

ARE YOU THERE, GOD?

Will Penner

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for September 1–8, 2013.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

“A quick glance through the book of Psalms—and the rest of Scripture, for that matter—reveals that humanity has always been guilty of questioning God in tough times, of questioning God’s motives, goodness, faithfulness, justice, compassion, and even God’s existence. The key to a healthy spiritual life isn’t the complete absence of doubt but rather the willingness to walk through dark times honestly and to continue to search for God in their midst. When we do that, our faith deepens in ways it can’t for ‘fair weather Christians’—and with the multitude of saints who have gone before us, we can ‘give thanks in all circumstances’ (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

“St. John of the Cross was a Carmelite monk who was imprisoned and beaten several times a week for trying to reform his faith community. During his imprisonment, he wrote several works, one of which was a poem, ‘Dark Night of the Soul.’ Since then, many people have resonated with the poem and with his longing to find God in even the darkest of times.” —Will

MEET THE WRITER

Will Penner has been in ministry with young people for more than two decades in Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches, public and private schools, and as a popular speaker at youth retreats, camps, and conferences. He has served as the editor of both leading professional journals of youth ministry and has authored or edited numerous youth ministry curricula and books, the latest of which is *It Happens: True Tales from the Trenches of Youth Ministry* (<http://www.amazon.com/It-Happens-Tales-Trenches-Ministry/dp/1937734048>). But most important, he is the husband of Christine Penner, Children’s Minister at First United Methodist Church in Dickson, Tennessee, and the father of five children ranging in age from 4 to 21.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- a computer with access to the Internet
- Bibles
- newsprint and markers
- paper and pens
- copies of the closing prayer

PLUGGED IN

- + “Dark Night of the Soul” by St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Spanish Carmelite monk, uses the rich metaphorical language of a love poem, like the Song of Songs in scripture, to describe the soul’s search for God. This video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfc7Q1L_8f4) is based on Kieran Kavanaugh’s English translation of the poem that can be found on pages 468-469 of the article “A Spiritual reading of the ‘Dark Night’” by Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm., along with other valuable background information about St. John and his writings. (<http://carmelnet.org/larkin/larkin078.pdf>)
- + “A Love Story—The Dark Night” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yDO4bLpuT4>) is a nice piece of music to use in the background during the “Exploring the Word” writing exercise. Some of the lyrics are posted with the video. For a copy of the complete lyrics and some commentary on the song and the poem by St. John of the Cross see “Loreena McKennitt—The Dark Night of the Soul.” (<http://josvg.home.xs4all.nl/cits/lm/lorecd53.html>)

CHECKING IN

Open the session by reading (<http://carmelnet.org/larkin/larkin078.pdf> —see pages 468–469) or watching the video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfc7Q1L_8f4) of the poem “Dark Night of the Soul” by St. John of the Cross. [NOTE: See “Plugged In” to find more information about the meaning of this poem.]

Then invite the group to watch the video of and to sing along with the song “As the Deer.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gaT4q9eJ1U>)

Invite discussion:

When were you most hungry or thirsty?

What was going on at the time? How did you feel?

How would you have felt if you hadn’t been able to satisfy your hunger or thirst for another day or two?

What would you have been willing to sacrifice to get something to eat or drink?

What would it be like to long for God that much?

EXPLORING THE WORD

Scripture: Psalm 42

The opening of Psalm 42 will probably be familiar to at least some of the group members because of the song, “As the Deer.” The rest of the psalm offers a perspective that is different from the one we receive from singing only the first two verses. The reason the soul is panting for God as a thirsty animal pants for water is that God and water do not seem to be immediately accessible.

Ask group members this question:

What kinds of “waves” and “billows” (verse 7) “cast down” your soul (verses 5-6)? (A *billow* is a great wave or surge of water, which is often devastating to boats at sea or even coastal regions, and is often used metaphorically in Christian hymns.)

Write their comments on a sheet of newsprint labeled “Waves and Billows.” Be sure to push group members to think of large and small things that attack their faith: death, divorce, breakup, job loss, academic stress, depression, teen drama, and so on.

Invite people to imagine that they are in ships at sea and that the waves and billows are extremely high. Discuss these questions:

When the ships are in the wave’s swells, the low portions, what do they see all around them? (At times, all that the people on deck can see on all sides is water. Some of it is higher than they are—an extremely scary sight.)

How is this image an appropriate way of describing our experience in difficult times?

During stormy seas, dry land is not closer or farther away than it is in calmer times; yet due to the billows, our perception is altered. In what way does this image describe our lives?

Our faith grows during tough times more than it does when we are just coasting. Even during our dark nights of the soul, God is waiting to hear from us. The psalmist describes beautifully a type of self-talk, in which a longing soul talks to his or her own doubt and frustration, encouraging the soul to continue to long for and to seek God.

Invite group members to spend the next 7–8 minutes writing, in their own words, a contemporary version of Psalm 42. Encourage them to use metaphors and images similar to those in the psalm, if they are helpful, and to write out the prayerful hope they would like to exhibit during the most difficult times.

[**NOTE:** You may want to play “A Love Story—The Dark Night” in the background as people are writing. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yDO4bLpuT4>) See “Loreena McKennitt—The Dark Night of the Soul” (<http://josvg.home.xs4all.nl/cits/lm/lorecd53.html>) for full lyrics and commentary. If you like, encourage those who finish early to watch the video.]

When everyone has finished writing their psalm, invite group members to take their psalms with them after the close of the session and to read them during the hard times in their lives.

SHARING IN PRAYER

Invite group members to pray together, saying:

“Merciful Lord, thank you for your continual presence in our lives, even when we don’t notice that you are with us. Help us to pay more attention to your faithfulness, and give us strength to continue in our faith during times when you seem to be absent. Bolster our faith, and help us to provide strength for others during times of difficulty. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.”

TAKING IT FURTHER

“Footprints in the Sand” is a prayer that resonates with many young people today because of its powerful imagery describing God’s presence with us even when we are unaware of it.

(<http://www.prayers-for-special-help.com/footprints-prayer.html#axzz2XBXTIYBk>) Follow up this session by sending your group members this prayer (or one of your favorites)—tweet it, Pin it, post it on Facebook or on your church or youth group website, or send it in a card or an email.

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