

Week 2

Our Story: Exploring Its Depth

Guide: Looking Closely at 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 continue to utilize 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, that I have a hard time imagining God knowing? Because I have a hard time imagining God accepting me there?

Where in my story were 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 our life story is connecting us with God’s presence and love. Let us experience the feeling of 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 us. 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.

It’s 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 your pan—a sieve or screen—into the water. What happens? You get a pan full of stuff. As you shake it a bit, some of the smaller debris falls through the screen, and you can look at larger stones that were in the water. And there in your pan, you discover a piece of gold. The message: You won’t get that piece of treasure by just sitting at the edge of the stream peering into the water. You have to pan for it — sort out some portion of your experience and go deeper into it. And remember, if you 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 website.

Imagine 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, is a spectacular Martian landscape.

It’s still about background. Doing this retreat in everyday life will challenge us to continue using that space in the background. There’s a lot 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 down your answers or even saying them out loud, even in your 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 were to love a blind person, I would not speak to them in sign language. If I loved a German-speaking person, I wouldn'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 his 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