

Introduction

BEING WITH GOD ON PURPOSE

A grandmother and her energetic young granddaughter were walking in the woods one crisp fall day. The leaves were mid-transformation, shades of deep green, orange, red, and yellow. The girl skipped ahead along the path while her grandmother walked peacefully behind. Every now and then the young girl would stop long enough to ask a question or two.

"Grammy, why do leaves change color?"

"Grammy, where do squirrels sleep at night?"

"Grammy, how come I can't fly like the birds?"

The grandmother lovingly and patiently answered the questions as best she could before her granddaughter would continue to run ahead of her on the trail.

Finally, the little girl slowed her pace until she and her grandmother were walking side by side. She reached up and slid her small hand into her grandmother's gentle fingers. "Grammy," she said breathlessly, "have you ever seen God?"

The grandmother smiled down at her granddaughter. She stopped walking and allowed a moment for sacred silence as she pondered her answer. Finally, she responded: "Have I ever seen God? Truth is, my dear, it's getting so that I hardly see anything else."

Over the years, that grandmother has learned to view the world around her with the eyes of her heart enlightened. Her wisdom provides a much needed example to us in our busy world today. Her story reminds us to walk slowly, savor the silence, and open the eyes of our hearts so that we see God's constant presence. I would love for the distractions that cloud my vision to fade away so that, like this grandmother, I might see the world around me with the eyes of my heart enlightened. But how? The answer—both infinitely simple and beautifully complex—is prayer.

I define *prayer* as "being with God on purpose." Prayer is the way we intentionally open the eyes of our hearts to God. The definition of prayer is simple; yet, with so many different ways to pray, we may be unsure of how to start or where to focus. For centuries, monks,

With the eyes of your heart enlightened,
you may know what is the hope to which
he has called you.

—Ephesians 1:18

mystics, saints, and seekers have developed methods of prayer to help us be with God on purpose. But even with these prayer resources available, I find my mind wandering during prayer.

I'd like to be able to say that I have a well-disciplined, regular, and purpose-filled prayer life, but that would be stretching the truth considerably. For whatever reason, I am easily distracted during prayer. I begin my prayer time with the best intentions, ready to spend some quality time with God. I carefully lay out my Bible, journal, purple pen, and candle. I set the stage for a meaningful moment of prayerful reflection; however, before I know it, I am going over my grocery list in my head rather than focusing on God. For many years, I have tried to develop a more intentional and regular prayer practice, but I haven't been able to muster the discipline or follow-through. Perhaps I put too much pressure on myself to pray in just the right way, making the simple act of prayer into a complicated theological exercise that feels more like a *haftado* rather than a *wannado*. I yearn to set aside the distractions and seek a way of prayer that draws me in, refreshes my spirit, and leaves me longing for more.

How can we set aside the daily tasks and demands that vie for our attention to focus on God? This is no easy feat. Even in the physical presence of Jesus, Martha still finds herself preoccupied by her worries and distractions. (See Luke 10:38-42.) Her sister, Mary, on the other hand, chooses to sit attentively at Jesus' feet. Although I long to be like Mary, truthfully, I am far more like Martha. In our modern world, Martha-like behavior is rewarded and Mary-like behavior is discouraged. We describe Marthas with words like *productive* and *conscientious*; in contrast, Marys are seen as wasting their time. We are praised far more for what we do than for who we are. "What do you do?" we almost always ask someone we meet for the first time as though what someone does is the most important aspect of his or her life.

Jesus reminds us, however, that we are human *be-ings* and not human *do-ings*. He invites us to a countercultural place of stillness rather than busyness, silence rather than speech, peace rather than worry. Jesus gently suggests that we choose the "better part" and set aside those tasks that cause worry and distraction so that we may sit at his feet. I do not mean to imply that we must completely abandon our responsibilities. Instead, we can seek to take care of our daily tasks in a balanced way that does not cause worry and distraction. In so doing, we will be able to find the much needed spiritual rest and renewal that we desire.

Recently, coloring has gained huge popularity for adults as a way to step out of the daily grind and find peace. Displays of exquisite coloring books and pencils have sprouted up in shopping malls and bookstores, promising us stress reduction and relaxation. I suppose it should come as no surprise that in our fast-paced, technology-driven world, we are craving ways to slow down and unplug. Coloring offers a tangible way to do this. While coloring, we can let go of our adult distractions and responsibilities—even if just for a few precious moments—and enter the safe sanctuary of our inner child.

As a child, I loved coloring books. Through them, I could create beautiful images without any advanced artistic skill. Someone else had done the hard work of drawing the picture, and I simply got to add the colors—whatever colors I wanted! A little girl's hair could be blue,

the sky could be green, and the trees could be purple. Coloring books provided an easy way to have a little artistic fun.

As an adult, I found myself gazing at the intricate coloring books on the shelves and wondering if coloring could bring me the same feeling of joyful abandon now that I'd felt as a child. Would I be able to leave behind my finely chiseled shield of perfectionism, allow myself to relax, and not worry about staying inside the lines? Much to my joy and surprise, I found that I could. Coloring became a great way to unwind and briefly let my artistic brain reign supreme while allowing my thinking brain to take a break. Coloring grounded me. Crayons and paper connected me with the tangible reality in front of me rather than the distraction of the virtual reality and technology that beckoned me.

Although I was becoming increasingly fond of coloring, I couldn't help but feel that something was still missing. I wasn't only looking for a way to relax and de-stress; I was longing for a new way to pray, to be with God on purpose. I wanted to take coloring to a deeper level. I wanted to find a way to blend coloring with more traditional methods of prayer so that I could breathe new life into my spiritual practice.

I began to pray as I colored and found that I was especially drawn to the coloring books full of mandalas—beautiful circular designs from around the world. I found deep meaning in the circle. A circle symbolizes God's never-ending love. God is both the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. In addition, when I focused on the center of a circle, I was reminded that God lies at the center of my being. Just as a circle is perfectly balanced, I found balance in my life through prayer.

In fact, the word *mandala* simply means “circle” in Sanskrit. Because of the Eastern origins of the word, mandalas have been most commonly associated with Eastern religious traditions. For example, Buddhist monks create intricate sand mandalas in a spirit of contemplative silence and deep prayer. I find myself moved by the depth and beauty of their faithful expression.

Given the deep symbolism of the circle, I wasn't surprised to discover that sacred circular designs, like mandala, have played a meaningful role in the Christian tradition for centuries as well. Examples of Christian circular designs include stained glass rose windows, artistic renderings of Saint Hildegard of Bingen's visions, the labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral, and even the seal designed by Martin Luther as a representation of his personal faith.

Stained glass rose windows are perhaps the most familiar examples of Christian sacred circular design. Over the centuries, stained glass windows have brought beauty and meaning to our places of worship. Before printed Bibles were readily available, stained glass windows told the stories of scripture for all to see. For example, the stunning rose window located in the chapel of my own beloved University Circle United Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, features six panels that illustrate Jesus' parables. These stained glass windows tell our sacred stories so that people through the ages can see with the eyes of their hearts enlightened.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) also used circular designs to share her sacred story. Hildegard was a Benedictine Abbess, prolific theologian, composer, healer, playwright, preacher,

visionary, and one of only four women recognized by the Vatican as a Doctor of the Universal Church (2012). From the time she was a young girl, Hildegard received visions from God that came to her in circular orbs of light. However, it wasn't until she was in her mid-forties that she began to share these revelations with others who then illustrated her visions. One of Hildegard's visions, later illustrated and titled "Cultivating the Cosmic Tree," beautifully conveys her reverence for all creation.

The labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral is another circular expression of faith. Built into the floor of the cathedral in the thirteenth century, scholars believe that people of faith prayed while slowly walking the path toward the center of the labyrinth.¹ It may have even represented a symbolic pilgrimage for those who were not able to make an actual pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Labyrinths have been used by many as prayer in motion, a way to unite the outer movement of the body with the contemplative inner movement of the spirit. A labyrinth is different than a maze in that it contains no dead ends; instead, it simply holds a purposeful path toward the center with many turns along the way. For centuries, people of faith have found the circular labyrinth design to be a powerful entry point into more meaningful prayer.

Another example of a sacred circular design is Martin Luther's seal. Martin Luther (1483–1546) created his seal as a symbolic representation of his own personal theology. The seal was used to authenticate his letters, much in the same way that many leaders of the time used signet rings to authenticate their correspondence by imprinting their seal in hot wax on a document. The following is an excerpt from a letter written by Martin Luther on July 8, 1530, explaining the symbolism of his seal.

There is first to be a cross, black [and placed] in a heart, which should be of its natural color, so that I myself would be reminded that faith in the Crucified saves us. . . . Such a heart is to be in the midst of a white rose, to symbolize that faith gives joy, comfort, and peace. . . . Such a rose is to be in a sky-blue field, [symbolizing] that such joy in the Spirit and in faith is a beginning of the future heavenly joy. . . . And around this field is a golden ring, [symbolizing] that in heaven such blessedness lasts forever and has no end, and in addition is precious beyond all joy and goods, just as gold is the most valuable and precious metal.²

Knowing that sacred circular designs are a part of the history from within my own faith tradition inspires me to continue exploring mandalas as part of my spiritual journey. Initially I used mandala designs from coloring books or free online sites and tried to keep an attitude of prayer as I colored them. What I discovered, however, was that different mandala templates lent themselves more readily to different types of prayer. A template that was good for intercessory prayer may not lend itself as easily for use with *lectio divina* or vice versa. I also found that some of the more intricate patterns were beautiful to look at but time consuming and challenging to color, which produced a less contemplative experience for me.

I began wondering how I could create simple mandala templates designed for use with specific methods of prayer. I focused on four prayer styles that I have found especially meaningful: *lectio divina* (savoring the words of scripture), intercessory prayer (remembering the needs of others), Centering Prayer (listening deeply for the still small voice of God), and the Ignatian Examen (seeing God in daily living). I shared some of these ideas with a graphic designer friend, and together we developed the four mandala found in this book. In brief, she and I designed the *lectio divina* mandala with lines around the outer ring for writing words of scripture that resonate with us while we pray. The intercessory prayer mandala provides space to include names and specific prayer requests for others. The centering prayer mandala draws our attention toward the center as we color and pray. And the Ignatian Examen mandala helps us see God in the specific events of our everyday lives. The following four chapters will offer more details about each design.

The mandalas in this book have become a refreshing way for me to focus my prayer time. When coloring, the distractions that often derail my prayers stay at bay, allowing me the space to be with God on purpose. I can more easily leave behind my Martha-like worries and embrace the opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus with a colored pencil in my hand. Through the spiritual practice of contemplative coloring, I have found a renewed sense of spiritual joy and relationship with God. My prayers are more focused, more enjoyable, and more meaningful. Even my prayers of lamentation hold greater honesty and connection to the healing balm of God's presence.

I have prayed using these mandalas in a whole host of ways and places. I try to carry my mandala journal and colored pencils with me wherever I go. As a result, I have colored and prayed in places as diverse as the top of Piestewa Peak in Arizona, a local hospital waiting room, a beach in California, and a village in Liberia. I have prayed with these mandalas to process a child leaving for college, the death of a dear friend's son, my reaction to terrorist attacks, illnesses of family and friends, struggles with self-doubt, birthday celebrations, and much more.

After praying with these mandala many times over, I feared that I might become bored using the same design again and again. Interestingly, I have found quite the opposite to be true. Rather than feeling that these four designs are limiting or repetitive, I am finding them

Lectio Divina—

savoring the words
of scripture

Intercessory Prayer—

remembering the
needs of others

Centering Prayer—

listening for the still small
voice of God

Ignatian Examen—

seeing God
in daily life

familiar, inviting, and nurturing, like spending time with a close friend. The more I use these mandalas, the more comfortable I feel. When I open my book of mandalas and choose a colored pencil, I begin my time of coloring and prayer with eager anticipation. Although based on the same four designs, each colored mandala becomes a unique expression of time spent with God through different times in my life—times of joy and anger, tears and laughter, grief and growth. God walks with me through it all. With each prayer mandala, I come to God with my thoughts and concerns. I use different colors, patterns, scriptures, and inspiration. These factors intertwine to make each mandala strikingly unique. Unlike traditional coloring books where every page has a different design, this book simply offers four mandala designs that create the foundation for infinitely diverse expressions of prayer. Over time, my colorful collection of mandalas has become a beautiful visual prayer journal. I can remember where I was and what was on my heart when I colored each one of them.

I hope and pray that *Praying with Mandalas* will serve as an invitation for others to create a prayer journal of their own. To facilitate this, each chapter includes inspirational stories, words of explanation, tips for getting started, ten blank mandalas for coloring, questions for reflection, and a prayer of dedication. *Praying with Mandalas* serves as a guide toward a more heartfelt and tangible experience of prayer.

All are invited to this practice of contemplative coloring—men, women, laity, clergy, thinkers, feelers, intellectuals, artists, the young, the old, and everyone in-between. In fact, I have been moved by the many ways that these prayer mandalas have already been used in diverse settings, including the following: prison ministries, hospitals (by patients as well as spiritual care volunteers), nursing homes, intergenerational events, Advent study groups, United Methodist Women circles, clergy renewal retreats, spiritual direction meetings, campus ministries, homes, international prayer exchanges, and prayer card ministries. People of faith are hungry for tangible ways to pray that unite their hands, head, and heart.

To help readers get started, I have included a list of ten tips for contemplative coloring at the end of this introductory chapter. Above all else, I hope we can boldly reclaim our God-given gift of creativity and recognize God's creative image at our center. Whatever we create in an attitude of prayer will be a divinely inspired piece of sacred art. Let's color outside of the lines, scribble, doodle, match colors, or clash colors. There is no right or wrong way to pray with mandalas.

I have a friend who was first introduced to praying with these mandalas at a spiritual renewal retreat. After the first day's events, she took colored pencils and a mandala design back to her room so she could give contemplative coloring a try. The next morning, she approached me and said, "I just don't get this mandala coloring thing. I think I did it all wrong."

"How so?" I asked gently, doubting that anyone could do contemplative coloring wrong.

"I sat down at the desk in my room to color after dinner last night. It was only about 7 p.m. I colored for five whole minutes but got so incredibly tired that I wanted desperately to crawl into bed and go to sleep. I had brought books back to my room as well, and I didn't

want to fall asleep so early! But the feeling of drowsiness was so strong that I finally gave in and went to sleep. I have never gone to bed that early! This morning, however, I woke up refreshed. I opened my book of daily devotions and read the scripture for today. It was, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28, KJV). Hmm, now that I think about it, maybe I needed that sleep after all.”

My friend hadn’t failed with regards to contemplative coloring. In fact, by sitting in sacred stillness, she was able to understand that her soul really needed a good night’s sleep. Coloring the mandala—even if only for five minutes—gave her clarity about her need to let go of distractions and simply rest in God’s presence.

Contemplative coloring offers a practical way to set aside the worries and distractions of daily life so that we can sit at the feet of Jesus. It can bring us much needed rest or inspire us to act. It provides an opportunity to look inward so that we may discern how to be the hands and feet of Jesus to a hurting world. Rather than feeling like one more thing on my *haftado* list, prayer has finally become a *wannado* activity. I now look forward to prayer and eagerly carve out time for contemplative coloring as often as possible.

May coloring and praying with mandalas be a simple and meaningful new method of prayer that reinvigorates our spiritual life. We can use the forty prayer mandalas included in this book in whatever way feels most meaningful. They can be used as a four-week study (perhaps during Advent), as a forty-day devotional (perhaps during Lent), or at any other schedule or pace. *Praying with Mandalas* can be used by individuals or as part of a small group. Either way, we will create a beautiful prayer journal that will provide a meaningful way to reflect on our spiritual journey for years to come.

On my own journey of discovery through contemplative coloring, I found myself inspired by the Hebrew term *selah*. This word is sprinkled throughout the Psalms, and scholars believe the word indicates the need for a pause or rest in the psalmist’s melodies. Music would be nothing but cacophony without the rests. Through the collaboration of silence and sound, the beauty of music emerges.

Let’s embrace the spirit of *selah*—the balance between the silence and sounds of our lives—as the harmonic blend of contemplation and action that inspires our soul to sing. As we spend time with God on purpose, may the eyes of our heart be enlightened so that, like the grandmother, when we look at the world around us, we will hardly see anything but God’s glorious presence.