Nancy Ortberg, who’s married to John Ortberg, the pastor of Menlo Church, tells a story from the days she worked as a home health nurse. One day she went to the home of a family that had recently immigrated from Mexico. When she got there, their seven-year old was lying on the couch in the living room, curled in a fetal position, suffering from a disease called adrenoleukodystrophy, a terrible disease that you may know from a movie called Lorenzo’s Oil. This child probably had only about six weeks more to live. The younger child in the family, who was just three, played on the floor. The mother was the only parent at home. Nancy asked where the father was.

“He’s gone,” the mother said, in broken English.

Do you mean he’s at work? Nancy asked. When will he be back?

No—just gone. He had left her, left his family, a week ago, when they’d been told that their younger child also carried the gene for the same disease. This child would probably come down with his first symptoms within the year, and then he would die too. And the father simply could not do it again. So he left.

Nancy Ortberg did what I think many of us would have done. First she cried at the horror of what this young mother was facing alone. Then she got in her car and made a list of all the ways she could help. Dinners. Calling people to help with babysitting, cleaning, yard work, meals. She knew she couldn’t take away this family’s sorrow, but she could do something to help. So she made her list. It made her feel energized, like she was doing something helpful, important.

She finished the list, put it next to her on the seat of her car, and then she did what we often do with our great plans to help someone else. She did…nothing. She got busy with her work and her life, her own family. The list got lost under other bags and papers. She had all the right intentions; she sincerely meant to help, but she did nothing.

I wonder if you can identify with that story the way I do. I hear about someone else’s need, or an injustice, a hurricane, a government policy that ought to be reversed. Something I am truly moved by. I feel inspired to help. I intend to help. I say out loud that I’m going to help. And then I do…nothing. Or, I do something, but it feels small, totally inadequate to what is needed. I run out of energy, or time, or focus. There are a hundred other things in my life that seem to demand more immediate attention. I’m pretty sure we will always run out of time and energy and money before the need is fully met.

Over the next several weeks, we’re preparing to dig into the work of Compassion Week, the week in early October when this church will marshal more than 2,000 volunteers in the community of Los Altos for seven days of service projects. Compassion Week has become a
signature of this church. It underlines, in a very public way, our commitment to be active participants in God’s work of transforming this community—repairing a broken world.

And every one of us knows that one week is not enough. That the needs we see and are drawn to help meet are not fixed quickly or easily. We understand that hurricanes like Harvey and Irma are a consequence of the bigger issue of climate change. That homeless people need not just a meal but an affordable place to live. That the future of young immigrants who may now be deported from the one place they have known as home is just one piece of a much bigger picture—about their families, their communities, our life together as a nation.

Real transformation—the work God is about—requires of us more than a flash of compassion, or a spurt of energy, or a single heroic contribution. What real change needs is people whose commitment and work are sustained by something that outlasts all the moments of discouragement or distraction. People who will stay with the need, in the messy incompleteness of the work, because they know this is where they are called to be. Where they belong.

I think many of us like to see ourselves as people of action. We are people who roll up our sleeves and get things done. We imagine this is what God needs of us. It’s how our spirituality is expressed. On the other side [over here] are Christians who are different. They’re contemplative. Their way of engaging with the world is to pray, or to believe that what happens inside of them is as important as the work we do to help others. I spent many years of my life thinking that these two ways of being were opposites; that we were either one or the other as a matter of type.

But now I don’t think that’s true. I think if we are going to be people who sustain a commitment to re-making the world into something that is whole and healed—the kind of deep and lasting transformation that God is about—then every action has to be rooted in prayer, contemplation, however we connect with a Goodness bigger than ourselves. Because even our most heartfelt compassion, our profoundest inspiration, our deepest conviction is not enough. We have to draw regularly from a source that that goes deep, and that keeps replenishing us every time we get tired, or discouraged, or distracted. Every time we hit the limits of our own resources.

There is a recipe, a formula, for tapping into that power that is greater than our own. A continuous cycle that keeps sending us back to our Source. A rhythm that includes both contemplation and action. And I think it has been there from the beginning.

Go back for a minute all the way to a story at the very beginning of our tradition: Moses, whose people were oppressed—treated like slaves—in Egypt, an empire perhaps not so different from first world countries today. Moses was a compassionate person by nature. The Bible tells a story from his young adulthood, when saw an injustice and tried to help—and it didn’t actually work out that well. He retreated—stung by feeling misunderstood, unsuccessful.

He took a job tending sheep—an unambitious career if there ever was one. One day he looked up and saw a bush burning so un-naturally, that it had to signal something spiritual. “Take your shoes off,” he heard a voice say. “You are standing on holy ground.” It was powerful, a heart-stopping moment. Moses was drawn into something out of the ordinary, something that felt like
a conversation with God. The first conversation he’d ever had with God, apparently. And God said to Moses, “I have seen the misery of my people. The injustice that holds them in Egypt. It pains me. I need you to lead them out of there. So get going.”

This is the pattern: an inner experience—spiritual, powerful, personal. But Moses couldn’t just float off, carried by the euphoria of that moment. Immediately, God turned him outward, toward action. His experience took on focus. Direction. It had implications, not only for Moses’ life, but for the world. For the brokenness that was breaking God’s heart.

Maybe a true experience of God will always turn us outward, to see others. To face the world.

That experience became for Moses his holy ground. A place to come back to again and again, every time his inspiration faltered, or his energy lapsed, or those people he was leading across the desert drove him crazy. A place to stand, sunk deep into the ground, a marker of the moment he heard a voice, and the picture of freedom that voice drew, and the power it promised him. Not always a physical place, but a rhythm, a steady drumbeat. A connection with God…then action…then a return. Again and again and again.

A lot of good work happens without the kind of regular God-connection I’m suggesting. Can you do good, helpful service in the world without it? Absolutely. The Rotary Club and other service organizations do it all the time. But I wonder if a healed world needs something else, something that can come only through people who are connected with a deeper substance, a less visible wholeness. Let me tell you a story that will say better what I mean.

It’s the story of a Bosnian man named Vedran Smailovic. He was born in 1956, in Sarajevo. He was the fourth of five children, born into a musical family. Like his brothers and sisters and mother and father, he became a professional musician. By the time he was 37, Vedran was the principal cellist at the Sarajevo Opera Theater. That’s how he made his living when Bosnia disintegrated into civil war in the early 1990’s. The orchestra continued to play as long as it could, but the nation was falling apart. A bomb destroyed the Opera Theater building. Hope of re-uniting the country dwindled. Recovering any civilized life, much less a vibrant cultural life, seemed impossible.

And then it got worse. On May 27, 1992, at 9:30 in the morning, as a long line of starving, helpless people waited in front of the only bakery in Sarajevo that still had enough flour to make bread, they were shelled—bombed from close range. Twenty-two people died in that one attack. Vedran Smailovic stood in his apartment 100 yards away and watched through the window as it happened.

The next day hungry people lined up for bread again. They might die standing there, but they were sure they would die if they couldn’t get to the bakery. While they stood in line, Vedran Smailovic came out of his apartment. He was dressed in the black suit and tie that he had worn every night until the Opera Theater was destroyed. He carried his cello and a chair. He sat down in the rubble in the square, surrounded by debris and death, and the despair of all the living people around him. And he began to play. No matter how dangerous it was, he came back to the
square every day after that, for twenty-two days, to play the same mournful music. For the people who had died; for the people who stood in line.

Smailovic gave what only he could give—from the root of his being, from his place to stand. Selflessly, without glory or support or even recognition, he played beautiful music for an audience that had come only because they were hungry. And with his music, he gave them hope—faith that something of their beautiful country would survive—which they needed maybe even more than they needed bread.

So often when we hear about a terrible situation our inclination is to run around and do something quick. Make lists. But maybe what is needed from us is something different. Something that only people of faith can offer. We belong to the God whose vision and hope for this world is not just food or clothing or safety for this day, but wholeness. Our best, most powerful, transformative work happens when we are close enough to hear what is breaking God’s heart.

Let that be our place to stand.