Lent. We know it is a season within which we are meant to fast, to intensify longing, and to raise our spiritual temperatures, all through the crucible of non-fulfillment.” Ronald Rolheiser***

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*Or what questions would you like to process more fully during Lent? Write them below.*

## The Natural Cycle of Deconstruction

As we consider the Psalms, I think we'll be able to process the themes of Lent in a way that continue to open our lives to vulnerability and honesty. Walter Brueggemann divides the Psalms into three parts: Psalms of Orientation, Psalms of Disorientation, and Psalms of New Orientation. What he is describing in his book, *The Spirituality of the Psalms*, is the full cycle of faith we face within life, as we mature and grow.

### Our Oriented Perspective

First, we are oriented, we see the world through a black and white lens—the world is ordered and the relationships are often transactional. I do this, you do this, this result happens. The Psalms of Orientation work under this motif—God is above, in control, providing a way for us to live; we live by this, we inherit good things. Transaction. Order. It's like my obsession of having everything in its place. It feels so very nice to be in control and to be on top of all that is happening. We like a everything to fall into categories—no surprises, no chaos, no mystery.

### The Crumbling of Our Oriented World

And yet, if we live long enough, the black and white world that feeds on order, transaction, and control can no longer hold up to much of what we experience in life. It's in this discover (maybe over years, maybe through tragedy, or maybe just observation) we can either choose to find God within a world of chaos, force ourselves to close our eyes, cover our ears, and ignore what's apparent—clinging to the Orientation we prefer, or we can abandon the God pursuit altogether. If you don't see the last two as an option—you will find, I pray, a home in Convergence and a love for the Lenten Season. Our hope, is to share the process of finding language and community within our loss of "orientation" and see the great value of the experience of disorientation. We even see that Lent can produce a regular immersion into such disorientation. During these forty days, we will consider the Songs of our Deconstruction—or, in Brueggemann's language, The Psalms of Disorientation. It's worth reading again Brueggemann's words,

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***(it is an act of bold faith to use 'psalms of darkness') because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart.***

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The Story includes some pretty gritty and offensive language, some perspectives that might offend. But, it's in these brutally honest and desperate cries that I've found a hope with God that weathers the chaos of life.

*Who could really express words better than Bono, front man for U2, when he writes of the Psalms,*

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***Abandonment and displacement are the stuff of my favourite psalms. The Psalter may be a font of gospel music, but for me it's despair that the psalmist really reveals and the nature of his special relationship with God. Honesty, even to the point of anger. "How long, Lord? Wilt thou hide thyself forever?" (Psalm 89), or "Answer me when I call" (Psalm 5).***

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### And Back Again

The cycle, as Brueggemann points out, doesn't end with disorientation—but a reorientation. It's this new orientation that we find ourselves clinging to to make sense of the world. But it is also this new orientation that one day, we will again, have to come to terms that what was new has now been found limited and wanting. Disorientation follows. And on and on. For all

who are reading—you may find yourself exhausted imaging the cycle of things I am describing. But for as many who are weary at the thought—there are those invigorated by the journey of old to new and the liminal space in between. May we have patience and grace to encourage one another—seeing the beauty of both perspectives.

One more insight from Brueggeman, on the subversive nature of making room for such a process of ORIENTATION + DISORIENTATION + NEW ORIENTATION (and back again, and again),

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***The dominant ideology of our culture is committed to continuity and success and to the avoidance of pain, hurt, and loss. The dominant culture is also resistant to genuine newness and real surprise. It is curious but true, that surprise is as unwelcome as is loss. And our culture is organized to prevent the experience of both.***

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And by the way, before you and I make a formula out of this process, let's hold it loosely. We cannot always readily fit into such narrowed categories—but, they may be helpful to us if we resist forcing life to fit.

**WHEN HAVE YOU GONE THROUGH A SIMILAR "PATTERN" OF ORIENTATION + DISORIENTATION + NEW ORIENTATION?**

**CAN YOU IDENTIFY WHERE YOU ARE IN THE PROCESS NOW? WRITE ABOUT IT.**



# The Forty Begins \* Deconstructing Time

## PSALM 102

A prayer of the weak and oppressed, when he turns his complaints to the Eternal.

*Hear me, O Eternal One, hear my prayer!*

*Hear my lonely desperate cry for help.*

*Do not hide from me*

*when my days are filled with anguish;*

*Lend Your ear to my wailing,*

*and answer me quickly when I call.*

*For my days come and go, vanishing like smoke,*

*and my bones are charred like bricks of a hearth.*

*My heart is beaten down like grass withered and scorched in the summer heat;*

*I can't even remember to eat.*

*My body is shaken by my groans;*

*my bones cling to my skin, holding on for dear life.*

*I am like a solitary owl in the wilderness;*

*I am a lost and lonely screech owl at home in the rubble.*

*I stare at the ceiling, awake in my bed;*

*I am alone, a defenseless sparrow perched on a roof.*

*All day long my enemies chide me;*

*those who mock me spit out my name as a curse.*

*For ashes have become my bread;*

*my tears fall into my drink*

*Because of the depth of Your wrath.*

*You have brought me up*

*and then hurled me aside.*

*My days go by like a long shadow—stretched thin and disappearing—*

*I shrivel up like grass baked in the hot sun.*

*But You, O Eternal One, remain forever,*

*and Your name endures to all generations.*

*You will rise up once again and remember Your love for Zion;*

*. . . Along my way He has sapped my strength;*

*He has shortened my days here on earth.*

*I said, "O my True God, don't take me away in the middle of my life;*

*Unlike me, Your years continually unfold throughout all generations."*

*In the beginning, You laid the foundation of the earth and set the skies above us with Your own hands.*

*But while they will someday pass away, You remain forever;*

*when they wear out like old clothes,*

*You will roll them up and change them into something new, and they will pass away.*

*But You are the same, You will never change;*

*Your years will never come to an end.*

*The children of those who serve You will enjoy a good, long life; their offspring will stand strong before You. (an excerpt)*

## Our Song of Deconstruction

The imagery found in this song speak of the contrast between the temporal and the eternal. Go back and note all the descriptions of the temporal by circling the phrases. It's overwhelming isn't it—the poet is facing a reality that we all want to avoid. Consider the language of Ash Wednesday, we receive the ashes and the words:

*"Remember, we are dust, and to dust we will return."*

Remember. But we do everything we can to forget. And yet, how would our life change if refused to avoid the reality that echoes from our Ash Wednesday liturgy? Often, the dominate Christian narrative would step in at this point and give us the assurance of the afterlife—devaluing the temporal and placing all the emphasis on the eternal. And yet, we must deconstruct BOTH the avoidance of death and our escapism to heaven. We must make room for BOTH now-ness and hopefulness.

The poet writes our song of deconstruction,

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***"For my days come and go, vanishing like smoke . . . unlike me, Your years continually unfold throughout all generations."***

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# Week One \* Deconstructing our Insulations

## PSALM 142

A contemplative prayer of David while he hid in a cave.

*I call out loudly to the Eternal One;  
I lift my voice to the Eternal begging for His favor.  
I let everything that's going wrong spill out of my mouth;  
I spell out all my troubles to Him.  
When my spirit buckled under the burdens I bear,  
You knew my way.  
They conspired to trip me up and trap me  
on the path where I was walking.  
Take a look around and see—to the right, to the left—  
no one is there who cares for me.  
There's no way out of here;  
no one cares about the state of my soul.  
You are the One I called to, O Eternal One.  
I said, "You're the only safe place I know;  
You're all I've got in this world.  
Oh, let me know that You hear my cry  
because I'm languishing and desperate;  
Rescue me from those who torment me  
because there's no way I can stand up to them;  
they are much too strong for me.  
Lift my captive soul from this dark prison  
so I may render to You my gratitude;  
Then Your righteous people will gather around me  
because You will treat me with astounding goodness."*

## Our Song of Deconstruction

David entered the cave to hide—to find refuge from the harm that chased him on the outside. And yet, while in the bunker, he faced his own life. In those moments, or at least reflecting on his time in the cave, he found a song—one that recounted his isolation and desperation.

For David, the cave became a place of introspection—a mirror of sorts. Imagine entering such a cave. Imagine that it's a cave of mirrors—less like a funhouse and more like a

mirror to the sum and details of your life. What would you see more clearly? Lent is a time to enter such a cave—to welcome introspection.

**WHAT DISTRACTS YOU FROM THE CAVE?**

**WHAT INSULATES YOU FROM THE MIRROR?**

**WHAT WALLS YOU OFF FROM YOURSELF?**

Consider the distractions, the insulations, the walls to be the very things we let go of during the forty days of Lent.

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***"Lent invites us to stop eating, so to speak, whatever protects us from having to face the desert inside of us. It invites us to feel our smallness, to feel our vulnerability, to feel our fears, and to open ourselves to the chaos of the desert that we can finally give the angels a chance to feed us." - Ronald Rolheiser***

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## Further Considerations

Read Matthew 4:1-11 and watch the youtube.com video: 40 - A Video Of Jesus In The Wilderness. **During the forty, we sing a song that deconstructs our insulation.** We tear away our hiddenness to find what is true. To enter the cave is to enter a mirror. Not a mirror for selfies and indulgence, but a mirror that speaks back the truth of who we are. It is in the cave that we will quiet the voices and listen deep within, to the truth of our beauty and our brokenness. The angels come to minister, and we will be awoken to more of God and the truth of ourselves.

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***"For us, Satan and wild animals refer particularly to the chaos inside of us that normally we either deny or simply refuse to face: our paranoia, our anger, our jealousies, our distance from others, our fantasies, our grandiosity, our addictions, our unresolved hurts, our sexual complexity, our incapacity to really pray, our faith doubts, and our dark secrets." Ronald Rolheiser***

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## Week Two / Deconstructing our Fictions

### Psalm 32

A contemplative prayer of David.

*How happy is the one whose wrongs are forgiven,  
whose sin is hidden from sight.*

*How happy is the person whose sin the Eternal will not  
take into account.*

*How happy are those who no longer lie, to themselves or  
others.*

*When I refused to admit my wrongs, I was miserable,  
moaning and complaining all day long  
so that even my bones felt brittle.*

*Day and night, Your hand kept pressing on me.*

*My strength dried up like water in the summer heat;  
You wore me down.*

[pause]

*When I finally saw my own lies,  
I owned up to my sins before You,*

*and I did not try to hide my evil deeds from You.*

*I said to myself, "I'll admit all my sins to the Eternal,"  
and You lifted and carried away the guilt of my sin.*

[pause]

*So let all who are devoted to You*

*speak honestly to You now, while You are still listening.*

*For then when the floods come, surely the rushing water  
will not even reach them.*

*You are my hiding place.*

*You will keep me out of trouble*

*and envelop me with songs that remind me I am free.*

[pause]

*I will teach you and tell you the way to go and how to get  
there;*

*I will give you good counsel, and I will watch over you.*

*But don't be stubborn and stupid like horses and mules  
who, if not reined by leather and metal,  
will run wild, ignoring their masters.*

*Tormented and empty are wicked and destructive people,  
but the one who trusts in the Eternal is wrapped tightly  
in His gracious love.*

*Express your joy; be happy in Him, you who are good and  
true.*

*Go ahead, shout and rejoice aloud, you whose hearts are  
honest and straightforward.*

### Our Song of Deconstruction

The Message translates the misery this way,

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***"When I kept it all inside,  
my bones turned to powder,  
my words became daylong groans.  
The pressure never let up,  
all the juices of my life dried up.***

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What a picture of the haunting that becomes our life  
without examination. Peter Rollins implores us,

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***"(We must) experience the trauma of our fictions . . ."***

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**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU TO EXPERIENCE THE TRAUMA  
OF OUR FICTIONS? WRITE IT.**

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***We've missed the scope of Jesus' teaching by limiting  
repentance to a confession or obligation to admit  
wrongdoing in order to be accepted by God and  
ultimately admitted into heaven. Jesus' teaching is much  
more transformational than that. What Jesus invited us  
into was a complete reform of thinking, intention and  
behavior so that we could experience heaven now—  
liberation, unity, peace, love. - Phileena Heuertz***

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As you encounter your fictions, and confess them, consider  
the deeper, "more transformational" process of the holistic  
reform Phileena Heuertz writes about. How do her words  
reshape your view of even this Psalm?

*To watch a beautiful (but dark and gritty) redemption story, view  
Sympathy for Delicious (2011) directed by Mark Ruffalo -  
streaming on Netflix. Consider the complexity of the journey for  
Delicious D and for the priest. It's not a simple movement through  
our fictions, lies, and motivations.*

# The Forty - Week 03 / Deconstructing Production

## Psalm 40

*I waited a long time for the Eternal;  
He finally knelt down to hear me.  
He listened to my weak and whispered cry.  
He reached down and drew me  
from the deep, dark hole where I was stranded, mired in  
the muck and clay.  
With a gentle hand, He pulled me out  
To set me down safely on a warm rock;  
He held me until I was steady enough to continue the  
journey again.  
As if that were not enough,  
because of Him my mind is clearing up.  
Now I have a new song to sing—  
a song of praise to the One who saved me.  
Because of what He's done, many people will see  
and come to trust in the Eternal.  
Surely those who trust the Eternal—  
who don't trust in proud, powerful people  
Or in people who care little for reality, chasing false gods—  
surely they are happy, as I have become.  
You have done so many wonderful things,  
had so many tender thoughts toward us, Eternal my  
God, that go on and on, ever increasing.  
Who can compare with You?*

## Our Song of Deconstruction

What we produce and our value as a human being are almost always linked. “What do you do?” is often at the top of the questions that begin small talk. Who we are is about what we do. But something feels broken about this. It's not that who we are can be completely disconnected from what we do—certainly that's an extreme on the other end. But, we must be more than our produce—more than our careers—more than our output. Joblessness or physical limitations may be two of most obvious exposures to such a limited way of valuing our lives. If we find ourselves laid off for any amount of time—we no doubt realize we are more than our career. If we find ourselves in a season or permanent state of limitation physically, we realize we must be more than the things we could accomplish. But, we can also find a

exposing of this limited way of valuing when we make our giftedness into all that we are. Everyone praises us for our talents, but we are more than the talent too. We must be more. Our talents can dry up, they can be our curse, they can become what we hate when we are burned out.

Sabbath teaches us that weekly that we still exist in beauty and fullness even when we resist production. It's within Sabbath that God reminds us to be—not do. Sabbath is a weekly reminder that our lives cannot be reduced.

The Psalmist finds an end to the proficiency of self-actualization. Now, in a hole, the poet realizes that helplessness doesn't strip of value—but enhances it somehow. Humility. Needing others. This does no harm to our value when we've seen a bigger picture of who we are. We are more than our doing. We are being—and in our being, we are not an island of self-sufficiency. Cry out in the words of the Psalm—if you've ever felt the end of your self-reliance. We need others. Find the new song of Sabbath.

## A Practice in Non-Production

### Centering Prayer

**PREPARE** by choosing a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. It would be fitting to use, *REST* for this exercise.

**SIT COMFORTABLY** with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.

**REPEAT REST** when engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. Your thoughts may also include body sensations, feelings, images, and the need to be doing. Whisper your sacred word until silence resumes.

**BE SILENT** and continue to sit in silence for 5 to 10 mins.

**RELEASE** the need for this time to produce anything. Maybe you will sense something from God but maybe you will not. The point isn't for revelation, but renewal. It is a conditioning of sorts to relearn a sense of emptiness—and to find God in our non-producing, restful, quiet, peaceful moments.

# The Forty - Week Four \* Deconstructing our Relationship

## PSALM 22

My God, my God, why have You turned Your back on me?

Your ears are deaf to my groans.

O my God, I cry all day and You are silent;  
my tears in the night bring no relief.

Still, You are holy;

You make Your home on the praises of Israel.

Our mothers and fathers trusted in You;  
they trusted, and You rescued them.

They cried out to You for help and were spared;  
they trusted in You and were vindicated.

But I am a worm and not a human being,  
a disgrace and an object of scorn.

Everyone who sees me laughs at me;  
they whisper to one another I'm a loser; they sneer and  
mock me, saying,

"He relies on the Eternal; let the Eternal rescue him  
and keep him safe because He is happy with him."

But You are the One who granted me life;

You endowed me with trust as I nursed at my mother's  
breast. I was dedicated to You at birth;

You've been my God from my mother's womb.  
Stay close to me—trouble is at my door;  
no one else can help me.

I'm surrounded by many tormenters; like strong bulls of  
Bashan, they circle around me with their taunts.  
They open their mouths wide at me like ravenous lions.

My life is poured out like water,  
and all my bones have slipped out of joint.

My heart melts like wax inside me.  
My strength is gone, dried up like shards of pottery;  
my dry tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;  
You lay me in the dust of death.

A throng of evil ones has surrounded me  
like a pack of wild dogs;  
They pierced my hands and ripped a hole in my feet.  
I count all my bones; people gawk and stare at me.

They make a game out of dividing my clothes among  
themselves; they cast lots for the clothes on my back.

But You, O Eternal, stay close;

O You, my help, hurry to my side.

Save my life from violence,  
my sweet life from the teeth of the wild dog.

Rescue me from the mouth of the lion.

From the horns of the wild oxen, You responded to my  
plea. I will speak Your Name to my brothers and sisters  
when I praise You in the midst of the community. (an excerpt)

## The Setting for Psalm 22

Let's gain a little context, and to do that, let's let the  
theologian-rockstar-activist share some the environment for  
such a dark psalm. Bono writes,

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*At the age of 12, I was a fan of David. He felt familiar, like a pop star could feel familiar. The words of the psalms were as poetic as they were religious, and he was a star. Before David could fulfil the prophecy and become the king of Israel, he had to take quite a beating. He was forced into exile and ended up in a cave in some no-name border town facing the collapse of his ego and abandonment by God. But this is where the soap opera got interesting. This is where David was said to have composed his first psalm -- a blues. That's what a lot of the psalms feel like to me, the blues. Man shouting at God -- "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me?" (Psalm 22).*

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## Our Song of Deconstruction

This is a heart wrenching song. From the opening words,  
we can image anguish so great that Jesus chooses this psalm  
to give language to his suffering on the cross.

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**"My God, my God, why have You turned Your back on me?"**

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More agony continues,

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**"My heart melts like wax inside me."**

---

David is obviously drawing from a dark place to write lyrics as disturbing as these. What is your reaction to such lines? Do you identify with his passionate tone or his desperation?

I find the most hopeful words to be a subtle plea that is easily missed in all the bigger language of abandonment and rescue. David petitions God,

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***But You, O Eternal, stay close;***

---

Earlier in the song David warmly imagines God being with him as he's conceived, developed in the womb, and as a nursing baby. David is recounting more than rescue, more than abandonment, but the nearness—the relationship with God. “Stay close” David writes.

I have prayed for rescue and seen no action (that meets my expectation). I have pled for intervention and felt abandoned (at least as I expected to hear). But, how often have I cried out—not for action, but for presence?

By no means am I saying that we should stop praying and pleading and asking for action. But, what if our relationship to God looked less like rubbing a genie's bottle for three wishes and more like a desire for the companionship of God? In fact, what if those around us—was the answer to such companionship? What if God's nearness was coming in the way of friendship with others?

**HAVE YOU EVER TAKEN ASSESSMENT OF YOUR PRAYERS?**

**HOW HONEST ARE YOUR WORDS?**

**HOW ROTE? HOW RELATIONAL?**

Psalm 22 deconstructs my expectations. The poem deconstruction my relationship with God. Do I have a relationship—or is God simply fielding my requests. What would it even look like to reshape my requests (or lack of) into the simple and honest prayer, ***stay close***.

## **ANTI-PSALMS**

To stay close—on our end—might very well mean that we need to get more honest in our prayers. If we wrote and compiled a book of poems and lyric to God, how lively

would it actually be? Would it look like the wild ups and downs — from the heart — uncalculated — unedited — language of David?

Recently reading a collection of writings from poets about their process, I came across the work of Alicia Ostriker. She writes about what she images are “Anti-Psalms.”

Alicia Ostriker writes,

*My poems wrestle with the need of God, the violence of god. I should rather say that I let these matters attack and wrestle with my poems. In 1999 I was working on a manuscript provisionally entitled "the space of this dialogue," after a sentence of Paul Celan, "Only in the space of this dialogue does that which is addressed take form and gather around the I who is addressing it." The experience was not so much of writing as of receiving. The poems arrived intermittently, and I had undertaken not to tell them what to say. They often addressed God, not expecting a response. Early in the process I wrote down some lines and called them "psalm." They are more like an anti-psalm. They say this:*

*I am not lyric any more  
I will not play the harp  
for your pleasure*

*I will not make a joyful  
noise to you, neither  
will I lament*

*for I know you drink  
lamentation, too,  
like wine*

*so I dully repeat  
you hurt me  
I hate you*

*I pull my eyes away from the hills  
I will not kill for you  
I will never love you again*

*unless you ask me*

*What I recognize in the poem is my resistance to a God who deals cruelly with us and demands our praise. What the final line tells me is that I want to stop resisting. Perhaps I am like one of those abused women who keeps forgiving her abuser. You read about them. They phone the police and then hide their bruises and refuse to press charges. Another poem ventriloquizes a pious voice that could emerge from any of the monotheistic faiths, and concludes with a last line that is, alas, a vast understatement:*

*One of these days  
oh one of these days  
will be a festival and a judgment*

*and our enemies will be thrown  
into the pit while we rejoice  
and sing hymns*

*Some people actually think this way*

I share Ostriker's words, not to offend, but to inspire. What would your life with God be like if you began to be truly honest? Use the area on this page to try your own ANTI-PSALM. And that's the funny thing—right? I cannot think of a psalm that could be written that would be ANTI— ; well, actually, maybe the only ANTI-PSALM is the one we write or speak that has nothing of us in it.

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***“Everything must be brought to speech, and everything brought to speech must be addressed to God, who is the final reference for all of life.” — Walter Brueggemann***

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**WRITE A PSALM ABOUT BEING DISAPPOINTED IN GOD.**

**WRITE ABOUT A TIME YOU FELT ABANDONED.**

**WRITE A PSALM ABOUT WHEN YOU WERE SCARED, HURT, ANGRY, OR HOPELESS.**

**WRITE ABOUT WHEN YOU WERE CONFUSED AND FULL OF DOUBT.**

**WRITE ABOUT YOUR CYNICISM, YOUR GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS, YOUR SCARS.**

**WRITE WHATEVER COMES TO MIND.**

# The Forty - Week Five / Deconstructing our Formulas

## Psalm 73

Truly God is good to His people, Israel,  
to those with pure hearts.  
Though I know this is true, I almost lost my footing;  
yes, my steps were on slippery ground.  
You see, there was a time when I envied arrogant men  
and thought, "The wicked look pretty happy to me."  
For they seem to live carefree lives, free of suffering;  
their bodies are strong and healthy.  
They don't know trouble as we do;  
they are not plagued with problems as the rest of us are.  
They've got pearls of pride strung around their necks;  
they clothe their bodies with violence.  
They have so much more than enough.  
Their eyes bulge because they are so fat with possessions.  
They have more than their hearts could have ever  
imagined.  
There is nothing sacred, and no one is safe.  
Vicious sarcasm drips from their lips;  
they bully and threaten to crush their enemies.  
They even mock God as if He were not above;  
their arrogant tongues boast throughout the earth; they  
feel invincible.  
Even God's people turn and are carried away by them;  
they watch and listen, yet find no fault in them.  
You will hear them say, "How can the True God possibly  
know anyway? He's not even here.  
So how can the Most High have any knowledge of what  
happens here?"  
Let me tell you what I know about the wicked:  
they are comfortably at rest while their wealth is  
growing and growing.  
Oh, let this not be me! It seems I have scrubbed my heart to  
keep it clean  
and washed my hands in innocence.  
And for what? Nothing.  
For all day long, I am being punished,  
each day awakening to stern chastisement.  
If I had said to others these kinds of things about the plight  
of God's good people,  
then I know I would have betrayed the next generation.  
Trying to solve this mystery on my own exhausted me;

I couldn't bear to look at it any further.  
So I took my questions to the True God,  
and in His sanctuary I realized something so chilling and  
final: their lives have a deadly end.  
Because You have certainly set the wicked upon a slippery  
slope,  
You've set them up to slide to their destruction.  
And they won't see it coming. It will happen so fast:  
first, a flash of terror, and then desolation.  
It is like a dream from which someone awakes.  
You will wake up, Lord, and loathe what has become of  
them.  
You see, my heart overflowed with bitterness and  
cynicism;  
I felt as if someone stabbed me in the back.  
But I didn't know the truth;  
I have been acting like a stupid animal toward You.  
But look at this: You are still holding my right hand;  
You have been all along.  
Even though I was angry and hard-hearted, You gave me  
good advice;  
when it's all over, You will receive me into Your glory.  
For all my wanting, I don't have anyone but You in heaven.  
There is nothing on earth that I desire other than You.  
I admit how broken I am in body and spirit,  
but God is my strength, and He will be mine forever.  
It will happen: whoever shuns You will be silenced forever;  
You will bring an end to all who refuse to be true to You.  
But the closer I am to You, my God, the better because life  
with You is good.  
O Lord, the Eternal, You keep me safe—  
I will tell everyone what You have done.

## Our Song of Deconstruction

The writer seems to know one thing to be true, while  
experiencing an entire other reality. Formulas and  
doctrines and beliefs are nice and helpful, but they can also  
lead to a stunting of growth.

**IN WHAT WAYS HAVE YOU FOUND A RIGID POSTURE TO BE  
CONFINING AND UNHELPFUL?**



**WHAT FORMULAS HAVE YOU LIVED BY, AND EVENTUALLY FOUND THAT THEY LIMITED YOUR EXPERIENCE OF LIFE?**

**WHAT FORMULAIC PROMISES OF GOD HAVE REDUCED YOUR LIFE WITH GOD TO TRANSACTIONAL RATHER THAN RELATIONSHIP?**

Trust may be a better word than belief at this point. Belief can (it doesn't have to) sound so final. Trust gives more of a sense that whatever is happening—one can remain—while not seeing the bigger picture. I think trust speaks to a willingness for things to feel chaotic and shaky—while still willing to roll with it.

Trust has some pitfalls too, though. Sometimes we may say, “I trust that everything works together for good.” And Scripture even attests to such. But, I think it's our version of “good” and even the shallowness of such language can be harmful. Trust is not a lack of questioning. Trust is not a grit-our-teeth-and-bare-it-without-any-emotion-pushback-or-struggle. Trust is saying, I don't get it. I'm frustrated or devastated, or pissed off. Because trust, ultimately, is engaging in relationship.

The psalms seems to provide language for such relationship,

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***But the closer I am to You, my God, the better because life with You is good.***

---

Good may not be meet your expectation. In fact, life may even bring some pretty tragic and horrific experiences your way. We must not make light of such things—or gloss over them with “good” language. However, maybe we can make room for relationship above our expectations.

Maybe our formulas for what life should fit into, will fall - and we will experience life as nearness.

## APPENDIX 01

### Psalm / Anti-Psalm

*an excerpt from The American Poetry Review, July 1, 2002, by Alicia Ostriker*

A few days after the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City in September 2001, the recently inaugurated Poet Laureate of the United States was interviewed by the journalist Sandra Martin. Asked what role poetry might play at such a moment, he replied that for him poetry was a private art, and needed a private focus. In a public radio interview on September 11 itself, he suggested that almost any page of any book of poetry would be "speaking for life ... against what happened today." Or, he said, read the Psalms. (1)

The Psalms? Was he joking?

The Psalms are glorious. No, the Psalms are terrible. No, the Psalms are both glorious and terrible, both attractive and repulsive to me emotionally and theologically. I read as a poet and a woman, a literary critic and a left-wing Jew who happens to be obsessed with the Bible. And when I read these poems, I experience a split-screen effect: wildly contradictory responses.

As Catullus says: I love and hate. And it is excruciating.

The Psalms are overwhelmingly beautiful as poems. They represent the human spirit, my own spirit, in its intimate yearning for a connection with the divine Being who is the source of all being, the energy that creates and sustains the universe. Unlike the portions of the Bible that lay down rules and regulations (I skip these), and unlike the narratives that tell compelling tales of patriarchs and matriarchs, judges, warriors and kings, but don't tell how they feel, what they think, what it all means to them--the Psalms are love poems to God. Since the course of true love never does run smooth, the Psalms are poems of emotional turbulence.

Sometimes the psalmist expresses a wonderfully serene, almost childlike faith and trust. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. The ineffable sweetness of this pastoral image surely taps a deep human desire to be relieved of responsibility, including the responsibility of being human. Is that why Psalm 23 is the most popular in the whole psalter? In "He restoreth my soul," the Hebrew for "my soul" is *nafshi*, a term humans share with animals. It is wonderful, too, that the psalmist does not declare "I am a sheep" or "I am like a sheep," but speaks directly as from the animal soul, the *nefesh*, itself. In Psalm 37 we are advised not to "fret" over evildoers; they are going to disappear, and "the meek shall

inherit the earth." All of us who are meek, who feel powerless on earth, can identify with this fantasy. Sometimes a psalm runs a video in my frontal lobe, and causes my back to straighten and my lungs to pull in air--I will lift up my eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth (121). These two sentences are so physical, but then so metaphysical, shaped like a chiasmus (a kind of word sandwich) but also striking a sequence of registers that expand into larger and larger space: body (eyes), natural environment (vista of hills), cosmos (heaven, earth). I catch my breath every time. I feel confident and alive every time. Commercials for recreational vehicles profiled against a mountain sunrise try to press the same button of exhilaration in me, but something is missing. My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved. He that keepeth thee will not slumber.... The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil. God is connected to nature, as its maker. God is in the hills, God is in the mountains. God made heaven and earth, so you and I are protected by the entire cosmos, which makes us very safe. God even makes it possible to shift pronouns from me to you without a touch of anxiety. And look at the security blanket of language when the psalmist has behaved and quieted myself like a child just weaned from his mother. My soul is like a weaned child (131). Not a child in the womb or a nursing child, but one who has left those comforts behind, and probably wept for them, but is confident of being loved anyway.

At other moments the psalmist is racked by doubt and self-doubt. How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? For ever? (13). Here is a voice of suffering, complaining, crying out, feeling abandoned, hurt, tormented. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the mouth of my roaring? (22). It seems evident that wicked people prosper in this world, that good people suffer, and that God refuses to intervene. Why standest thou far off O Lord? Why hidest thou in time of trouble? The wicked persecute the poor.... [the wicked man] boasts of his heart's desire. As for his enemies, he puffeth at them (10). Or, as we would say, the bad guy blows off anyone who bothers him. They are enclosed in their own fat, with their mouths they speak proudly (17). And they say, How does God know? (73). O God, how long shall the adversary reproach? Shall the enemy blaspheme thy name for ever? (74). Evildoers get away with murder, they are shameless, and the psalmist passionately begs God's help.

## APPENDIX 02

### An Easter Invitation

#### Lectio Divina

*Begin with a prayer of humble expectation*

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***Abide in me as I abide in you . . . If you abide in me and my words abide in you... (John 15)***

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*continue on through the following movements of prayer:*

**The Prayer of LECTIO:** In Lectio, we slowly and deliberately read the Scripture passage aloud, in its entirety. Ask, what is it in this text that resonates or stands out? Feel the words. Listen for what ‘shimmers.’ Stay there, focusing on that single word or phrase, in prayer.

**The Prayer of MEDITATIO:** In Meditatio, we slow down even more—asking what the word or phrase that ‘shimmered’ is saying. Let your imagination go, images are invitations to dialogue with God. It’s in this prayer that “shimmering word” or phrase may “beckon you, address you . . . with something that stirs, unnerves, disturbs, grabs, or touches you.”

**The Prayer of ORATIO:** Now is the time to remember, this is not informational, but the entire exercise of is prayerful. Let go of special facts, or histories, and let The Story sink deep within. Speak and listen to God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you, see the words as a means to awaken you.

**The Prayer of CONTEMPLATIO:** In Contemplatio, you can rest in God’s embrace, let go of the words and images until silence--rest--receptivity enters. You will carry with you this experience with new eyes and a willingness to see the passage fresh as you move back into your days encounters.

**The Prayer of ACTIO:** In Actio, you are moving throughout your day—but, ready to listen and look for moments to act on the interaction you had while doing the practice of Lectio Divina. What in your prayer was drawing you to act?

*Use the following as your Lectio Divina prayer:*

#### Psalm 14

*Come, all you who have wandered  
far from the path,  
who have separated yourselves  
from Love;  
A banquet is prepared for you in the  
heart's Secret Room.*

*There you will find the way home;  
a welcome ever awaits you!  
Even as you acknowledge the times  
you have erred,  
the forgiveness of the Beloved  
will envelop you.*

*Call upon the Beloved when fear  
arises,  
when you feel overwhelmed;  
The Eternal Listener will heed  
your cry;  
you will find strength to face  
the shadows.*

*Befriend all that is within you,  
discover the Secret Room in  
your heart.*

*Then will abundant blessings enter  
your home; and,  
you will welcome the Divine Guest  
who is ever with you.*

*- from Psalms For Praying,  
An Invitation to Wholeness  
by Nan C. Merrill*

## APPENDIX 03

### Reading List

#### Psalms of Disorientation:

*Psalm 13*

*Psalm 22*

*Psalm 32*

*Psalm 35*

*Psalm 50*

*Psalm 51*

*Psalm 73*

*Psalm 74*

*Psalm 79*

*Psalm 81*

*Psalm 86*

*Psalm 88*

*Psalm 130*

*Psalm 137*

*Psalm 143*

#### Other Books:

*The Spirituality of the Psalms*

By Walter Brueggeman

*God for Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Lent and Easter*

By Greg Pennoyer

*A Book of Psalms: Selections Adapted from the Hebrew*

by Stephen Mitchell

*My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*

by Christian Wiman

*Reading the Bible with the Damned*

by Bob Ekblad

*A God in the House: Poets Talk About Faith*

by Ilya Kaminsky

# APPENDIX 04

## COLLABORATIVE VANITAS

### History in Art

*Vanitas, in art, is a genre of still-life painting that flourished in the Netherlands in the early 17th century. A vanitas painting contains collections of objects symbolic of the inevitability of death and the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures; it exhorts the viewer to consider mortality and to repent. The vanitas evolved from simple pictures of skulls and other symbols of death and transience frequently painted on the reverse sides of portraits during the late Renaissance. It had acquired an independent status by c. 1550 and by 1620 had become a popular genre. Its development until its decline about 1650 was centered in Leiden, in the United Provinces of the Netherlands, an important seat of Calvinism, which emphasized humanity's total depravity and advanced a rigid moral code. - wikipedia*

### Participate in Vanitas

*Bring an item that represents what you are giving up (or taking on) during the 40 days of Lent. We will be working on an art project together - to view and reflect on our community journey of Lent. To help you consider your fast - think about the following words from Ronald Rolheiser in the book, God For Us, and consider what you could give up (or take on) - that would remind you of the non-fulfillment found in the Season of Lent.*

---

***Lent. We know it is a season within which we are meant to fast, to intensify longing, and to raise our spiritual temperatures, all through the crucible of non-fulfillment.***

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*Consider what insulates you, what supports you, what you may even “hide” behind to avoid the full force of vulnerability.*

---

***(Jesus) deprived himself of all the normal supports that protected him from feeling, full-force, his vulnerability, dependence, and need to surrender in deeper trust to God the Father. And in doing this, we are told, he found himself hungry and consequently vulnerable to temptations from the devil, but also, by the same token, he was more open to the Father.***

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*Consider any areas of life you avoid—what would help you face them fully—no longer denying them.*

---

***“For us, Satan and wild animals refer particularly to the chaos inside of us that normally we either deny or simply refuse to face: our paranoia, our anger, our jealousies, our distance from others, our fantasies, our grandiosity, our addictions, our unresolved hurts, our sexual complexity, our incapacity to really pray, our faith doubts, and our dark secrets.”***

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*Examples of what to bring . . .*

*If you are slowing down, maybe you bring a clock.*

*If you are reducing technology, bring a smartphone.*

*If you are avoiding sweets, bring a box of twinkies.*

*(Bring these to Community Meal night 3/16/2014 so we can take pictures of the still-life, Vanitas)*