

Welcome



NAOMI STARKEY

The idea of ‘noon’ contains two contradictory images. One is that of the highpoint of the day to which the activity of morning leads; the other is the time when the sun is at the top of the sky, the heat at its most intense, and when, in many cultures, the custom is to take a midday rest—or at least a long lunch!

Both these images are explored here: ‘seizing the day’ and also pausing for breath, taking stock and not allowing ourselves to be driven without rest. For a number of years, Stephen Rand helped to lead a church called Kairos, a word used in the Bible to pinpoint a significant time, the moment to act before the opportunity is lost. In our opening article he unpacks the importance of this principle for our walk as Christian disciples, balanced by the Spirit’s guidance as we seek to understand God’s calling.

As the world has become busier and more pressurized, awareness has grown of the benefits of living according to a different rhythm. For this ‘Noon’ issue, Henry Wansbrough, a Benedictine monk of Ampleforth Abbey, has written a profile of St Benedict and the framework for work, rest and prayer that he devised soon after the fall of the Roman Empire, which still orders the lives of many today.

We also have Sarah Parry sharing how her inner-city church was transformed from near dereliction into a bustling centre for the local community. Amy Boucher Pye, meanwhile, describes the challenge of parenting young children and finding God in a small oasis of peace, in the middle of a transatlantic flight.

Work and rest, busyness and stillness—may you enjoy both as you read *Quiet Spaces* over the coming days.

Quiet Spaces

VOLUME 11

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Life's noontide hour



Margaret Siff is an ecumenical lay Christian committed to working across and beyond the traditional denominational divides. Formerly employed in the computer industry, she now devotes her time to writing and facilitating retreats and workshops on aspects of Christian spirituality.

Two images come vividly to mind when I think of 'noontide'. The first is a memory of climbing the hills of Cumbria, resting at the summit to gaze at the landscape spread out below and enjoy a hard-earned packed lunch. The second is an image of noontide in the deserts of central Australia, in the burning midday heat and the full force of the sunlight. Both images continue to draw me into deeper reflection on the seasons of my own life—especially the noontide season.

**... reflection on
the seasons
of my own life**

┌ ... curiosity
about all
that still lies
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in the future

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daily work

Hills have always fascinated me. There is something about the desire to reach the top of a hill. What is it that drives us to keep striving towards the peak? Obviously there is a curiosity to see the view from the summit, even though we may have already seen it a thousand times in books and on postcards. We want to see it for ourselves and let it become part of who we are.

Then there is the satisfaction of achievement. We have to climb the peak, as the mountaineers always say, 'because it is there'. We want to push ourselves to the limits, just to see whether or not we can. There is a desire to be 'on top'. At its best, this is human nature trying to reach a personal best. At its worst, it can indicate a dangerous drivenness. Both are present, or at least latent, in the noontide of our lives—a healthy curiosity about all that still lies undiscovered in the future and a determination to achieve all we can as the years of our lives slip by.

The top of a hill is the landmark that divides the climb up from the way down. It marks a very definite change of direction. It is the resting point between the first and second halves of our day and of our lives. What do we find at the summit? What does it reveal about where we have come from and where we might be going?

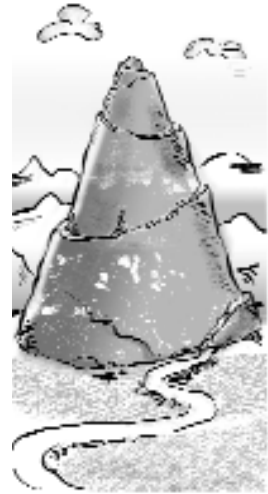
Perhaps I can invite you to sit down awhile with me as we unpack the sandwiches, take out the thermos flask and enjoy the hour 'at the top'. When I reached this particular season in my own life, I was in full-time employment in the computer industry. I had 'climbed' my own rockfaces and been through my own struggles to gain and hold on to a competitive job, and I had the great good fortune to have a home-based contract, which meant that I could arrange my working hours around the care of my daughter.

But as any working mum will know, this brought with it the perpetual tension between the demands of work and the requirements of parenting. Like many mothers in the same position, I often felt I was failing on both counts. As a Christian, I often wondered whether this was really ‘God’s will’, but there seemed to be no choice except staying on the treadmill of daily work as I knew it.

When we get to Australia, I will share with you something of how the light changed, but for now, let’s just take a look at the view we have climbed so far to see. When I look down from my noonday peak, I see all the fields spread out below me. Some are doing fine, with good crops and ripe fruits. Some are dry and sterile. Some of my life’s projects have taken wings. Some have been miserable failures that I don’t even want to think about. Yet from up here I can, and must, see them all, just as they are.

Then a strange thing happens: it gradually dawns on me that they all belong to the big picture. What I thought were failures were actually learning opportunities, providing the compost for the new growth in other parts of my life. Without them I would not be who I am. In fact, the failures were probably more important to my growth in God than any of my ‘successes’, real or imagined. Our failures can be God’s fast-track routes into our inner depths, precisely at the points where we need God most.

Another thing that the summit view reveals is the large number of winding pathways that lead up the hill. I have taken only one of them and I have agonized about which way to take at every fork in the path. Now, from up here, I can see that whichever path I might have chosen anywhere along the way, God would have been there with me, guiding and nourishing me, prompting, correcting and encouraging. ‘I am the Way,’ I hear God whisper. ‘You don’t have to take the path alone, but I will make your path my own, and together we will find the way home to my heart and yours.’



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Great dreams can be dreamed, here on the mountaintop. Experience is heightened and from here, we feel, we can reach for the stars—but what goes up must come down. The vision may happen on the hilltop but the outworking of that vision, its *real-ization*, can only happen down in the valley, where real life is really lived by real people in a real world. And so, after we have been refreshed in our peak moments, God turns our sights to the way back down. There is work to be done in the valley. Noontide was just a flavour of all that is still to come.

A dramatic change of scene now, as we fly south to Uluru in the heart of the Australian central desert. This landscape, too, gave me the gift of a noontide revelation. It was my first day there and I tentatively set forth to walk a little way through the red sand and the low shrubs of the outback. The image that captured my imagination that day was the power of light and shadow. Every growing thing was anchored to its own black shadow, so clearly defined and so very beautiful. I couldn't put my camera down, so enthralled was I by the strength and definition of these powerful shadows and so captivated by the sheer glory of the light. Perhaps it was in that place and at that time of my life that I truly began to understand how God's call and God's dream can penetrate our depths in ways we never expected, setting our own efforts into a new perspective and transforming our dreams into an authentic call to turn them into action. The light illuminates us in new ways but it also reveals the full force of our shadow side.

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... transforming our dreams into an authentic call to turn them into action

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With a clarity I had never dared to hope for, I knew that the time for change had arrived in my life. I could see, unmasked, the fears that held me in a routine job that had actually passed its sell-by date. The noontide sun revealed the persistent call of the requests from people to write more and to offer days of reflection or retreats. I had reached a decision point. If I wanted to honour these requests and my own heart's promptings, I had to take the risk of letting go of a secure job and pay cheque, and set out along a road both unknown and unpredictable. But in the light of that noonday sun, not just in Uluru but in my times of quiet prayer, I knew in my heart that there was no contest. God doesn't easily take 'No' for an answer.

Now, in hindsight, I know that it was certainly the right choice at the right time. I found a quite unexpected way down the mountain, and I am overwhelmed with wonder when I think of the thrilling and challenging landscapes that this 'descent' into the second half of life has disclosed. I thank God for every moment, even though the way has not been without its tumbles and fears and questions.

The miracle is this: the noonday light doesn't fade but it takes up residence in our hearts if we let it. Then the summit view turns out not to be a fleeting vision but a glimpse of what is more real than anything we can grasp with our 'morning' minds. Don't be afraid to embrace the changes of noon. They come from God and they lead to God. ■

Embracing God's World



'Embracing God's World' (BRF, 2007) is the revised edition of Joyce Huggett's personal selection of prayers, first published in 1996. It includes many of her own prayers as well as contributions by other writers. Here are some of Joyce's prayers from the first section of the book, 'Enjoying intimacy with God'.

Hungry and thirsty for God's presence

Dear Lord,
teach me to pray.
For just as the deer pants for cool water
so my heart hungers for you.
My soul is parched and dry;
I thirst for your presence, my living Lord.
I will carve out a place for you.
Lord, hear my prayer
in that place,
in every place—
come to me and meet me.



Your servant is listening

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

*O, Lord, my heart is ready,
my mind awake, attentive, alert;
my spirit open and ardent,
abandoning all else,
holding itself in leash,
straining the eye of faith,
hearkening for your step, distant and nearer,
leaping with love,
throbbing loudly, yet lying still.*

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

At peace

*You are my peace, O Lord.
From the thousand wearinesses of the day-to-day,
from the disappointments,
from the nervous and senseless haste,
I turn to you
and am at peace.
The clamour dies.
I spring to life in the sunshine of your presence.
Even so, come, Lord Jesus,
to this heart of mine.*

God's love

*Father,
I pray that out of the wealth of your glory
you will strengthen my inner being with your Spirit,
so that Christ will make his home in my heart,
and so that I may have my roots in love
and make love the foundation
of my entire existence.
I pray that you will reveal to me
just how broad and long,
how high and deep
the love of Christ is,
so that I may be filled to overflowing
with the very nature of Christ.*

*Lord, your love is a persevering love
that brings me back,
that renews a sense of perspective,
that woos and wins me again and again.
For this undeserved, unearned gift
I feel eternally grateful.*

Noon



These prayers are written by Steve Aisthorpe, recently returned from missionary service in Nepal, where he was Executive Director of the International Nepal Fellowship (INF). He is married to Liz, has two sons, and lives in the Highlands of Scotland.

Many of us begin the day in prayer and scripture reading, seeking to realign ourselves with the Lord and his priorities. But what about at noon? When the sun reaches its zenith and frenzied activity threatens to draw us into a blur of busyness, are we still walking in step with the Spirit?

Sunday

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:16, NIV).

There you were, Lord, the crowds pressing in, multitudes craving your attention, yet you chose to step aside. Your love for each one of the crowd undiminished, you withdrew to spend time with your Father, my Father. I am inspired by the unbroken rhythm of your life: fellowship with the Father and service to people, a constant flow of divine love and power.

Please grant me the wisdom to know when the pace and agenda of this world threaten to interrupt your tempo and divert me from your priorities. Please strengthen my resolve to draw

aside to seek your presence and perspective. In those precious moments, please renew my love and equip me for your service. Amen

Monday

The sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two (Luke 23:45).

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that as darkness descended on that strangest of all noons, you were ready to take upon yourself the sin of the world—and my sin. The vast chasm between God and humanity is bridged; the dividing wall is broken down. I rejoice and praise you for an open door into your presence. You turned the day of evil into the moment of victory.

Please enable me to stand, with my eyes fixed upon you, and see your victories. In the darkest moments may I discern your light and, by your presence and by the joy set before me, be inspired to endure. Amen

Tuesday

Nothing is hidden from its heat (Psalm 19:6).

Lord, you know how it is: by the middle of the day the heat is full on. Sometimes it feels overwhelming; there is no escape, nowhere to hide. Yet where the sun's heat is at its hottest, there its dazzling light is at its most

intense, penetrating in and radiating out.

Lord, in the heat of this day, open my eyes to perceive the light of your presence in each person and in each situation. When there seems to be neither shade nor oasis in sight, grant me the courage to peel back the layers and allow the intense light of your gracious Spirit to search my heart. Please bring growth in all that pleases you within me—and consume all that fights against you. Amen

Wednesday

The Lord is your shade at your right hand (Psalm 121:5).

Heavenly Father, thank you for the assurance of your unfailing protection. In the midst of the day ahead, please screen my vision from being dazzled by the glare of ambition or pride and shield my self-control from being frazzled by the heat. In the challenges of today, please enable me to find rest in the shadow of your almighty presence.

Lord, keeper of Israel, please fulfil your unshakeable promises to all who are especially vulnerable: to those who wrestle with temptation, give strength and a way out; to those in pain and bereavement, bring your comfort; to victims of poverty and injustice, bring relief and hope. Amen

Thursday

The sun stopped in the middle of the sky (Joshua 10:13).

Creator God, sustainer of the universe, everything—all universes, all eternity—is yours. Thank you for the reminder that nothing is impossible for you. Natural and supernatural are one in your eyes; the miraculous is ordinary to you.

Forgive me that I often think and behave as if you are a small god, bound by the norms of this world. Please increase my faith today—enlarge my vision of you. Give me the courage to obey you in all circumstances and the faith to watch out, eagerly and with hope, for you to demonstrate your extravagant love and your awe-inspiring power. Amen

Friday

A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat... Jesus was in the stern, sleeping (Mark 4:37–38).

Lord, I must confess that when the heat is on, I often fear. Like the disciples, in the midst of all kinds of storms I sometimes ask, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?'

Please give me the eyes of faith to see you with me—right here, in the same

boat. Just as the wind and waves responded to your word, help me, too, in the turmoil of chaos and calamity, to hear and obey your command: 'Quiet! Be still!' God of peace, may I be your agent today, your oil on troubled waters, the bearer of your words to people in fear and hopelessness. Amen

Saturday

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning to noon... Elijah stepped forward and prayed: 'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel' (1 Kings 18:26, 36).

Lord God, it was idolatry in broad daylight! Not hidden away in a dark corner but blatant, in the full glare of the sun on top of the highest hill.

Holy God, please give me the sensitivity and determination to discern and uproot the idolatry in my own life—all those things that displace you from the position that is rightfully yours. Lord of my life, please grant me the courage of Elijah. May I, in wisdom, in love and under the guidance of your Holy Spirit, confront idolatry and let it be known in this land that you are God. Amen

