



*"For I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

*Jeremiah 29:11*

When life is predictable and we feel in control, it's easy to ignore big questions and to accept simple answers. When we are in our comfort zone, faith sometimes goes on cruise control. However, we are living in an unsettling time - a time that can challenge our beliefs and cause us to question God's presence in the world. Thankfully, God asks us to bring all of our questions, concerns, and challenges directly to Him. Though we may not get all the answers or we may not like the answers we get, we can be confident that God will walk alongside us in the midst of our struggles, pain and doubt and that we will be transformed by the time spent with God.

This toolkit was created to help you see God's love active and alive in your life during these challenging times. It's not a checklist of to-dos with a specific outcome in mind. Instead, it's designed to help you articulate your "big questions" and to open yourself up to God's presence.

You will begin by articulating your personal narrative - something that is weighing on your heart and mind right now. Then, you will begin exploring a God-centered narrative - how might God speak into these circumstances. Next, you will choose a traditional spiritual practice that can help you open up space to see God's presence in the midst of the places that you find most compelling. Finally over a period of weeks, you'll engage in that practice and reflect each day on your experience.

This process is meant to be interpersonal and interactive especially in this time when we are already physically distanced from one another. We strongly encourage you to invite a faith companion into the process to provide shepherding that might expand your thinking. If you would like Atonement to provide a faith companion and didn't request one when you registered, please contact Jennie Kramer at 847-209-2756 or [jennie.kramer@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jennie.kramer@sbcglobal.net). You may already have someone in your life who you depend on for spiritual support. If so, you may want to ask that person to walk alongside you in this process.

You will need a pen and paper to work on each of the tools in the toolkit. You may want to use a journal or notebook to keep all your notes and thoughts in one place.

## **1. Your personal narrative**

Read the list of questions/statements below and make a note of which ones stand out to you the most. To clarify, standing out doesn't mean the easiest ones to answer - it means the ones that you feel most drawn to or feel some resistance to. Recognize that the Holy Spirit may be stirring up those feelings in you. Challenge yourself. Pay attention to why these questions may be particularly significant in your life right now.

Choose 3-5 of these questions to answer. Spend some time in prayer asking God to help you to reflect on and answer these questions. Take your time. Write your responses down (don't just think about them). Revisit them later in the day or tomorrow when you've had a chance to think about your answers. Remember there are no right or wrong answers (but there are honest answers and deflecting answers!) . Remember also, this process is grounded in God's grace and love. Romans 8:1 says *there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*.

1. Make a list of the things you miss doing right now.
2. Make a list of the things you are worried about right now.
3. What are you fearful of?
4. What would you like to be able to tell your children or grandchildren about your faith during the pandemic?
5. How would you describe your relationship with God today? How near or far away has God felt to you in this season?
6. What currently makes you excited or motivated?
7. Where would you like to see God active and present in the world right now?
8. Where would you like to see God active and present in your life right now?
9. What are your hopes for the church at this time and in the future?
10. What, if anything, do you think God is calling you to do in the midst of the pandemic?
11. How is your faith being challenged right now?
12. What questions would you like to ask God right now?
13. What person or group of people are you most concerned about? Why?
14. How is your worldview being challenged right now?

15. Which of your thoughts or experiences does your faith feel inadequate to address right now?
16. Is there something on my mind not reflected in these questions that is weighing on you? If so, describe the thought and why you are concerned about it.

Look through your written notes and focus on the question and answer that you most want to address with God. Try to summarize your statement in 2-3 sentences. We will refer to this as your *personal narrative*. Write it here:

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## 2. God-centered narrative

Thinking about what you have learned in worship, prayer, biblical reflection, serving and your faith experience in the past, reflect on how you think God might speak into your personal narrative. What might God say directly to you? Write it down. We'll call this your *God-centered narrative*.

This may be challenging for several reasons. First, it may feel uncomfortable to speak for God. Or, it may feel inauthentic because your response seems more like a simple platitude that you might find on a poster or a facebook post. You may not feel like you have enough knowledge of the Bible or God's story to know how God might respond. That's okay. This is just a starting point.

Have a conversation with your faith companion about how God might reveal his presence to you at this time. Your faith companion may ask you questions or help you clarify your thoughts so that together you might discern how God may be gently and lovingly speaking into your personal statement. Edit your God-centered narrative as it changes and write it down. Again, keep in mind that this is a starting point and be open to God leading you to becoming more convicted about it or to draw you to a deeper response as you begin the next step.

Write your God-centered narrative here:

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### 3. Spiritual practices

Spiritual practices are regular habits, activities, rhythms, or experiences that help open us up to grow in our relationship with God. Practices position us not to “get it (our faith)” but to “be gotten” by the God who loves us. They turn us toward the places God has promised to meet us to hear God’s voice and to see God’s presence in our lives. We all have trouble hearing from God (even Mother Teresa struggled with this!) but we know it isn’t because God isn’t actively reaching out to us. The noise of daily life - work, family, recreation, media, among other things - can interfere with our ability to receive God’s word. Practices can reduce or eliminate the noise for a time and make space for God. We are going to use daily practices to journey from our personal narrative to a God-centered narrative speaking into the areas of our lives that are most compelling to each of us individually right now.

Some of the traditional Christian practices and a brief description of each are listed below. Which of these practices may help you hear God’s voice related to your personal narrative? Work with your faith companion to determine which practice you’d like to start with. Again, there is no right or wrong answer. Your faith companion can help you create a specific plan for the practice. For example, if you choose daily bible reflection, your faith companion might help you to decide where to start within the Bible. Or, if you choose serving, they may help you create a plan to serve in a unique way or to serve a specific person or group of people.

There can be a lot of flexibility and creativity to match your individual circumstances. The important thing is that you commit to your practice for at least 3-4 weeks. Studies show that it takes 21 days to create a habit and up to 90 days to make a lifestyle change. For some of you, the pandemic has created a lot of extra stress and work and you may not feel like you have time to add another thing to your plate. Please, consider adding a very simple practice to your day. Some of you have found that you have a lot

of extra time because a lot of your other activities have been cancelled. You may decide to take on a more complex practice.

- **Serving** - Helping or assisting someone in need in a way that glorifies God
- **Generosity** - Giving of our resources beyond what seems reasonable, trusting in God's abundance
- **Biblical reflection** - Reading the scriptures and meditating on its meaning and impact on our lives. It's about transformation not information.
- **Prayer** - Talking to and listening to God about your relationship with God and with others
- **Fasting** - Skipping a meal or another thing that feeds your appetite (social media, alcohol, etc...) to find greater nourishment from God
- **Solitude / Silence** - Spending quiet time to hear from God.
- **Confession / Self-examination** - Honestly assessing and confessing where you have "missed the mark" and accepting God's grace and love for you no matter what.
- **Fellowship** - Seeking community with others because God is a relational God. This may seem challenging during the pandemic but is still possible with creativity.
- **Gratitude** - Thanking God in all circumstances. You don't have to thank God FOR all circumstances but look for where God is working for good in the midst of joys and sorrows.

## EXAMPLES

Here are some examples of different ways to engage in a practice. Some are fairly simple and some are more complex. This list is barely the tip of the iceberg. We encourage you to get creative to develop a plan that fits your life situation and the way God created you. If you would like to dig deeper into some of the other practices or brainstorm examples of those practices, please talk to a faith companion.

- If you are going to practice **Gratitude**, you may:
  - Write down 3 things you are thankful for each day and post them on your mirror.
  - Call or write to a different person every day to share a specific thing you are grateful for about that person.
  - Reflect on the people who influenced your faith life and what you learned from them. Spend time in prayer, thanking God for putting each person in your life and pray for the well-being of the person and his/her family.

- If you are going to practice **Biblical Reflection**, you could:
  - Commit to reading a chapter of Scripture a day. You can start anywhere.
  - Choose one verse per week that relates back to your God-centered narrative and practice lectio divina each day to study that verse ([Lectio Divina](#))
  - Read a different parable each day and think about what person or thing you relate to the most. Ask God to help you see from other perspectives.
  - Choose several Psalms and read them replacing the name of a person or group of people you struggle relating to for the word “me”.
  - Work on memorizing one verse each week and repeat it when you are driving, showering, or making a meal.
- If you are going to practice **Generosity**, you might:
  - Choose something meaningful to you that you spend money on. Give that up for a week and use that money for the benefit of someone else. Choose a different thing to give up or a different way to use the money each week.
  - Significantly increase your weekly giving to Atonement or another organization for several weeks and pray for the programs or people who will benefit from your added generosity.
  - Find a new way to be generous each day - increase a tip when you order out, call a teacher to find out what his/her needs are during the pandemic and donate what they need, buy coffee for the person behind you in the drive through, etc...

Write down the practice you have chosen and your specific goal in “practicing” your practice.

I have chosen the spiritual practice of \_\_\_\_\_. Each day for 21 (or \_\_\_\_\_) days, I will \_\_\_\_\_

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Each day write down the answer to these questions. There are no right or wrong answers. Reflect on your honest answers with God.

1. What did you notice today (something that stood out to you or was unexpected)?
2. Where did I experience God today within my practice or some other time during the day?
3. How is God speaking into my personal statement today? What am I resisting and what is resonating? Is God reinforcing or redirecting what I thought God wanted me to hear?

Check in with your faith companion weekly. Keep “showing up” to do your practice each day. There will be days when it’s joyful and days when it is a chore. That’s okay. We will be praying for each of you during this season.

*“May God in his mercy lead us through these times; but above all, may he lead us to himself.”* Dietrich Bonhoeffer