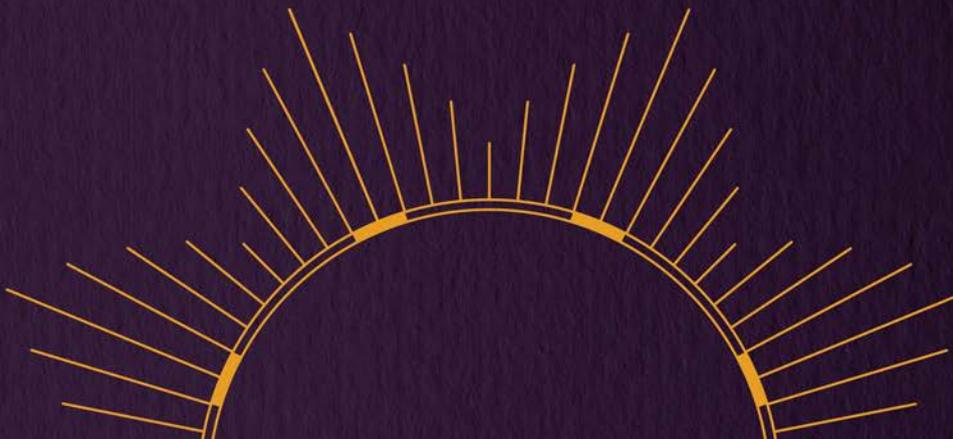




THE MESSAGE®
*PRAYERFUL
READING
BIBLE*

LUKE & ACTS

EUGENE H. PETERSON



It's wonderful to witness more and more people incorporating the *lectio divina* into their devotional lives, moving from *reading* the biblical text in search of revelation to *prayerful exploration* of its message, in search of a personal, transformative encounter. Eugene Peterson was one of the great modern champions of this approach. His *Message* translation of the Bible and the *lectio divina* complement one another like fish and chips! This is a resource to revitalize the prayer lives of thousands.

PETE GREIG, cofounder of 24-7 Prayer International and senior pastor of Emmaus Rd church

A stunning and beautiful guide that understands, after all, that the only way to come to the Holy Bible is prayerfully. *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible* meets us there, affirming our astonished desire to stop, open our hearts, and hear well from God. Thoughtful, kind, and challenging, this Bible lights the way to that deeper walk. What we'll gain along the way can't be measured, and that's just one aspect that will make the journey so special.

PATRICIA RAYBON, author of *I Told the Mountain to Move*

I was taught to read Scripture in order to: understand God, apply his truth to my life, and teach it to others. But *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible* takes it deeper: to not just understand God but meet with him. We need wise guides on how to engage in the spiritual reading of Scripture, and this is as good as I've seen. Engaging soul and imagination with cognition and intellect, this resource connects one more fully to all the ways God speaks in and through his Scriptures. If you've been wanting to rediscover the presence of God—and the power of his written Word—I can think of no better resource.

MATT TEBBE, cofounder of Gravity Leadership

It's just plain rude not to respond when God speaks to us! Let *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible* help you never leave God's words without truly conversing with God about what you've read.

JAN JOHNSON, author of *When the Soul Listens* and coauthor of *Renovation of the Heart in Daily Practice*

Modernizing ancient practices of biblical reflection significantly enhances our prayerful reading of the Scriptures. Dig in. Eat this book. Savor every morsel. So good for your soul. Our beloved mentor, Eugene Peterson, would have been delighted with our prayerful attentiveness and our transformed lives.

STEPHEN A. MACCHIA, founder and president of Leadership Transformations and director of the Pierce Center for Disciple Building at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

Choose for yourself a metaphor for *lectio divina*: diving into God's Word, carefully marinating in it, or slowly chewing on it to be nourished. It is not reading for information, but for transformation. Eugene Peterson brings the Bible to us in American English vernacular—making it easier for us to digest. As young as late elementary school, I pictured myself in Bible stories and could also relate to the sentiments in the Psalms. I was with Zacchaeus up in the tree, craning my neck to see Jesus, wondering if Jesus would see me. I was with Jesus and overcome with grief as he wept over his friend Lazarus. I practiced *lectio divina* without knowing it. Peterson's *Message* paraphrase allows for rich, robust prayer and contemplation. Nuance. Eat this book. Be filled full with the life of God.

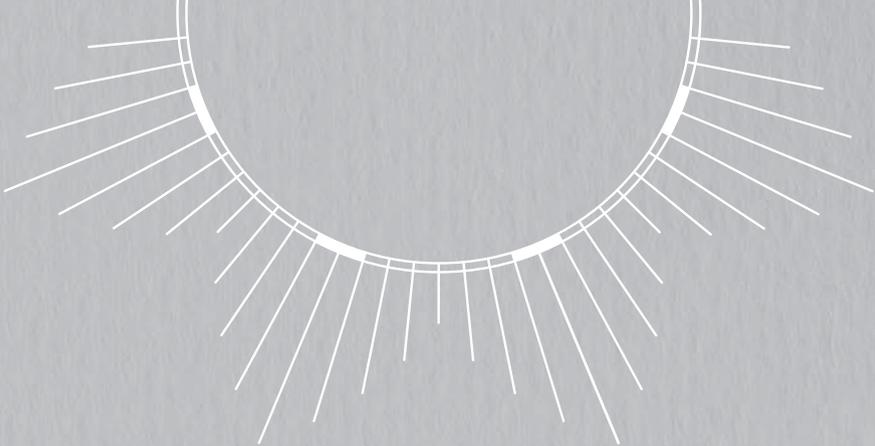
MARLENA GRAVES, author of *The Way Up Is Down*

The Message Prayerful Reading Bible combines two of my favorite ways of reading the Scriptures. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* opens windows to new understandings of familiar passages. *Lectio divina* invites me to enter into God's love and grace as I embrace these truths in daily life. I look forward to continuing to experience truth and grace through this book for years to come and to passing it along to my companions on the journey.

ALICE FRYLING, author of *Mirror for the Soul* and *Aging Faithfully*

I love *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible*! Its take-and-eat, chew-and-digest approach to God's Word will help you receive his message more deeply, moving it from your head to your heart. Enjoy the feast!

AMY BOUCHER PYE, author of *7 Ways to Pray*



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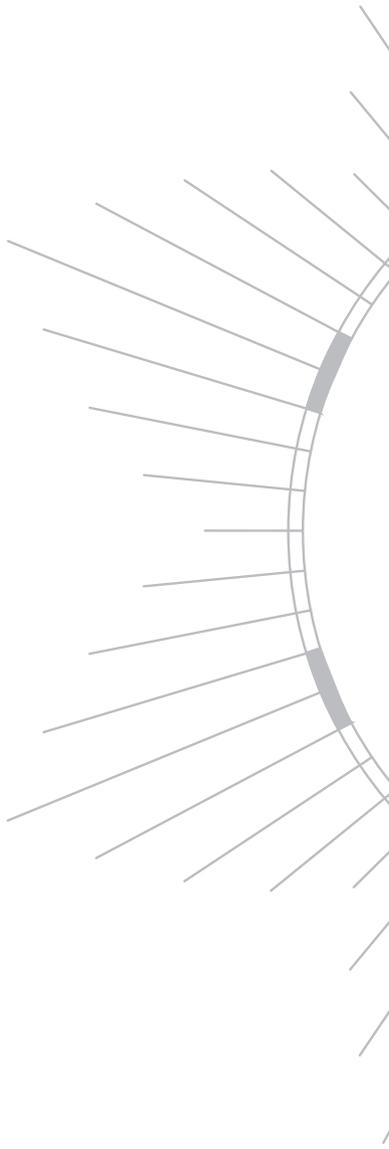
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*The Message is a contemporary rendering
of the Bible from the original languages,
crafted to present its tone, rhythm, events,
and ideas in everyday language.*





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INTRODUCTION TO THE MESSAGE

Reading is the first thing, just reading the Bible. As we read we enter a new world of words and find ourselves in on a conversation in which God has the first and last words. We soon realize that we are included in the conversation. We didn't expect this. But this is precisely what generation after generation of Bible readers do find: The Bible is not only written about us but to us. In these pages we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us.

We aren't used to this. We are used to reading books that explain things, or tell us what to do, or inspire or entertain us. But this is different. This is a world of revelation: God revealing to people just like us—men and women created in God's image—how God works and what is going on in this world in which we find ourselves. At the same time that God reveals all this, God draws us in by invitation and command to participate in God's working life. We gradually (or suddenly) realize that we are insiders in the most significant action of our time as God establishes his grand rule of love and justice on this earth (as it is in heaven). "Revelation" means that we are reading something we couldn't have guessed or figured out on our own. Revelation is what makes the Bible unique.

And so just reading this Bible, *The Message*, and listening to what we read, is the first thing. There will be time enough for study later on. But first, it is important simply to read, leisurely and thoughtfully. We need to get a feel for the way these stories and songs, these prayers and conversations, these sermons and visions, invite us into this large, large world in which the invisible God is behind and involved in everything visible and illuminates what it means to live here—really live, not just get across the street. As we read, and the longer we read, we begin to "get it"—we are in conversation with God. We find ourselves listening and answering in matters that most concern us: who we are, where we came from, where we are going, what makes us tick, the texture of the world and the communities we live in, and—most of all—the incredible love of God among us, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Through reading the Bible, we see that there is far more to the world, more to us, more to what we see and more to what we don't see—more to everything!—than we had ever dreamed, and that this "more" has to do with God.

This is new for many of us, a different sort of book—a book that reads us even as we read it. We are used to picking up and reading books for what we can get out of them: information we can use, inspiration to energize us, instructions on how to do something or other, entertainment to while away a rainy day, wisdom that will guide us into living better. These things can and do take place when reading the Bible, but the Bible is given to us in the first place simply to invite us to make ourselves at home in the world of God, God’s word and world, and become familiar with the way God speaks and the ways in which we answer him with our lives.



Our reading turns up some surprises. The biggest surprise for many is how accessible this book is to those who simply open it up and read it. Virtually anyone can read this Bible with understanding. The reason that new translations are made every couple of generations or so is to keep the language of the Bible current with the common speech we use, the very language in which it was first written. We don’t have to be smart or well-educated to understand it, for it is written in the words and sentences we hear in the marketplace, on school playgrounds, and around the dinner table. Because the Bible is so famous and revered, many assume that we need experts to explain and interpret it for us—and, of course, there are some things that need to be explained. But the first men and women who listened to these words now written in our Bibles were ordinary, everyday, working-class people. One of the greatest of the early translators of the Bible into English, William Tyndale, said that he was translating so that the “boy that driveth the plough” would be able to read the Scriptures.

One well-educated African man, who later became one of the most influential Bible teachers in our history (Augustine), was greatly offended when he first read the Bible. Instead of a book cultivated and polished in the literary style he admired so much, he found it full of homespun, earthy stories of plain, unimportant people. He read it in a Latin translation full of slang and jargon. He took one look at what he considered the “unspiritual” quality of so many of its characters and the everydayness of Jesus, and he contemptuously abandoned it. It was years before he realized that God had not taken the form of a sophisticated intellectual to teach us about highbrow heavenly culture so we could appreciate the finer things of God. When he saw that God entered our lives as a Jewish servant in order to save us from our sins, he started reading the book gratefully and believingly.

Some are also surprised that Bible reading does not introduce us to a “nicer” world. This biblical world is decidedly not an ideal world, the kind we see advertised in travel posters. Suffering and injustice and ugliness are not purged from the world in which God works and loves and saves. Nothing is glossed over. God works patiently and deeply, but often in hidden ways, in the mess of our humanity and history. Ours is not a neat and tidy world in which we are assured that we can get everything under our control. This takes considerable getting used to—there is mystery everywhere. The Bible does not give us a

predictable cause-effect world in which we can plan our careers and secure our futures. It is not a dream world in which everything works out according to our adolescent expectations—there is pain and poverty and abuse at which we cry out in indignation, “You can’t let this happen!” For most of us it takes years and years and years to exchange our dream world for this real world of grace and mercy, sacrifice and love, freedom and joy—the God-saved world.

Yet another surprise is that the Bible does not flatter us. It is not trying to sell us anything that promises to make life easier. It doesn’t offer secrets to what we often think of as prosperity or pleasure or high adventure. The reality that comes into focus as we read the Bible has to do with what God is doing in a saving love that includes us and everything we do. This is quite different from what our sin-stunted and culture-cluttered minds imagine. But our Bible reading does not give us access to a mail-order catalog of idols from which we can pick and choose to satisfy our fantasies. The Bible begins with God speaking creation and us into being. It continues with God entering into personalized and complex relationships with us, helping and blessing us, teaching and training us, correcting and disciplining us, loving and saving us. This is not an escape from reality but a plunge into more reality—a sacrificial but altogether better life all the way.

* * *

God doesn’t force any of this on us: God’s word is personal address, inviting, commanding, challenging, rebuking, judging, comforting, directing—but not forcing. Not coercing. We are given space and freedom to answer, to enter the conversation. For more than anything else the Bible invites our participation in the work and language of God.

As we read, we find that there is a connection between the Word Read and the Word Lived. Everything in this book is live-able. Many of us find that the most important question we ask as we read is not “What does it mean?” but “How can I live it?” So we read personally, not impersonally. We read in order to live our true selves, not just get information that we can use to raise our standard of living. Bible reading is a means of listening to and obeying God, not gathering religious data by which we can be our own gods.

You are going to hear stories in this book that will take you out of your preoccupation with yourself and into the spacious freedom in which God is working the world’s salvation. You are going to come across words and sentences that stab you awake to a beauty and hope that will connect you with your real life.

Be sure to answer.

Eugene H Peterson

LECTIO DIVINA: AN INTRODUCTION

“How do you read?”

LUKE 10:26

Reading the Bible, if we do not do it rightly, can get us into a lot of trouble. We pick up a Bible and find that we have God’s word in our hands—our hands. We can now handle it. It is easy enough to suppose that we are in control of it, that we can use it, that we are in charge of applying it wherever, whenever, and to whomever we wish without regard to appropriateness or conditions.

Those who don’t know the conditions implicit in the technology of the Bible are dangerous to themselves and others. And so, as we hand out Bibles and urge people to read them, it is imperative that we also say, *caveat lector*, let the reader beware.

The word of God is not my possession. The words printed on the pages of my Bible give witness to the living and active revelation of the God of creation and salvation, the God of love who became the Word made flesh in Jesus, and I had better not forget it. If in my Bible reading I lose touch with this livingness, if I fail to listen to this living Jesus, submit to this sovereignty, and respond to this love, I become arrogant in my knowing and impersonal in my behavior. An enormous amount of damage is done in the name of Christian living by bad Bible reading. *Caveat lector*, let the reader beware.

Lectio divina trains us in the discipline of reading Scripture rightly. At every turn of the page it poses Jesus’ question to us: “How do you read?”

Lectio divina is the deliberate and intentional practice of making the transition from a kind of reading that treats and handles, however reverently, Jesus dead to listening to, accompanying, and following Jesus alive. A word written is less than a word spoken—and sometimes not even the same thing at all. Which, of course, is why many of us prefer words written to words spoken. It is simpler, we are more in control, we don’t have to deal with the complexities of people. If we don’t like what we are reading we can shut the book and pick up another—or go shopping, or take a walk, or spend an hour or so in the garden.

But we do not read the Bible in order to reduce our lives to what is convenient

to us or manageable by us—we want to get in on the great invisibles of the Trinity, the soaring adorations of the angels, the quirky cragginess of the prophets, and . . . Jesus.

Lectio divina is a way of life that develops “according to the Scriptures.” It is not just a skill that we exercise when we have a Bible open before us but a life congruent with the Word made flesh to which the Scriptures give witness. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that the word of God originated when “going through a long line of prophets, God [spoke to] our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently he spoke to us directly through his Son. . . . It’s crucial that we keep a firm grip on what we’ve heard” (Hebrews 1:1-2; 2:1). These are spoken words delivered to us by “pioneers who blazed the way” (Hebrews 12:1) and now rewritten in our Holy Scriptures. It is the task of *lectio divina* to get those words heard and listened to, words written in ink now rewritten in blood.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Eugene H. Peterson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a prominent initial 'E'.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit . . . we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:16-18, *THE MESSAGE*

“The Bible is not only written about us but to us,” Eugene Peterson writes in the introduction to The Message. “In these pages we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us.”

This is not a new idea from Eugene, but rather his expression of the ancient Christian understanding of how we encounter God through Scripture. The spiritual discipline of *lectio divina* (“holy/sacred/divine reading”) has been a principal means for generations of Christians to experience this divine encounter through the pages of the Bible:

- pausing for a moment and preparing to encounter God (*silencio*, or “stop”)
- doing a first reading and then making observations about the text (*lectio*, or “read”)
- reflecting on what we observed in our reading of the text and in ourselves as we read (*meditatio*, or “ponder”)
- engaging in conversation with God inspired by the text (*oratio*, or “pray”)
- taking note of what this time with God has brought to the surface (*contemplatio*, or “reflect”), and finally,
- considering how this time with God translates into our lives with God (*incarnatio*, or “live”)

The Message Prayerful Reading Bible: Luke & Acts has been carefully curated to facilitate this holy reading experience for you. Through the uniquely readable language of *The Message* version of the Bible itself, the guided reflections designed to orient you to the practice, the structured journaling pages at the outset of each book of the Bible, and, finally, the wide-open spaces of the remaining journaling pages, our hope is for you to move quickly from *lectio divina* as a habit you are learning to *lectio divina* as a natural, automatic way of engaging with the Scriptures—in fact, in Eugene’s words, as “a way of life.”

Here, then, is a brief overview of the intent of each feature of the book.

- **Lectio Divina: An Introduction.** If you’re like many of us, you may have skipped or skimmed Eugene’s overview of the idea of *lectio divina*. We hope you’ll flip back to it and take the time to read it. You are entering a way of life, and a little orientation goes a long way toward getting you settled.
- **Guided reflections.** Intermittently throughout this book, you’ll find guided reflections for your use. We’ve preselected passages of Scripture for you to interact with and provided touch points for each stage in the *lectio divina* process. These will be satisfying devotional experiences for you, but they will also help you get your feet wet in the *lectio divina* experience. Think of the instructions and questions in these guided reflections as stepping-off points: Feel free to adapt them as you are led. The point is for you to feel increasingly comfortable moving through this process in conversation with God.

A quick caveat: Please don’t skip any steps! *Lectio divina* is a holistic experience, and to bypass any part of the process is to rob yourself of a meaningful encounter with God. You’ll notice that each guided reflection begins (*Stop*) and ends (*Live*) simply with a brief passage of Scripture; even these are an essential aspect of the experience. Let yourself be led through each step of the process each time you come to the Scriptures.

- **Structured pages.** Near the beginning of Luke and then of Acts, you’ll find a page with minimal instructions for a prayerful reading experience. In these cases, you’re invited to select your own passage of Scripture and move through the *lectio divina* process at your own pace, with minimal direction. Our hope is that these pages will further assimilate you to the process of prayerful reading and give you greater confidence in the possibility embedded in each meeting you have with God and his Word. Again, don’t skip a step in the process, but give yourself freedom to engage with each step in a way that makes sense to you and God in the moment.
- **Journaling pages.** The rest of the book is simply this: you, the Scriptures, and space for you to meet with God. Turn through the pages and you’ll often find Bible text on one side and open journaling space on the other. We’ve included as a reminder the stages of *lectio divina*—*Stop, Read,*

Ponder, Pray, Reflect, Live—but we want you to feel at liberty to use this open space in whatever way will draw you deeper into life with God by way of the Scriptures. Draw, doodle, take notes, journal, or move through the prayerful reading process—whatever seems sensible to you and the Spirit.

The Bible is a gift to us from the God who loves us and desires for us to draw near to him—not just in chance encounters but in the normal outworking of our everyday lives. *The Message Prayerful Reading Bible: Luke & Acts* is meant to help you do just that, and in the process to find yourself settled deeply and contentedly in the palm of God's hand.

LUKE



1¹⁻⁴ So many others have tried their hand at putting together a story of the wonderful harvest of Scripture and history that took place among us, using reports handed down by the original eyewitnesses who served this Word with their very lives. Since I have investigated all the reports in close detail, starting from the story's beginning, I decided to write it all out for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can know beyond the shadow of a doubt the reliability of what you were taught.

A Childless Couple Conceives

⁵⁻⁷ During the rule of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zachariah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth. Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old.

⁸⁻¹² It so happened that as Zachariah was carrying out his priestly duties before God, working the shift assigned to his regiment, it came his one turn in life to enter the sanctuary of God and burn incense. The congregation was gathered and praying outside the Temple at the hour of the incense offering. Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense. Zachariah was paralyzed in fear.

¹³⁻¹⁵ But the angel reassured him, "Don't fear, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. He'll achieve great stature with God.

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ "He'll drink neither wine nor beer. He'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother's womb. He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. He will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among

hardened skeptics—he'll get the people ready for God."

¹⁸ Zachariah said to the angel, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman."

¹⁹⁻²⁰ But the angel said, "I am Gabriel, the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news. But because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time—*God's* time."

²¹⁻²² Meanwhile, the congregation waiting for Zachariah was getting restless, wondering what was keeping him so long in the sanctuary. When he came out and couldn't speak, they knew he had seen a vision. He continued speechless and had to use sign language with the people.

²³⁻²⁵ When the course of his priestly assignment was completed, he went back home. It wasn't long before his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. "So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!" she said.

A Virgin Conceives

²⁶⁻²⁸ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you.

²⁹⁻³³ She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

He will be great,
be called 'Son of the Highest.'

The Lord God will give him
the throne of his father David;
He will rule Jacob's house forever—
no end, ever, to his kingdom.”

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, “But how? I’ve never slept with a man.”

³⁵ The angel answered,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
the power of the Highest hover over you;
Therefore, the child you bring to birth
will be called Holy, Son of God.

³⁶⁻³⁸ “And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God.”

And Mary said,

Yes, I see it all now:
I’m the Lord’s maid, ready to serve.
Let it be with me
just as you say.

Then the angel left her.

Blessed Among Women

³⁹⁻⁴⁵ Mary didn’t waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah’s house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

You’re so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also
blessed!
And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?
The moment the sound of your
greeting entered my ears,
The babe in my womb
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.
Blessed woman, who believed what God
said,
believed every word would come true!

⁴⁶⁻⁵⁵ And Mary said,

I’m bursting with God-news;
I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.
God took one good look at me, and look
what happened—
I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!

What God has done for me will never be
forgotten,
the God whose very name is holy, set
apart from all others.

His mercy flows in wave after wave
on those who are in awe before him.

He bared his arm and showed his
strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the
cold.

He embraced his chosen child, Israel;
he remembered and piled on the
mercies, piled them high.

It’s exactly what he promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up
to now.

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then went back to her own home.

The Birth of John

⁵⁷⁻⁵⁸ When Elizabeth was full-term in her pregnancy, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives, seeing that God had overwhelmed her with mercy, celebrated with her.

⁵⁹⁻⁶⁰ On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child and were calling him Zachariah after his father. But his mother intervened: “No. He is to be called John.”

⁶¹⁻⁶² “But,” they said, “no one in your family is named that.” They used sign language to ask Zachariah what he wanted him named.

⁶³⁻⁶⁴ Asking for a tablet, Zachariah wrote, “His name is to be John.” That took everyone by surprise. Surprise followed surprise—Zachariah’s mouth was now open, his tongue loose, and he was talking, praising God!

⁶⁵⁻⁶⁶ A deep, reverential fear settled over the neighborhood, and in all that Judean hill country people talked about nothing else. Everyone who heard about it took it to heart, wondering, “What will become of this child? Clearly, God has his hand in this.”

⁶⁷⁻⁷⁹ Then Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
he came and set his people free.
He set the power of salvation in the
center of our lives,
and in the very house of David his
servant,

STOP “Are you listening to this? Really listening?” (Luke 14:35)

READ Passage for Reflection:

Observations and Resonant Words and Phrases:

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PONDER What is this passage bringing to mind for you?

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PRAY Talk with God about what has come to mind.

REFLECT What are you taking with you from this time with God?

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LIVE “Whatever he tells you, do it.” (John 2:5)

Just as he promised long ago
 through the preaching of his holy
 prophets:
 Deliverance from our enemies
 and every hateful hand;
 Mercy to our fathers,
 as he remembers to do what he said
 he'd do,
 What he swore to our father Abraham—
 a clean rescue from the enemy camp,
 So we can worship him without a care in
 the world,
 made holy before him as long as we
 live.

And you, my child, "Prophet of the
 Highest,"
 will go ahead of the Master to prepare
 his ways,
 Present the offer of salvation to his people,
 the forgiveness of their sins.
 Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,
 God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
 Shining on those in the darkness,
 those sitting in the shadow of death,
 Then showing us the way, one foot at a
 time,
 down the path of peace.

⁸⁰ The child grew up, healthy and spirited.
 He lived out in the desert until the day he
 made his prophetic debut in Israel.

The Birth of Jesus

2 ¹⁻⁵ About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

⁶⁻⁷ While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

An Event for Everyone

⁸⁻¹² There were shepherds camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel

said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

¹³⁻¹⁴ At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

Glory to God in the heavenly heights,
 Peace to all men and women on earth
 who please him.

¹⁵⁻¹⁸ As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherds were impressed.

¹⁹⁻²⁰ Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherds returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!

Blessings

²¹ When the eighth day arrived, the day of circumcision, the child was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived.

²²⁻²⁴ Then when the days stipulated by Moses for purification were complete, they took him up to Jerusalem to offer him to God as commanded in God's Law: "Every male who opens the womb shall be a holy offering to God," and also to sacrifice the "pair of doves or two young pigeons" prescribed in God's Law.

²⁵⁻³² In Jerusalem at the time, there was a man, Simeon by name, a good man, a man who lived in the prayerful expectancy of help for Israel. And the Holy Spirit was on him. The Holy Spirit had shown him that he would see the Messiah of God before he died. Led by the Spirit, he entered the Temple. As the parents of the child Jesus brought him in to carry out the rituals of the Law, Simeon took him into his arms and blessed God:

God, you can now release your servant;
 release me in peace as you promised.

With my own eyes I've seen your
salvation;
it's now out in the open for everyone
to see:
A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish
nations,
and of glory for your people Israel.

33-35 Jesus' father and mother were speechless with surprise at these words. Simeon went on to bless them, and said to Mary his mother,

This child marks both the failure and
the recovery of many in Israel,
A figure misunderstood and
contradicted—
the pain of a sword-thrust through
you—
But the rejection will force honesty,
as God reveals who they really are.

36-38 Anna the prophetess was also there, a daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher. She was by now a very old woman. She had been married seven years and a widow for eighty-four. She never left the Temple area, worshiping night and day with her fastings and prayers. At the very time Simeon was praying, she showed up, broke into an anthem of praise to God, and talked about the child to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem.

39-40 When they finished everything required by God in the Law, they returned to Galilee and their own town, Nazareth. There the child grew strong in body and wise in spirit. And the grace of God was on him.

They Found Him in the Temple

41-45 Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.

46-48 The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his

parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

49-50 He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

51-52 So he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

A Baptism of Life-Change

3 **1-6** In the fifteenth year of the rule of Caesar Tiberius—it was while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod, ruler of Galilee; his brother Philip, ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, ruler of Abilene; during the Chief-Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—John, Zachariah's son, out in the desert at the time, received a message from God. He went all through the country around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of life-change leading to forgiveness of sins, as described in the words of Isaiah the prophet:

Thunder in the desert!
"Prepare God's arrival!
Make the road smooth and straight!
Every ditch will be filled in,
Every bump smoothed out,
The detours straightened out,
All the ruts paved over.
Everyone will be there to see
The parade of God's salvation."

7-9 When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your *life* that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and flourishing? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire."

THE STAGEHAND AND THE MAIN CHARACTER (Luke 3:16-20)

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STOP “Are you listening to this? Really listening?” (Luke 14:35)

READ Read the passage aloud twice, each time at a different pace and volume.

PONDER What welled up in you as you read this passage aloud? Which phrases were most arresting to you? Why?

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What is your general impression of John the Baptist from this passage? What do you admire about him? What about him, if anything, makes you nervous? Why?

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PRAY Invite God to make a clean sweep of your life, and then sit in silence, taking note of what comes to mind: the true things that he wants moved to their proper place and the false things he wants out of your life.

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REFLECT John and Herod, the ruler, are described as opponents in this passage. Why do you think that is?

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Where have you observed spiritual authority and worldly authority in conflict? Which side tends to appeal to you more? Why?

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LIVE “Whatever he tells you, do it.” (John 2:5)

¹⁰ The crowd asked him, “Then what are we supposed to do?”

¹¹ “If you have two coats, give one away,” he said. “Do the same with your food.”

¹² Tax men also came to be baptized and said, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³ He told them, “No more extortion—collect only what is required by law.”

¹⁴ Soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He told them, “No harassment, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.”

¹⁵ The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, “Could this John be the Messiah?”

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ But John intervened: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”

¹⁸⁻²⁰ There was a lot more of this—words that gave strength to the people, words that put heart in them. The Message! But Herod, the ruler, stung by John’s rebuke in the matter of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, capped his long string of evil deeds with this outrage: He put John in jail.

²¹⁻²² After all the people were baptized, Jesus was baptized. As he was praying, the sky opened up and the Holy Spirit, like a dove descending, came down on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

Son of Adam, Son of God

²³⁻³⁸ When Jesus entered public life he was about thirty years old, the son (in public perception) of Joseph, who was—

son of Heli,
son of Matthat,
son of Levi,
son of Melki,
son of Jannai,
son of Joseph,
son of Mattathias,
son of Amos,
son of Nahum,
son of Esli,
son of Naggai,

son of Maath,
son of Mattathias,
son of Semein,
son of Josech,
son of Joda,
son of Joanan,
son of Rhesa,
son of Zerubbabel,
son of Shealtiel,
son of Neri,
son of Melchi,
son of Addi,
son of Cosam,
son of Elmadam,
son of Er,
son of Joshua,
son of Eliezer,
son of Jorim,
son of Matthat,
son of Levi,
son of Simeon,
son of Judah,
son of Joseph,
son of Jonam,
son of Eliakim,
son of Melea,
son of Menna,
son of Mattatha,
son of Nathan,
son of David,
son of Jesse,
son of Obed,
son of Boaz,
son of Salmon,
son of Nahshon,
son of Amminadab,
son of Admin,
son of Arni,
son of Hezron,
son of Perez,
son of Judah,
son of Jacob,
son of Isaac,
son of Abraham,
son of Terah,
son of Nahor,
son of Serug,
son of Reu,
son of Peleg,
son of Eber,
son of Shelah,
son of Kenan,
son of Arphaxad,
son of Shem,
son of Noah,
son of Lamech,
son of Methuselah,