

Prayer Guide: Imaginative Prayer

In imaginative prayer, the same Holy Spirit who inspired the authors of the Gospels also “breathes into” our imaginations in a way that draws us closer to Christ. Prayer is a conversation with God; imaginative prayer creates a space for that encounter. The heart of imaginative prayer, then, is to “meet” God, usually in the person of Jesus, in a personal way.

1. Choose a Scripture passage – First, choose a suitable Scripture. Imaginative prayer can be used with any passage, but it’s recommended for contemplating scenes from the Gospels, the primary texts in which we encounter the Son of God “in the flesh.”

2. Prepare with prayer – Be reminded that God is already here waiting for you. Rest in his loving presence. Then, respond to God’s loving presence by giving yourself over to him. Pray that you might love and serve him in all your thoughts, words, and actions.

3. Read the scripture – Read the passage at least once. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to read prayerfully. Slow down; the Gospels were written slowly and intentionally. Each word, phrase, and omission was chosen for a reason. Stay with the words and see where they lead.

4. Set the scene – After reading the story use your imagination to set the scene. Engage your senses: touch, smell, sound, sight, taste. The Son of God chose to save us not merely with a word from heaven, but by becoming the Word-made-flesh at a specific time and place in history. In imagining the Gospel in its physical setting, we honor the reality of Jesus’ incarnation, and set the stage for encountering him “in the flesh” ourselves.

Consider these questions as you set the stage for your imaginative prayer experience:

Who are you in this story? What time of day is it? What is the weather like? What do you see around you? Who is present? What do they look like, and what are they doing? What ambient sounds do you hear? How do you feel? Hot? Hungry? Tired? What do you smell? Above all, be sure to pay attention to Jesus. What does he do? What does he look and sound like?

5. Walk with Jesus – Once you’ve imagined the setting of the story, put aside the text and let yourself enter into it. This is the body of your imaginative prayer, so take as much time here as you need. Before stepping into the Gospel, pray for what you most desire from this encounter with Jesus. Next, enter the Gospel, letting the action of the story unfold by itself under the direction of the Holy Spirit; do not actively direct or force the actions of the main characters. Your role is to participate in the action of the story in whatever way seems natural. Finally, as you step out of the Gospel story, speak to God directly. St. Ignatius refers to this as a “colloquy,” or a spiritual conversation. He invites us to share our thoughts, feelings, and desires with God much as one friend would speak to another.

6. Reflect on the Journey – After you are finished praying, spend some time reflecting on your encounter with Jesus. You can do this immediately after your prayer, or as you go about the rest of your day. You might record your reflection in a journal or notebook, or share and discuss your experience with your community group or a spiritual director.

**Adapted from Jerry Windley-Daoust’s guide on imaginative prayer