

Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

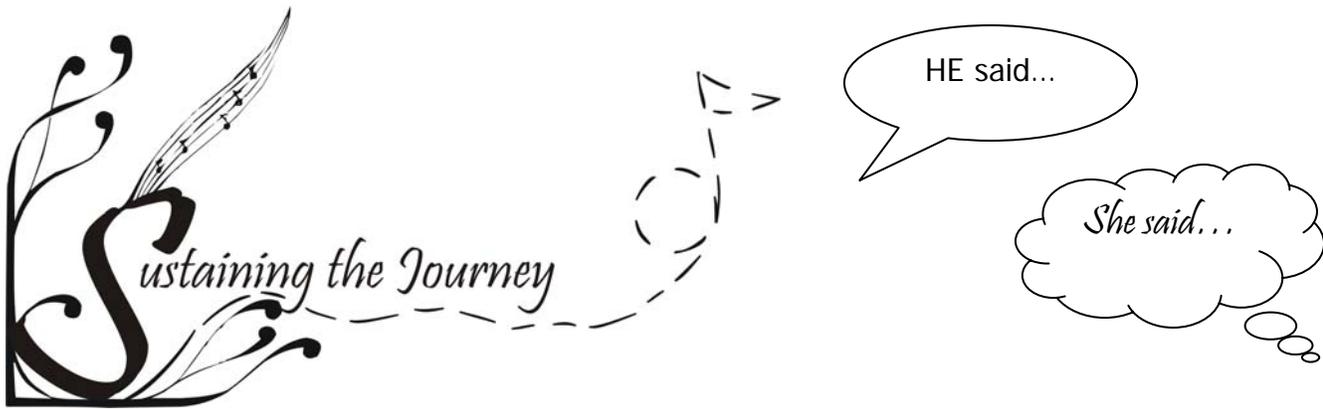
Are You Listening?

Mary's Perspective:

I'm not a resolutions kind of gal, but every year, I do try to take stock of various aspects of my life. I look at where I've been, where I am today, and where I'd like to be. I consider my business – evaluating everything from our business relationships to what projects were most and least profitable. I look at my home and think about what rooms could use some attention. (Be careful with this one – when the list extends beyond one page of a tablet of paper, it becomes daunting!) I consider my personal relationships, with my spouse and my children and my friends and my co-workers. I take a hard cold look at myself – where can I make reasonable changes to improve my health, my spiritual life, and my personal well-being? In ministry, I look at what projects I might take on, and the volunteers who could perhaps benefit from more attention, coaching, or encouragement. A priest friend once said, “What you're doing well, keep doing. And what could use some improvement – make some changes!”

I deliberately try to take stock a couple of times per year: once, near the beginning of the calendar year, and once in the summer before ministry activities ramp up again. Last summer, I decided to incorporate a simple change to our choir practices. Every practice this season, we begin by singing a simple refrain by Carol Browning called “The Prayer of My Heart”. It's a sung prayer that serves many purposes. It's a chance to focus our hearts on our music ministry, warm up our voices together, and draw attention to the reason we gather. The gist of the prayer is ***Lord, attune me to you.***

We are past the busyness of Christmas season, and are on the precipice of embarking on a Lenten journey. These few weeks of Ordinary Time provide a good opportunity to slow down, catch our breath, and listen. We spend so much time amidst the noise – social gatherings and music preparation and end-of-year business in the professional world – that it's easy to get caught up in always being on the move. I believe this season is an opportunity to center ourselves and re-tune our heads and our hearts to our calling.



Sometimes, I need to be reminded to be open...open to look beyond what truths or certainties I think I know. There are limitations I may impose on myself that are simply self-imposed. Perhaps there are good reasons. I try to limit my commitments so that I still can get sufficient hours of sleep each night. However, sometimes my limitations may not be based in truth. It's not that I *can't* go to the gym in the morning, but rather I choose to stay cozy in my bed. It's not that I *can't* write a book, or compose original music, or learn a new language – or (fill in your blank here) – but that I haven't been open to the process. Now is a good time to consider how to broaden your horizons, however that may take shape. Maybe it's a career change you've been hesitant to pursue, or committing to learning a new skill or ministry, or perhaps it's a desire to spending more time in prayer and reflection. We still have a couple of weeks before Lent starts. Now's a great time to focus on being attuned to the Lord.

In this little spurt of Ordinary Time between Christmas and Lent, we hear Scriptures over and over about the Lord calling. He calls Samuel and Jonah and the disciples... and us. Are we listening?

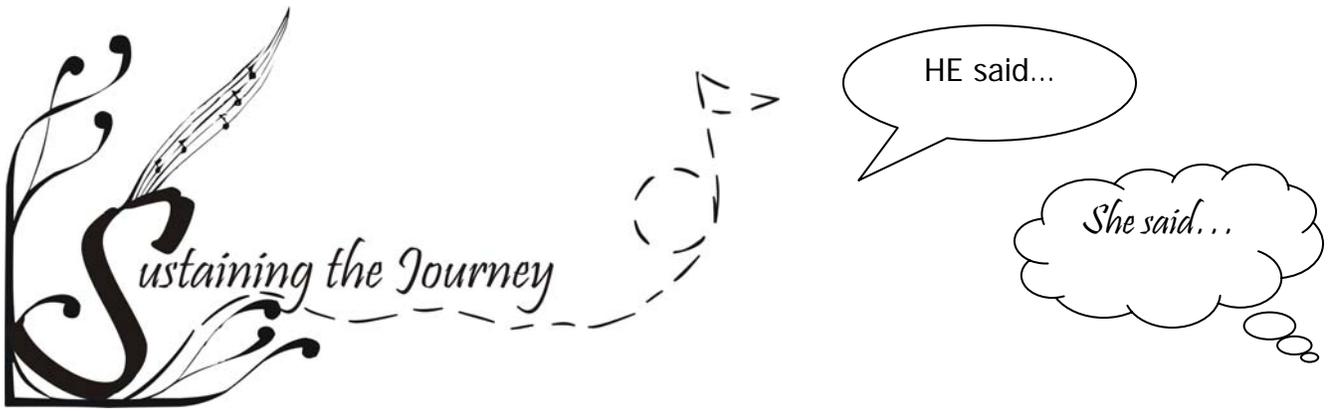
Bob's Perspective:

“I pray and pray and pray and pray, but God never answers my prayers.” How many times have we all heard that, or maybe even said it ourselves? The truth is that God ALWAYS answers our prayers; we just need to do a better job in listening. Granted, the answers maybe somewhat cryptic at times...but they're there!

The point is that we need to spend time listening, and we can't do that if we're always talking. Remember that prayer is a dialogue – a two way street. So how do we listen?

I can only speak from personal experience at this point. I have found that listening (and hearing) God's message comes by means of being mindful about the path on which I'm journeying. Generally speaking, when I'm following the correct path (no matter how challenging it may be) my inner being feels a certain sense of serenity or peacefulness. The lack of these would indicate that some adjustments need to be made in my life. How do I best discern these adjustments?

In my case, life events tend to move in patterns. Sometimes the patterns are very clear, and sometimes events need a little more analysis, but eventually they become clear. When I'm feeling out of sync, I go back to the point where I first noticed the lack of balance and look at the events



(or patterns) which were taking place at the time. In other words, I try to figure out what got me off track. The vast majority of the time, it's because I was not paying attention, or ignoring, or maybe even turning my back on some aspect of God's intention for me. Whether this may happen intentionally or unintentionally, we all wind up there at various stations in our lives. The trick is to be perceptive enough to realize what's happening, open enough to admit it, and humble enough to do something about it.

This isn't to infer that God necessarily punishes us for getting out of kilter every now and then. He doesn't need to. It may just be that God withholds his blessing from the things in our lives that aren't holy in his sight or not in line with his plan for us. This is actually a very effective way in which God communicates with us. Consider the parable of the Prodigal Son. When the young son went off and squandered his life, the father didn't follow after him and nag. Rather, he let his young son go off on his own without any help. The fact that the son faltered wasn't a punishment – it was merely a consequence of his own stupidity. The father didn't do anything at that particular juncture to come to his aid because the son wasn't in sync with his father's will. He taught the son a lesson without saying a word. In essence the father withheld his blessing. The story then illustrates that the son eventually came to realize that he was out of balance and remorseful. After making the appropriate adjustments to his life, the son returned to his father and was again accepted and blessed by him.

In the actions of our lives, and in our minds and hearts we hear the loving voice of God on a constant basis. We just need to listen, take heed and move forward.