

## **Taste: Incarnational Praying**



“Take the bitter with the sweet.”

This is a proverb that comes from the late 1300’s. It advises to accept life’s misfortunes as well as its joys. Using the sense of taste, making a very poignant association about how a situation or life itself requires the experience of both bad and good, the hard and easy.

There is a current cold and cough medicine uses the tagline in its advertising: “It tastes awful, but it works.” Cleverly tapping into the human experience that the journey to wellness sometimes means experiencing unpleasantness. In fact, their media influence convinces us that it only works if it tastes bad. Bad = good. Small pain leads to full gain.

Oppositional association is highly effective. Something being two things at once is possible.

In the Hebrew tradition food and flavour are deeply connected with faith. Food is used to remember the story. Bitter herbs (usually horseradish) are eaten on Passover to remember the hardship of slavery in Egypt. There is the tradition of making learning the Torah sweet, by giving the young child honey on their first day of school. There is a custom in some Jewish traditions where honey is spread over a board or paper with the Hebrew alphabet

written on it. The young scholars then lick the letters. Cookies of the Alef bet are made for Simchat Torah. Learning is sweet.\*

Taste evokes memory and can make powerful associations. As we explore taste today as an incarnational form of prayer, reflect on the bitter and the sweet of your life. Identify or recall experiences of difficulty and bitterness that led to a times of joy and peace. How did you fare the bitter? What sustained you during the “tastes awful” experiences? How did the wellness after sour medicine feel? Spend time today with both the bitter and the sweet in your life now, and from experiences of your faith and life journey. Savour, balance and bless them.

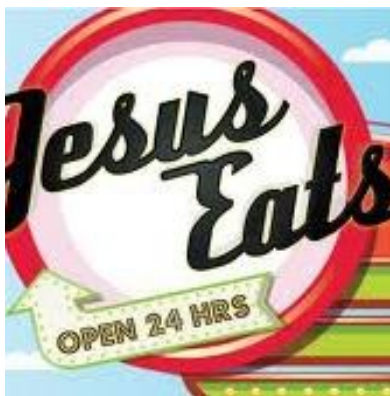
**Prayer: Gracious One, help me in the balance of this life, accepting both the joys and the sorrows. Give me the fortitude to taste that which is bitter, and the wisdom to moderate the sweet. Life is both and life is gift. Thank you for the many flavours of your grace and gift. Amen.**

\*Alef bet Simchat Torah cookies are made to teach the Torah, and continue this association of taste with the enjoyment of learning. (Vered Guttman. See recipe: <https://veredguttman.com/index.php/2022/10/17/the-sweet-taste-of-torah/>)

Photo by [Jovan Vasiljević](#) on [Unsplash](#)

---

### **Taste: Incarnational Praying**



Taste is a powerful sense. In Hebrew the word taste is “ta’am”; in Aramaic, “te’em”. It means flavor, taste, perception. To taste something is to perceive it, to know it, to ingest and be united with what is tasted. In scripture taste is poetic and invitational. Taste is associated with God’s promises that are sweet: “How sweet are your promises to my taste, more than honey to my mouth.” Psalm 119: 103. Taste is a way to know God and

enter a deep relationship: “Taste and see that God is good. Happy are they who trust in God.” Psalm 34:8.

Food is fundamental to our survival. Taste is vital for our enjoyment and pleasure, which then leads to a grateful heart. Eating keeps us alive. Tasting, truly tasting what we eat, keeps us connected to the provider of the gift.

We are at the mid-point of the celebration of Christmas. Christmas is associated with special foods and delicacies, or traditional foods that hold memory and meaning. Flavor has association to a season or occasion. Clove, cinnamon, peppermint. Sage, thyme, rosemary, and marjoram. All flavors, seasonings of the season.

Perhaps at the mid-point, we might pause to really taste what we eat today. As has been our practice over these incarnational praying days, we might with intention and heightened awareness bring a mindfulness to the practice of our consuming. Slowly and intentionally taste the food we eat. No gulping. No gorging. A heart, and mind, and body set to receive and truly taste what you eat.

Choose to make one experience of eating today a prayerfully attentive slow experience. Choose to “taste and see”. Pick one food item for this practice. It can be a cracker, a piece of fruit, a pickle. Whatever you choose, sit and eat it slowly, in a place with no distractions. (Turn off the screens, the television, the podcast/radio.... fast that you may feast.). Sit down. Take time to peel the orange or slice the pickle. Smell it, look at it. Eat each piece slowly, experiencing the feel of the food in your mouth, the sensations, the nuances of textures, the taste of it, where on your tongue you take in the flavour. Experience the real taste of it. This may feel weird and uncomfortable at first, because we are so accustomed to “fast food” and fast eating. As with all praying, stay with the discomfort and self-consciousness, trying to stay present and awake to the practice. Savour and taste what you have been given to eat.

What feelings does the flavour of this food evoke in you? What memories? Which prayer comes to your heart as you taste and see? What hunger is fed in you by this tasting and eating?

Jesus ate a lot in the gospel stories. He feasted at weddings, shared in meals with outcasts and sinners, enjoyed the hospitality of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, shared in numerous Passover meals, making his last a significant one. He ate fried fish on the beach with his disciples and was made known to them in the breaking (eating) of bread. I am certain that Jesus ate with enjoyment and pleasure, and with a grateful heart.



It is no small thing that bread and wine are the ways we are to remember Jesus, to know Christ now, and be with Christ at the banquet table of heaven. As one of the children said to me after receiving and eating the eucharistic bread baked by one of our members, “Jesus tasted good today.”

Indeed. God tastes divine.

Taste and see....

Take time to truly taste and see.

**Prayer: Generous God, thank you for feeding us. Thank you for the bounty of the earth that nourishes and sustains us, but also gladdens our hearts and brings us joy. Help me to taste the goodness of your love and promises, that I may rejoice in your glory and share generously to feed those who live in hunger and famine. Amen.**

---

## **A Feast for the Eyes: Incarnational Praying**

Visual praying, using one’s eyes to engage with the Divine can be a deeply transformative form of spiritual experience. Here are two examples of places that provided experiences of visual praying. Both were transformative, but in opposite ways.

We had the gift of visiting Greece in 2019 and visited Meteora, the rock formation that has Eastern Orthodox Monasteries built precariously on the natural pillar formations. The landscape is stunning, and the monasteries are equally miraculous in their beauty and very existence. Each monastery of course had spaces for prayer and worship. These were

heavily adorned with icons. Every inch was covered with icons, images of heaven, colours of gold, red and the eyes of saints who transport you to the divine. Holy space most clearly. Busy holy space. Surrounded by saints and angels. Everything about it was an invitation to look up. A feast for the eyes to see a foretaste of heaven.



*Quaker Meeting House, Sparta Ontario Photo: John K*

The counterpoint to this experience, was my visit as a young adult to the Quaker Meeting House in Sparta Ontario. This space is a simple white house, with an interior of sparse walls, clear windows that filled the building with light. Simple benches for seating, white walls, and a lofted ceiling. It was a calm space. No images, no symbols. A feast for the eyes and a foretaste of heaven in a different way. The wood, the light, the lines held beauty in their graceful functionality. Everything about this space felt grounded. This unadorned and plainly appointed place of prayer quietly invited you to look inwardly to see a foretaste of heaven.

“The eye is the lamp of the body...” Matthew 6:24.

The light we take in through the lamp of our eyes can provide us with nourishment. It can also blind us. The darkness we take in can comfort and renew, but it can also deform.

There is a need to monitor the intake of light and darkness consumed by our sight. Learning how to calibrate our spiritual nourishment through the visual stimulation around us is an important skill. Too much or too little are equally ineffective and unhealthy. Finding balance, monitoring our feasting on visuals is how the eyes stay healthy.\* We cannot stare at the sun. We need to avert our gaze from too much light, stimulation, beauty; and we need to open our eyes from darkness and sleeping to be awake and alert and to see. Sacred balance, sacred focus. Visual care. Eyes open. Eyes closed. Look up. Look down.

How do you keep the “lamp of your body”, your eyes healthy? What do you look at that promotes spiritual health and wellness? What do you consume with your eyes that prevents health or makes you unwell, depressed, disconnected from God? Images, visuals and what we look upon have great power. May we feast wisely and well, that our souls and bodies are full of glory.

**Prayer: Holy One, keep my eyes on you that I may be filled with your glory. Whether I look outwardly or inwardly, may I see you. Teach me sacred balance in my seeing. Thankyou for the feast. Fix my eyes on you. Amen.**

*\*(the whole of verse 24 in Matthew 6: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So if the eye is healthy your whole body will be full of light.”).*

---

## **LOOK! Incarnational Praying**



From: Fun with Dick and Jane

“Open my eyes O God, that I may behold your wondrous things...” (Psalm 119:18)

Seeing is believing, the old proverb states. And indeed, seeing can lead us toward belief, and belief can open us to seeing more. Today we will explore, how we might have our eyes opened and sight enhanced so that we can indeed have our believing deepened and our connection to God strengthened.

You may remember the late 1950's early 1960's first-grade reader series Dick and Jane. These simple books taught millions how to read. They also were primers in a spiritual call, an invitation to see. "Look! Look Jane, look!" The imperative invitation to see, to observe to open the eyes and attend. This is also the Divine's call to us. LOOK human. LOOK!! God shouts this call to us in the beauty of creation, in the gift of love, in the wonder of our lives, in the call to justice.

As with listening, seeing the sacred and seeing God's wondrous things requires of us an intention of heart. We set an intended focus to gaze, to really attend at what we are looking. We choose to bring into our awareness the detail of what we look at, noticing the colours, the texture, the intricacy of detail, the shadows and light. Such a focus makes the observational seeing an intentional meditation, allowing what we see to open us to wonder, curiosity, awe, beauty, and change. To really look at something or someone is to behold. Sacred seeing is the practice of beholding. It is seeing with the "eyes of the heart". Paul spoke of this in the letter to the Ephesians when he wrote: "so that, having the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you ..." (1:18)

What might the practice of beholding be for you? Can you spend 10 minutes today, with the intentional choice of focusing with your eyes on something and truly look, and see? Try praying with your eyes wide open and your heart receptive to the wonder your eyes behold. Keep a pure heart as you look, and you will see God.

**Prayer: Gracious One, thank you for inviting me to see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly. Open my eyes that I may see. Open my eyes that I may see your wondrous blessings and life. Amen.**

*(variation on the prayer of St. Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)).*

## **Incarnational Praying: Selective Listening**



We sat in our cars in the parking lot on a Sunday afternoon. Sat there looking forward. Close to the close of the hour at 1 pm we began to emerge making our way toward the grocery store. There was a band of about 15 of us. I smiled at one of others and as we arrived at the door at the same time. “Stuart had a great story today.”, I said. He looked at me bit startled and perhaps embarrassed. Then he laughed. “Yes, he did! You just can’t leave in the middle of the story!”

As we entered the store, this little community of radio listeners had been fed, by the Dave and Morley story on the Vinyl Café (a Canadian Radio programme). We chose to stay in our cars and listen to Stuart McLean tell the story. We chose to listen. As did, no doubt many others around our country. United by a story, united by listening together.

Choosing to listen is an active practice in life. Choosing to listen is also an active practice our spiritual life. Selective listening is a choice to be fed and shaped by what we hear. Once we have been exposed to the restorative nature of sacred sound, we choose to be more discerning about what our ears consume or take in. We selectively listen, rejecting noise and clamor, and choosing to seek out sacred sound. We listen to what nurtures, feeds and expands us. We listen to what makes us feel, remember, and lift us beyond our limited thinking, or pain. We listen to new ideas, to music, to a beloved’s breath while they sleep. We listen to podcasts, symphonies, poetry, a baby’s first words, the sounds of creation. If we are particularly courageous, we choose to listen and hear the cry of the lonely, the oppressed, to those who are different, to the poor. We choose to hear the lament of our neighbors or their exultation, and in hearing have our hearts changed and moved to action and connection.



Selective listening as a positive spiritual practice is being attentive to what you consume as a hearer, as an active listener. What are you listening to that presently feeds you? What are you listening to that expands your understanding and teaches you a new thing? Who speaks in a way that challenges and changes you? Are you choosing to listen to the sacred sound they offer? (Jesus did this a lot. Go read the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) out loud and imagine how it was to hear these words for the first time). What or to whom do you choose to not listen? Why is that? How do you choose to listen to God speaking in your life?

Try being an active and intentional listener.

**Prayer: Holy One, help me listen better. Help me to choose to be intentional in my listening to others, to you and to those who may not speak in words or in ways I want to hear. Thank you for the gift of sounds and words that heal and teach. Speak Holy One, for your servant is listening. Amen.**

---

## **Do You Hear What I Hear? Incarnational Praying**



Just before Christmas I was walking my dog on a very cold morning. It was one of those dry deep cold days, where the hoarfrost was glistening and the quiet of the cold hushed the trail where we walk. Winter has a way of buffering noise and amplifying silence. As we walked, I found myself listening, intentionally listening to the loudness of the quiet. The crisp crunch of every footfall, the happy sniffing of my Labrador's exploration, the slow creak of the branches in their miniscule movement of wearing ice and snow, the river water gurgling under ice. Sound was everywhere in the solitude of the place. It was luxury to listen. It was blessing. It was prayer.

This intentional listening as prayer can happen anywhere.

It is all about choosing to hear. Choosing to attend.

When we choose to attend and tune our ears toward sounds rather than the internal noise of the mind, a sacred shift happens. We are present in the moment. We are alive in the reception of a symphony of sounds that make us notice our surroundings and the grace and gift that the Creator gives us. This can happen on a busy subway, in a grocery store, in the lineup at the recycling depot. Wherever we find ourselves and let ourselves be found by sound that lifts us to the sacred.

Consider practicing holy ear training today. Find a "quiet" place. Intentionally take a moment to still yourself and calm the noise of your mind, so that you can attend and listen to life around you. Pause and listen. Follow the sounds and their origins. Be curious. Experience how you are enveloped with the sound of life and gift and glory. Listen to God speaking to you in silence. Discover the holy paradox that quiet is full of sound and beauty.

"Whoever has ears, let them hear." – Jesus

**Prayer: Holy One, teach me to listen. Teach me to attend to your voice and the sacred sounds of your creation. May I have ears to hear and a heart to love. Speak, Holy One, your servant is listening. Amen.**