

Week 14

God Announces the Way; Servants Are Open

Guide: The Faith That Formed Jesus



When we look at a friend's photo album, some of the most intriguing pictures are the ones of our friend's grandparents and parents. We stare into those faces not only to look for some resemblance but also to discern something of the character, the traits, the personality of our friend.

This week, we will use the first chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in pursuit of our growing desire to know Jesus more completely, that we might grow in love with him more intimately, because we want to follow him more freely.

Our method this week will be to stare into the faces of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, and look for what they tell us about our friend Jesus.

We will try to enter into these scenes in the midst of

our busy, everyday lives. We will try to learn about the character and personality of Jesus by studying the faith that formed him.

This type of prayer takes some practice, but anyone can do it, because it's what we most naturally do when we meet the parents of a friend. And when we learn something about our friend's family, we learn something about our friend. For practical help in praying with these scenes, be sure to read the practical helps for prayer.

Zechariah couldn't imagine how God could overcome Elizabeth's old age. And he could not speak at all until he could say his new son's name, "God is faithful." The angel announced to Mary that "nothing is impossible with God." Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled." Mary's whole being proclaims the greatness of God and her words echo the faith of her ancestors.

As we walk around in our busy lives this week, these wonderful stories will shape our week. There will be a Zechariah-in-doubt moment, when we can't imagine God's presence, and another Zechariah moment when we can say, "God is faithful." There will be times when this week's photo on our computer screen will remind us of a feeling of being overwhelmed and saying, "How can this be?" And there will be times when it will remind us of Mary's words, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said."

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

When directing someone through his or her desires to know, love, and follow Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola would teach them to contemplate the scenes in the Gospels with great focus and freedom. We will learn to do this, in a way adapted for our busy everyday lives, during this week and the weeks to come.

If we just read a Gospel story, we might imagine it with very vivid imagination, but that is not much different than someone telling us very vividly about a story in his or her life. That would be very special, but there is an even deeper approach, which is possible because the Scriptures are the word of God. These stories are an alive and active revelation. When we read them, something keeps happening in our hearts. The revelation continues *beyond* the text of the story.

Ignatius encourages us to *enter* the story. He wants us not only to hear the story and get the facts of what happened. He wants us to *experience* the story and let its *meaning* and *revelation to us* happen in our hearts. This takes great focus and freedom, and it takes us *beyond* the details of the particular text, and it lets the story come alive and address us as we become a *participant* in the scene. Let's take two examples.

A Prayer Period to Contemplate a Gospel Scene

If I have the time, in just thirty to forty-five minutes, I can have a wonderful experience of almost any Gospel scene. I would begin by placing myself in the presence of God. Then, I would formally ask for the grace I desire from God during this time of prayer. Here, it might be to ask for the grace to grow in understanding of who Jesus is that I might grow in my love for him and my desire to be with him.

Then I would read the text of the story and put the text down. I would begin by slowly picturing the scene as completely as I can. Where is it? Notice all the things in and around the scene. Who's there? What is everyone wearing? How hot or cold is it there? What smells come to me? I then enter the scene even more, by becoming a character in the scene. I might just let myself be a member of the crowd, or I might become one of the principal characters in the story. When I get there, then I let the story happen and go wherever it goes. Inside the scene, the words and actions are not merely a videotaped replay of the text. Inside the scene, I can back up and fill in how the scene began, I can let what is revealed to me be played out in the words and gestures of the participants, and I can speak or simply experience my own reactions. The details of the text cease to be important as the experience of the story moves my heart. Finally, I would end with a prayer, speaking to Our Lord, heart to heart, friend to friend, in whatever way comes to me, expressing my gratitude for the graces I had just received.

Contemplating Such a Scene in Everyday Life

With focus and freedom, it is possible to let a story from Scripture become fruitful in the midst of my busy day. During this week, for example, I will wake up, and while I'm getting ready for the day (shaving, showering, putting on my makeup, getting dressed), I will think of the scenes we are contemplating this week. During this week, it will be Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary. Then I will recall what the basic messages of these readings are. Here it will be messages such as these: the struggle to believe that nothing is impossible for God, the experience of having to trust God and live in faith, the experience of God being faithful. Then I will recall what I am facing today. With an open heart, some *congruence*, some *connection*, will occur to me.

It might be that there are tensions in my marriage and it is a struggle for me to believe God's faithfulness to us is stronger than our stubbornness. In this example, when I'm with my spouse, I can literally walk around in the scenes involving Zechariah and Mary — at some times really experiencing that I can't speak until I can say, "God is faithful," or at other times, "I am your servant, Lord." Or hearing Elizabeth say, "The Lord has blessed you because you believed he would keep his promises."

Perhaps all I anticipate is another routine, busy day, full of stresses that I handle in the ordinary way I do — which I discovered weeks ago in this retreat are sometimes part of the pattern of my sinfulness and the mystery of God’s love for me. This week could be very rich if, in my own life’s scenes, I walk around as Elizabeth. Imagine these questions, in the background, as I walk around: “It’s been like this too long, to imagine any change”; “Who am I to think I will ever be more fruitful than I am?”; “In the middle of *this stuff* can I possibly imagine giving birth to a voice crying in the desert, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’?”

Perhaps the entry into a scene in my everyday life is simply memorizing a line from the Gospel story and letting it enter my heart as I say it at various *in-between* times, dozens of times each day. Imagine if, this week, we kept saying Mary’s words, “With all my heart, I praise the Lord” or “God cares for me, his humble servant.”

For the Journey: Praying with Imagination

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” The Jesuit priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins shouts this double-meaning proclamation in the first line of his great poem about our God-loved world.

The earth is charged as with electric impulses to reveal God’s glory. The earth is also charged as one might be commanded to do a certain task of importance. Both these meanings become focused this week with our considering the charge given to Elizabeth, Mary, and a man named Joseph.

It takes a certain humility to be surprised, a humility that allows the unexpected, the unusual, and the frightening. This kind of humility we can call “openness” as well. It is a spirit or interior attitude or disposition that makes one available to whatever might be spoken or offered. It is not something that one can turn on or off; it is an abiding outlook or sensitivity to what is out there or in here.

We are praying with and for the grace of that humility this week as we watch and listen to three characters living their roles in the drama of salvation. It is the opening scene of the last act. We will be getting to know the ways of Jesus, the main character, by first watching those who play their parts by bringing him on stage. Ignatius encourages those making the Exercises to try to get into the scene by use of their imagination. We use memory and our power to think and somewhat downplay this natural faculty that we all have, our imaginations. We can more easily come to truth, we think, by logic, use of facts, and use of our memories. We say that fantasy is the result of imagining, and what good is that?

Psychology uses our sense of sight to move our imaginations in what are known as projective tests. You may have taken the Rorschach, for example. In that test, you see an inkblot and, by your verbal responses, some important truths are revealed to the person conducting the test. The person taking the test has revealed something true by using the imagination. It is more powerful than most of us believe. Ignatius trusted all the human faculties to be powers by which God could get to us.

So this week, we put this faculty to work so as to be open to the graces of openness, humility, and trust. Be attentive to where you are standing when Mary is visited by an angel. Be aware of what you imagine the angel is saying and what Mary is thinking. What do you say and do as you accompany Mary to the house of Elizabeth? What is Joseph doing after he awakens from a dream in which he understands that he must marry his betrothed even though she is with child, which he knows is not his?

Then Ignatius asks us to make reflections on ourselves and draw some insight and grace. Perhaps we watch Mary from a distance. That is good. Now we pray with those feelings of distance. Perhaps the distance comes from not wanting to have anything to do with mystery and having to trust. There we are then, praying with a truth, whose realness has been revealed in a new and dramatic way. For Ignatius, getting close to Jesus and his close friends is a way of getting closer to ourselves. This is in no way self-preoccupying or narcissistic. The closer I get to myself and my real truth, the more intimately will I find Jesus being with me. God's Truth, made flesh, enters the lives of these three persons by charging them with trust and charging them with the mystery of giving in to surprise and adventure.

This is a frightening, yet consoling, week for us who watch and listen to the human struggle to let God into our private and personal scenes. We also pray to receive the grandeur of God's charge.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for again showing me the photo album of your family. It's a little different, praying this way, and I can feel myself being self-conscious. Be with me in this. Let me feel it bringing me closer to you.

I picture Elizabeth and Zechariah struggling to have children and finally giving up. How hard that must have been for them! Did they pull together and hold each other in their pain? How did they handle it within their marriage? Then, years later, an angel appears and tells them they will have a child.

Then I look at Mary and Joseph. She was so young. I see her laughing in the kitchen, stirring up her soup on the stove, entertaining her friends with her stories. Is that where you learned to tell stories — from your mother? Then I see her — this vivacious woman with the infectious laugh — standing in an empty kitchen when the angel appears. “Will she be the mother of God?” I watch with surprise as she struggles. She knows it will turn her life upside down! Does she really want to complicate her life this way? She just wants a simple life: to cook for her friends, to marry Joseph, and to pray at the synagogue each week. Yes, she wants to live her life for you, God, but does it have to be so hard?

It never occurred to me that Mary would struggle with this. I thought she just smiled beatifically and the decision was over. But I watch her struggle with her fears and pray to God as she always does when she is afraid. Her fears melt. Of course, if this is what God wants for her, she will do it. And there she is, still standing in the kitchen with soup still bubbling on the stove. She looks calmly and directly at the angel and says, “Yes.”

I wonder at the power of this kind of prayer before you, Jesus. I watch as your mother becomes a real person to me. I watch her say yes. Then I feel myself getting self-conscious about my own prayer. Maybe my imagination is running away. Then I do the same thing Mary does. I'm becoming afraid and so I pray to God. Slowly the fear subsides.

I'm not sure I ever saw your mother as a real, live person before, Jesus. I see her say yes and I wonder about the yes in my own life. I want to know you better and to make my life more like yours. I want to be open to the messages you send, even if your messengers aren't wearing wings and halos but are the people I see every day in my life. Dear Jesus, help me to recognize the messenger. Help me to listen to the message. Most of all, help me to say yes.

Scripture Readings

Luke 1:5–25, 57–66

Luke 1:26–38

Luke 1:39–56

Luke 1:67–79

Matthew 1:18–24