



Practicing Retreat

The Essential Practices Toolkit for Retreating

introduction

Imagine yourself sitting on the edge of a lake watching the subtle ebb and flow of the water as it laps up on the edges of the sandy shore. As you take a deep breath, you feel a sense of calm, inner peace, and wonder at this simple yet marvelous example of God's creation. In this moment you are present, savoring the scene with all your senses. You can't help but feel as though time has slowed down and that what you are seeing and experiencing is holy.

Retreat, when used as an intentional time of dwelling with God, is a break from the daily rhythms and distractions of life. It helps us experience revitalization, tend our souls, and to reconnect with others and with God.

We see retreat as a Sabbath practice because it affords us the opportunity to set aside our daily responsibilities and live into our relationship with God in meaningful ways. Although the practice of retreat is often temporary, our experience in it provides us the opportunity to go deeper in our connections with God and others, while also helping to develop new spiritual habits that affect the rhythms of our daily lives.

“Retreat is time set apart in order to reconnect with God and remember who we were created to be.”

why retreat matters

When we participate in retreat, we begin to shed the stress, worry, feelings of doubt, and failure we often carry with us day to day. This happens when we create the time and space to let go and let God work in our lives. After we shed these feelings, God can replace these feelings with hope, wonder, a renewed perspective, and a deeper sense of purpose. Retreat should function like a reset button for our souls, reminding us that continuous communion with God is our life source.

When we participate in retreat, we are re-prioritizing our faith and our connection with God for a period of time. This happens as soon as we walk out of our front door and leave our creaturely comforts, habits and routines at home. When we set these things aside and step into something that can often feel uncomfortable at first, we are taking a perceived risk. Retreat provides us an opportunity to dive in, try new things, and experience the results.

When we participate in retreat, we allow ourselves the opportunity to heal and tend to our relationships. This happens when we narrow our focus during this time, and we can be more fully present to the relationships in our lives. When we return from retreat, we are spiritually recharged and able to be more present and purposeful.

When we participate in retreat, we face the truth of our humanity. This often happens when we are either physically or emotionally challenged through a retreat experience. Sometimes the physical exertion or rustic living of an experiences reminds us of our human limitations. And

sometimes the deep inner reflective work we do in retreat helps us to remember how much we need God and others in our lives. Through these challenges we reconnect and are reminded of our shared identity in God.

When we participate in retreat, we follow Jesus' model that rest and reflection are necessary to live a life of service. This happens when we allow ourselves the benefit of our own "mountain top" experiences. We do not have infinite human resources to do this work alone. Jesus knew this and practiced retreat at many critical moments in his life. When we follow this model, either as individuals or in groups, we too can often "hear" God's voice offering us clear guidance. These experiences can help us to see God's path for us in crisis, distress or notable changes in our lives and communities.

retreat in scripture

Consider these passages as you prepare to lead others in this practice:

Rest for the People of God—Hebrews 4:9-11

So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

This passage reminds us that when we faithfully believe, we will not fall short of God's promise for a Sabbath rest. We are to earnestly and faithfully complete the work assigned to us, and when it is completed, we will benefit from this rest. The promise of Sabbath rest is more than a practical weekly day off. It's patterned after God's seventh day of rest in creation and is a foretaste of our heavenly rest in God's everlasting kingdom.

Jesus Cleanses a Leper—Luke 5:12-16

Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him. And he ordered him to tell no one. "Go," he said, "and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them." But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. 16 But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

Jesus often retreated after ministering to others. This passage reminds us not only that we need space apart for rest, but that in this solitude we can avoid further distraction and unnecessary attention. Jesus knew that his answers lie not in the praises of his followers, but in the voice of God found when he retreated from the crowds.

Feeding the Five Thousand—Mark 6:30-32

The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Being in continuous service to God is difficult work. Jesus knew that and in addition to modeling rest and retreat for his own needs, he wanted the same for his disciples.

Jesus Chooses the Twelve Apostles-Luke 6:12-13

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.

Jesus models for us that prayer before action is essential for making important decisions.

The Transfiguration-Matthew 17:1-5

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

In this passage, there are parallels to both Jesus's other mountaintop experiences as well as to that of Moses at Sinai. The transfiguration of Christ can also parallel our own human transformations and those that we experience with other people. There are elements which we sometimes cannot believe with our own eyes, and it is not always necessary to try to explain what we have experienced to others, if they are not able to hear it. God's voice is clear and authoritative on the mountain, probably more so than at other points in both Jesus's life and for Peter, James and John.

retreat in action

The practice of retreat can be actualized in various ways: it can be individual or communal, indoors or outdoors, active or quiet, short or long, daily or annual.

- ✦ **Organize an annual retreat.** This will take a little more planning naturally, but the practice of retreat is often at its best when a congregation gets away together.
- ✦ **Host an overnight retreat.** If a weekend retreat is financially challenging for your congregation, consider holding an overnight retreat at the church. Make sure to include both times for corporate worship and play.
- ✦ **Create a sacred space at the church or on your church property** that would encourage your congregation to dwell in this space when they seek renewal. This could include a labyrinth, a silent meditation and prayer area, or perhaps simply a place with contemplative music and candlelight.
- ✦ **Host a Bible study or discussion** about the importance of retreat experiences in the life of Jesus and our own lives.
- ✦ **Encourage your congregation to go to a local retreat center for personal renewal.** Some centers offer silent retreats, topic-based events, writing workshops, and meditation workshops. Simply getting away from one's normal rhythm can offer the same benefits of longer retreats when done intentionally and on a regular basis.
- ✦ **Consider prioritizing time (a few minutes or a day) for yourself or your family.** By designing space in your home or carving out time each day for silence, reflection and renewal, you can incorporate the practice of retreat in your daily life.

notes

retreat resources

Books

Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time by MaryAnn McKibben Dana. Chalice Press, 2012.

Retreats for Renewal by Nancy Ferguson. The Upper Room, 2007.

The Retreat Leader's Manual: A Complete Guide to Organizing Meaningful Christian Retreats by Nancy Ferguson & Kevin Witt. Discipleship Resources, 2006.

The Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel. The Noonday Press, 1994.

Theology of Play by Jurgen Moltmann. Harper & Row, 1972.

On Holiday with God: Making Your Own Retreat – A Companion and Guide by Sue Pickering. SCM Press, 2012.

At Home with God: How to Go on Retreat without Going Away – A Seven Day Programme by Penny Roker. SCM Press, 2009.

A Community Called Taizé: A Story of Prayer, Worship and Reconciliation by Jason Brian Santos. IVP Books, 2010.

Learning to Walk in the Dark by Barbara Brown Taylor. HarperOne, 2015.

Babbit and Joan, a Rabbit and a Phone by Denise Turu. Flyaway Books, 2020.

Curriculum

[All God's Children: The Church Family Gathers for Retreat.](#) GenOn Ministries.

[Sabbath: The Gift of Rest](#) by Lynne M Baab. Life Guide Bible Studies. IVP Connect, 2007.

[Essentials of Retreat Design](#) by Nancy Ferguson. The Thoughtful Christian.

[Learning to Honor Sabbath](#) by Nancy Ferguson. The Thoughtful Christian, 2010.

[What's the Point of Church Retreats?](#) by Nancy Ferguson. The Thoughtful Christian.

Online Resources

[“Creating Your Own Intergenerational Retreat.”](#) Association of Presbyterian Church Educators.

[Directory of Retreat Centers.](#)

[Directory of Summer Camps.](#)

[“Fantastic Retreat Planners Guide.”](#) Presbyterian Mission Agency.

["Importance of Congregational Retreats."](#) PC(USA) Leader Reader. The Thoughtful Christian, 2011.

["Navigating a Multigenerational Retreat."](#) Friends General Conference.

["Retreats: Why do them?"](#) by Andrew Noe. Youth Ministries Conversations.

["Resources for Intergenerational Retreats."](#) United Church of Christ.

[*Walking the Camino: Six Ways to Santiago.*](#) IMDB, 2013.