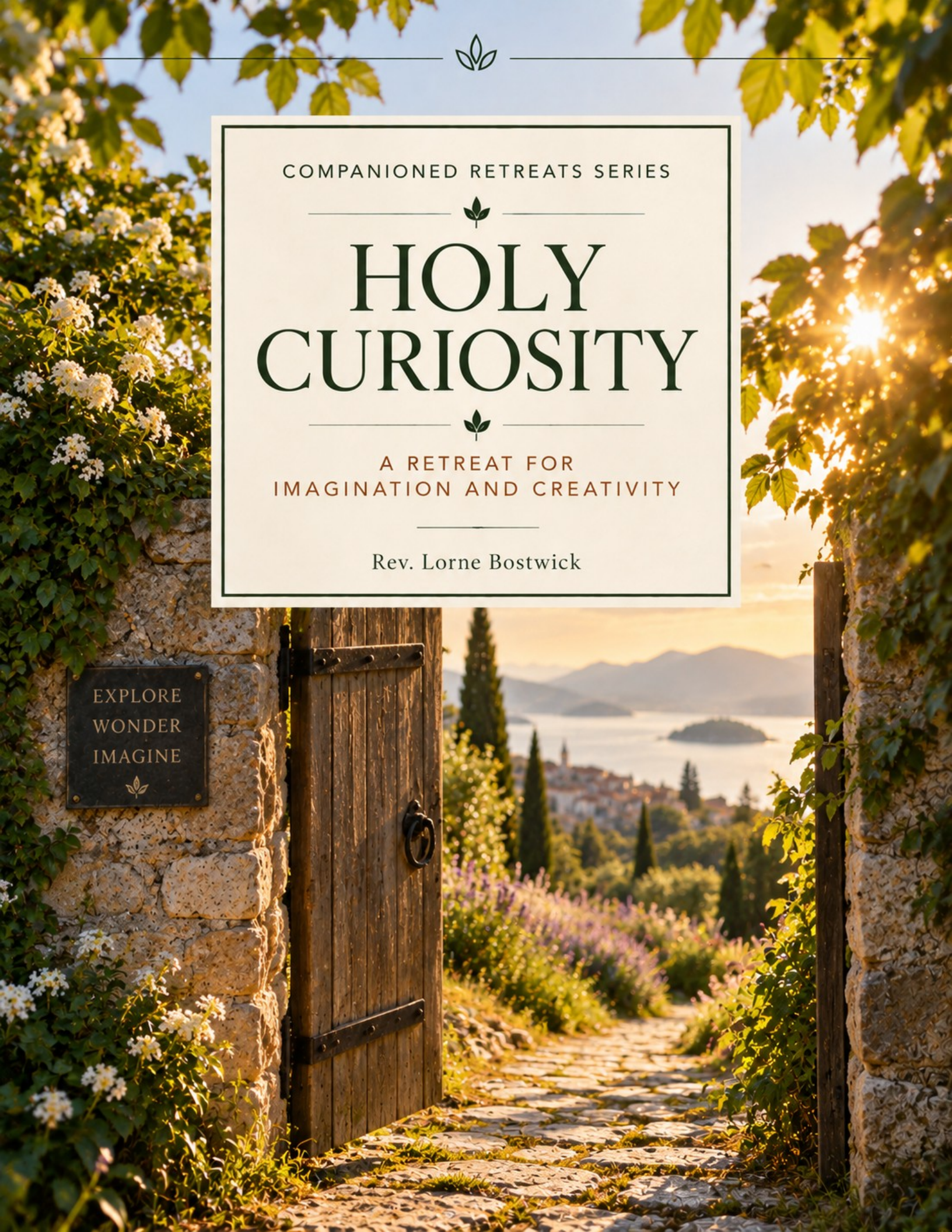
COMPANIONED RETREATS SERIES
HOLY CURIOSITY
A RETREAT FOR IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY
Rev. Lorne Bostwick
EXPLORE
WONDER
IMAGINE

Holy Curiosity

A Companioned Retreat for Imagination and Creativity

[Insert the approved Common Introduction here.]

Holy Curiosity

You spend a good deal of ministry knowing what to do.

Someone asks a question, and you answer.

Something breaks, and you help repair it.

A meeting wanders, and you help it find direction.

Sunday comes, and something must be preached.

A decision must be made.

A problem needs a solution.

Experience teaches you things. That is one of its gifts.

But experience can also make the world smaller.

You learn what usually works.

You recognize familiar patterns.

You anticipate what will probably happen next.

Without realizing it, you may begin approaching new situations with old answers already in your hand.

Curiosity interrupts that.

Curiosity asks:

What haven't I noticed?

What else might be true?

What happens if I try this?

What would I see if I looked from somewhere else?

What wants to be made?

What might God be doing that I have not yet imagined?

For these days, you do not need to solve anything.

You do not need a ministry plan.

You do not need a new vision for your congregation.

You do not need to become more creative.

Instead, give yourself permission to wonder.

Explore.

Make things.

Follow something interesting.

Try something you don't know how to do.

Change your mind.

Be surprised.

Laugh when something goes badly.

Leave something unfinished.

Curiosity does not always know where it is going.

That is part of its gift.

Choosing a Place

Somewhere with Something to Discover

This retreat does not require wilderness or solitude.

In fact, a place with variety may serve it better.

You might choose a retreat center near a town you have never explored.

A cabin near an unfamiliar trail system.

A hotel in a walkable historic district.

A monastery with unusual architecture, art, gardens, or a library.

A college or university town.

A place near museums, galleries, studios, or public art.

A coastal town with docks, boats, shops, beaches, and people coming and going.

A mountain community.

A working farm or craft community.

An artist colony.

A cabin where you can spread things across a table and make a mess.

A city neighborhood you have never explored.

A retreat center with an art room, workshop, pottery studio, piano, library, or labyrinth.

Or somewhere familiar enough to feel comfortable but large enough to wander without already knowing what you will find.

You are looking for a place that gives you something you cannot entirely predict.

What to Bring

A Bag of Possibilities

Bring your Bible.

Then consider bringing a few things you might enjoy using without knowing beforehand what you will do with them.

Colored pencils.

Markers.

Watercolors.

Clay.

A sketchbook.

Old magazines and scissors for collage.

Glue.

A camera.

Index cards.

A deck of cards.

Building blocks.

A small model kit.

Yarn or fabric.

Wood.

A pocketknife or carving tools, if you know how to use them safely.

A musical instrument.

A book of poetry.

A novel.

A children's book you have always loved.

A puzzle.

A map.

A magnifying glass.

Binoculars.

A few interesting objects from home.

Don't bring all of this.

The point is not to arrive with an art supply store.

Bring a few things that make you think:

I wonder what I could do with that.

And perhaps bring one thing you have never used before.

When You Arrive

Don't Settle In Too Quickly

Get your belongings into your room.

Make sure you know what you need to know about the place.

Then resist the impulse to establish the retreat.

Don't decide where your prayer chair will be.

Don't organize the next two days.

Don't begin reading the guide from beginning to end.

Go explore.

Choose a direction because something catches your attention.

A staircase.

A path.

A building.

A garden gate.

A sound.

A painting.

A store.

A shoreline.

A strange tree.

A road you haven't taken.

A room you didn't expect.

Follow something.

If something else catches your attention along the way, change direction.

You aren't lost.

You aren't trying to get anywhere.

For a while, let interest choose the route.

The First Question

When you eventually return, read Genesis 2:19–20.

God brings the creatures to the human being “to see what he would call them.”

Pause there.

To see what he would call them.

There is something wonderfully open in that sentence.

God does not appear to hand the human being a list of correct answers.

The creatures arrive.

The human encounters them.

And language begins.

Imagine that for a moment.

A creature comes toward you that no human being has ever named.

What do you notice first?

Its movement?

Its sound?

Its shape?

Its eyes?

Its color?

Its strangeness?

And then you make a word.

The biblical story begins with a God who creates—and who makes room for human beings to respond within creation.

To name.

To cultivate.

To discover.

To imagine.

To make.

You do not need to prove your creativity.

You are already participating in a world in which new responses are possible.

Make Up Some Names

Go somewhere with living things.

Plants.

Birds.

Insects.

Trees.

Fish.

Flowers.

Don't look up their names.

For now, don't worry about what they are actually called.

Choose several and name them yourself.

The little bird hopping beneath the hedge might become a **leaf-skipper**.

A flower might become **purple morning laughter**.

A twisted tree might be **the old dancer**.

A dragonfly might be **blue lightning**.

Your names may be beautiful.

They may be ridiculous.

Good.

You are not producing a field guide.

Play with language.

Later, if curiosity leads you to discover their actual names, find out.

You may discover that someone else's imagination got there before you.

Dinner

Try Something You Would Normally Pass By

If you have choices for dinner, consider choosing something you have never eaten.

Or something you usually pass over.

Ask the server what they particularly enjoy.

Try a cuisine you don't know.

Let someone else's taste lead for once.

You don't have to choose anything you dislike.

Just interrupt habit.

Taste.

Notice texture.

Fragrance.

Heat.

Sweetness.

Bitterness.

Something familiar prepared differently.

If you like it, enjoy it.

If you don't, now you know.

Not every experiment needs to succeed.

That is one of the freedoms of curiosity.

The First Evening

Make Something Badly

Choose something from the possibilities you brought.

Paint.

Draw.

Build.

Carve.

Fold.

Arrange.

Write.

Play.

Make a collage.

Shape clay.

Take photographs.

Build something out of sticks.

Invent a tune.

Write six lines of a story.

Create a ridiculous sculpture.

There is one rule:

It does not need to be good.

You might even deliberately make something badly.

If you draw stick figures, draw them.

If your watercolor runs together, let it.

If the clay collapses, see what the collapsed thing looks like.

If the tune goes nowhere, play it again.

If the story becomes absurd, let it become absurd.

You have spent enough of your life producing things that must be ready when other people arrive.

This does not have to be ready.

No one is waiting for it.

No one will evaluate it.

It doesn't have to communicate anything.

Make something simply because human beings make things.

Then decide what you want to do with it.

Keep it.

Change it.

Take it apart.

Throw it away.

Or leave it on the table until tomorrow.

Before Sleep

I Wonder

Take one question to bed.

Not a serious question.

Not a ministry problem.

Not a decision.

Simply:

I wonder…

Complete the sentence with something that genuinely interests you.

I wonder why…

I wonder what would happen if…

I wonder what it would feel like to…

I wonder who first…

I wonder where…

I wonder whether…

Don't answer it tonight.

Let a question remain a question.

Then sleep.

The Next Morning

Look at Something as Though You Have Never Seen It

Choose one ordinary object.

A spoon.

A shoe.

A pinecone.

A chair.

A cup.

A key.

A leaf.

A door hinge.

An apple.

A stone.

Spend some time with it.

Imagine you have never encountered such a thing.

What would you think it was?

Why is it shaped this way?

What can it do?

What else could it do?

Turn it upside down.

Look underneath it.

Look very closely.

Notice texture.

Weight.

Wear.

Construction.

Shadow.

What becomes visible when familiarity is temporarily removed?

You don't need to write anything down.

Just look.

Scripture

Do You Not Perceive It?

Read Isaiah 43:18–19:

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

You probably know this text.

That can make it harder to hear.

So don't begin with what you know it means.

Stay with the question:

Do you not perceive it?

Perception comes before explanation.

Something new can already be present before you know what to call it.

Something may be emerging before you understand where it leads.

Faithful attention sometimes requires more than recognizing what you have seen before.

Carry the question for a while:

What might I not yet know how to see?

Go Somewhere You Have Never Been

Choose an unfamiliar destination.

Not somewhere dangerous.

Not somewhere requiring an elaborate expedition.

Just somewhere you have not been.

A garden.

A neighborhood.

A gallery.

A trail.

A library.

A market.

A chapel.

A dock.

A cemetery.

A historic building.

A museum.

A small town.

A section of the retreat grounds you ignored yesterday.

Go there without deciding what the experience is supposed to give you.

If something interests you, stay.

If nothing does, move on.

If you see a door you are permitted to enter, enter.

If a path divides, choose one.

If you hear music, perhaps follow it.

If a shop window makes you curious, go inside.

If someone is making something and conversation happens naturally, perhaps ask about it.

You are not searching for a message.

You are practicing discovery.

Change Your Point of View

At some point, deliberately look from somewhere different.

Sit on the ground.

Look straight up.

Climb safely to a higher place.

Look through something.

Stand behind what you were looking at.

Turn around.

Photograph a reflection instead of the object.

Look through a doorway.

Frame a landscape between two trees.

Watch people from a bench.

Look closely enough that the whole disappears.

Stand far enough away that details disappear.

Listen instead of looking.

Close your eyes and let sound describe the place.

Then notice:

The thing did not necessarily change.

Your position did.

And because your position changed, something else became available to you.

You don't need to make that mean anything yet.

Let it remain available.

Midday

Receive Someone Else's Imagination

Spend some time with something another human being imagined into existence.

A painting.

A poem.

A piece of architecture.

A garden.

A novel.

A sculpture.

A quilt.

A piece of music.

A meal.

A stained-glass window.

A building.

A piece of furniture.

A film.

A handmade object.

Perhaps even a machine whose design makes you wonder how someone thought of it.

Don't begin by evaluating it.

Ask instead:

What did someone imagine here that did not exist before?

A blank canvas became color.

Silence became music.

A field became a garden.

Stone became a building.

Words became a story.

Ingredients became a meal.

Thread became pattern.

Someone saw possibility before there was form.

Receive what they made.

You do not have to make anything in response.

For now, let someone else's imagination be the gift.

What Are You Looking For?

Read John 1:35–39.

Two disciples begin following Jesus.

Jesus turns and asks them:

“What are you looking for?”

It is an interesting first question.

He does not begin by telling them what they should seek.

He asks what they are looking for.

They respond by asking where he is staying.

Jesus says:

“Come and see.”

There is no lecture.

There is an invitation.

Come.

See.

For a while, don't make the question vocational.

Don't ask what your church should be looking for.

Let it remain personal and spacious.

What are you looking for?

You don't have to know.

Perhaps curiosity begins precisely there.

The Afternoon

What If?

Play with possibility.

You can do this in your head, aloud, with index cards, with drawings, with objects, while moving things around on a table, or in any form that appeals to you.

Begin sentences with:

What if…

What if houses had no square rooms?

What if a garden were designed entirely around fragrance?

What if you could hear color?

What if a meal lasted three hours?

What if every neighborhood had one enormous table?

What if you had to communicate something important without words?

What if you designed a place of prayer for people who were afraid of churches?

What if children designed a celebration?

What if you could plant something today that would live for five hundred years?

What if you learned something you have always assumed you couldn't do?

Make up your own.

Make some impossible.

Make some ridiculous.

Let some become beautiful.

If ministry questions appear, they may stay.

But do not turn them into plans.

Do not ask whether they would work.

Not yet.

What if? has a different task.

It loosens the assumption that what already exists is what must exist.

Possibility deserves some time before practicality arrives.

Make Something Again

This Time, Follow What Appears

Return to something creative.

You may continue what you began last night or start something entirely different.

You might make an object.

Or a sound.

A flavor.

A pattern.

A story.

A small arrangement of a room.

A sequence of photographs.

A few lines of poetry.

A tune.

Something built.

Something cooked.

Something planted.

Something nobody else will ever see.

This time, pay attention to what happens while you make.

A color may suggest another color.

A line may suggest a shape.

A sentence may surprise you.

A piece of wood may resist what you intended.

A photograph may reveal something you hadn't seen.

A musical phrase may want to go somewhere else.

A flavor may need something you had not planned.

A story character may do something you didn't expect.

Let what you are making participate.

You begin.

Something happens.

You respond.

Something else becomes possible.

There is a rhythm here:

Offer. Notice. Respond. Discover.

You do not control everything that emerges.

Neither are you passive.

Creativity happens somewhere between receiving and responding.

There may be something familiar here from prayer, discernment, conversation, leadership, and life with God.

You don't need to explain the connection.

Keep making.

Leave It Unfinished

At some point, stop.

Even if you know what you would do next.

Especially if you know what you would do next.

Leave something unfinished.

Look at it.

Notice whether you feel the urge to complete it.

You can finish it someday if you want.

But for now, let unfinished mean something other than failed.

An unfinished thing still contains possibility.

The Second Evening

Surprise Yourself

Do something you did not expect to do on this retreat.

Nothing dangerous.

Nothing that violates your commitments.

Just something unnecessary and slightly surprising.

Buy an ice cream cone.

Go to a concert.

Walk outside at 10:00 at night.

Ride a bicycle.

Sit at the counter instead of a table.

Read a children's book.

Skip the next section of this guide.

Build a tower.

Dance badly.

Call someone who makes you laugh.

Watch people arriving at a train station.

Go somewhere for dessert.

Put your feet in the water.

Try to identify constellations.

Make popcorn.

Write a ridiculous poem.

Perhaps you will think of something better.

Curiosity sometimes needs permission to be frivolous.

Give it permission.

Before Sleep

God Is Not Finished

Read Revelation 21:5:

“See, I am making all things new.”

Not:

I made all things once.

I am making.

The biblical story begins with creation.

It ends with new creation.

And between them is a God who continues calling, forming, redeeming, surprising, disrupting, restoring, and bringing life where life seemed impossible.

You do not need to decide what God is making in your life tonight.

Simply let yourself live in a story in which God is not finished.

Neither are you.

Sleep.

The Final Morning

Begin Without Knowing Where You Are Going

Choose what happens this morning without consulting the guide.

Do something because you are curious about it.

Follow a path.

Return to something you noticed yesterday.

Make something.

Visit somewhere.

Sit somewhere unusual.

Read.

Listen.

Talk with someone.

Take photographs.

Explore.

Play.

Do nothing until something interests you.

You do not need instructions for this part.

By now, perhaps curiosity can lead.

Put the guide away.

Come back later.

When You Return

What Became Interesting?

Don't evaluate the retreat.

Don't ask whether you accomplished what you came for.

Instead, notice what became interesting.

What caught your attention?

What surprised you?

What did you make?

What did you abandon?

What made you laugh?

What did you see differently because you changed where you stood?

What question remained unanswered?

What did someone else's imagination give you?

What did you discover because you followed something rather than planned it?

What became possible when you did not need to know where you were going?

You don't need to answer every question.

Perhaps only one matters.

Perhaps none does yet.

Going Home

Keep a Door Open

Curiosity does not require you to return home with a new project.

You do not need to become an artist.

You do not need to redesign your ministry.

You do not need to make innovation your next responsibility.

That would turn these days into work too quickly.

Instead, perhaps carry home a little more room for the unknown.

When you encounter something familiar, you might occasionally ask:

What haven't I noticed?

When someone sees something differently:

What are they seeing that I am not?

When an old problem returns:

What else might be possible?

When something beautiful catches you:

What is asking for my attention?

When you feel the impulse to say, “We've tried that”:

Perhaps wait.

When you don't know:

Perhaps don't hurry to know.

You do not have to know everything in order to be faithful.

You do not have to imagine every possibility yourself.

Other people will see what you cannot see.

The world contains things you have not yet noticed.

Something new may already be emerging before you have language for it.

The God you worship is Creator.

The biblical story is not a story of a God who once created and then ran out of imagination.

God is still at work.

That means uncertainty does not always have to be a threat.

Sometimes it can be an opening.

You can look.

Listen.

Explore.

Try.

Receive another person's imagination.

Change where you stand.

Make something.

Leave something unfinished.

And trust that reality is larger than what you already know.

Sometimes a faithful response to what you do not yet understand is neither certainty nor decision.

It is simply:

I wonder.