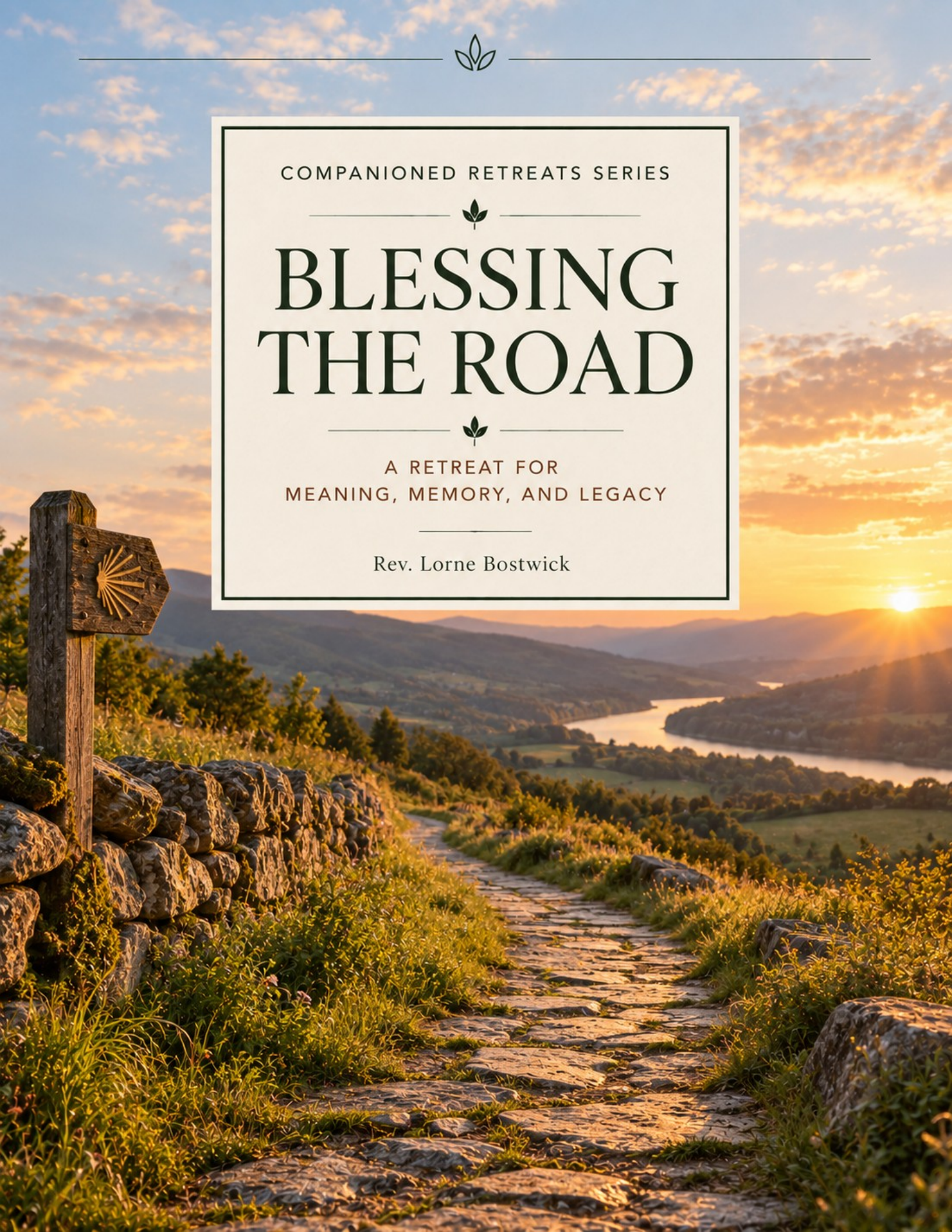

COMPANIONED RETREATS SERIES

BLESSING THE ROAD

A RETREAT FOR
MEANING, MEMORY, AND LEGACY

Rev. Lorne Bostwick

Blessing the Road

A Companioned Retreat for Meaning, Memory, and Legacy

[Insert the approved Common Introduction here.]

Blessing the Road

There comes a time in a long vocation when the road behind you becomes longer than the road ahead.

That may happen as retirement approaches.

It may happen after retirement, when the rhythms that organized your days have changed and there is finally room to look back.

It may happen after twenty years of ministry, or thirty, or forty, when you realize that you have lived long enough to have become part of the history of the church yourself.

You have known people who are gone now.

You have served congregations that have changed.

You have watched the church change around you.

Some things you hoped for happened.

Some did not.

Some things you worked very hard to accomplish disappeared surprisingly quickly.

Other things that seemed small at the time endured.

There are people whose lives became woven into yours.

Places you can still see when you close your eyes.

Sanctuaries.

Hospital rooms.

Kitchens.

Cemeteries.

Campgrounds.

Meeting rooms.

Front porches.

Communion tables.

Parking lots.

Living rooms.

There were baptisms and funerals.

Weddings and ordinations.

Christmas Eves and Easter mornings.

Meetings that went far too long.

Conflicts you wish had ended differently.

People who astonished you.

People who wounded you.

People you probably wounded.

There were sermons you remember and thousands of words you no longer do.

There were ordinary Tuesdays when you simply showed up.

There were moments when you knew exactly why you had been called.

And others when you wondered what you were doing there.

A life in ministry accumulates pieces.

No retreat can recover them all.

You cannot reconstruct an entire life.

You don't need to.

Think instead of a mosaic.

Different pieces.

Different colors.

Some luminous.

Some dark.

Some irregular.

Some beautiful only because they are beside something else.

Some pieces are missing.

Still, enough remain for a pattern to emerge.

Or think of stained glass.

The pieces do not become beautiful because they become alike.

The window holds them together.

And when light passes through them, something appears that no single piece could reveal.

For these days, you are not assembling a record of accomplishments.

You are not writing your memoir.

You are not deciding whether your ministry was successful.

You are gathering pieces of a life.

Perhaps, as light passes through them, you will see something you could not see while you were busy living it.

Choosing a Place

Somewhere with a Long View

Choose a place where memory has room.

You may want somewhere quiet and beautiful.

A retreat center.

A monastery or abbey.

A cabin.

A cottage near water.

A mountain lodge.

A comfortable inn.

A place with a porch.

A room with a fireplace.

A familiar retreat center you have visited through the years.

Or perhaps a place connected in some way with your own story.

If possible, choose somewhere with a long view.

A hill.

An overlook.

A shoreline.

A broad field.

A mountain.

A long stretch of road.

A window from which you can see into the distance.

Later in the retreat, that view will matter.

Comfort matters too.

This is not a retreat that needs physical challenge.

You are bringing enough terrain with you.

What to Bring

Pieces of a Life

Before you leave home, spend a little time gathering things that carry memories.

Don't try to represent your whole ministry.

Choose what draws you.

A photograph.

An ordination certificate.

A stole.

A worship bulletin.

A letter.

A thank-you note.

A sermon.

A photograph of a congregation.

A picture of a church building.

A photograph of people you served with.

Something from seminary.

A small object from a place you served.

A gift someone gave you.

A book that formed you.

Something handmade by a child.

An old calendar.

A piece of correspondence.

A photograph from a baptism, wedding, mission trip, confirmation class, church supper, building project, protest, retreat, youth trip, or ordinary congregational day.

Bring some things from outside ministry too.

Your life was never only your work.

Family.

Friendships.

Places you loved.

Things you made.

Journeys you took.

People who knew you without needing you to be their pastor.

Bring your Bible.

If you would like to make an actual mosaic or collage, bring scissors, glue, tape, colored paper, markers, photographs, or other simple materials.

You might bring translucent paper or colored tissue that catches light.

Or bring none of those.

The mosaic may simply be an arrangement of photographs, objects, words, colors, and memories that exists for these days and is taken apart when you leave.

Do not turn preparation into an archaeological excavation.

You are not trying to find everything.

Bring enough.

When You Arrive

Put the Pieces Down

Unpack.

Make yourself comfortable.

Then place the things you brought somewhere you can see them.

On a table.

Across a bed.

On the floor.

Along a windowsill.

Don't arrange them yet.

Don't put them in chronological order.

Don't decide which are important.

Just put them down.

Look at what came with you.

Then leave them there.

Have something to eat.

Explore the place if you want.

Rest.

Let the first evening come without beginning the work of remembering.

You have carried these years for a long time.

They can wait another evening.

The First Evening

The Road Behind You

Later, if you want, go somewhere you can see a road, path, shoreline, river, or horizon.

Don't bring the pieces.

For now, bring only yourself.

Think about the astonishing fact that you have actually lived all those years.

You once stood at the beginning of them.

There was a time when you had never preached a sermon as an ordained pastor.

Never moderated a session.

Never stood at some of the graves where you eventually stood.

Never knew the names of people who would become precious to you.

Never imagined some of the places ministry would take you.

You could not have known the road.

Yet you walked it.

Perhaps there is no question to answer tonight.

Just look back for a while.

Not to evaluate.

To recognize.

I have come a long way.

Before Sleep

The God Who Has Been There

Read the beginning of Psalm 90 slowly:

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.”

All generations.

The ones before yours.

Yours.

The ones that will follow.

The church did not begin when you entered ministry.

It will not end when you leave it.

Your life has taken place inside a story much larger than your own.

Tonight, let that be enough.

Sleep.

The First Morning

Let Memory Choose

Don't begin with a timeline.

Don't begin with your first call and work forward.

Return instead to the things you brought.

Pick up whatever catches your attention first.

Hold it.

What comes with it?

A person?

A room?

A smell?

A voice?

A conflict?

A joke?

A congregation singing?

A hospital corridor?

A meal?

A face?

A feeling you had forgotten?

Let one memory lead to another.

If you suddenly remember something for which you brought no object, find something nearby to represent it.

A stone.

A scrap of paper.

A leaf.

A word.

A color.

Or simply say a person's name aloud.

Don't worry about remembering accurately enough to write history.

You are not writing history.

You are allowing memory to offer pieces.

Stay with what comes.

People in the Glass

Sooner or later, faces will appear.

People who called something out of you.

People who trusted you.

People who challenged you.

People who taught you.

People who irritated you.

People whose courage changed you.

People you baptized.

People whose hands you held.

People who cooked for you.

People who sat through your sermons.

People who disagreed with you.

People who served beside you.

People who forgave you.

People you forgave.

People whose funerals you conducted.

People you still miss.

People you have not thought about in years.

Some entered your life briefly and somehow remained.

Others walked beside you for decades.

You don't need to make a list.

Let faces come.

If you have photographs, look at them.

Say names.

Remember voices.

Notice affection when it comes.

Notice grief.

Notice gratitude.

A vocation is never carried alone.

Some of your legacy is already alive in other people.

And some of theirs is alive in you.

The Places That Hold the Story

If you feel drawn to it, take out a map.

A paper map may be especially good for this.

Mark places where your vocation has lived.

Where you studied.

Where you were ordained.

Congregations you served.

Hospitals.

Retreat centers.

Presbyteries.

Communities.

Places where something changed in you.

Perhaps the map stretches across a state.

Perhaps across the country.

Perhaps across the world.

Perhaps most of your life happened within fifty miles.

Distance is not the measure.

Look at the geography of your vocation.

These were not abstractions.

You served God somewhere.

Among particular people.

In particular years.

Under particular circumstances.

You were there.

What Endured?

Planting, Watering, Growing

Sometime around midday, read 1 Corinthians 3:5–9.

Paul writes:

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”

Stay with the verbs.

Planted.

Watered.

Gave growth.

One person plants.

Another waters.

God gives growth.

Ministry is full of consequences you cannot trace.

You may never know what became of many seeds.

Someone remembers a sermon you forgot the week after you preached it.

A child you welcomed may remember that church was a place where they were safe.

A person you visited may have told someone else what that visit meant.

Someone you taught may have passed something onward.

A congregation may have learned something slowly, long after the initiative that began it disappeared.

A practice you preserved may have become important after you were gone.

Something you began may have failed.

Something you thought failed may have planted something.

Something you thought was successful may have vanished.

You cannot reconstruct all the consequences.

You don't need to.

Look at the pieces before you.

Ask:

Where do I recognize life?

Not success.

Life.

Where was there courage?

Love?

Truth?

Mercy?

Beauty?

Justice?

Hospitality?

Faith?

Hope?

Repair?

Community?

A deeper capacity to love God and neighbor?

Don't force an answer.

Notice where life appears.

The Church You Actually Served

There may be grief here.

You may have entered ministry with expectations about the church that did not survive the years.

The church changed.

The culture changed.

Congregations changed.

Traditions that once seemed secure became fragile.

Biblical knowledge you assumed could be taken for granted could no longer be assumed.

Patterns of belonging weakened.

Institutions declined.

Some congregations closed.

Some ministries disappeared.

Some things changed in ways you welcomed.

Others changed in ways you still grieve.

Perhaps you spent years trying to reverse decline.

Perhaps numbers became more important than you wanted them to be.

Attendance.

Membership.

Giving.

Programs.

Growth.

Survival.

You may still carry the question:

Did we fail?

Don't hurry past it.

Decline is real.

Loss is real.

Disappointment is real.

But institutional success and vocational faithfulness are not the same thing.

You were not called to control history.

You were called to serve within it.

Some generations build.

Some reform.

Some preserve.

Some translate.

Some carry precious things through seasons when their future cannot yet be seen.

Some plant trees beneath whose shade they will never sit.

You may not know what history will eventually call your generation.

You don't need to decide.

Ask instead:

What was entrusted to us?

And:

How did we try to carry it faithfully?

Let whatever answers come become pieces of the mosaic too.

The Pieces You Would Not Have Chosen

Not every piece is bright.

There are things you wish had happened differently.

Decisions you regret.

People you failed.

Conflicts you handled badly.

Times you were frightened.

Times you were arrogant.

Times you were too certain.

Times you remained silent.

Times you spoke when silence might have been wiser.

People you could not help.

Congregations you could not save.

Relationships that did not heal.

Perhaps there are things for which you have already asked forgiveness.

Perhaps some cannot now be repaired.

Do not excavate wounds that require another person to help you carry them.

This is not that retreat.

But you do not have to remove every difficult piece before the life can become beautiful.

If one manageable regret comes, hold it gently.

Not the worst thing.

Not something that overwhelms you.

Something that belongs honestly in the picture.

Perhaps say:

I wish this had been different.

And then:

It belongs to the life I lived.

If forgiveness is needed and can be sought, perhaps someday you will seek it.

If repair remains possible, perhaps someday you will make it.

For now, grace allows truth to remain in the picture without becoming the whole picture.

And Sometimes You Were More

There is another truth to tell.

There were times you were more than you expected to be.

You found courage you didn't know you had.

You spoke when you were afraid.

You stayed when leaving would have been easier.

You left when staying would have been easier.

You loved someone who was difficult to love.

You learned something that changed you.

You stood beside someone in terrible grief and somehow remained present.

You preached something you didn't know you knew until the words came.

You helped a congregation through something nobody had prepared you for.

You admitted you were wrong.

You changed.

You began again.

Grace worked through gifts you had cultivated and gifts you didn't know you possessed.

Do not diminish those pieces either.

Humility does not require pretending grace did nothing through you.

Sometimes you were not all you could have been.

Sometimes you were more than you imagined you could be.

Both belong.

Make the Mosaic

Now begin arranging the pieces.

Use photographs and objects if you brought them.

Write a few names or words on scraps of paper.

Add colors.

Tear paper rather than cutting every edge cleanly.

Draw something.

Include a Scripture phrase if one belongs.

Add a place.

A congregation.

A person.

A loss.

A joy.

A surprise.

Something funny.

Something unfinished.

Something you received.

Something you gave.

You may make an actual collage.

You may arrange objects temporarily on a table or floor.

You may make something resembling stained glass, with pieces of color held beside one another.

Do not make a timeline.

Do not make a résumé.

Do not arrange success on one side and failure on the other.

Let the pieces become neighbors.

A funeral may sit beside a baptism.

A conflict beside a friendship.

A church that closed beside a person whose faith came alive there.

A mistake beside something beautiful that happened anyway.

A place you left beside a place that still lives in you.

Don't try too hard to make the picture say something.

Arrange.

Move.

Notice.

Move something again.

Let your hands participate in remembering.

Eventually, step back.

Look.

Leave the Gaps

You will notice what isn't there.

People you forgot.

Years represented by almost nothing.

Stories you cannot quite recover.

Questions that never resolved.

Consequences you never learned.

Pieces that have simply disappeared.

Leave the gaps.

Do not go hunting for something to fill every empty place.

You do not possess the complete meaning of your own life.

Some of it lives in other people.

Some of it is still unfolding.

Some belongs to generations you will never meet.

Some is known only to God.

Enough is here.

Look again.

The Second Evening

Let the Light Through

If you have made something physical, place it somewhere light can fall across it.

Near a window.

Beside a lamp.

Near a candle, safely placed.

If you have not made anything physical, sit somewhere you can watch evening light change.

Think again of stained glass.

Deep blue.

Red.

Amber.

Green.

Clear glass.

Dark leading between the pieces.

Irregular shapes.

The dark lines are not removed so that light can enter.

The different colors do not have to become one color.

Light passes through the window as it is.

Perhaps grace is something like that.

Grace does not require you to call every piece good.

It does not ask you to pretend pain was secretly pleasant, mistakes were necessary, or every loss happened for a reason.

Grace allows the whole life to be held before God truthfully.

And still the light comes through.

The beauty of a vocation does not require every year to have been beautiful.

The meaning of a life does not require every piece to make sense.

Sometimes meaning becomes visible only when enough pieces have accumulated and light passes through them.

Sit with the life you actually lived.

Not the life you might have lived.

Not the ministry you wish you had had.

This one.

Let it be seen.

Before Sleep

What Remains Unfinished

Read Deuteronomy 34:1–5.

Moses climbs Mount Nebo.

God shows him the land.

Moses sees it.

And he does not enter it.

A lifetime has been spent traveling toward something Moses will not personally experience.

Yet Scripture does not conclude that his life failed.

Tomorrow, you will spend more time with this story.

Tonight, simply notice:

Even Moses left something unfinished.

Sleep.

The Final Morning

The View from the Mountain

Take Deuteronomy 34 with you.

Go somewhere with the longest view available.

A hill.

An overlook.

A shoreline.

A field.

A balcony.

A long road.

A window.

Read the story again.

Then look outward.

There are things you hoped to see in the church that you may never see.

Questions you will not answer.

Ministries others will finish.

Traditions others will carry differently.

Seeds whose growth you will never witness.

People whose stories will continue without you.

There is a church beyond your ministry.

There is a world beyond your lifetime.

And God will be there.

Let that sentence have some room.

God will be there.

The church after you will not be your church.

It may preserve things you treasured.

It may release some of them.

It may recover things you feared had been lost.

It may discover forms of faithfulness you cannot yet imagine.

You will not control that.

You were never meant to.

Perhaps one of the final acts of a long vocation is learning to trust God with what happens next.

You do not have to enter every promised land toward which you have traveled for the journey to have mattered.

Stay with the view.

Let the future remain beyond you.

Entrusting the Unfinished

When you return, look once more at your mosaic.

Notice the unfinished pieces.

The gaps.

The things still becoming.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:6–7 again:

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”

If these words help, use them slowly:

What I planted, I entrust to God.

What I watered, I entrust to God.

What I could not finish, I entrust to God.

What I do not understand, I entrust to God.

What will grow after me, I entrust to God.

What will change, I entrust to God.

What will be forgotten, I entrust to God.

What will endure, I entrust to God.

Perhaps add something of your own.

You do not have to know what God will do with everything you have offered.

Trust does not require seeing the finished picture.

What Is Legacy?

Perhaps now the word can mean something different.

Legacy is not the size of the church when you left.

It is not the buildings constructed.

The programs established.

The books written.

The positions held.

The number of people who remember your name.

Those things may belong to the story.

But legacy is larger and quieter.

Legacy lives in what has entered the life of God's creation because you were here.

Love given.

Truth spoken.

Mercy practiced.

Beauty created.

Faith handed on.

Tradition carried.

Questions opened.

People accompanied.

Communities tended.

Injustice resisted.

Meals shared.

Grief carried.

Children welcomed.

Scripture opened.

Sacraments celebrated.

Forgiveness offered.

Hope protected.

Courage awakened.

People loved.

And countless things whose consequences you will never know.

What you have given enters lives that enter other lives.

You do not own what happens next.

Legacy is not possession of the future.

It is participation in a story that continues without you.

The Destiny of the Pieces

Read Revelation 21:1–5.

The Christian story does not end with your ministry.

It does not end with your denomination.

It does not end with the particular form of church you have known.

It does not even end with the world as you have known it.

“See, I am making all things new.”

All things.

The pieces of your life belong within that promise.

The work you finished.

The work you didn't.

The people you loved.

The mistakes you made.

The gifts you gave.

The gifts you received.

The traditions you carried.

The things you had to release.

The seeds you planted.

The things that died.

The things whose resurrection you will never see.

You do not have to make all of it meaningful by yourself.

Meaning is not something you have to manufacture from the pieces.

Your life has belonged within God's creation all along.

And it belongs within the destiny toward which God is drawing creation.

Before You Leave

Bless the Road

Return to the mosaic one final time.

Don't fix it.

Don't fill the gaps.

Don't improve the arrangement.

Look at it as it is.

Perhaps place your hand near it.

Or simply sit before it.

Remember that there were times you were not all you could have been.

There were also times grace made you more than you expected to be.

You received gifts you did not create.

You were given people to love.

You inherited a faith you did not invent.

You were given particular places in which to serve.

You lived through a particular moment in the life of the church.

You carried what you could.

You planted.

You watered.

You received.

You gave.

You failed.

You learned.

You loved.

You kept going.

And now much of what your life has meant lies beyond your ability to measure it.

Let that be true.

Well Done

Read Matthew 25:21:

“Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Notice the word.

Not successful.

Not impressive.

Not indispensable.

Faithful.

You do not need to pronounce those words over yourself as though you were the judge of your own life.

Receive them instead as the hope toward which a Christian vocation has always been lived.

The hope that one day, standing in the presence of God, the life you carried can be received in grace.

Not because you did everything right.

You didn't.

Not because everything you touched flourished.

It didn't.

Not because you completed everything you began.

You couldn't.

But because this life was given to you.

And you gave it back.

Perhaps that is what you most want to carry from these days.

Not proof of success.

Not a defense of your ministry.

Not a list of accomplishments.

A life.

Many pieces.

Many colors.

Some dark.

Some luminous.

Some missing.

Some whose beauty appeared only much later.

Enough pieces to glimpse a pattern.

Enough light to see beauty.

Enough grace to tell the truth.

Enough trust to leave the picture unfinished.

And enough hope to entrust the whole thing to God.

Bless the road you have traveled.

Bless the people who traveled parts of it with you.

Bless the places that received your life.

Bless what you planted.

Bless what grew.

Bless what did not.

Bless what remains unfinished.

Then leave the mosaic unfinished.

God's creation is still unfolding.

The story is still being written.

The seeds are still becoming what seeds become.

Others will walk roads you helped prepare.

Others will carry pieces you handed them.

And you do not have to see the completed window to trust the light.

Well done, good and faithful servant.