

COMPANIONED RETREATS SERIES

WHERE IS GOD LEADING ME NOW?

A RETREAT FOR
VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

Rev. Lorne Bostwick

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A Companioned Retreat for Vocational Discernment

[Insert the approved Common Introduction here.]

Where Is God Leading Me Now?

Sometimes the question arrives quietly.

Is this still where I am called to be?

Sometimes another question follows.

If not here, then where?

Perhaps nothing is wrong.

Perhaps you love the congregation you serve and can imagine remaining for years.

Perhaps something has begun to shift.

A restlessness you cannot quite name.

A possibility you keep returning to.

A season that feels as though it may be ending.

A desire for something different.

Or simply the awareness that the person who once said yes to this particular ministry is not exactly the person you are now.

Discernment does not always begin with dissatisfaction.

Sometimes it begins with attention.

Something is moving.

You don't yet know what it means.

And movement does not necessarily mean leaving.

You may discover that what is changing is not your call to this place but the way you are being invited to inhabit it.

This retreat will not ask you to decide whether to stay or leave, apply or decline, retire or continue, begin something new or remain where you are.

Perhaps one of those decisions will eventually need to be made.

But not yet.

For these days, there is a prior question:

What is God inviting me to notice?

Before You Arrive

Leave the Decision at Home

Bring your Bible.

Bring a journal.

Bring comfortable clothes and whatever you need to spend some time outside.

If music helps you listen, bring an instrument.

And bring something completely unrelated to discernment—a novel, poetry, a puzzle, handwork, something you enjoy making, something that gives your mind somewhere else to go.

Leave the research at home.

Don't bring job descriptions.

Don't bring church profiles.

Don't bring salary comparisons.

Don't spend the retreat browsing positions online.

If you are considering retirement, don't bring the retirement calculator.

There will be time for information.

There will be time for practical questions.

There will be time for decisions.

Discernment needs something else first.

It needs enough room for you to notice what is happening before you decide what to do about it.

If there is a particular decision pressing on you, write it on a piece of paper before you leave.

Fold the paper.

Put it in your journal.

Bring it with you.

Then leave it folded.

The First Evening

You Don't Have to Know

Arrive.

Settle in.

Eat.

Learn the place.

Let yourself come down from the journey.

Don't begin discerning immediately.

You have probably been doing plenty of that already.

Later in the evening, find somewhere comfortable to sit.

Notice how it feels to be away from the place where the question ordinarily lives.

You may feel relief.

Anxiety.

Excitement.

Sadness.

Freedom.

Guilt.

Nothing in particular.

Don't interpret any of it.

For tonight, feelings are simply feelings.

Let whatever is there be there.

Then say:

I don't have to know tonight.

You don't.

Before Sleep

Read Genesis 12:1–9.

Abram is told:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.”

There is direction.

But there is not yet a map.

Don't turn Abram's journey into an instruction to leave anything.

Stay instead with the strange incompleteness of the call:

“To the land that I will show you.”

Sometimes enough light comes for the next step before it comes for the destination.

Close the Bible.

Let the question sleep too.

The First Morning

Begin With What Is

Have breakfast.

Let morning become morning before you begin thinking about vocation.

When you are ready, take your journal somewhere comfortable.

Before asking where God may be leading you, spend some time with where you actually are.

Write:

Where is there life in my ministry now?

Let particular things come.

A person.

Preaching.

Teaching.

Pastoral care.

Working with staff.

Community relationships.

A particular ministry.

Leading worship.

Developing leaders.

The ordinary rhythm of parish life.

Something difficult that nevertheless matters deeply to you.

Don't evaluate your congregation.

Don't make a list of strengths and weaknesses.

Notice your own experience.

Where do you find yourself thinking:

This is why I do this.

Write what comes.

Then stop.

Go Somewhere Else

Let the Question Rest

Leave your journal behind.

Go outside if the setting allows.

Move your body in whatever way feels good.

Walk.

Swim.

Stretch.

Sit in the sun.

Find shade.

Have another cup of coffee.

Look at something farther away than the room you have been sitting in.

You don't need to carry a question.

Give your mind somewhere else to be.

Late Morning

What Has Changed?

When you return, take your journal again.

Read what you wrote about where there is life.

Then ask:

What has changed in me?

Not:

What's wrong here?

Not:

Why am I unhappy?

Simply:

What has changed in me?

Something you once loved may no longer give the same energy.

Something you once tolerated may now cost too much.

Something that mattered enormously may matter less.

Something you never imagined wanting may have begun to matter.

Perhaps nothing significant has changed.

That is worth noticing too.

Write only as long as something is coming.

Then close the journal.

Midday

Stop Discerning

Have lunch.

Taste your food.

Then leave the discernment question alone.

Read your novel.

Take a nap.

Swim.

Work on a puzzle.

Make something.

Play music.

Sit outside.

Do something that has absolutely nothing to do with your vocational future.

There is no virtue in thinking about your call continuously for two days.

Some things become clearer when you stop staring at them.

The First Afternoon

Desire

Later in the afternoon, return to your journal.

Write:

What do I want?

Then wait.

The question may feel liberating.

It may feel uncomfortable.

You may immediately begin correcting yourself.

What you should want.

What the church needs.

What your family needs.

What is financially possible.

What would look responsible.

What other people would think.

Those things matter.

But give them the afternoon off.

For now:

What do I want?

Perhaps you want to stay exactly where you are.

Perhaps you want to love the place you are in differently.

Perhaps you want more time to write.

More teaching.

Less administration.

A smaller church.

A larger staff.

A different community.

Chaplaincy.

Coaching.

Interim ministry.

A different kind of work entirely.

Retirement.

A sabbatical.

More time with people you love.

More room for something you have not yet named.

Don't make desire prove that it is practical.

Don't make it prove that it is God's will.

Desire is not a decision.

Let it speak before you interrogate it.

Carry One Desire

Read what you have written.

Notice what has some life in it.

Choose one desire that keeps drawing your attention.

Don't ask:

How could I make this happen?

Ask instead:

What does this tell me about what matters to me now?

Take the desire somewhere.

Walk with it if walking feels right.

Sit beside water.

Take it to a porch.

Lie in the grass.

Hold it lightly.

You don't need to make it answer.

Toward Evening

What Fear Gets to Say

Read Galatians 5:1, 13–14.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”

Christian freedom is not freedom from responsibility.

But discernment becomes distorted when fear is allowed to make every decision.

Sit quietly.

Then ask:

What am I afraid of?

Let whatever comes be honest.

Disappointing people.

Making a mistake.

Staying too long.

Leaving too soon.

Money.

Losing identity.

Beginning again.

Not being wanted somewhere else.

Discovering that you really do want to leave.

Discovering that you really want to stay.

Don't argue with the fears.

Don't reassure yourself.

Don't try to overcome them.

Simply notice them.

Fear gets to speak.

It does not automatically get to decide.

The First Evening

Enough for Today

Have dinner.

Then stop discerning.

Really.

Your vocation can survive an evening without being examined.

Read.

Make music.

Sit beside a fire.

Talk with someone if company is available and welcome.

Watch the stars.

Have dessert.

Do something enjoyable.

The question will still be there tomorrow.

The Second Morning

Before Elijah Hears Anything

Begin slowly.

Have breakfast.

Then read 1 Kings 19:1–13.

Elijah is exhausted.

He has had enough.

Before there is revelation, there is sleep.

Food.

More sleep.

More food.

A journey.

Only later does Elijah stand at the mountain.

Wind.

Earthquake.

Fire.

And then something quieter.

The biblical text has been translated in different ways: a sound of sheer silence, a still small voice, a gentle whisper.

Whatever language you know best, stay with the quiet after everything loud has passed.

Notice, too, that God does not begin by demanding an answer from an exhausted man.

Let the passage be enough.

The Morning

What Keeps Returning?

Find somewhere you can be unhurried.

Take your journal.

Look back over the past year or two.

Ask:

What keeps returning?

Not what appeared once during a terrible week.

What has persisted?

A thought.

A desire.

A question.

A possibility.

An image of another kind of life.

A sense that something is unfinished.

A sense that something may be complete.

Perhaps you have repeatedly found yourself saying:

Someday I would like to . . .

Or:

I don't think I can keep . . .

Or:

I wonder what it would be like to . . .

Write the recurring things down.

Don't rank them.

Don't interpret them yet.

Persistence does not automatically mean divine guidance.

But something that keeps returning may deserve your attention.

Late Morning

What Are You Free to Love?

Leave your journal behind.

Go somewhere you like.

Take only this question:

What am I free to love now?

Not:

What must you accomplish?

Not:

What position should you hold?

Simply:

What am I free to love now?

A community.

A kind of ministry.

A group of people.

Preaching.

Teaching.

Writing.

Caregiving.

Justice.

Beauty.

Learning.

Mentoring.

Creating.

A slower life.

A place.

People you have not met yet.

People you already know.

Perhaps the answer points somewhere new.

Perhaps it points more deeply toward where you already are.

Let the question open the future rather than narrow it.

Midday

Eat

Have lunch.

Don't discern while you eat.

You have done enough thinking for the morning.

The Final Afternoon

Open the Paper

Now take out the folded piece of paper you brought with you.

Read what you wrote before leaving home.

Notice your response.

Perhaps the question looks different.

Perhaps it looks exactly the same.

Perhaps you now suspect it wasn't quite the right question.

Don't force clarity.

Take your journal and make three headings:

What I know

What I don't know

What I don't need to know yet

Begin with what you genuinely know.

Then name what remains unclear.

Finally, consider what you have been demanding an answer to before an answer is actually needed.

Give yourself permission to put some things there.

Especially there.

The Next Faithful Step

There is one more question:

What is the next faithful step?

Not:

What is the five-year plan?

Not:

Where will I be next?

Not even:

Should I stay or should I go?

The next step may be a conversation with your spouse.

A spiritual director.

A coach.

A trusted friend.

A presbytery leader.

Perhaps you need to learn something.

Visit somewhere.

Ask a question.

Explore a possibility without committing to it.

Take a sabbatical.

Set a boundary.

Change something in the ministry you already have.

Perhaps you need to remain where you are and pay attention a little longer.

Perhaps there is no step yet.

Waiting can be a faithful step when waiting is chosen rather than merely endured.

Write down only what seems true.

One step is enough.

Before You Leave

A Lamp, Not a Floodlight

Read Psalm 119:105.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

A lamp does not illuminate the entire road.

It gives enough light for where you are standing and perhaps a little beyond.

You may have arrived hoping for a floodlight.

You may be leaving with a lamp.

That may be enough.

Think about what you have noticed.

Life.

Change.

Desire.

Fear.

Persistence.

Love.

What you know.

What you don't know.

What you don't need to know yet.

Don't turn them into an answer.

Let them remain together.

Then, when you are ready, say:

Show me enough for the next step.

Sit for a while.

Then pack.

Going Home

You may leave knowing what you need to do.

If so, receive the clarity without rushing it.

You may leave knowing only what deserves more attention.

That is also clarity.

You may leave with almost exactly the same question you brought.

That does not mean the retreat failed.

Discernment is not the production of certainty.

It is becoming attentive enough to recognize what is true and free enough to respond when the way becomes clear.

Don't demand a decision from yourself on the drive home.

Let what you have noticed travel with you.

Talk with people who know you well and who do not need a particular answer from you.

Test what you think you are hearing.

Give important decisions the time they deserve.

And remember:

You do not need the whole road.

For now, perhaps there is enough light for the next step.