

Abide

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Keeping Vigil with the Word of God

Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB



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*Dedicated to
the Word of God,
abiding in you.*

Contents

Foreword xi

Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction 1

Chapter One: Drawn Like a Magnet to the Divine 11

1. Desire for God (Psalm 63) 13
 2. Come to the Water (Isaiah 55) 18
 3. All I Want Is to Know Christ (Philippians 3:7-16) 23
 4. Recognizing the Beloved (John 21:1-14) 27
 5. Pouring Out Your Heart of Love (Luke 7:36-50) 31
 6. Pilgrimage to the Heart of God (Psalm 84) 35
 7. The Prayer of Creation (Psalm 148) 40
 8. Consecrate Them In Truth (John 17:1-26) 44
- Poetic Summary of Chapter One* 49

Chapter Two: The Deepening Places 51

1. The Tapping of the Heart (1 Corinthians 2:1-16) 53
2. Staying Connected to the Vine (John 15:1-8) 58
3. Clothing Yourself with Virtues (Colossians 3:1-17) 63
4. The Comfort of Being Known by God (Psalm 139) 67

5. When Revelation Dawns (Acts 9:1-19) 72
 6. A Space of Love (Genesis 18:1-15) 76
 7. Opening Your Heart to Guidance (Psalm 25) 80
 8. Every Day Is the “Day of the Lord”
(1 Thessalonians 5:1-26) 85
- Poetic Summary of Chapter Two* 89

Chapter Three: The Beautiful Struggle of Daily Life 90

1. Being Loved through the “Meanwhiles”
(Matthew 14:22-33) 91
 2. Opening Your Eyes (Luke 24:13-32) 96
 3. Hold All Things Lightly (Matthew 19:16-22) 100
 4. Everyone Needs a Refuge (Psalm 16) 104
 5. The Power In Powerlessness (2 Corinthians 12:1-10) 108
 6. Called to Be Holy (1 Peter 1:13-25) 112
 7. What’s Enough? (Luke 12:22-34) 116
 8. The Limp of Blessing (Genesis 32:1-33) 120
- Poetic Summary of Chapter Three* 124

Chapter Four: Don’t Look Back 126

1. Don’t Look Back (Luke 9:51-62) 128
 2. The Practice of Being Ready (1 Peter 4:7-11) 133
 3. If Only You Had Listened (Isaiah 48:12-21) 138
 4. Away with Your Troubled Hearts (John 14:1-14) 143
 5. This Tremendous Love (Matthew 5:38-48) 148
 6. A Rule of Life (Philippians 4:4-9) 153
 7. “Do Not Fret, It Only Leads to Evil” (Psalm 37) 158
 8. Before the Mountains Were Born (Psalm 90) 162
- Poetic Summary of Chapter Four* 167

Chapter Five: Return to Your Original Love	168
1. United In Purpose (1 Corinthians 3:1-25)	170
2. "Chosen and Precious" (1 Peter 2:1-10)	175
3. Called to Freedom (Galatians 5)	180
4. A Season of Forgiveness (Genesis 33)	185
5. How Dear You Are! (1 Thessalonians 1 and 2)	189
6. Jesus Stopped (Mark 10:46-52)	193
7. Somewhere In You Lives a Child (Mark 10:13-16; Luke 10:21-22)	198
8. Little Lights along the Way (Deuteronomy 8:1-20)	204
<i>Poetic Summary of Chapter Five</i>	209

Notes	211
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Bibliography	213
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Foreword

*When I found your words, I devoured them;
they became my joy and the happiness of my heart. (Jer 15:16)*

Jeremiah, the great prophet of Israel, was torn between his devotion to God and his utter terror at proclaiming the difficult message that God's people needed to hear. He begged the Lord for relief from his duties, and yet embraced his prophetic mission with a zeal that was singular. Why? Because God's words had become Jeremiah's nourishment; he knew no joy or happiness could match the power of God that filled him.

Jeremiah wrestled with the Word of God, a sometimes difficult but always life-giving Word. He is not the only one to do so. Our Bibles are filled with stories of those who sought God's voice and responded, sometimes haltingly and sometimes poignantly, to the sound of the divine. They listened for God's voice so often that it became familiar.

We do the same. When we allow God's words to wash over us, we cannot help but be transformed, however slowly, until finally we want to consume the sacred words. This book, appropriately titled *Abide*, invites us to sit with the Word of God, to remain there for a while so that it can begin to seep into us. It reminds us that receiving the Word of God is not a matter of intellect but of presence, our lingering presence in the company of God, and God's desire to be present with and for us.

In 1991, Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB, began writing a regular column for the *Stepping Stones* newsletter of Little Rock Scripture Study. From the beginning, she set out to invite readers into a relationship with God through the words of Scripture. Her columns are titled “Romancing the Word” and in each one she reminds us that when we pray with Scripture, we place ourselves knowingly in relationship with God. These original columns form the background for this book that you hold in your hands.

In the reflections that Sr. Macrina offers, you will notice the rich Benedictine heritage of *lectio divina* as well as evidence of artful attention to lived experience. This is the kind of book that can be picked up for a short while, allowing just a few pages at a time to penetrate your being. This book will invite you to stillness and wonder, and sometimes to wrestling and embracing.

Cackie Upchurch
Director, Little Rock Scripture Study

Acknowledgments

The Gift you have received, give as a gift. (see Matt 10:8)

This book is a gift and I am indebted to many gift-givers who have assisted me in the shaping of these pages as well as teaching me to abide.

I am grateful for the gift of

- the Little Rock Scripture Study staff and their tireless efforts to offer the Word of God to seekers throughout the world: Judy Hoelzeman, who in 1991 invited me to write a column for the *Stepping Stones* newsletter; Cackie Upchurch, director, and Susan McCarthy, newsletter editor, who have been encouraging mentors in this project;
- Mary Ann Soerries, Joyce Rupp, Elise Forst, Beth Fritsch, and Diana Squibb for their wise suggestions about rearranging words;
- my Benedictine community, Fr. David McKillin, Barbara Bock, Rachel Dietz, Kay Pope, and Karen Ewan for the little ways (often unknown to them) they teach me to abide;
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- and finally for my newly discovered editor Mary Ann Soerries, who, although not a professional, became my primary editor for this work. As she faithfully perused these chapters making valuable suggestions for improvement, I kept saying to her, “People get paid for what you are doing.” Nevertheless, she did it as gift.

The Gift you have received, give as a gift.



Introduction

Long before I knew anything about the Word of God, I found words intriguing. As a child I took delight in rearranging words into phrases and patterns, stories and poems. Perhaps, even then, I was romancing the Word. I was discovering that words bless. They move and dance and sing. They abide. They absorb and unite. They inspire. Words invite us to feel included, loved, honored. They call us to play and to work. They teach, comfort, praise. They forgive. They ask us to be authentic and true. They summon us to go deeper into the mystery of our lives. They teach us compassion and love. They make us laugh and cry. They draw us into the romance of life. Words can also destroy, wound, and kill the spirit. They can reject and ridicule. They can torment and make us believe that we are less than we are. Words are powerful; we can use them for good or for evil. Our words have power to bless or distress others. When we speak a word, it cannot be unspoken.

When our words are united to the Word of God, the result is a new creation. We are born into creativity, for ultimately we have come from the womb of God, the Source of life. The Word that spoke us into life was the Word of God. There is power in every word God speaks and since each one of us is a word of God, there is power in our words also. This is why it is so important for us to attend the Word. Pay attention to the words you speak. Pay attention to the words spoken by God. Only with attention

will we discover the power in the Word that enables us to call it the Word of God.

Keeping Vigil with the Word

In the Gospel of John Jesus directs us, “Remain in me, as I remain in you” (15:4). Here is an invitation to make the Word of God your home. This book of scriptural reflections encourages you to keep vigil with the Word each day so that you become more aware of the Holy Mystery keeping vigil with you. Thus as you open the pages of your heart to the transforming power of God’s Word, a depth within you makes itself known and cries out for continued nurturing.

I love the story told in the first chapter of the Gospel of John (vv. 35-42). We see John the Baptist pointing his disciples in the direction of Jesus. The two disciples of John then begin following along behind Jesus. When Jesus sees them following and asks them, “What are you looking for?” they inquire, “where are you staying?” (v. 38). Jesus’ answer, “Come, and you will see” (v. 39), can be an invitation to each of us to move deeper into our romance with the Word of God. The quest for a deeper relationship with the Holy Mystery we call God requires more than just asking questions about the dwelling place of God. We must be willing to be a home for the Word of God. Likewise, the Word becomes our abiding place, our abode. It is the space in our lives where we practice being rather than doing; it is the space where we remain in Jesus as he remains in us. There is no way to arrive at this place except through the gentle practice of romancing the Word of God.

In light of the story of the first disciples being called, I offer you two questions as guides for your transformational journey:

- *What are you looking for?* This is the question Jesus asked the two disciples who were tagging along behind him. Tagging along wasn't enough! A little more commitment was needed. However, at this point the disciples didn't have a clue about Jesus' identity. They were merely following him because John the Baptist pointed him out and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Curiosity is a good beginning; at least, they were looking in his direction. Nevertheless, in order to truly become a disciple of Jesus, our following must eventually become a choice of our own. In this question Jesus is trying to find out what it is they are seeking. He is curious about their hearts' deepest desire. Their counter question to Jesus is personal and probing.
- *Where are you staying?* Where is your dwelling place? Where is your home? It may be a rude awakening for the two disciples to discover that Jesus cannot tell them where he is staying by means of describing a physical environment. Perhaps Jesus is hoping they will eventually discover that he lives in communion with the one he calls Abba. His true dwelling is not in a physical place. He abides in the Holy Mystery. As they slowly become his disciples this is where they must learn to stay—not in a place but in the heart of a Mystery too deep for words.

These two questions are good spiritual guides for our quest to the home of the Beloved. We find the way on the way.

As you pray the Scriptures each day, listen to Jesus asking you, "What are you looking for?" And just what are you looking for as you spend time with the Word of God? If I were to respond to that question, I would probably answer something like this: "I'm looking for a relationship with God, a communion with Christ that shows itself in the way I live." Although that is my answer today, next week it might be a little different. Our answer will come out

of our lived experience as well as what is being revealed to us each time we come to the table of the Word of God.

Lectio Divina: How to Keep Vigil

These reflections have been gathered from my morning hours of keeping vigil with the Word of God. In the Benedictine tradition we call this form of monastic prayer *lectio divina*. In the monastic way of abiding with the Word we do not read the Scripture text to obtain information. The careful reading of the text is for the purpose of opening our hearts to be formed by the Word of God. We listen to the words so carefully that even our reading becomes a prayer. Sometimes we memorize short passages from the text so that we may more easily carry them with us throughout the day.

Here are a few suggestions for you as you entrust yourself to this way of prayer. As you begin your encounter with these meditations on the Word of God, spend some personal time with each text before reading my reflection on that text. Find the Scripture passage assigned to you in your Bible. Open the Scriptures to that particular text and then, WAIT.

Waiting may seem like an unnecessary constraint, yet the Scriptures are filled with assertions about the goodness of waiting. "For you I wait all the long day, because of your goodness, LORD" (Ps 25:5). You are invited to wait before the Word. You are not in a hurry. Are you waiting for the Holy Spirit? Yes and no! The Spirit is already present, so why are you waiting? Perhaps you are waiting for yourself to show up. Your body may be present but what about the roving mind?

A few moments of waiting can help you remember that this is a consecrated time, blessed and set apart. Your waiting may enable you to sense the presence of the Holy Spirit. Most of us

do not like to wait; we are tempted to plunge right into our work, even into our spiritual work. Yet, there is so much grace in waiting. You are keeping vigil with your longing to be transformed by the Word of God. Discover the grace of waiting. Learn to wait! When you sense a readiness in your soul, READ.

Read the Scripture text slowly, committing yourself to see it through to the end even if you decide midway through the reading that it does not speak to you. Perhaps you have prayed with this text many times before; you want something new and more exciting. Stand in faith and read it anyway. Your only assignment is to be faithful to this pathway of words. When you have finished reading the assigned Scripture text, then it is time for you to LISTEN OBEDIENTLY.

Does obedience to the Word of God seem to be an outdated assignment? You were probably expecting the task of meditating on the assigned Scripture. In a sense this is exactly what I am asking you to do; I'm just using different language. Many of us are not eager for obedience. The invitation to obedience often evokes memories of unhealthy forms of submission. The obedience referred to here, though, is a listening so deep we are drawn into the Spirit of Jesus and given a wisdom that enables us to know how to respond to the Word. It is an obedience that is revelatory.

As I grow in the way of *lectio divina* I find it an enriching practice to ask the Holy Spirit to show me how to be obedient to the Word of God. Saint Benedict asks us to listen with the ear of our hearts. You are being invited to be formed by the Word of God. Read the text a second time, opening your heart to the deeper ways you are being called to obedience. If it is helpful, journal about the particular ways this Scripture is inviting you into a greater spiritual maturity. Let the words paint icons in your mind. Envision yourself being drawn into a deeper union with God. How can the

message of this Scripture text teach you to abide? Having reflected on obedient listening to God's Word, it is now time to PRAY.

Do you know how to pray? Only the Holy Spirit can teach you to pray. I am not giving you instructions on how to pray. In whatever way the energy of the Spirit moves you, lean in that direction. Look once again at the ways God has spoken to you in this Scripture text; hold it dear and pray. With or without words, pray. Your prayer may lead you quite naturally into the final movement of *lectio*, which is simply to ABIDE.

This is a beautiful moment spent in pure contemplative presence with the Beloved. This is love. "Remain in me, as I remain in you" (John 15:4). "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10, NRSV). Dwell. Remain in love. ABIDE.

These are only a few suggestions of ways for you to commit yourself to the Word of God: *Wait* in silence before the Word. *Read* contemplatively. Be faithful to the reading whether you are moved by it or not. *Listen obediently* to the text. Discern how the Word is calling you to a greater obedience. *Pray* as the Holy Spirit leads you. And finally, *ABIDE*. You are being invited to enter into an abiding presence with the Word of God.

The Sacramentality of Our Daily Quest for God

In these reflections on the Word of God we will be praying with the sacramentality of our lives and our faithful efforts in renewing our spiritual selves as we continue our quest for God.

Chapter 1 offers us opportunities to reflect on the magnetic attraction we experience as we are constantly drawn toward the divine. In chapter 2 we are invited to be faithful to our innate yearning for God as we search for ways to move more deeply into relationship with God. Chapter 3 encourages us to find beauty

and sacramental grace right in the midst of our ordinary daily struggles. The fourth chapter attempts to support us in the difficult task of living truly committed lives. Finally, the fifth chapter invites us into the conversion experience of returning to our original love. Each chapter ends with a poetic reflection, which can serve as a summary of the chapter and as a way to review the core themes with which we have prayed.

These reflections were written while I was enjoying ordinary places—lakes, mountains, meadows, gardens, churches, coffee shops, dining rooms, retreat centers, and hospitals. Most, though, were written while I was in my daily place of prayer—beside my window overlooking my beloved sycamore tree, which has stood through all kinds of weather.

As my faith life matures, I sense a deepening reverence for the Word of God. A scene from Pete Hamill's novel *Snow in August* describes the reverence I am beginning to feel. A boy is teaching English to Rabbi Hirsch. Michael, the young teacher, observes that when he corrects the pronunciation of the rabbi, the old mistake is never made again. The rabbi treats each word with astounding reverence.

The rhythms of the sentences were often wrong; the verbs were in the wrong place. But the rabbi treated words as if they were jewels. He caressed them, handled them with his tongue, repeated them with delight, turned them over for a view from another angle.¹

The rabbi's reverence in reading the words of Scripture throws light on a very dear moment. I am able to observe the rabbi with his sacred text just as I might gaze upon a rare painting. I too would like to treat each word as a jewel, treasuring it and beholding it from many different views. I want to turn the words

over in my heart as a plough turns over the soil to welcome the seed. I would like to breathe upon and into the words much like the poet Mary Oliver breathes into her poems. That is the kind of presence I desire.

If this poetic language of turning words over like jewels and breathing into them is too dramatic for you, please understand that I am only trying to underline the importance of radical presence. Drawing near to the Word of God requires a very special kind of presence.

Before you begin your journey through these reflections on the Word of God, I offer you yet one more way to approach the assigned Scripture texts. On some days, stand as a pilgrim before the Word of God. Visualize your movement down the path of words as a pilgrimage. The places where you choose to stop for further reflection are your pilgrim sites, your holy places along the way. This is an insightful and creative way to keep vigil with the Word.

It is not easy to find the Word of God in the midst of a jumble of words. The secret is connection. A community of words connects with each other and somehow in that connection we discern God's Word for us. Praying with the white space between the words, sentences, and paragraphs is also important. The artist in us needs white space—our place of waiting, listening, and being. White space is the womb and the tomb in which we abide. We will experience birth, life, and death there, as we keep vigil with the Word of God.

Be open to God's Word blossoming everywhere. Walk with awareness through the forests, parks, and gardens, along the seashore, or down a busy city street. The Word of God is near you. Climb a mountain and the Word will meet you. Move mindfully through your daily work tasks—the Word is at your fingertips. Celebrate the Eucharist with a community of struggling believers. You will be enfolded in God's creative Word.

Every person you encounter during the hours of your day is a word that God has spoken into the world. You too are one of God's spoken words. And now God speaks through you.