

PREFACE TO THE  
NEW EDITION



Books have a life before they appear in print. They also have a life after their creation. Following its publication, *When in Doubt, Sing* ceased to belong only to me. It took on a new life with its readers.

Books also have a context. They live with us in history, in societies and cultures, and in the case of books like this one, in communities of faith and practice.

A couple of years after the book's release, I was scheduled to give a daylong retreat in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the topic of "Praying with Body, Breath, and Voice." The scheduled date was September 22, 2001.

A few days after the attacks of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I phoned my hosts in Grand Rapids and told them that I would keep my commitment and fly from California, where I was living, to western Michigan, but that it might be a good idea to change the title of the retreat. Flights had begun again, though planes were nearly empty. Soft Muzak versions of patriotic songs piped through the loudspeakers during the layover at Chicago's O'Hare airport. The retreat met under the title "Praying in a Time of Terror." We still spoke of praying with body, breath, and voice, having kept that theme in the subtitle for the day, but the mood of the retreat, some of its content, and the tone of our spoken and unspoken prayers were not what they would have been two weeks before.

In other ways the world in which we pray has not changed. The poor, here and abroad, still struggle for food and for hope. Rich and poor still suffer, become ill, give birth, fall in love, make and break friendships, rejoice, work, join and leave and sustain communities of faith—and die.

The speed of life in the United States, and in many other postindustrial nations, seems to increase daily. The years go by faster, and not only because I have grown older. When I wrote this book a decade ago, I spoke of the scarcity of contemplative spaces. This is even more true now. It is true not only in the world of work, in both corporate and nonprofit organizations, but in churches and other religious communities, in civic and charitable organizations, and on college campuses like the one where I am now a professor. Every time I offer a retreat or a workshop on prayer, I find myself simplifying, paring down the content and components of the session. We all suffer from information overload and lack of Sabbath time. I think about this almost constantly.

The Internet has changed our lives as well. It competes with prayer. It also can help us to pray. Its competitive and intrusive aspects are more obvious to us. Like many other people, I read the news online, check my e-mail too often, spend time in front of a screen that I could be spending on my knees or in half-lotus position. But that is only half the story. There is also religious life in cyberspace. The Daily Office of the Episcopal Church is online; so are Catholic prayers and Jewish chants. Communities of support and spiritual conversation have cropped up across geographic and denominational boundaries as well as inside them. Sometime in 2006, I began reading other people's blogs. On Ash Wednesday 2007, I began my own blog. Sometime during this period, I found myself in a community of support and spiritual conversation. Some of us have since met in person. A few of us knew each other before meeting again in cyberspace. Others will never meet, but talk about politics, theology, church, culture, and sometimes ourselves. We pray for each other. We post icons of well-known saints and stories of unsung ones.

Still, the discipline of contemplation is more difficult than it was, though as the desert fathers and mothers of the early church knew, the demons of distraction and doubt live inside us as much as outside. I am certain that the amount of time I spend at my desk in front of a screen is what determined this past year's Lenten practice. I decided that I would take a half-hour walk as my first action of the day after morning ablutions. This got me outdoors; I live near beautiful trees with which I do not spend enough time, and the first class

I taught this winter was not until the middle of the day. The practice also gave me time for quiet prayer (or just quiet), exercised my body, offered me a chance to breathe more consciously, and forced me to start my day away from my desk. It was small and simple and not too ambitious. It was also difficult, since it required changing my morning routine, interrupting a set of reflexes I had developed, keeping me away from words, even those of the morning Psalms; deferring, for just a short while, the mail, the deadlines, the haze of sentences and paragraphs and to-do lists. As I suspected it would, it often affected the rest of the day. But the point of Lenten disciplines is not to produce “results.” My new practice changed the gateway to the day and did so with body, mind, soul, heart, environment, and time. Some mornings it was a liberation and a relief. At other times it was a struggle.

The speed of daily life and the Internet: are they related? Certainly. But it would be wrong to blame the dearth of contemplative time on technology alone. The Internet and the ubiquitous cell phone have accelerated our lives and filled them with beeps, rings, and interruptions, as have the letters demanding immediate response, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and the temptation to seize upon the first piece of information found in an online search rather than to be critical and careful. Nevertheless, these hallmarks of the twenty-first century are not the only reason we lack time and space to breathe, stop, be mindful, and spend time listening for God. Labor practices and the state of the economy also have something to do with this. In almost every industry I know, individuals are doing the work that two or three people were doing ten or twenty years ago. Workdays and workweeks are longer; expectations of availability have changed; household time and work time overlap. This transformation was taking place long before the World Wide Web threaded its way into our lives. Alone among industrialized nations and dozens of other countries (more than 130 at latest count), the United States has no guaranteed paid holidays mandated by law. Urban and suburban people especially have less and less time in nature, with their families, in the company of friends, and in solitude. How can this not affect our prayer?

Since I wrote this book a decade ago, my life as a Christian has remained much the same: I still spend Sunday mornings in communal

celebrations of word and sacrament. I do what I can to work for justice and peace. I ask, “How will this affect the poorest among us?” I give thanks for creation, incarnation, forgiveness, healing, and resurrection. I still live by the calendar, celebrating the seasons of the church year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost. I still read and ponder and tell and listen to biblical stories. I still pray the Psalms, tussle with the Prophets, remember Jesus.

In one major way, however, my life as a Christian has changed. I remember thinking, around the time I handed in the manuscript for *When in Doubt, Sing*, “There are an awful lot of Anglican prayers in this book.” Three years later, I had become an Anglican. I was formally received into the Episcopal Church in early 2002, after becoming a member of a local Episcopal congregation the previous fall. I had spent a full year in discernment before that. It was not an easy decision: I had chosen to become a Catholic in my formative young-adult years, at the beginning of my twenties; I expected to die a Catholic.

I had, though, delayed my baptism and confirmation for a full year after the decision to become a Catholic in the 1970s. I was experiencing three calls at once: a call to baptism, a call to ordained ministry, and a call to examine Christian tradition from a feminist perspective and to find a way of living faith that would fully embrace and articulate the experience and wisdom of women. The church community to which I felt most drawn was the Roman Catholic Church; it felt like home, and in that decade after the Second Vatican Council, I joined and was received into it, after that year of reflection, with a sense of joy and peace. I have never regretted that decision. At the time, I was a student at Harvard Divinity School, in the Master of Divinity program, the degree usually leading to professional ordained ministry. In November of my third MDiv year, I attended the first conference on the ordination of Roman Catholic women (Detroit, 1975) and was among the women who stood up at a moving and solemn celebration to acknowledge a vocation to ordained priestly ministry.

The story of the intervening quarter of a century is a long tale for another time and place. The short version is that the call to ordained priestly ministry—a call from God, a call from God’s people—never left me. This was a driving reason, though not the

only one, for my emigration to the Episcopal Church. I have found a welcome home in this church, with its mix of Catholic and Reformed traditions, its reasoned thoughtfulness and passionate sacramental life, its hospitality and forthrightness. I treasure its love of poetic speech. I value its governance allying the ministry of bishops with strong lay involvement. Immigrants do become true citizens. They also bring who they are with them. Would I have written this book differently had I written it five rather than ten years ago? Perhaps a little, but not in fundamental ways, and so my editors and I have chosen to keep this edition of the book as I wrote it more than a decade ago, except for the addition of this preface and a few small updates to the dedication and acknowledgments.

*When in Doubt, Sing*, which is now yours as much as mine, has accompanied me in retreats, lectures, and workshops—to Arkansas with the Omega West Dance Company, to retreats with Catholic women in Texas and Episcopal women in Florida, to a Presbyterian retreat center in New Mexico with an ecumenical group watching thunderstorms travel over the mesas in the late afternoons. I have listened to stories of prayer and spoken about prayer with Lutheran, Catholic, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalist, Quaker, and Presbyterian groups and at a retirement community with a majority of Jewish members. I had the privilege of addressing a community of Catholic sisters at their national gathering, a multifaith audience of Christians and Jews at a Benedictine abbey, and a Clinical Pastoral Education program training rabbinical students and seminarians as hospital chaplains. I kept a straight face through my host's questions on a television news channel that positioned me without prior warning as a stress-reduction expert on a day when the stock market had the jitters.

I continue to pray in community as well as alone, especially at Sunday Eucharist, periodically in the daily office of the church, but also in more informal prayer gatherings, some Episcopal, many ecumenical. Since the beginning of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, many of these gatherings have focused on prayer in a time of war and prayer for peace. Others involve healing prayer. Many make space for silence and contemplation. I often choose prayers, meditations, and songs for meetings of the diocesan anti-racism committee for which I serve as chair. I pray as I write sermons and as I preach.

I am a recipient of prayer, a participant in prayer, and a leader of prayer. I am grateful for the grace in all of these moments.

And yes, I still sing, in solitude and, regularly, in community. There, amid a richer harmony than I could ever know alone, I meet Christ, who continues to surprise me.

IN THE SEASON OF EASTER 2008  
GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA