

40 Days with *Still*

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR *Still*

by

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In *Still*, you will find fifty-four meditations on what it looks like to arrive at a middle place in a spiritual journey and how to respond to a feeling of God's absence. *Forty Days with Still* can be used in a general way, allowing you to press in closer with the readings, or it can be used specifically as a Lenten guide. If you choose the latter, over each of the forty days of Lent you will be guided to read one to three meditations and then reflect on the question(s) that correspond with that day's reading. Let this guide deepen your understanding of who God is and how we communicate with God even in the moments when we can't always feel God near.

DAY 1 (pages ix–xix)

Preface

Preface, ii

“When the Lord came into me, it was such a good feeling . . . but then there was all this stuff to do and to

think about, and I don't remember the feeling all that well" (p. x). Think about your conversion experience or the first time you experienced the nearness of God. What was that like? Did you think that feeling would last forever? Looking back on it, how do you remember that period of your life?

Lauren talks about hitting a spiritual wall and the questions that arose once there. Have you ever hit a wall in your spiritual journey? What were the questions that arose for you? How did you figure out what to do and where to go next?

Lauren says that even in the muddled, doubting times, "glimmers of holy keep interrupting my gaze" (p. xiv). Can you recall a time when you observed glimmers of holy in your life?

What event(s) brought you to the "middle" of your spiritual journey? Was it something tragic, like Lauren's loss of her mother and the dissolution of her marriage? Was it quieter, the dull throb of doubt or a "fading" that "seems a hollowing loss" (p. xvi)? Was it something else altogether?

DAY 2 (pages 3–9)

Failure

Lauren says that during her marriage, "God became an abstraction. God became puzzling, like field theory, and far away" (p. 7). Have you ever reached this point, where

God no longer felt clear and close, but rather like an abstraction? If so, what did that mean for your faith and your understanding of your spiritual life?

“Many Sunday mornings, I wanted to stay put on my screen porch. . . . The porch is a good place to stay when you think that God is gone, made up, fictive, and when you are a person who is choosing to hold on to jagged things” (p. 9). What is the porch for you? Where is the safe place you retreat to, the place you sometimes use to escape from difficult situations? What do you learn when you leave the porch?

DAY 3 (page 10)

The View from Ellie’s House

Lauren describes feeling pathetic about moving into her priest’s guest bedroom and sleeping in a twin bed at age thirty-two. How have you responded to the unexpected, difficult moments in your life? What do those moments have to do with your understanding of vulnerability, gratitude, grace, or faith?

DAY 4 (pages 11–14)

A Poem at Thanksgiving

“Still—still we say thank you, dark though it is” (p. 14). Thankfulness, praise, and worship in the midst of dark-

ness, as poet W. S. Merwin and Lauren affirm, can be beautiful and necessary, even in their apparent contradiction. When have you been able to offer thanks in a dark moment? What was the fruit or result of offering thanks in the middle of darkness? Has there ever been a time when you agreed with Lauren's aunt and uncle—that it would be dishonest to offer thanks in such a time?

DAY 5 (pages 15–20)

Ode on God's Absence

What do you do when you feel God is absent? Pull away? Try harder to connect? Busy yourself with other things? Shut down?

In this meditation, Lauren often returns to the refrain “Time passes.” How does the passing of time shape your spiritual life?

When Lauren tells a friend that she is having marital trouble, her friend tells her: “I don’t know if you will get divorced. . . . I do know that, if you do, two years later you will know some things about God that you don’t know now” (p. 19). How do loss, absence, and emptiness sometimes give us a fuller understanding of God?

DAY 6 (pages 21–22)

Healing Prayer

There is something special about how the physical and the spiritual come together in healing; Lauren experiences this when she goes forward at church for healing prayer. Have you known people uniquely gifted in offering comfort and healing to you in difficult times? How have they helped?

Lauren recognizes that someday she, too, will be able to offer healing prayer and comfort to others. What is the importance of learning to receive the grace of someone's praying for you in the times you need it most? Conversely, how does this receiving allow you to better offer comfort and healing to others later?

DAY 7 (pages 23–27)

Christmas with Anne Sexton, Dead Poet

What do you think of the idea that “the sacred must sometimes change shape to meet us” (p. 26)? Must we always reshape ourselves to meet the holy, or can we, as Anne Sexton does, demand that the sacred change to make space for us?

Do you have a favorite reading—a poem, a passage from a book, a line from a song—that you take comfort

in, perhaps “like a rosary, say them over and over; like prayer” (p. 27)?

DAY 8 (pages 31–32)

A Sort of Psalm, Maybe

“Every ten years you have to remake everything” (p. 31). How, over the years, have you reshaped, relearned, remade the pieces of your life?

DAY 9 (pages 33–36)

Epiphany

“And again, to church” (p. 33). For you personally, what is the significance of going to church? Is it a holy discipline to be observed? A habit? A therapeutic exercise? An attempt to make God less of an abstraction? Have there been periods in your spiritual life when the faithful response to your life circumstances has been to remove yourself for a season from your faith community?

Lauren reads the story of Jesus’ baptism and realizes that perhaps the true beauty in this story is that he is Emmanuel, God with us, standing alongside us in the line of sinners waiting to be baptized. What does Jesus’ place in that line signify as we meditate on God’s presence and absence?

As Lauren imagines herself in line with these “tawdry, first-century sinners” and Jesus, she feels relief. How does it make you feel to imagine yourself in line with those sinners?

DAY 10 (pages 37–46)

Eucharist, i
Visits to My Mother’s Grave

What has been your experience of grief? As Lauren finds, the death of a loved one opens a hole, points to a tear that needs to be fixed but can’t be. What are we to do in these times?

DAY 11 (pages 47–52)

Exorcism; Blessing

Lauren feels that her home needs both an exorcism, to remove the negative parts of herself and her history that have been taking up space there, and a blessing, to affirm the goodness of her house, her faith, and her future. When have you, literally or metaphorically, needed a combination of exorcism and blessing to start healing and move forward?

DAY 12 (pages 53–59)

A Thought After Reading Emily Dickinson

Loneliness, i

Loneliness, ii

Lauren realizes, “Maybe the loneliness has something for me” (p. 54). What beneficial purpose could loneliness serve? Have you ever found something or learned something in your lonely times? Perhaps exercise the practice of “staying” in loneliness for five or ten minutes, and see what it could have for you. What might you find in these experiences of loneliness?

DAY 13 (pages 60–62)

Middles

When you hear the word “middle,” what does it bring to mind? Does it have a positive or negative connotation for you? What about when you think of the middle of a spiritual journey?

DAY 14 (pages 63–69)

Prayer, Lively

Have you ever experienced real difficulty in prayer? How have you responded to the shifts in your prayer life?

There is a line from Carrie Fountain's poem to which Lauren keeps returning: "Just as I was getting good [at prayer], I lost it. As soon as it was gone, I understood it was not a skill at all" (p. 64). If prayer is not a skill, what is it?

Lauren realizes that even when she cannot pray, she knows that other people continue to pray for her. Have there been seasons in your life in which you have had a profound sense of other people's praying for you? What is the importance of praying for one another?

DAY 15 (pages 70–74)

Pie Social

Lauren finds that "the offering of pie," as humble and ordinary as it is, is a wonderful reminder, if only for a moment, that "God is not lost" (p. 74). What ordinary things remind you of God's presence?

DAY 16 (pages 75–77)

Prayer, ii

Do you think that reading about prayer can be a form of prayer itself?

"I can participate in prayer (or not), show up to pray (or not), but I am not the author of my prayers; when they

come, they come from God” (p. 77). What does this statement mean?

DAY 17 (pages 78–87)

Anxiety, i

Lauren decides that for Lent, she will give up anxiety. Have you observed the season of Lent and the practice of giving something up? What was your experience like?

DAY 18 (pages 88–93)

Anxiety, ii

Lauren describes trying to exercise control over her emotions. When have your emotions overtaken you? Do you have any tricks for trying to control your emotions, rather than letting them control you? Do you think prayer can be part of the process of managing your emotions?

Is there something about which you want to say to God, “Be pleased, O LORD, make haste to help me” (p. 92)?

DAY 19 (pages 94–98)

Manchester Pilgrimage

Rabbit Angstrom, a character in one of John Updike’s novels, finds “that the best proof of God’s existence is Rabbit’s own desire for him, his own undeniable longing” (p. 97). What does our longing for God reveal about God? What does it reveal about us?

Lauren finds in one of John Updike’s books a line he scrawled quoting Augustine: *Deus est qui Deum dat*. How do you respond to the idea that God gives us many gifts, but “God is He Who gives God” (p. 98)?

DAY 20 (pages 99–101)

Across the Street from the Dickinson House

Lauren offers some examples of the metaphors Emily Dickinson gave for Jesus: Largest Lover, Gigantic Sum, Tender Pioneer. See if you can come up with a couple of “kens,” or two-word metaphors, that illuminate the great mystery that is Jesus. Do you agree with Lauren, that you must know Jesus intimately to come up with such beautiful metaphors for his character?

DAY 21 (page 102)

Wisdom from My Friend S., Which Is Something of a Comfort

“One of God’s gifts to some of us is just not to be immediate, so that we have to undergo the kind of discipline necessary to have what others seem to have effortlessly” (p. 102). Do you experience God “effortlessly,” or do you, like Lauren’s friend S., find that you must undergo disciplines and practices in order to know God? Do you agree that sometimes the process of searching out God, even questioning God, is more valuable than immediate certainty? Or is there merit to immediate certainty that cannot be found in the searching?

DAY 22 (pages 103–108)

Busyness During Lent

“Busyness is the new sloth” a fellow parishioner tells Lauren (p. 104). Do you agree that in our current society, busyness has become something that could be added to the seven deadly sins? Is being busy really that harmful?

The forty days of Lent encourage us to slow down, abstain from busyness, and partake in prayer and remembrance of Christ and his suffering. How can you best use these forty days (whether you’re observing Lent or not) to practice reducing busyness?

“From *The Cloud of Unknowing*: ‘You only need a tiny scrap of time to move toward God.’ My ways of coming to God these days are all scraps” (p. 108). Does it help to think of your efforts to meet God as only needing to be “tiny scraps of time”? How can you recognize these scraps in your day and then turn them into—or find in them—meaningful experiences?

DAY 23 (pages 109–116)

Purim

After Purim, the Eucharist

Perhaps, Lauren says, “we live in a time when it is possible for God to remain hidden.” However, “to abide in God’s hiddenness is one thing, to abide in God’s absence is altogether something else” (p. 115). What is the distinction between God’s hiddenness and God’s absence? How are we to abide in God’s hiddenness?

Throughout *Still*, Lauren recounts being spiritually sustained by the Eucharist. What have your experiences of the Eucharist been? Have you had an experience of being sustained by the Eucharist?

DAY 24 (pages 117–120)

The Feast of St. Joseph
Another Good Reason to Go to Church

Is it possible to lose Jesus? Do you identify with any of the ways of losing Jesus that Lauren lists? Are there other ways that one might “lose” Jesus?

Throughout *Still*, Lauren names reasons that she finds herself in church. What do you think are the reasons people are drawn to church? What draws you to church?

DAY 25 (pages 121–126)

Boredom

When do you find yourself bored? What do you think of the idea that people sometimes respond with boredom to situations that make them uncomfortable or that challenge them—that boredom may point directly at those parts of our lives that need untangling?

“Perhaps boredom is not unlike loneliness: the best response may not be to run from it, but to give yourself to it, to see it as an invitation to attend more carefully to the very thing that seems boring” (p. 126). As with loneliness, perhaps exercise “staying” in boredom the next time you get bored, and see what comes of it.

DAY 26 (pages 127–132)

Hospitality: An Icon
In Boston, Theology for the Middle

If you believed, as Lauren’s friend Sarah does, that you could find God in any person you encounter, how might that change how you treat those around you, both friends and strangers?

“I am learning this is a condition of the middle: you take wisdom where you can find it” (p. 132). When in the middle of a difficult situation, have you found wisdom in unexpected places or from people you didn’t anticipate learning from? How did this insight from an unexpected source change you?

DAY 27 (pages 133–141)

Reading the Bible in Eight Places

Lauren starts to practice “dislocated exegesis,” that is, the practice of reading scripture in unexpected places” (p. 136). Have you ever read the Bible in an unexpected place, and if so, what was the result? If not, would you consider trying this practice? Why might reading a familiar passage in unfamiliar, and at times jarring, locations change how you experience the text?

“I have envied, a little, my friends who are fluent in the pages of the Bible—not only can they quote the Bible, but

they have let it inside their imagination. I have often left the Bible closed” (pp. 138–139). What does it look like to let the Bible inside your imagination?

DAY 28 (pages 142–150)

Holy Saturday Visitation

Easter Vigil

After a Lecture About Jewish-Christian Metaphors

“Even on the days when I don’t believe in God, I still will tell you that one night, while sitting in church, I heard God’s voice, naming a resurrection of sorts, telling me I could stay” (p. 149). How have you heard God speak to you? Have you experienced a moment that was a turning point for your life, where you heard God speak and then understood that your life would go in a different direction?

Lauren meets a woman who tells her, “That is how my spiritual life has always moved. Like a Jewish day, from darkness and then into light” (p. 150). It’s a simple metaphor, but profound. Does it help to view your spiritual journey as a movement from darkness into light? Even when God seems absent, can you still be moving toward light?

DAY 29 (pages 153–159)

Two Conversations

Middle Voice

Eucharist, iii

After tasting a piece of bread used for Eucharist that was “sweet, like caramel on your ice cream” (p. 158), Lauren is struck by the psalmist’s words to “taste and see that the LORD is sweet.” Do you think that the adjective “sweet” is a good word to describe God? Do you often think of God as sweet? If not, why?

Have you ever had a sensory encounter—a taste, a smell, the feel of a rough piece of fabric—that helped you understand something about God?

DAY 30 (pages 160–161)

Female Saints, Their Intimacy with Jesus

As she starts to feel God’s presence again, Lauren realizes that she is becoming reacquainted with Jesus as “mother, bread of life, author of my salvation, the bright morning star” (p. 161). What are some names you would give to Jesus, especially in this stage of your life? Whether at the beginning or middle of your faith journey, how do you know Jesus? Intimately, who is he to you?

DAY 31 (pages 162–164)

Prayer in the Middle of Saturday Afternoon
Lecture About Light

“God is no longer an abstraction. But God is elusive. With this elusive God, there is a certain kind of closeness, one I did not know before God became elusive, one I did not know when God was still nearby as friend” (p. 162). What do you think it means to have an intimate relationship with an elusive God?

Lauren likens intimacy with God to praying with someone who lives in another state, or reading in one room of your house while your husband or wife is reading in another room. What other analogies are apt? How do you understand intimacy with God?

DAY 32 (pages 165–167)

Emily Dickinson, May 15

“Maybe God has given to some this humming sense that we know nothing, this belief and disbelief a hundred times an hour, this training in nimbleness” (p. 167). What is the gift that Lauren finds in “winding back and forth between belief and disbelief”? Can this winding back and forth be an indication of a healthy faith? Can it be, as Lauren suggests, a gift to the church, just as other people’s very certain belief is a gift to the church?

DAY 33 (pages 168–172)

Terminology
Confirmation

Lauren recalls the church's creedal formulations of belief, and then thinks: *Let this be my scaffolding. Let this be the place I work, struggle, play, rest. I commit myself to this* (p. 169). What does this response to the creed call forth for you? What would your faith look like if you allowed the teachings of the church to be your scaffolding?

Another great way of understanding faith—especially how we maintain it in the face of doubt and uncertainty—is the line that Julian's father said to Julian as she was about to be confirmed: “What you promise when you are confirmed is that that is the story you will wrestle with forever” (p. 172). What are the ideas, theologies, and questions that you wrestle with? Do you think that wrestling is a good metaphor for faith? Why or why not?

DAY 34 (pages 173–181)

Things Ellie Says in Church
A Sunday Morning in Massachusetts

Lauren is in church one morning when a less-than-desirable woman sits next to her in the pew. At one point, the woman starts tapping her finger on her knee, and instinctually Lauren reaches out and holds the woman's

hand to stop it. The woman isn't bothered, and in the end the two women hold hands throughout the service. Why do you think this happened? Do you think Lauren needed to connect with the woman, or sensed the woman's need to connect to her? What, in the end, did Lauren discover about herself afterward?

A sacrament is often defined as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Many Protestant churches would say that the only sacraments are baptism and Eucharist—but in a sense, this hand-holding became sacramental for Lauren. Have you had an experience of something other than an official sacrament that seemed sacramental?

DAY 35 (pages 182–188)

After the Eucharist, Baking

"I want to feed people as Ellie feeds people, as I have been fed" (p. 188). For Lauren, a part of inching toward wholeness is learning to leave yourself and serve other people. She begins to serve other people by baking. How can you feed the physically, emotionally, and spiritually hungry people around you? What hesitations do you have about feeding others? How does your experience of being fed allow you to turn around and feed others?

DAY 36 (pages 189–191)

Middle Tint

Lauren offers the “middle tint” as another metaphor for faithfulness, that of everyday, ordinary tasks: churchgoing, prayer, and such—actions that will never get noticed and don’t sing of the extraordinary but that make up the majority of your spiritual life. Is it helpful to picture spiritual acts that otherwise might feel mundane in this way? What tasks would you put in the “middle tint” category, and how can you view them in a new light?

DAY 37 (page 192)

Wall, Again

The wall that Lauren had earlier stared at, been stuck next to, and fought with for so long, she now sees as “opalescent, incandescent, like the inside of a shell, like glazed porcelain” (p. 192). How does this speak to the nature of spiritual middles? Does this image of the opalescent and incandescent wall encourage you? Frustrate you? Can you think of a time in your life when a situation looked one way when you were in the middle of it and then different after some time had passed?

DAY 38 (pages 193–194)

Failure, ii

Ethicist Samuel Wells has said, “A saint is just a small character in a story that’s always fundamentally about God” (p. 194). How do you notice God as the fundamental character in your story? Does this change how you live, or want to live, out the story already in motion?

DAY 39 (pages 195–196)

Rumors

The Arkansas woman Lauren describes is someone who, in Lauren’s perception, has come to “a place of wisdom, of beatitude . . . a place of unself-consciousness,” a place where “there is a lot of give in the fabric” (p. 195). Who in your life has arrived at that place of beatitude and spiritual unself-consciousness?

DAY 40 (pages 197–198)

Metaphors

Lauren lists three metaphors for the Christian life, metaphors drawn from great saints of the Christian tradition—Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and Gregory of Nyssa. What metaphors would you offer for the life of your spiritual journey?