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9/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, God is with us

## The first day

by Jenna Pulkowski

**It's that time of year when my social media frequently remind me that summer break is drawing to an end and the school year is beginning. Friends with school-age children have started posting "first day of school" pictures, saying goodbye to summer break and hello to the school year rush.**

Since I'm not in school anymore, don't have kids of my own, and am not serving a parish, it can be easy for me to be nostalgic about the beginning of a new school year. I miss shopping for school supplies. Sigh, the smell of freshly-sharpened pencils (is everything mechanical now? That would be sad). New books and new course materials, new teachers and new friends, new schedules and new opportunities.

In that nostalgia, I forget the anxiety, uncertainty or even fear that can come with a new beginning. Whenever we move into a new phase in our lives, whether it's the new school year, a new job, or a change in the season, we may find ourselves wondering where God is in this. We may ask ourselves if we are making the right choice, if we shouldn't have just stayed where we were. Why go back to school, or change jobs, or move? Have you ever found yourself going, "What was I thinking!"

Not just me? Whew. Good.

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Even when I'm so ready to move on that I can't even focus on where I am, I'm still surprised by how hard it can be to let go of the past, to let go of what was for what God is calling me to now. I know part of that is personal—I really don't like endings—but part of it is a simple human response to the unknown. All those new things I had thought were fun and hopeful suddenly become roadblocks and dead ends.

This fear has caused me to almost back out of major commitments more than once. The only thing that stopped me was the bigger fear of disappointing others or wasting money. I still remember crumbling into a sobbing mess at the storage facility the day before I was to move 9 hours away to start my first parish call. I started crying as my dad helped me load the moving truck, overwhelmed by the immensity of what I was doing. Was it too late for me to call and tell the church I'd changed my mind, thanks anyway?

As people of faith, many of us have had some solid experience with nostalgia and holding onto the past. Churches are notorious for the "that's how we've always done it!" pattern of thinking and acting, and if our buildings aren't an homage to nostalgia and the past, then I don't know what is. Yet so much of our faith does require being well-versed in the past, as we spend time with scripture, worshiping in community and growing in our discipleship.

We can do both, be both. We are "both/and" people. We can delight in learning about our past, and we can delight in what God is doing now. We can be ready for a new phase in life and be sad about things changing. We can kick the dust off our sandals and later on think it wasn't really that bad.

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Through it all, what remains steady is the loving presence of God. We may have been taught that the church is supposed to remain constant, but it is God who is constant. God remains constant in love, mercy, grace, and presence. The story of our people's past as told in scripture is a story of a God who always keeps God's promises to name and claim Israel as God's own.

And when we realize that God's constancy helps us change and adapt to the world, when we expand our understanding of who God is and who we are as God's people, then our fears and anxieties need no longer dictate our lives. We can release them to God, trusting that through the tears and worries and doubts, God has always and will always be with us. For us. Loving us and on this journey with us.

Whether this new school year that means you or a loved one will be going to school across town or across the world, starting a new job or taking on a new role, this prayer and blessing can be used as you go forth into a new time in life.

### **Closing prayer:**

Good and gracious God, we come before you to ask you to keep (name) safe in this next part of their life in you. Keep them safe in their travels+, give them laughter and light for their journey, energy and focus for their work, and a passion for using their gifts to serve you and your people. Give them courage to meet hatred with your love, division with your peace, suffering with your care, and hopelessness with your grace. Show them ways to honor their past, to be present in their now, and to look forward to where you will call them next. May God the Creator, Christ the Redeemer, and the Spirit that Sustains bless them and keep them until you bring us back together again. We ask this in the name of your Beloved, the restorer of relationships, Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. If you are getting ready to go back to school, start a new job, or shift into a new rhythm in your life, what are some of the ways you experience God's presence?

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2. What are some ways you have found to help you give thanks for your past while inviting God's continued work in the future?

3. When is a time that a feared change ended up being a wonderful thing for you?

+ If you'd like to name specific parts of their travels—the roads, bikes, trains, parks—or how they're traveling—walking, biking, driving, etc.—this is a good place to do so.



Jenna lives in Chicago with her husband and two fur babies. She serves as chaplain to the wonderful residents and staff at St. Pauls House, a long-term care community for assisted living and skilled nursing residents. If she weren't working in ministry, she'd probably work in a coffee shop and talk about all things nerd-related—especially Harry Potter, Outlander, Star Wars, and Doctor Who. Oh, who are we kidding—that's all she talks about anyway!

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09/01/2018 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic, God is with us

## Those that cry out for rest and relief

by Jenna Pulkowski

**I have a confession to make. As I write this, I am so darn tired. And while part of that's because I didn't sleep well last night, another part is that everything around me feels like it's always rushing. I live in Chicago, so there are always people, vehicles, and activity wherever I am. The pace of life doesn't slow down for me unless I leave the city.**

When I get so darn tired that my head and heart and body hurt, I usually get pretty grumbly. I get short-tempered with my spouse, who has also had an equally rough and exhausting day and needs me to be supportive. I get impatient with my friends who want to share their ups and downs with me. And I get crabby with God, too.

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.  
Matthew 11:28*

This is one of the first pieces of scripture to come to mind when I feel this drained. God is calling us to God's own self, to help carry the burdens and give rest. Jesus shares this promise praying his gratitude that God has revealed the beauty of the good news to those the world does not expect to be worthy. God invites us in to have a rest, to be refreshed and renewed. To be cared for, and to have time to care for ourselves.

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It's not just about self-care though, something with which I have a love-hate relationship. This is not to say that I do not love a mani-pedi, or a massage, or getting my hair done, but that I have come to realize this really isn't what we mean when we discuss self-care—or at least not all of it. Yet practicing care of my whole self feels like just one more thing I have to do, one more thing I have to figure out and add to an already overwhelming schedule. Can't just sitting in front of the TV with Brooklyn 99 or Parks & Rec, zoning out to whatever game I'm playing on my phone, be good enough self-care?

Add to this the oh-so-fun layer of having a chronic autoimmune disease that zaps my energy before it's even had a chance to arrive, and well, I'm done with self-care, thank you very much. I simply do not have the time or energy to figure out what will make me feel better. Now give me the remote.

Psalm 34 is one of many psalms and passages of scripture that illustrate God's response to those who cry out for relief. Each of its 22 verses winds its way around praising God, what God has done to elicit that praise, and how God's response has changed things for the petitioner. God rescues the righteous, those who are in right relationship with God by following God's commandments. When we take refuge in God, our lives are redeemed. We look to God and are radiant; we are never ashamed. Turning to God, we are renewed.

So I invite you, now or later, to turn to God, to spend time drawing yourself into the One who knows you, who loves you, who longs for your prayers, and desires to give you rest.

Take a moment to center yourself, to settle into yourself. What does that mean? For me, it feels like my middle aligns. From the crown of my head to my tailbone or even down to the soles of my feet, I can feel energy pull into my spine and settle down, even if it's only for a moment. You may feel this differently. Your center may be different than mine. How you sit or stand or lie down may be different because our bodies are different. If you've never tried this before, it's fine to say it's silly and you'd rather not, or to be curious and give it a try. Do what you need to do right now.

If you're trying this settling-into-yourself, here's what I do. You might try it too. Next, after the energy is settled down into my spine, I think of an image or a place that gives me peace. Sometimes it's the valley where I worked at my Bible camp, sometimes it's on a beach by the ocean, sometimes it's a little chapel with blue stained-glass windows. And as I picture my happy place, I let it wash over me. The peacefulness, the joy I felt when I was last there, and I bask in that moment. I do this until I feel ready to move on, breathing as deeply as I can comfortably manage.

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And I talk to God, praying for the peace or rest that I need, asking God to help me.

Closing prayer:

Holy God, draw me into you, you who are a refuge in a time of trouble, you who bear my burdens and give me rest. Remind me that I cannot do it all. You are the Holy Three-In-One who shows us the way to be in relationship with you and with one another. Encourage me to release what I cannot control into your care. Shape me into a disciple who shines your light of love and care to the rest of your tired world, so that anyone who is weary and heavy-laden will know they can depend on you to relieve them. Fill me with your peace, your joy, your love. Amen.

### Discussion questions:

1. How do you know when you are exhausted—mentally, physically, spiritually? Not just in need of a good night's sleep or a nap, but something much more than that?
2. What are some things you do when you're exhausted that help you to be renewed, refreshed, restored? Do they change depending on the sort of exhaustion you're experiencing?
3. Do you have any particular scripture passages that are refreshing and renewing for you? Do you share them with others when they are tired and weary?

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09/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, God is with us

## A Litany for the Homesick

by Elizabeth McBride

Loving God, we thank you for accompanying us in all our paths from our homes. We acknowledge this blessing and give thanks for all the people in our communities who have helped us to arrive at this place.

**God of love and mercy, hear our prayer.**

Faithful God, we ask that you bless us and help us as we adjust to our new surroundings. Do not forget us as we venture bravely into a new community. We understand that taking risks to meet others is not easy and we ask that you guide us through this transition.

**God of love and mercy, hear our prayer.**

Caring God, help us honor our pasts and the homes that we have come from. Protect our loved ones in our absence. We recognize that these places of home will change as we will be changed by our new experiences. Please give us grace to accept these changes and know that eventually they will be good for those we left behind and for ourselves as we grow.

**God of love and mercy, hear our prayer.**

Strengthening God, give us patience to endure this time of transition with open hearts. Help us to listen to ways that you are calling us as your beloved children. Guide us on our paths as we discern the ways that we can be blessings to all whom we meet.

**God of love and mercy, hear our prayer.**

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Comforting God, please be with us when we are lonely and not comfortable in our new surroundings. Help us to remember our baptism and that we are beloved and perfect as we are—as you created us to be. Help us to remember that even if this period of adjustment takes time, you are always with us. Help us not lose faith in ourselves and in you.

**God of endless love, hear our prayer.**

**In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**



*Elizabeth McBride remembers what leaving home for college felt like and the many months it seemed to take to feel comfortable. She is the editor of Café (<http://boldcafe.org>).*

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