

Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God

Available September 18, 2018
\$22, 144 pages, hardcover
978-0-8308-4646-7

Transforming Center founder and seasoned spiritual director Ruth Haley Barton gently and eloquently leads us into an exploration of retreat as a key practice that opens us to God. Based on her own practice and her experience leading hundreds of retreats for others, she will guide you in a very personal exploration of seven specific invitations contained within the general invitation to retreat.

Yearning for Retreat

The problem with trying to talk about retreat these days is that the word itself has been severely compromised, both in the secular culture and in the religious subculture. In business circles, a retreat is often a long meeting you cannot go home from. It usually involves extended days spent off-site in which the event organizers not only have control over your daytime working hours but also your evening and early morning hours. Typically, we work harder on “retreat” than in our normal working days, and of course we come home exhausted.

The same is true in church culture. A retreat might involve an extended time away for the elders or pastoral staff to do strategic planning or problem solving. Usually time is built in for fellowship and community building, which means that the days are long and the evenings even longer!

We also might be accustomed to youth retreats and men’s, women’s or couple’s retreats that include multiple teaching sessions with many other carefully orchestrated programming elements – loud music, icebreakers, games, elective workshops, activities, skits, and entertainment. Participants typically share rooms with other participants, which means they stay up later than usual and don’t rest as well because of the snoring person in the other bed! While such events are wonderful opportunities for building community and creating space for focused teaching and interaction with others, they can also be stimulating to the extent that no one leaves rested or in touch with their own souls – at least not in the way Jesus encouraged his disciples to: “come away with me and rest a while.”

So what are we really talking about when we reference retreat as a spiritual practice?

Retreat in the context of the spiritual life is an *extended time apart* for the purpose of being with God and giving God our full and undivided attention; it is, as Emilie Griffin puts it, “a generous commitment to our friendship with God.” The emphasis is on the words *extended* and *generous*. Truth is, we are not always generous with ourselves where God is concerned. Many of us have done well to incorporate regular times of solitude and silence into the rhythm of our ordinary lives, which means we’ve gotten pretty good at giving God twenty minutes here and half an hour there. And there’s no question we are better for it!

But many of us are longing for more – and we have a sense that there is more if we could create more space for quiet to give attention to God at the center of our beings. We sense that a kind of fullness and satisfaction is discovered more in the silence than in the words, more in solitude than in socializing, more in spaciousness than in busyness. “Times come,” Emilie Griffin goes on to say, “when we yearn for more of God than our schedules will allow. We are tired, we are crushed, we are crowded by friends and acquaintances, commitments and obligations. The life of grace is abounding, but we are too busy for it. Even good obligations

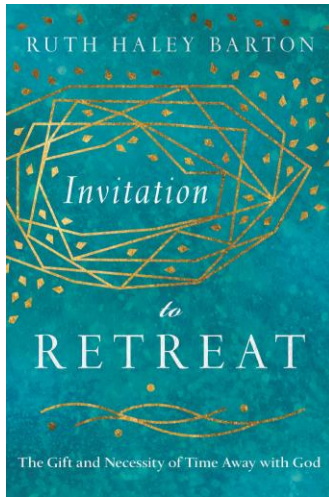
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begin to hem us in.”

There are three images for retreat used in Scripture that meet us in our yearning; all of them apply in different ways at different times as we stay faithful to our journey.

- There is the lonely place to which Jesus invited his disciples when he said, “Come away to a deserted place . . . and rest a while” (Mark 6:30). With this invitation he was calling them out of their busyness to a place of rest beyond the demands of their life in ministry, as we referenced earlier.
- There is the desert/wilderness that the Spirit drove Jesus to after his baptism (Luke 4). Here he did battle with Satan and faced his demons, as we all must. But there’s more! Old Testament references hint at the fact that the wilderness (spiritually speaking) is also a place of intimacy where God tenderly speaks those things he has been wanting to say to our souls: “Therefore I will now allure her, / and bring her into the wilderness / and speak tenderly to her. . . . / There she shall respond as in the days of her youth” (Hosea 2:14-15). “When Israel was a child, I loved him, / and out of Egypt I called my son [to a journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land]. / The more I called to them, / the more they went from me” (Hosea 11:1-2). Clearly something special happens between God and his people in the wilderness!
- And there is the Sabbath, the first retreat of all retreats, in which God introduces rhythms of work and rest to the way we order our time. When time had no shape at all, God – by his example and by his instruction – established optimal rhythms for his creation that included working six days and resting on the seventh. This was not a lifestyle suggestion; it was a commandment as significant as not murdering, not committing adultery, and not lying.

These metaphors form the biblical/spiritual context for reclaiming retreat as spiritual practice for our time. In fact, there has never been a time when the invitation to retreat is so radical and so relevant, so needed and so welcome.

The yearning for retreat: can you feel it? That yearning is your invitation. It is the Spirit of God stirring up your deepest longings and questions in order to draw you deeper into the intimacy with God you were created for. Will you trust it? Are you brave enough to let it carry you into the *more*?

– Adapted from the introduction



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Ruth Haley Barton, Author of *Invitation to Retreat*

Ruth Haley Barton (Doctor of Divinity, Northern Seminary) is founding president/CEO of the Transforming Center, a ministry dedicated to strengthening the souls of pastors and Christian leaders and the congregations and organizations they serve. For over twenty years, she has ministered to the soul care needs of pastors and leaders based on her conviction that the best thing we bring to leadership is our own transforming selves.

Trained at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation and the Institute for Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago, Ruth is a seasoned retreat leader and spiritual director. A sought-after speaker and preacher, she has served on the pastoral staff of several churches and teaches frequently at seminaries and graduate schools.

Ruth is the author of numerous books and resources on the spiritual life, including *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, *Sacred Rhythms*, *Longing for More*, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, and *Life Together in Christ*. She continues to share her thoughts and perspectives on soulful leadership through an online resource called *eReflections* and a podcast titled *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*.

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