



You created every part of me,
knitting me in my mother's womb.
For such handiwork, I praise you.
Awesome this great wonder!
I see it so clearly!

—Psalm 139:13–14
(The Psalter,
International Committee
on English in the Liturgy)

WEEK 2

Our Story: Exploring Its Depth

Guide: Looking Closely at Our Stories

As we reviewed the photo album of our life stories last week, we all experienced special memories that have put us in touch with our God's presence with us throughout our life's journey. Our exercises this week will help us enter more deeply into our stories.

One powerful way to go deeper is to ask, and explore the answers to, key questions. We are still going to be doing this in the midst of our busy lives this week, and will keep utilizing the background (see the "Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week" section). These questions are easy to remember and are important in preparing for the weeks to come. We were all "knit together in our mother's womb," as Psalm 139 tells us. Various events and experiences have shaped us into the people we are today. Let's listen for the answers that will reveal the depths of God's movement in us this week.

What graces, insights, special or painful memories were given to me last week?

Did I like doing these exercises last week, and did they nurture some new desires in me?

After last week's review of my photo album, I'm attracted to . . .

Where, in my life story, did I feel most totally known by God?

Is there a part of me, my story, I have a hard time imagining God knowing? Because I have a hard time imagining God accepting me there?

Where in my story were there *crossroads*? It could have gone this way or that: how was God present in the way my story continued from there?

Am I accepting of who I am today? If not, can I hold those areas up to God? If yes, can I hold my whole self up to God, in gratitude?

Are there areas I feel God is wanting to
love in me?
change in me?
make use of for others?

Throughout this week, in every background moment, let there be expressions of gratitude for the blessings of how my life story is connecting me with God's presence and love. Let me experience the feeling of my continuing to grow and develop. The one who formed us in our mother's womb is still forming us this week.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

Notice what the questions are about this week. That will make them memorable. They ask us to *focus* on images, memories, crossroads, specific painful memories. We could say, "I already *did* that!" This week we are asked to recollect those special memories that came to the surface and to revisit them, so that we can use them to go deeper.

Is there a *desire* coming out of last week? We'll see this question often. It asks us to be attentive, to *notice*, even the most subtle of new attractions, even new curiosities within me. For example, I might recognize a desire in me to spend more time reflecting on a particular time in my life that I didn't have much time to reflect on last week. Or I might just remember several important people in my life whom I haven't contacted in a while and feel a desire to write them.

Stay where you find fruit. This direction from Ignatius is very wise. If I've experienced *fruit*—consolation, some wonderful insight, a closeness to God, even a new awareness—I can trust that that *gift* is a *signal* from God: "*Look deeper here, my dear friend, for I have so much more I want to give you.*" Another way of looking at this is to imagine receiving a gift, all wrapped in paper and ribbon and a big bow. I can know it's a gift, and even know who the giver is, and even say, "Thank you," without *opening it*. This direction from Ignatius invites us to *explore* the gift and discover what it really is.

Panning for gold. The image of panning for gold will be a helpful image throughout our retreat. Imagine a stream, with water rushing by all the time—a pretty good image of our busy lives. Imagine putting my pan—a sieve or screen—into the water. What happens? I get a pan full of stuff. As I shake it a bit, some of the smaller debris falls through the screen and I can look at larger stones that were in the water. And there in my pan, I discover a piece of gold. The message: I won't get that piece of treasure by just sitting by the edge of the stream

peering into the water. I have to *pan* for it—sort out some portion of my experience and go deeper into it. And remember, if I discover some kernel of gold, it would be very important to *weigh* it—write it down and perhaps share the grace with others on the sharing page on the retreat Web site.

How NASA handles an image from space. Another image is that this is like the way NASA receives an image from space. When they first receive the image, it is fuzzy and one piece of a whole series of images. Then NASA gets to work to *clean up* the images—getting rid of the distortions that come from the long transmission. They then *digitally enhance* the image—basically, by filling in what is missing and thus making the image sharper. And finally, they put the various images together, and before our eyes, there is a spectacular Martian landscape.

It's still about background. Doing this retreat in everyday life will challenge us to keep using that space in the background. There's lots of debris and noise and distortion in our busy lives. If we can purify the background and let this week's questions flow in and out of that background all week, then we will notice a tremendous difference. Again, writing my answers down, or even saying them *out loud*, even in my head, will help preserve the grace.

By the end of the week we will want to be holding our whole life up to God—especially the parts that are least attractive, which might seem unacceptable. It's all about gratitude. I don't have to be *together* to be grateful.

Enjoy the journey. We are just beginning, starting to let God work in us. God can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Let's trust it and enjoy it.

For the Journey:

Watching for What God Reveals

Our prayer during this retreat centers our attention on a loving God who centers affectionate attention on us. Two simple

points of the nature of love help us pray during these weeks of praying with and about creation.

Love urges being revealed. If we love someone, sooner or later we will want that person to know. We might send a valentine and then a box of candy and then perhaps make a phone call and then get together. All the time there is a creative, ongoing revelation that presents the beloved with the opportunity to receive the affection or not. The lover wants his or her love to be experienced and received.

Love must be expressed in words and gestures that the beloved can understand. The lover must reverence the beloved so much that he or she adapts the expression of love to the way the beloved can receive it. If I love a blind person, I do not speak to them in sign language. If I love a German-speaking person, I don't speak any other language to that person except German. The lover adapts to the person and personality of the beloved.

In praying these next weeks, we watch how the loving God reveals that love through gestures of revelation. We also consider how this God adapts that same love to our ways of reception. We pray with God's courtship of us, constantly attracting us through acts of gentle yet persistent love.

We begin by considering that each of us has been and actually is now being created. God does not create us and then set us on the earth as so many abandoned milk jugs or degenerating cars. God tends to us as the beloved and labors on and around us for our soul's purpose. God wants only this, then: that we experience infinite love being revealed within our finite experiences and our reception of that love in our lives.

Our having been created tells each of us how important we are in the eyes of God, and our prayer these next weeks helps us to see our value and significance in our own eyes. In so many ways God says, "Look around and see who I have said and I say that you are." We are in the presence of a God who cannot keep love hidden, and we are God's best work of art.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Lord,

Last week brought powerful, unexpected memories. When I prayed with the photo of the mother holding the child, I thought of the love you have for me, and the way you hold me close, protecting me from harm. It's an image I sometimes struggle against because I like to be free and independent, not needy.

Now as I pray with this week's photo, I think of your individual care for me, as an individual. I look at the young girl listening to the child in her mother's womb and I am flooded with a sense of the love and care you had for me even before I was born. The words in the Psalm move me: "You created every part of me, knitting me in my mother's womb." How can it be possible for you to have that much love for me—then and now?

I go back to places in my photo album that I looked at last week, places where I really felt you so strongly in my life. Isn't it odd that most of those times really are the difficult, painful ones? Why is it that I don't turn to you in the joy and the triumphs? Is it then that I delude myself into thinking that I'm in control of my life? That I don't need to rely on you—or anyone else?

When everything is going well, I have this vision in my head that I have to be perfect for you—and I'm not perfect. So I wait to really turn to you, thinking I will somehow correct all my flaws, by myself, before I come before you to speak.

But I look again at the photo album. When I'm in pain or in trouble, I fly to you for help. Later, when the pain eases, I don't always go running back to you. You are there waiting patiently, but somehow I keep thinking that I need to be a better person before I turn to you with my life. If I can just fix this one thing about myself—if I can just make this part of me better—that's when I will turn this all over to God. Suddenly I am aware, dear Lord, that now, in all of the things

that are wrong in my life, in all of the things that I want to make better, now is when I need to turn to you.

Please hold my hand and go with me to the places inside me where I am afraid. Be with me as I look at myself with all of my flaws. Stay with me when I am afraid of my anger, my sadness, and my grieving for the pain in my life. It's the part I want to avoid the most, and yet it's where I need your love the most.

Thank you; thank you for being with me today, this week, and always. I am so grateful for your love and care. Help me to know how to repay your love.

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 49:14–16

Hosea 11:1–4

Psalm 23