AT THE STILL POINT

A Literary Guide to Prayer in Ordinary Time

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*At the Still Point: A Literary Guide to Prayer in Ordinary Tim*e

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For our baby, Micah John,
whose conception, development, and birth
coincided with the creation of this book:
May you ever be
a lover of literature,
a haunter of libraries,
and a friend of Ordinary Time.

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is…
—T. S. Eliot, from "Burnt Norton" in *Four Quartets*

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INTRODUCTION

This is a guide to prayer for the liturgical season known as Pentecost, or Ordinary Time.[1] To my knowledge, however, it is not an ordinary guide to prayer. It does not contain readings from spiritual or devotional writings, discussing spiritual or devotional things through discursive thought. Rather, it is a journey of the imagination guided by poets and authors, both classic and contemporary, who have known the things of God but speak in metaphor. These are writers who tell the truth, as Emily Dickinson put it, but they "tell it slant." In not stating out loud what they know, they have left much to our imaginations—which is a way of saying they have trusted the Holy Spirit. *Let those who have ears, hear.*

For many Christians in the Northern Hemisphere, Ordinary Time coincides with summer and fall—a time that, for some of us, is far from ordinary. As a young child growing up in Michigan's northern lake country, I experienced summer as nothing short of miraculous, a kind of extended, intoxicating dream. After eight months of snow and ice and a muddy spring, school was finally out, strawberries were in, each body of water called for a sail or a swim. Sediments of sand piled up in the car and tub as we trekked daily from trail to dune, dune to shore, milking the warm sunlight while it lasted. Twilight was a world unto itself. We played outside till mosquitoes drove us indoors; and then we were sent to bed while it was still light enough to read, illegally, tilting the pages toward the fading light of the western windows till words ran together in the dark.

1 Two seasons of the church Year have periods of time that go by the name of "Ordinary Time." One occurs during the season between Epiphany and the beginning of Lent, and the other is the long stretch from Pentecost to Advent. This book focuses on the latter.

Dusk was the only time I read; the rest of my waking hours I played, hard, as if I had been given only four months to live. There seemed nothing ordinary about Ordinary Time. Years later I would scribble in a notebook, "I read poetry in springtime, novels in the winter, how-to books in autumn and baking recipes. But come summer, suddenly I'm somehow illiterate: creation itself is one long run-on sentence I can't find the end of." Finishing the thought with a preposition seemed to say it all. God was present in the summer, but not in finite words.

Then, sometime in my elementary years, my father, a Presbyterian minister, took his first pastorate in a farming community in central New York State. We lived between the two longest of the Finger Lakes, within ten minutes of cottage communities like the ones I remembered in Michigan. But the resort ethos did not extend up into the neighboring fields of corn and soy. Summertime meant labor and harvest for our community—and creeping boredom for us. What was a mother to do? Children underfoot all day, complaining, bored, in *summer*, of all times. Finally one morning she came home from running errands, carrying a stack of books. She had remembered, as good mothers often do, that entertainment and character formation do not have to be mutually exclusive, and both can be found at the local library. Two weeks later, my sister and I trooped along with her, and thus began a summer tradition.

That old library was a spectacular building, I realize now, converted from a colonial church with pillared columns and a wraparound balcony. The children's books and junior novels were in the lower level, in a kind of crypt with inset windows high in the walls, bookshelves from floor to ceiling. There I found treasures beyond reckoning, as one finds in cathedrals all over Europe, except these were words. To this day I associate libraries with old churches—which only makes sense, I suppose, for in both places one finds a quiet kind of reverence and "people of

the book." And to this day I associate good books with ordinary summer days: bumblebees buzzing in the crypt windows; nothing much to do except crack open the cover of a library book (one that smells new, and you know you are the first to read it) and enter another world. Ordinary Time is reading time.

It is otherworldly time, a time when strange things happen, when tantalizing sounds waft to us from beyond the fields we know. It is a time when we are open to adventures, which is another way of saying that we are open to change. We remember certain scenes from certain books like we remember major life events: they become part of our personal histories, listed among the episodes that marked turning points in our lives. Indeed, many of us might include a poet or an author, whether dead or living, among our spiritual mentors. On a quiet evening, curled up with a good story, we have encountered the memorable character, the articulate phrase, the evocative image, the small suggestion, the smuggled truth, the shattering epiphany, which changed us, and we weren't even looking to be changed. It enriched our lives, and we didn't even know our own poverty. We were not the same people afterward.

Part of the power of such moments is that they sneak up on us when we are unaware. Spiritual insight, wrapped in the cloak of fiction or poetry, slips inside the back door of the imagination; and suddenly there it is, nonchalantly sipping coffee at the kitchen table. It pours another cup, invites us to have a seat. *Well*, it seems to say, *and what will you do with me now?* We were not expecting a spiritual moment because we didn't think we were reading a spiritual book. Our defenses were down. The bolt was unlocked. So the intruder gets further, pushes much deeper than if we, bristling with suspicion, had been expecting a salesman proselytizing at the front door.

Rather self-consciously, therefore, this book expands the genre of spiritual writing to include excerpts from classic and

contemporary fiction and poetry, aimed at inviting you to experience God through your imagination. In these pages there are worlds to be explored, characters to meet, images to gaze upon, phrases to savor. This is back-door material, less interested in what you think than what you dream or feel. The applicability or relevance of these writings may not be immediately obvious, if ever. But, like parables, they can work on you over time, in your subconscious, perhaps surfacing later to offer unexpected insight, a slight shift in perspective.

Many of the authors whom I've included wrote in an attitude of Christian worship, even if the excerpt is not overtly Christian. And a few of the selections have been chosen in order to invite you to reflect Christianly, even if that is not what the original author might have intended. Together the readings create a rich (if not exhaustive) anthology that can draw you deeper into God's presence.

Of course, to collect such literary moments in a kind of anthology is to put the reader on high alert. These readings might as well come with neon signs saying, "Warning: Powerful Spiritual Moment Ahead"—which is tantamount to robbing them of all potential impact. By including these excerpts I do not insist that you be profoundly moved by each of them. Some will disappoint. Others will bewilder. What is a spiritual encounter for one person may not be for another.

For instance, I love the novels of Jane Austen. And yet, despite the fact that she was the daughter of a clergyman and wrote prayers for her household's evening devotions, it is a stretch to say that her novels are self-conscious acts of Christian worship. I

will not inflict Elizabeth Bennet's epiphany, "Until this moment, I never knew myself," upon you, even if it has profound meaning for me. We must be careful, an English professor of mine once warned, not to "baptize" a literary work just because we happen to love it. A book may "baptize" our imaginations (in the words of C. S. Lewis), but we cannot turn, therefore, and become celebrants at the local library, pronouncing words of institution over every poem that delights us.

Even so, many of us have experienced a moment of spiritual awareness while reading a book that was not necessarily intended for that purpose. Like the apostle Paul, we have found ourselves atop a hill in Athens, conversing with Epicureans and Stoics, when suddenly struck by Christian truth issuing from the pen of a pagan poet. God has been at work in the world of books since long before there were such things as Christian publishing houses and Christian bookstores and Christian book groups. Indeed, God has been at work in the world of books since before there were Christians. As C. S. Lewis puts it, for many long centuries God sent humankind "good dreams"—ancient stories, legends, myths—that anticipated the work of God in Christ. The Holy Spirit has been known to use the secular for God's own purposes to an astonishing degree. And meanwhile, "A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist," writes Lewis, "cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere—'Bibles laid open, millions of surprises,' as Herbert says, 'fine nets and stratagems.' God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous."[2] If we thought we had entered the world of literature in order to be "safe" from divine interference, the Spirit is quite happy to take advantage of our wanderings.

2 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 191.

So, be warned. Read on, reader. And meanwhile, keep in mind I am not suggesting that you stretch any of the readings in the direction that suits your current spiritual mood: otherwise the reading may break. However, I *am* inviting you to read these works differently than you might, say, for an English class or for personal entertainment. I'm inviting you to experience them as an act of worship, which was how many of the authors experienced or even intended them, and also as an opportunity for prayer, for conversation with God. I'm inviting you to read them like you read good books in summertime, at the beach or with the windows open, crickets buzzing in the sweet grass. Read like one who expects to be enchanted, at twilight, by the light of the first star. Because God is at work, not only in overtly spiritual things—devotionals and memoirs, liturgies and hymns—but also in the imaginative lives of God's people, in their subcreative worlds (as J.R.R. Tolkien put it), in their carefully crafted turns of phrase.

Here at the still point, in the nook at the top of the stairs, the Holy Spirit hovers, waiting, waiting for the sound of the turning page.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The liturgical season of Ordinary Time runs for roughly twenty-nine weeks, from Pentecost Sunday in the spring until the first Sunday of Advent in late fall. It's the longest season of the church year, with few significant events along the way, which gives it a kind of ordinariness that the other seasons lack. There are no narrative highpoints, no showy colors or costumes, not even a signature hymn or two. Even the lectionary readings (or

the cycle of Scriptures read by many denominations for each week of the church calendar), toil through lesser-known stories with a kind of plodding predictability. If Advent, Lent, and Easter are the glitzy celebrities at the liturgical party, Ordinary Time is the plain auntie collecting dirty wine glasses afterward. We almost forget she's there.

So to dress her up with some of the world's most extraordinary works of fiction and poetry is ironic, to say the least! But if, as the church prescribes, the season of Ordinary Time is when we are to focus on the mystery of Christ in *all* its aspects (not merely on the mystery of Christ's birth or resurrection, as in Advent and Easter), then this plain auntie just might surprise us. Seen in a slightly different light—say, emerging from the shadows into a moonlit garden—she might reveal something of the holy mystery that we hadn't seen before.

Think of the readings in this anthology as the moonlit garden. They are an invitation to experience the long season of Ordinary Time in a new way. To that end, they have been organized thematically, in groups of three to six, for each of the twenty-nine weeks; and their themes range all over the breadth of human spiritual experience: from conviction to calling, quarreling to awakening, dark nights, redemption, and everything in between. The weeks are not in chronological order to match the lectionary, so you are free to jump around. However, they *are* arranged with attention to the weeks that precede and follow them, so you may wish to follow the order given, just to see what the Spirit might spark in your imagination.

Each week begins with a suggested outline for daily prayer, including an opening and closing prayer, a psalm for the week, and suggested Scriptures. The psalm can be meditated upon daily, or you may wish to read only a portion of the psalm each day. Or find a particular section of the psalm with which you

especially resonate and dwell there awhile, meditating on the words as a kind of personal prayer. The psalms as Hebrew poetry are some of the greatest literature you will encounter in a given week, providing echoes and resonances that a mere cursory skim will miss.

Meanwhile, both the Scriptures and the literary readings can be read daily or spread throughout the week as a guide for prayerful reflection. As you may already have discovered, the medium of poetry lends itself rather well to this kind of meditation. It is nearly impossible to read a poem both quickly and well. Often we find ourselves reading it a second or even a third time, savoring its images, marveling at the carefully crafted word patterns. It may not be all that difficult to imagine how to turn your poetic meditation into prayerful reflection, inviting God into your wonderings and insights.

But the fiction excerpts are a different matter. In many cases, you will be jumping in mid-story, with only a brief editor's note to orient you to people, places, and plot. It may take you a moment to settle in to the author's voice, to let the story weave its spell on your imagination. That's why some of the excerpts are rather long, because fiction doesn't work its magic right away. You might consider picking a day in the week in which you will focus only on the story excerpt, rather than trying to cram the other readings in as well. (However, not every week contains a fiction excerpt.) And meanwhile, you are absolved from trying to hunt for the story's "point." Some of the fiction may have obvious connections to the weekly theme; others may not. Rather than agonize over an excerpt, it is perfectly okay to move on, trusting that if the Spirit has something to say to you (whether it has to do with the theme or not), the insight will come in time.

If you desire to deepen your exploration of each week's themes, the back of the book includes a section titled "For Further Reading."

Still unsure of how to engage fiction or poetry prayerfully? Consider applying aspects of the practice of *lectio divina* (divine reading) to this process. It is an ancient method for prayerful meditation on the Scriptures, involving four steps: *lectio* (reading the passage), *meditatio* (meditating; reading it over several more times slowly), *oratio* (letting the text speak to you by paying attention to words, phrases, images, or ideas), and *contemplatio* (shifting one's focus to God; resting in God's presence). To be clear, I recognize that these literary readings are not the words of Scripture. So perhaps we might call this process *lectio sacra* (holy reading). Whatever the case, the basic principles of *lectio* that one might apply to Scripture can be applied to novels and poetry, since Scripture is in fact great literature. And meanwhile, as we have already noted, the Spirit is unscrupulous about means or method.

In the prayer outline for each day, you will notice there is an opportunity for personal prayer and reflection that follows the readings of Scripture and literature. This is the *oratio* and *contemplatio* stage. You have read the passage (*lectio*)—perhaps several times, slowly (*meditatio*)—and now you go back through it, making note of the words, phrases, images, metaphors, or ideas that "shimmer." What jumps out at you? What speaks to you (*oratio*)? You may even want to write it down. Then invite God to show you why this word or phrase spoke so strongly. What is God up to? In what ways do you sense God's presence in the midst of this reading? Finally, pause and simply rest in that presence (*contemplatio*). There are no demands on you in this moment. You are simply resting in God.

Here at the still point, read. Listen. Wonder.

Rest.

WEEK 1

Encountering the Spirit

OPENING PRAYER

Come Lord, Come Wisdom, Love, and Power,
Open our ears to hear;
Let us not miss the accepted hour;
Save, Lord, by Love or Fear.
—John Keble (English, 1792–1866)

SCRIPTURES

Psalm 104 | Joel 2:21–32 | Acts 2:1–21 | John 20:19–23

READINGS

"Not Like a Dove" by Mary F. C. Pratt
"God's Grandeur" by Gerard Manley Hopkins
"A.M." by Robert Siegel
From *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame

PERSONAL PRAYER AND REFLECTION

CLOSING PRAYER

Listen sweet Dove unto my song,
And spread thy golden wings in me;
Hatching my tender heart so long,
Till it get wing, and fly away with thee.
—George Herbert (English, 1593–1633)

READINGS FOR WEEK 1

Not Like a Dove

MARY F. C. PRATT (American, contemporary)

Come Holy Spirit, come
like a red eft[3] creeping out
from under wet leaves
crossing the traveled highway
at night after rain.
Come like the brown anole comes north
unexpected in bananas or limes;
like a gecko hunting roaches on a wall.
Come like Chameleon;
like Iguana still as deep green death
flittering a cloven tongue.
Come like Komodo parting the ways
with your stinking breath. Come
clear the carrion from this isle.
Come Holy Spirit
come like the Dragon remembered of old
rattling and clanking on golden wings.
Seize our treasures for your glittering hoard.
Burn away all that will burn.

God's Grandeur

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS (English, 1844–1889)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

3 *eft*—a young newt

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

A.M.

ROBERT SIEGEL (American, contemporary)

Yellow flames flutter
about the feeder:
a Pentecost of finches.

FROM *The Wind in the Willows*

KENNETH GRAHAME (Scottish, 1859–1932)

[Editor's note: Grahame's classic children's book about the adventures of animal friends contains one of the most powerful scenes depicting a creature's response to the call of a holy "Other." In this scene, Rat and Mole are patrolling the river in search of a baby otter that has gone missing, when mysterious music wafts across the water. The longing that such music stirs in Rat, and the awe it produces in Mole, beautifully captures what an encounter with the Spirit (in this case the god Pan) does to the soul.]

Then a change began slowly to declare itself. The horizon became clearer, field and tree came more into sight, and somehow with a different look; the mystery began to drop away from them. A bird piped suddenly, and was still; and a light breeze sprang up and set the reeds and bulrushes rustling. Rat, who was in the stern of the boat, while Mole sculled, sat up suddenly and listened with a passionate intentness. Mole, who with gentle strokes was just keeping the boat moving while he scanned the banks with care, looked at him with curiosity.

"It's gone!" sighed the Rat, sinking back in his seat again. "So beautiful and strange and new! Since it was to end so soon, I almost wish I had never heard it. For it has roused a longing in me that is pain, and nothing seems worth while but just to hear that sound once more and go on listening to it for ever. No! There it is again!" he cried, alert once more. Entranced, he was silent for a long space, spell-bound.

"Now it passes on and I begin to lose it," he said presently. "O, Mole! the beauty of it! The merry bubble and joy, the thin, clear, happy call of the distant piping! Such music I never dreamed of, and the call in it is stronger even than the music is sweet! Row on, Mole, row! For the music and the call must be for us."

The Mole, greatly wondering, obeyed. "I hear nothing myself," he said, "but the wind playing in the reeds and rushes and osiers."

The Rat never answered, if indeed he heard. Rapt, transported, trembling, he was possessed in all his senses by this new divine thing that caught up his helpless soul and swung and dandled it, a powerless but happy infant in a strong sustaining grasp. . . .

"Clearer and nearer still," cried the Rat joyously. "Now you must surely hear it! Ah—at last—I see you do!"

Breathless and transfixed the Mole stopped rowing as the liquid run of that glad piping broke on him like a wave, caught him up,

and possessed him utterly. He saw the tears on his comrade's cheeks, and bowed his head and understood. For a space they hung there, brushed by the purple loose-strife that fringed the bank; then the clear imperious summons that marched hand-in-hand with the intoxicating melody imposed its will on Mole, and mechanically he bent to his oars again. And the light grew steadily stronger, but no birds sang as they were wont to do at the approach of dawn; and but for the heavenly music all was marvellously still.

[continued below]

FROM *The Wind in the Willows*

Slowly, but with no doubt or hesitation whatever, and in something of a solemn expectancy, the two animals passed through the broken, tumultuous water and moored their boat at the flowery margin of the island. In silence they landed, and pushed through the blossom and scented herbage and undergrowth that led up to the level ground, till they stood on a little lawn of a marvellous green, set round with Nature's own orchard-trees—crab-apple, wild cherry, and sloe.

"This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me," whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. "Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!"

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy—but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side, cowed,