The presidential biographer Jon Meacham has written a new book that departs from his normal political journalism. Meacham is a Christian of sincere faith. He was invited a few years ago to offer some meditations on the Seven Last Words of Jesus from the cross during the season of Lent and he’s turned these into a book titled *The Hope of Glory*. Meacham picks up on something subtle and profound about the Christian faith: even though we would have no such thing as Christianity without the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, it’s the death of Jesus by public crucifixion that has been central to our understanding of what God is doing to reconcile the world.

One point of that reconciliation is the rejoining of heaven and earth, the spiritual and the material, the sweet by and by with the sour here and now. Too much religion is ethereal—so concerned with the world to come that it allows ungodly powers in this world to run amok. Meacham cites the perspective of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said: *The Gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well-being, but his material well-being. Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.*

I agree with King and Meacham about this, and you know that matters of social and economic and environmental justice are always at the front of my mind. But we have entered now into the season of Lent and it’s first important to join Jesus in the desert for spiritual training. You see, before Jesus would move into his public ministry of making straight what was crooked in the world, he had to get his own head on straight.

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Now, you may think that that was unnecessary for the Son of God, but scripture is clear that even Jesus had to learn obedience. That is, he had to grow in his understanding of who he was and how he would carry out his mission. Prayer and meditation were vital to his spiritual formation, and so they are for us who follow him.

We are using the Sarum Prayer to guide us in these forty days of Lent. For the five Sundays of Lent that take us up to Palm Sunday and Holy Week, we will follow the lectionary Gospel texts and overlay them with the five stanzas of the Sarum Prayer. I hope you will pray along with us in this season, using the prayer itself and maybe some of Ken Wilson’s meditations on it from his little book.² Our theme for the season is God Be in Us. Today we begin with the opening line of the prayer: God be in my head and in my understanding.

Jesus went into the Judean wilderness for forty days to pray and prepare. Dr. King knew the importance of this kind of preparation during the civil rights era. He knew that anger at injustice was not the motivation that would transform the world and conquer evil. If you just fight evil with evil, if you just play the game on a human level, you will never change anything. You have to transform the way people think and make it unimaginable for them want to return to their old ways.

Baylor professor Greg Garrett was with us a few weeks ago. He’s been doing a lot of work on racial reconciliation. He told some of us to imagine how unlikely it might have been during the time of slavery to imagine a world without slavery. The abolitionist British politician William Wilberforce worked his entire life against the forces of empire and commerce that assumed human slavery was the only viable way to obtain labor and make a profit. Most everyone believed slavery was a natural condition of humanity. It had always existed and always would. It was Wilberforce’s great achievement to undermine that vile thinking and make it inconceivable for Christians to imagine a time when we treated human beings that way. (I won’t go into the fact that we still have

² God Be in My Head: The Sarum Prayer (Church Publishing, 2019).
a terrible problem with human trafficking, which is modern day slavery, especially now with the sex slavery of poor women. But that we even know it as evil and a crime against humanity is the point. No one defends such a thing today as a natural right or a social good.)

Where did Wilberforce find his inspiration? It came from his Christian faith. God was in his head and in his understanding. In his own words from his time, Dr. King said that "it was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love."³

So, the challenge for us is to get God’s ways so thoroughly into our heads that we have a spiritual understanding to guide us. This will allow us to resist the temptations of the devil to take shortcuts to victory that will end up being no victory at all.

Jesus got his head right in the desert. How did he do it?

The first thing is the practice of spiritual mindfulness. This is a pre-cognitive practice of Christian prayer. Before God can dwell in our heads, we have to sweep out all other intruders and clear the space.

When Jesus went into the wilderness, he was leaving behind the noise of the cities and clamor of the urgent. Finding time for God to get into our heads means making room in our attention. We do that by getting quiet, sitting still, paying attention to our breath.

Kim gave me new coffee cup for Christmas. She knows how my weekdays go by and how the weekend ends up being cramped by the need to prepare and deliver a sermon worthy of your worship. The cup says: I really need a day between Saturday & Sunday. So, I posted a picture of the cup on Facebook, knowing that my preacher friends would understand. I am loath to admit, though, sometimes the best preachers are in the pews. Kirsten Robertson replied as if she were channeling Jesus in the desert: I get it, she said, but in the meantime, there is an eternity of peace in each breath. Praying

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³ Meacham, op. cit.
you will find this today.

Darn it, Kirsten, how dare you speak truth to your pastor! *Breathe, George. It’ll be okay.*

When we breathe, when we empty ourselves of ourselves, of our self-importance, of our need to attend to everyone else’s agenda for us, what leaves us first is fear. Fear that we aren’t good enough. Fear that we aren’t doing enough. Fear that there isn’t time enough. In those moments when fear leaves our head, love walks in. Love tells us God with us is enough for us. We are able to replace our scarcity mindset with one of abundance.

Jesus used this strategy to defeat the devil. When he was hungry, the devil tempted him to feed himself. Food was scarce, but as the Son of God, the devil said, Jesus could turn one of those roundish, pita-looking stones into a soft tasty meal. But in doing so, he would be buying into the devil’s logic that he deserved it because he was special.

This leads to the second thing.

When God is in our head and in our understanding, we will know the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world. Our understanding will be UNDERstanding, not OVERstanding. That is, the kind of knowledge we have will not be about giving us mastery over others but mastery over ourselves. Or better, giving God mastery over us.

The Persian Sufi poet Rumi said: *In love with insanity, I’m fed up with wisdom and rationality.* By that he didn’t mean he was in love with true insanity; he meant that the truth itself sometimes seems insane to others.

When God fills your head, it can be hard for other people to understand you. You aren’t defined by the wisdom of the crowds. You know the difference between the voice of whole truth and the voice of half-truth, between the author of your life and the usurper of it.

When Jesus is offered the chance to have the angels protect him or to possess the kingdoms of this world for himself, he could tell

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the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the devil. Here’s the difference: the devil appeals to our ego and our rights; God appeals to our relationships and the rights of others. The devil insists that violence is the only way to win the peace; God insists that peace is the only way to defeat violence. The devil sounds altogether reasonable and rational, but as the Bible says, there is a way that seems right to humans, but its end is destruction.

And that scripture citation leads to the final thing: if God is in our head and in our understanding, we will be able to see ourselves at crucial moments in the story of God because we know the story of God. Every time the devil tempted Jesus, Jesus answered with scripture. The devil himself used scripture to appeal to Jesus, which is why I would say that just knowing the Bible is no protection. It’s understanding the Bible that matters. The devil misused and misinterpreted scripture to promote his own agenda. Jesus used scripture to orient himself to God’s agenda.

Jesus quoted from the book of Deuteronomy each time the devil approached him. He knew the scripture. God was in his head and in his understanding.

This is why we need to read and meditate on scripture, and also why we need to study it with others, including listening to scholars. It’s important to know God’s word so that it sticks in our heads and speaks to us when we need it most. Memorizing scripture is one way to welcome God into your head. But just knowing the words doesn’t guarantee you know the Word. To know the Word, you have to know the music, too, so to speak. This is understanding.

I know a lot people who can quote scripture freely, even preachers, don’t you know?! But when I listen to them, I don’t hear the sound of God’s voice in theirs.

I was listening this week to the convention sermon for the Southern Baptist Convention in 2004. The preacher’s words were filled with fear of others, Muslims especially. He seemed sure God’s wrath was being poured out on the nation because of abortion and homosexuality. He called on Christians to be wall-builders, defending the faith against its
militant secular foes.

Lots of scripture, little understanding. Lots of conviction, little compassion. I heard the words, but I didn’t hear the Word. There was no music in it.

God be in my head and in my understanding. God be in my head and in my understanding. Say it with me: God be in my head and in my understanding.

We need to keep saying it until it sings. Until the world can hear the music in it and join the song of God’s love for all. Amen.