

Back then I understood literature as moral lessons wrapped in story. The story was the glittery packaging that we tore into in order to get to the theme. I have often seen the same interpretive strategies in Bible reading and teaching. Our objective in interpreting a biblical story is to find the principles, the propositions that can be proved true or false, which we can then apply to life.

When we read the story of David and Goliath, for example, we might distill the battle narrative into this little elixir: God sides with the little guy. Such a principle becomes a handy tool that can be applied to any number of obstacles we face in life. This principle is simple, manageable and controllable, and it becomes a master key that can unlock almost any door. It no longer matters where we got the key from or who made the key. The context of the story is no longer necessary once we have extracted the principle; the life context of the reader becomes the priority. We can write the principle out on a flashcard and close the book.

## **LISTENING IN**

What if, instead of trying to drag principles, and God, out of the Scriptures, we sought to be drawn into the Scriptures? I want to find my place in the grand story, not extract out pieces of the story, allowing the big story to rewrite my own story. That is why I am drawn to listening approaches that help us find our way into the Bible and meet the God who is already there. These are methods that emphasize conversation with God, using the words of the Scriptures as starting points for those conversations. In other words, Scripture reading becomes prayer.

***Praying the Psalms.*** One of these biblical listening methods is the ancient tradition of praying the Psalms. This practice has structured the rhythms of monastic communities for seventeen hundred years as men and women have cycled through the Psalms, singing and chanting them day after day, week after week, year after year. The best title I have heard for this practice is "Words from God, Words to God."

Sometimes we have to start with the words of others in order to find our own words. Praying the Psalms is a way of praying the words of others in order to find our own prayer. We enter empathically into the praises, celebrations, laments and agony of the psalmists, taking their experiences and struggles into ourselves and offering our own circumstances, joy and pain to God through those words. In repeating their words I often find myself in direct conversation with the Lord. Even more, praying the Psalms is offering

God's own inspired words back to him. If you are one of those people who never know what to say in prayer, there is no better place to start than praying God's very words. Let the God-breathed words form your own prayer.

***Prayer of the senses.*** Another method that emphasizes conversation with God through Scripture is the Ignatian style of Bible reading. Ignatius Loyola, the sixteenth-century founder of the Jesuit order of the Catholic Church, developed a creative style of Bible reading that he called "the prayer of the senses." This is an exercise in the prayerful use of the imagination.

In this approach you plunge yourself right into a Gospel story, directly into first-century Palestine. Employing all your imaginative faculties, you feel the desert heat, smell the dust, see the characters and hear their voices. You are not studying

the words of the characters as much as you are trying to enter into their world: you see the lines on their faces, feel their fears, experience the tensions between people and take on their questions as your own. After you have taken in the scene broadly, you enter into conversation with Jesus as though you are a character in the story.

Let's experiment with this. Say you want to enter into the story in Mark 9 where Jesus encounters a father whose son suffers from violent seizures. You pray for openness, and then you shine your imagination on the father's troubled face, the scolding faces of the scribes and the scared faces of the disciples. You smell the sweat of the hot crowd packed in around the boy. You see the poor boy convulsing on the ground, eyes rolled back in his head, the dust swirling around him. You feel his pain and his fear. You hear the gasps of the onlookers. You detect the tremble in his dad's voice when he begs Jesus, "I believe! Help my unbelief!"

Then you see Jesus approach the boy, his face still glowing from his transfiguration on the mountain, and speak with the authority only he has. The boy exhales and his body goes limp, and you are sure that he is dead. But then Jesus takes the boy's hand and raises him off the ground, new life bursting forth. You feel the warmth in their clasped hands and you are pierced with joy and relief as dad and son embrace.

Now, without leaving that dramatic scene, you interact with Jesus. Perhaps there is one character in the story that you most resonate with, and if so, you ask the questions that the experience of that character prompts. If you relate to the father, you might ask, in the presence of Jesus, where in my life do I find faith? Where do I find unbelief and doubt? Or perhaps you sympathize with the son, and you ask, what are my places

of pain? What do I fear? How do I need healing and new life? Then listen for Jesus' response. Does he speak? What does he say? Is his tone gentle? Does he correct you? Is he smiling? Does he seem compassionate? How do you feel as you listen?

In an Ignatian reading of a Gospel story, we do not treat our imaginative reconstruction as an extension of Scripture, and we must be careful to weigh anything we hear Jesus say against the balance of the whole biblical witness, community and prayerful discernment. What we imagine in a scene tends to reveal more about us than it does about God, but this is good news because those personal revelations can become grounds for fruitful interactions with the Lord in prayer.

***Lectio divina.*** The practice of lectio divina is what resurrected my devotional reading of the Bible. It takes the Bible's inspiration so seriously that it declares every word, every letter and every squiggle has its ultimate origin in God. Those words and characters are not stuck in the past but, because they are enlivened by the Holy Spirit, are means for God's communication with us today. Lectio listens through old words for a new word. A twelfth-century monk with a funny name, Guigo the Second, is credited for the classic formulation of lectio divina, which literally means "sacred reading." The core idea is that through your settling into a text and slowly reading through it multiple times, the Holy Spirit may give you a particular word, phrase or idea in that passage that becomes the basis for prayer and reflection. I like to put it this way: in listening to a Scripture you may find that something in it sings to you. The words flow in a linear and unsurprising sequence until suddenly a word or phrase leaps out at you, and the angels start singing. This is a clue that God is speaking to you, and you hang on to it for all it's worth. Lectio divina lets you stretch out that experience, turning over the word in your

mind, listening to it and praying it, and through it being drawn into God's presence.

The four steps in Guigo's approach are in Latin: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer) and *contemplatio* (contemplation). I like to reframe those movements in listening terms.

*Listen.* Slowly read through the text two times. Read it aloud and enunciate carefully, pausing between sentences. You're reading this like you would a love letter, trying to capture every tone and resonance, the emotions in and around the words, and the pregnant silences in between words and sentences. Take the words into your heart. If anything sings to you, take note without judging or analyzing it.

*Ask.* Read through the passage again, paying attention again to anything that sings to you. Is there a word or phrase that stands out? Something that seems mysterious or attractive and holds your attention? If so, spend time with it. Reflect on it and why it seems important. This isn't time for intellectual exercise or reading commentaries but for personal reflection. How does it speak to your life? Is there an invitation in it?

*Answer.* Read through it one more time, praying the words. Now interact with the Lord through what you have read. If a word or phrase sang to you, ask for understanding. If an invitation emerged, offer it to God and listen for his response. If a relationship, struggle or dark part of your life surfaced, do not hold that back. Be as honest as possible, knowing that the Lord searches our hearts and knows us better than we know ourselves. Is there a fresh word that he is speaking to you right now?

*Be.* The words of the Scriptures are windows intended to bring us face to face with the Word behind them. In this last phase, linger in the presence of the Lord. Let the word you have heard sweep you up into his embrace. Sit in silence, enjoying him and being with him without feeling pressure to speak or do anything. Let God sing his song over you.

The practice of *lectio divina* reminds us that we are never done listening to the Scriptures because God is never done speaking to us through them. Just like we can savor a classic piece of music over and over, listening for all the parts and layers and lines of instrumentation, hearing something new each time, we can return again and again to a passage of Scripture because its richness and beauty is never exhausted and because God shows us new things and speaks fresh words to us each time. Then we can take what we have heard and carry it with us all day, a song we want stuck in our heads, playing and replaying and reminding us of Immanuel, God with us.

## **THE CHARACTER OF THE LISTENER**

A listening approach to the Bible is deeply personal. It does not preclude other forms of reading, but it acknowledges that the best kind of Bible reading happens when our minds are swept up into the presence of God and our hearts kindled by what we hear. For that reason, I am fascinated by how the church fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries understood biblical interpretation. They refused to separate intellectual pursuit from spiritual pursuit, instead insisting that the most important component in good Bible reading is the character of the listener.

Professor Christopher Hall explains that "the fathers considered the Bible a holy book that opened itself to those

who themselves were progressing in holiness through the grace and power of the Spirit. The character of the exegete would determine in many ways what was seen or heard in the text itself." For example, the third-century bishop Athanasius proclaimed that the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures [demands] a good life and a pure soul. ... One cannot possibly understand the teachings of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is truly to imitate their life."

The fathers would claim that our lack of understanding comes from our refusal to live what we read. It is not that our minds are empty; it is that our hearts are closed. This echoes what Jesus himself said: "Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own" (John 7:17).