

Seeing with the Heart

A Visio Divina Guide

Introduction

What do you see? What do you feel? What is God inviting you to see and know with your heart?

This short Guide has three parts. The first is a personal account of how I came to blend photos and scripture in a simple spiritual discipline. The second and third parts are an invitation to this practice – either using another’s scripture image or developing one’s own. You will see that there are both individual and group ways to plan this exercise. May this Guide serve as a starting point for you to engage with scripture and photography in a new way!



Part One – A Personal Journey

I was quaking on the inside and exhausted from overload. My father had passed away at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. I was trying to help the church figure out how to stay connected via Zoom. My husband and I were grateful we both still had our jobs but trying to help our children study online was almost too much. Our geographic area was one of the last in Ontario to lift stay-at-home restrictions. Our trip to Europe was put on hold, my

summer sabbatical was postponed, and our 25th anniversary plans had crumbled. Trying to learn the tech for hybrid worship was humiliating and frustrating. By January 2021 I was deeply tired—physically, emotionally and spiritually.

In February 2021 I began my sabbatical leave, thanks to the generosity of our congregation, Faith Mennonite Church, and our regional church body, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. It was not the leave that I had planned but it was what I needed.

I began to walk. I began to walk with my camera.

I had been interested in photography for years. I had earlier taken a course yet felt more free to use the automatic settings of my camera.

I read some books on photography and contemplation, including:

The Little Book of Contemplative Photography by Howard Zehr –
<https://www.commonword.ca/go/2966>

Eyes of the Heart: Photography as Christian Contemplative Practice by Christine Valters Paintner – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2967>

“Visio Divina” in *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2968>

The insight that we do not *take* photos but *receive* photos as a gift has left an impression on me.

On my walks with my camera, I would stop and snap a photo of a detail that caught my eye. A bird. A leaf. The light. The field. The sky through the tree leaves. I tried different things.

Spending time in nature and playing with my camera meant that I was slowing down enough to rest and see.

My heart was open to God in a new way.

When I came home, I took a break and often had a cup of coffee.

I then loaded the pictures onto my computer to see them on a larger screen.

I was often surprised.

Sometimes I was disappointed – what I wanted to capture or remember with my camera didn't always work. The light moved in a way that could not be captured.

But sometimes the camera focused on a bird in flight – perfectly in focus.

Sometimes I was moved spiritually by what I saw.

A new insight. A deeper understanding. A strong feeling. A longing.

For example, I almost discarded this picture of a dog.

I wanted a photo of my friend's dog walking toward me. It didn't work. Upon reviewing my photos, I took a closer look. The dog was pointing to the path. I pondered. What path was the dog pointing to? What path was God pointing me to? What desire for life was being tapped? To walk on the path? Photo the path? Let God lead me on the path! Although the end was not in sight, the walk was beginning.



I am a pastor. I love the scriptures. But I also was a pastor tired from preaching and teaching. I didn't want to study the Bible. But I was curious whether scripture could mediate a conversation between God, the photo and me. So, I started finding scripture verses that fit with the spiritual insights of the photo, adding another layer of meaning to my reflective exercise.

I used an online search tool from Bible Gateway and conducted word searches in different translations of the Bible. I generally prefer the New Revised Standard Version. (We have received permission to use this translation for this project—see more about copyright, below).

I started with a word search on a surface level.

“Dog.”

There are 45 references to dog but none seemed to fit this picture.

But it wasn't the dog that spoke to my heart. It was the invitation to the path.

So, I did a word search for "path."

I began to read different parts of the Bible that I hadn't read before.

Some of the verses could fit. Most did not.

I was finding myself reading the Bible in a different way.

In the end, I chose Psalm 25: 4 – "Make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths."

The angle of the dog's nose was pointing down the path, representing a desire, a prayer.

I found myself moving inwardly, spiritually. I was invited to turn my nose—and point my way down the path—and become open to learn and explore. Open to God and God's ways.

This simple but deeply personal process of photography, prayer and scripture has been life-giving for me. Since I began experimenting with this process on my sabbatical, I have continued the practice. It has helped me to move from my head to my heart, enabling me to learn about scripture and our Creator in deeper ways. So, with some simple tools—a camera in hand, photo editor, and the Bible online—together with an open spirit, God is revealing something new with images and scripture.

Part Two – Spiritual Practices I

Using an Image

What do you see? What do you feel? What is God inviting you to see and know with your heart? I invite you to explore these questions through several individual or group spiritual practices.

1. An individual practice of Visio Divina¹

Use art or a photo or a sculpture as a guide to prayer and reflection.

Years ago, I took an Art and Theology class with Bob Haverluk at the University of Winnipeg. I no longer have the class notes, but remember that his approach to art was similar to this approach of engaging the Bible. Sit quietly with an image or text long enough to begin to see with your heart or long enough to have your soul moved. Take time to notice patterns, connections, contrasts, context, and any divine invitations. Above all, listen for how God speaks to you in the moment.

- a. Choose an image, a painting, a sculpture, an exhibit.²
- b. Be open to what you may see.
- c. Take time to sit down or stand.
- d. Gaze.
- e. What do you see? Name specific things.
- f. What conversation is happening within the image?
- g. How does it make you feel?
- h. What is stirring within you?
- i. What is God inviting you to see or notice?
- j. Is there a scripture passage that comes to mind – or a word, or phrase? Perhaps a song or poem or quotation comes to mind.
- k. Pray, write or drawn a response.

1 *Voices Together: Worship Leader edition* has an excellent description of Viso Divina. See page 45 – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2968>.

2 Feel free to use a photo I have shared at CommonWord – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2915>. Or visit an art gallery, in person or online (e.g., the Louvre in Paris). Or choose another image from a book or online collection. This really doesn't require a special image – God speaks to us in a myriad of ways and with what we have on hand. Use the image as a tool in your time of prayer.

2. A group practice of Visio Divina

A group can be led through this process together.

One afternoon, I met with a small group of women from our congregation. I shared my story and the process I have described above. We then went outside and each took photos – of just about anything. It didn't matter if people took photos of the same subject – often someone pointed out something we had not seen on our own. One person noticed this intriguing spider web that held a stone. It was so translucent and fragile that it needed a dark background for it to be seen.

Back inside, each person shared one of their photos and why they were drawn to it. These were projected so we could all view them together. We reflected on what we saw and how we felt.

We then looked for biblical passages together. Many different scriptures were suggested before we collectively chose one we felt was best suited.



The picture of the bird resting on the spruce tree was the result of our common effort.



3. A guide for Spiritual Conversation

A photo can be a neutral starting place for a conversation about faith. The spiritual practice of Visio Divina or Seeing with the Heart can guide a pastoral care conversation.

Ask the individual to share a photo that is on their phone or one they have brought with them. (Even if you are having the visit remotely the individual could e-mail or text the photo to you so you are both viewing it together.)

Then slowly guide the individual through the process. What do you see? How do you feel? Etc. Help the person choose a scripture passage. Sometimes you may need to navigate an online search tool or a concordance. Remember this is about what the other person is seeing and feeling and how a text connects with them. How their experiences with scripture may be linked to what God is actively doing.

4. A practice of Encouragement

Often we call or send a text message to someone who needs encouragement. Why not also expand the message by including an image with scripture.

A woman in our congregation was in the hospital and she was very discouraged. I contacted 3 or 4 other women and asked them to simply light a candle, take a photo and send it to the person in hospital. Within 10 minutes the patient knew she was not alone, and that people were praying for her. In the end, the photos don't have to be super great, just authentic.

Use the photo collection at Commonword – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2915> to share an image and scripture with someone in hospital or at home.

Send the scripture image by text or email, or use the image to print a card.



5. A practice of Photo Therapy

Therapeutic Photography is an emerging specialty in the field of mental health that uses exercises with photos in one's healing journey. A significant leader in this field is Canadian Judy Wieser. She is a writer, teacher and therapist, and has written the book, *PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*. Please research further online for resources.

6. A practice of Corporate Worship

Images and scripture can be used effectively in worship, either as a primary image on a printed bulletin or as a projected backdrop to a musical setting, scripture telling, etc.

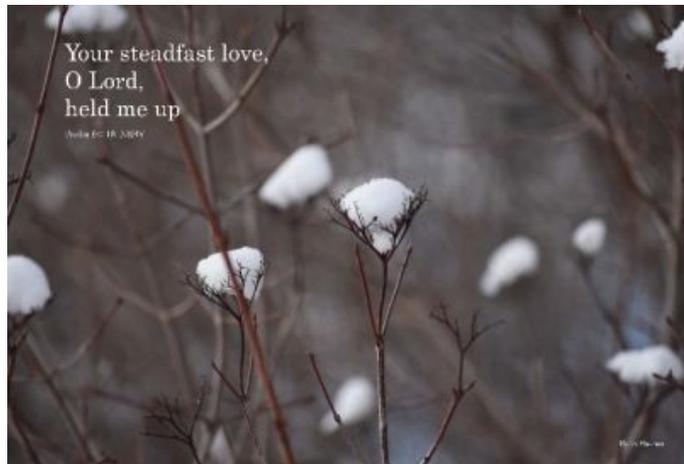
Again, feel free to use CommonWord's Visio Divina collection (with or without scripture text) -

<https://www.commonword.ca/go/2915>

or other visual images.

All CommonWord worship images can also be found at

<https://togetherinworship.net>.



Part Three – Spiritual Practice II

Creating Your Own Scripture Photos

What do you see? What do you feel? What is God inviting you to see and know with your heart? I invite you to try this process yourself. Experiment. See what you discover.

What can see with your eyes and your heart? How is God speaking with you?

1. Get ready to go for a walk.

Get your camera, tablet or cellphone.

Grab some water. Take a deep breath. Start walking.

Walk with an openness of spirit.

2. Walk with your eyes and heart open.

What catches your attention? What do you see?

What are the colours? The lights?

What shadows do you notice? What patterns?

Do you see the large landscape? Or a tiny detail?

Birds? People? Animals? Flowers?

Use your camera to record what you see. You don't have to be a trained photographer to take a picture. Just take a picture of what you like.

3. Photography tips.

Photographer Lee-Ann Dueck suggests three keys for composing a better photo: focus, background, perspective.

What do you want to have in **focus**?

Where is the camera focusing? Sometimes with automatic settings the camera is not focusing on what our eyes are focusing on. Make necessary adjustments. Is the object in the centre or to the side? Is the focal point clear?

What is in the **background**?

Pause before you click and look at what is in the background. If you shift your angle slightly, does it make a difference? Although you may choose to crop the photo later, the best cropping method is the position of the camera.

What is your **perspective**?

Could you shift your perspective?

What if you took the photo lying down? Sideways? Looking up? Looking down? What if you squatted or got down on the ground? Try it.

4. Rest.

Take a break.

5. Look at the photos.

What do you see?

What do you notice?

This review process is important. Review your pictures on your phone or it's often better to view them from a larger screen.

When I saw this picture, it wasn't that great. I almost discarded it. We were in an open field.

There were power lines. I saw female red wing blackbirds flying around. I zoomed in and saw that the camera lens had focused clearly on this bird. I cropped the picture closely and you still see the bird clearly. I was amazed to see the form of the bird, the eyes, the stripe on the head.



6. Edit. Crop. Narrow the focus.

This stage of the process is just for fun, but it is also the act of purposely and willingly moving deeper.

Choose one of your photos from your walk that best captures your attention.

Edit if needed.

Crop to highlight the focal point.

7. Scripture

Choosing the scripture passage is an adventure in faith. It involves moving from the head to the heart. It requires an openness to listen to God and to yourself.

What do you **see**?

(A duck, lily pads, marsh, calm water, rippling water)

What do you **feel**?

(Calmness, rest, enough, part of the ecosystem, alone, lonely)



Search for verses. Start with a word search.

(There is no match for duck in the NRSV translation of the Bible.)

Look up words that have to do with the feelings or setting. For me this photo had to do with rest. So, I read a lot of the verses in the Bible that had to do with rest.

A portion of the verse from Joshua 1:13 seemed fitting – “The Lord your God is providing you a place of rest.”

You can almost stop at this point. You have an image. You have a text. Take a moment to reflect.

How are you being invited to trust God? God is providing a place of rest for you.

The duck is resting. What rest are you needing? Are you open to receiving it?

All the provisions for food and safety are present for the duck. What provisions and safety are present for you?

8. Blending text and image.

This is a fun part of the exercise. Certainly artistic. Personal. Playful. Prayerful.

Add text using whatever photo editing software you have. Or, you may print the photo and write the scripture text on it directly.

a) Placing the Text

This was my first attempt with this photo.

I placed the text in white over the rippling water.

But I was not satisfied. The focus of rest was supposed to be the duck.



A second attempt meant cropping the photo further and placing the text amid the lily pads. Nestled away in God's resting place.

I also shortened the verse. There were too many words. "God is providing you a place of rest" says it well. That is all that is needed.³



³ Note: Due to copyright restrictions, truncating a scripture verse is plausible; adapting or paraphrasing a verse (and referencing it as the NRSV) is not.

b) Choosing the Text

The choice of scripture is important, but it can be changed. A different biblical reference may be paired with the photo at a different time to communicate how you are feeling then or how you are connecting with God in a new way.



This duck looked like it was taking off on a mission. A fighter jet ready for battle, departing with purpose.

Judges 18:6 - "Go in peace. The mission you are on is under the eye of the Lord." This verse seemed to fit.

When I shared this version, it was a political leader who found resonance during the pandemic.



I sat with this image longer. I shared it with a family member. They suggested the photo represented a gentle "send off" of a loved one who is dying, releasing them to fly off in peace.

With that comment in mind, I searched for a different text. 1 Samuel 29:7 was shortened to "Go Peaceably." I cropped the photo to focus more on the duck.

This was shortly before my father died in April of 2020. It made me think of him in a new way. This text and photo has become a blessing.

9. Sharing or not!

This process of walking, meditation, contemplative photography, reflection, listening, choosing scripture, blending text and photo artistically, is a very personal process. I preach and teach regularly but sharing photos and scripture have been very risky for me. This process is

my prayer, my conversation with God. In many ways, this reflects what is happening with me and what God is inviting me to do.

I, therefore, don't share all my photos and scriptures. But I share some. And I invite you to do the same in whatever safe way you find.

10. Practice of Gift sharing

If you have played and prayed with photos and scripture and have a scripture-photo to share, please consider gifting it to the church, as I have done, through CommonWord (<https://www.commonword.ca>). CommonWord is a resource centre of the church that makes personal and congregational materials available to buy, borrow or access freely online. With me, they are inviting additional submissions to the "Visio Divina Project."

Here are the submission details:

- Submissions should be made via this online form – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/3032>.
- Photographs must be original and not previously published in a way that limits their copyright. CommonWord requests that the photograph be given a Creative Commons license <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> that allows the free copying and redistributing of the material (with certain expressed limitations).
- Scripture texts must be the NRSV translation (for which CommonWord has secured permission to use for this project) or another translation in the public domain.
- The artist needs to incorporate the scripture text onto the photo. Please also choose the font style and placement. (If you need direction on how this may be done, please contact CommonWord.) CommonWord will resize your photo for an 8.5" x 11" Visio Divina card and for image projection (in worship settings).
- The following information will appear with your scripture-photo:

"[Your name] invites us to 'see with our own heart' using the practice of Visio Divina, a personal reflective exercise with image and scripture. You may use these photos and biblical selections as your devotional guide, as an encouragement note for a friend, or as an example of a practice you might engage with your own camera and Bible. With the image, or with a camera, come with your eyes and heart open. Rest. Explore. Perceive. Let creation and scripture encourage, inform, surprise, and inspire you."

- Your scripture-photo will appear within the Visio Divina Project collection – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2970>. Please allow several weeks for processing. Feel free to let others know about its availability!
- You are welcome to submit more than one scripture-photo. Please submit one scripture-photo per form. If you need to check what you've just submitted, you can do so at this link <https://airtable.com/shrOYwt4ZC6D3uL6G/tb1Fkqc905iDiRl3S> (no images or personal information are shared).
- CommonWord reserves the right to accept or decline all submissions.

Part Four – Ruth’s invitation

I have shared my process with you and how *Seeing with the Heart* is evolving for me. I am curious what processes you might use? Are there methods we hold in common? Please be in touch with me – fmcleamington1@gmail.com.

The Bible is so often dismissed as irrelevant, no longer speaking to who we are and what we see and experience.

Bringing photography and scripture together in a reflective and prayerful way has been renewing for my heart and soul.

I believe God speaks to us through nature, through the Bible, and delights in being in relationship with us through whatever we are seeing and hearing.

I hope you have fun going for walks with God and your camera.

Receive your images with curiosity.

Hear God speak through God’s word.

And be changed as you see with your heart!

Ruth Boehm (Canada), 2022.

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