

THE 50 DAY BIBLE CHALLENGE

A
JOURNEY *with*
LUKE

EDITED BY MAREK P. ZABRISKIE



**A Journey
with Luke**

The 50 Day Bible Challenge

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Forward
Movement

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FORWARD MOVEMENT
Cincinnati, Ohio

Preface

The Bible Challenge began as a simple idea: to encourage daily reading of scripture. Simple ideas can bring forth great change.

Developing a daily spiritual discipline or practice is crucial for all Christians who wish to be faithful followers of Jesus. Saint Augustine and many other great Christians have written about the power of reading the Bible quietly on our own. There is no other book in the world that can so transform the human heart, motivate the human spirit, and give us the mind that was in Christ Jesus himself.

The Bible remains the world's best-selling book year after year. However, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, and other mainline Christians often do not read it. Church historian and author Diana Butler Bass reports that among the 22,000 Christian groups and denominations in the United States, Episcopalians are the best-educated group but drop to nearly last when it comes to biblical literacy.

The goal of The Bible Challenge is to help individuals develop a lifelong, daily spiritual discipline of reading the Bible so that their lives may be constantly transformed and renewed. Studies reveal that prayerfully engaging scripture is the best way for Christians to grow in their faith and love of Jesus.

More than 250,000 persons in 2,500 churches in over forty countries are now participating in The Bible Challenge. We continue our partnership with Forward Movement with this new series—a focus on reading one book of the Bible over a fifty-day period. This book joins *A Journey with Matthew* and *A Journey with Mark* as the third book in the series. This Bible Challenge series is an ideal resource

for individuals, churches, and dioceses during the Easter season or any time of the year.

Regular engagement with the Bible develops a strong Christian faith, enhances our experience of worship, and helps to create a more committed, articulate, and contagious Christian. This is exactly what the world needs today.

With prayers and blessings for your faithful Bible reading,

The Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie

Founder of The Bible Challenge

Director of the Center for Biblical Studies

www.thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org

Rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church

Fort Washington, Pennsylvania

How to Read the Bible Prayerfully

Welcome to The 50 Day Bible Challenge. We are delighted that you are interested in reading God's life-transforming Word from the Gospel of Luke. It will change and enrich your life. Here are some suggestions to consider as you get started:

- You can begin The 50 Day Bible Challenge at any time of the year that you desire. It works especially well for the fifty days of Eastertide, beginning on Easter Day. It also could be read during Lent, beginning on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday.
- Each day has a manageable amount of reading, a meditation, a question or two, and a prayer, written by a host of wonderful authors.
- We suggest that you try to read the Bible each day. It is a great spiritual discipline to establish.
- If, however, you need more than fifty days to read through the Gospel of Luke, we support you in moving at the pace that works best for you.
- Many Bible Challenge participants read the Bible using their iPad, iPhone, Kindle, or Nook, or listen to the Bible on CDs or on a mobile device using Audio.com, faithcomesthroughhearing.org, or Pandora radio. Find what works for you.
- Our website, www.forwardmovement.org, offers many resources for learning more about the Bible and engaging in scripture. In addition, you can find a list

of resources at www.thecenterforbiblicalresources.org. The center also offers a Read the Bible in a Year program and reading plans for the New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs.

- Because the Bible is not a newspaper, it is best to read it with a reverent spirit. We advocate a devotional approach to reading the Bible, rather than reading it as a purely intellectual or academic exercise.
- Before reading the Bible, take a moment of silence to put yourself in the presence of God. We then invite you to read this prayer written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

- Consider using the ancient monastic practice of *lectio divina*. In this form of Bible reading, you read the text and then meditate on a portion of it—be it a verse or two or even a single word. Mull over the words and their meaning. Then offer a prayer to God based on what you have read and how it has made you feel or what it has caused you to ponder. Listen in silence for God to respond to your prayer.

- We encourage you to read in the morning, if possible, so that your prayerful reading may spiritually enliven the rest of your day. If you cannot read in the morning, read when you can later in the day. Try to carve out a regular time for your daily reading.
- One way to hold yourself accountable to reading God's Word is to form a group within your church or community. By participating in The 50 Day Bible Challenge together, you can support one another in your reading, discuss the Bible passages, ask questions, and share how God's Word is transforming your life.
- If you do not want to join a group, you may wish to invite a friend or family member or two to share The 50 Day Bible Challenge with you.
- Put a notice in your church newsletter that you are starting a group to participate in The 50 Day Bible Challenge. Invite others to join you and to gather regularly to discuss the readings, ask questions, and share how it is transforming your life. Visit the Center for Biblical Resources website to see more suggestions about how churches can participate in The Bible Challenge.
- If you form a Bible Challenge group, consider holding a gathering or meal to celebrate your spiritual accomplishment.
- Have fun and find spiritual peace and the joy that God desires for you in your daily reading. The goal of the

Center for Biblical Studies is to help you discover God's wisdom and to create a lifelong spiritual practice of daily Bible reading so that God may guide you through each day of your life.

- If you find reading the entire Bible and being part of The Bible Challenge to be a blessing in your life, then we strongly encourage you to share the blessing. Invite several friends or family members to participate in The Bible Challenge.
- Once you've finished one complete reading of the Bible, start over and do it again. God may speak differently to you in each reading. Follow the example of US President John Adams, who read through the Bible each year during his adult life. We highly advocate this practice.
- After participating in The 50 Day Bible Challenge, you will be more equipped to support and mentor others in reading the Bible.

We are thrilled that you are participating in The Bible Challenge. May God richly bless you as you prayerfully engage the scriptures each day.

An Introduction to the Gospel of Luke

I first fell in love with the Gospel of Luke shortly after graduating from college. I was headed to France with dreams of becoming fluent in French, hoping to study philosophy at the Sorbonne or theology at the Institute Catholique. Before moving to Paris, I had arranged to work in the *vendange*, the French grape harvest, in a little village outside Saumur.

A professor of philosophy and mentor from Emory University gave me a small red book as a farewell gift. It contained the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles in French. I carried it with me and began reading it faithfully, digesting the stories of Jesus, his teachings, miracles, and parables as told by the four evangelists and reading in Acts about how the Church began.

I became especially enamored with the Gospel of Luke. A master storyteller, Luke wrote like a journalist. I had been an editor at my college newspaper, and Luke's descriptive writing style captivated me and made the stories about Jesus come to life.

Legend has it that Luke was an artist and painted as well as wrote. He was said to have interviewed eyewitnesses to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In this sense, he was a journalist. Some traditions say that Luke not only met and interviewed Jesus' mother Mary, but he also painted her portrait. This portrait is known as "The Black Madonna," and it is Poland's most treasured sacred relic.

Luke was also said to have been a physician. It is believed that he was Paul's traveling companion. Luke uses the most sophisticated Greek found in the New Testament. He was clearly the most learned among the New Testament writers. On several occasions he uses precise and unusual medical terms, offering evidence of his training in medicine.

Luke's training and experience as a physician allowed him to see and appreciate things in Jesus' ministry that did not strike the other evangelists to the same extent.

Most of Jesus' ministry begins with his senses. He looks and he sees. He listens and he hears. His eyes wide open and his ears alert, Jesus sees and hears the pressing needs of those around him, and he responds compassionately. Time and again, Jesus physically heals those in need around him. Luke's Gospel conveys more healing stories than any of the other three gospels. Luke portrays Jesus as a compassionate healer. In fact, if there is one word that best summarizes Luke's depiction of Jesus, it is "compassionate."

Jesus' compassion, however, extends beyond those who were physically and mentally impaired or suffering. It extends to the poor and outcast. Jesus includes marginalized people in his conversations, healings, meals, and ministry that other Jews and Romans of his day exclude. He constantly draws the circle of God's love wider. While others are concerned about whom to exclude, Jesus expands the circle to demonstrate how God's love, grace, and forgiveness know no bounds.

The poor are constantly on Jesus' mind, as evidenced in Luke's Gospel. Scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was the first to be written. It is the shortest and most concise telling of the story of Jesus' life and ministry. Matthew's Gospel was the second. It elaborates on many of the stories and adds details and events like a birth narrative, which is not found in Mark. Luke's account is even longer. He adds three parables found nowhere else in the gospels—the parables of the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, and the unjust judge. All three are stories about mercy and forgiveness, justice and love. They

exude compassion and mercy, the defining characteristics of Jesus as revealed by Luke.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus offers his finest sermon—the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus lays out his definitive teachings in a sermon of poetic beauty and unsurpassed wisdom. Scholars believe that the Sermon on the Mount was actually a series of Jesus' sermons strung together like a “greatest hits” of preaching.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus offers a similar discourse but with two very distinct differences. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus does not stand at the brow of the hill, which made for a perfect setting to speak to a large audience. Instead, Jesus comes down from the mount and walks among the people as he speaks. Jesus is among them, not as a figure towering over them, but as one who has compassion upon each and every person and walks side by side with them.

The second difference has to do with Luke's emphasis on Jesus' concern about the plight of the poor. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, those who suffer physical, mental, or psychological pain of any sort, those who grieve, those who are shunned, ignored, cast out, or condemned, are closest to his heart.

Hence, whereas in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God,” in Luke's Gospel, Jesus merely says, “Blessed are the poor, for they shall see God.” It is not the “poor in spirit” but *ptokos*, an ancient Greek word meaning the “poorest of the poor.” Theologians often speak of God's “preferential option for the poor,” and Luke's portrait of Jesus reflects this. If you want to find Jesus, go look for him among the poor and the suffering and there you shall find him.

After Jesus' birth, his parents Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the temple, and Mary brings an offering of two turtledoves for the rite of purification. This was the offering acceptable for a poor family to make. Luke makes it known that Jesus was born into a poor family. No wonder when John's emissaries come to find out whether or not Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus tells them, "The poor have good news preached to them." Jesus could speak to the poor because he was one of them, and they were constantly in his heart. Luke's Gospel is known as the universal Gospel, because Luke's Jesus constantly breaks down the walls that divide people and builds bridges that bring people closer to God.

For Luke, Jesus' compassionate breadth and depth extend beyond the poor and suffering to those on the margins of society. Throughout Luke's Gospel and in the book of Acts, the ministry and role of women is highlighted. The birth narrative in Luke's Gospel is told from the perspective of Mary. Luke includes the experiences of women such as Mary's cousin Elizabeth, the prophet Anna, the widow of Nain, and the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her hair. It is Luke who makes Mary Magdalene as well as Martha and Mary come alive and figure prominently in his story. And, Luke's Jesus makes a Samaritan a hero in the parable, even though Samaritans were much-despised by the Jews.

Luke was also a historian. He begins his gospel with four verses that scholars say are the best Greek found in the entire New Testament. Two chapters later, Luke anchors Jesus' ministry in time, writing in a most historical fashion, noting, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the

high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” (3:1-2)

Among the evangelists, Luke was the only Gentile. He was clearly writing to share the life and ministry of Jesus with a Gentile audience. Hence, he translates Hebrew words into Greek or gives their Greek equivalent. Simon the Cananaean in Matthew appears as Simon the Zealot in Luke. Calvary is not called by its Hebrew name but is known as Golgatha, its Greek equivalent. Luke avoids the Jewish term “rabbi” and always has the disciples refer to Jesus as “master.” When tracing Jesus’ ancestry, he does not stop, like Matthew, at Abraham, the father of the Jewish race, but traces Jesus back to Adam.

A careful analysis of the Greek used in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts reveals that the same writer wrote both, employing a similar vocabulary and the same writing style. In addition, both books begin with an address to “most excellent Theophilus,” who may have been a wealthy benefactor who commissioned Luke to write these works or a high official in the Roman government for whom Luke was attempting to tell the story of Jesus and the birth of the Church. The word “Theophilus” literally means “lover of God.” Hence, the address “most excellent Theophilus” may actually refer to you and me, who seek to know, love, and serve God.

As a trusted companion of Paul, Luke met and spent time with the leaders of the early church. He witnessed the people of the Way, as the first Christians were known, come together to create the Church. He was imprisoned with Paul in Caesarea. Luke knew what it was like to suffer for the sake of the gospel. One can only imagine the conversations that Paul and Luke shared.

It is said that if Luke’s Gospel were performed on stage, it would be a musical. Throughout, characters stop and break into song.

After receiving the news that she would bear the Son of God and usher Jesus into the world, Mary launches into song and gives us the *Magnificat*—the Church’s most important song, which lifts up hope for the poor and warns the rich that the tables will be turned if they do not care for those in need. We also discover the *Nunc Dimittis*, sung by Simeon after he has beheld the baby Jesus and recognized him as God’s Messiah, and Zechariah’s *Benedictus*. In Luke, everyone has a song to sing.

Finally, prayer is prominent in Luke’s Gospel. Often, as Jesus prepares to do something significant, he begins with prayer. Jesus prays at his baptism. Before selecting his disciples, Jesus prays. Before taking on the Pharisees, Jesus prays. Before Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is, he prays. Before predicting his death, Jesus spends time with God in prayer. At the Transfiguration, hanging on the cross, and before Peter denies him three times, Jesus prays. Jesus reveals prayer as our lifeline to God, as are the words of scripture.

In one of the final stories told in his Gospel, Luke alone offers the story of the encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Two disciples, lost in thought and buried in grief, are trying to comprehend what had gone so wrong in Jerusalem. They are just beginning to come to terms with Jesus’ gruesome death, when they encounter a stranger, who sidles up to them as they walk. “What are you discussing?” he asks. “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there?” they reply. Then Jesus opens up the scriptures and reveals everything that the Bible has to say about him, and the disciples’ hearts burn like fire. So, too, as we read Luke’s Gospel, our hearts burn like fire and Jesus comes alive among us so that we might live lives full of compassion, mercy, and love.

The Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie

A Journey with Luke

The 50 Day Bible Challenge

Luke 1:1-25

1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations

of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. ⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will

rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” ¹⁹The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which

will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” ²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. ²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Reflection

How would you tell the story of Jesus? Luke begins his version using a traditional Hellenistic approach that invites the listener into the story, while at the same time highlights the research that has gone into his account. In this way, we are also invited into the telling and sharing of the gospel that has gone on since the time of Jesus.

Beginning not with Mary and Joseph, but with Elizabeth and Zechariah, Luke calls to mind the great exemplars of faith, Abraham and Sarah, reminding us that Jesus comes from a long line of faithful people.

Pouring it on thick now, Luke highlights Zechariah's use of incense, a privilege usually granted to priests only once in a lifetime. Zechariah's vision in the temple evokes Elijah, making the point that Jesus comes from the most faithful people of Israel. But his relatives are also human, as we can see when Zechariah doubts the promise of God.

Poor Zechariah must leave the temple, unable to speak, and confront all the people waiting expectantly. Imagine his challenge as he beholds the promise of God and also feels ashamed because of his faithlessness.

In this short beginning, Luke puts the listener on notice: no one is untouched when they draw near to God's blessings in the story of Jesus that will unfold. All will be transformed in unlikely ways.

The Rev. William Lupfer
Rector of Trinity Wall Street
New York City, New York

Questions

Are you open to God's surprises like Elizabeth, or do you attempt to keep God squarely in a place that you can control and access, like Zechariah?

Are you ready to open your heart and live faithfully, come what may?

Prayer

Oh God of unchangeable power and might. Draw near to us as we open our hearts to your awesome and bewildering blessings. Give birth to new faith in our hearts and guide us when we waver. We ask this in the name of Jesus. *Amen.*

Luke 1:26–56

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the

angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” ⁴⁶And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty

One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” ⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Reflection

In clear, crisp language, Luke announces the birth of Jesus in a similar manner as he did with John's birth. God sends the angel Gabriel to deliver the message, and he invokes the ancient houses and beloved historical figures of Israel: this time, David and Jacob.

The angel Gabriel has some work to do in order to convince Mary of the improbable events that will come to her. And she doesn't hesitate to ask questions. Gabriel talks about Elizabeth's pregnancy as a sign of God's power. Mary commends herself to God's power even though it puts her at grave risk as an unwed mother.

Now that they are both aligned with God's bewildering, transformative power, Mary and Elizabeth come together as two women who love each other and love the God who has surprised them. They both have been given huge, transformative gifts for which neither of them likely feel ready. Yet their joy in one another is palpable. Elizabeth's joyful acclamation is offered in a powerful, feminine, prophetic voice.

Mary's response is strong, powerful, and prophetic. She sings a song that confidently loops her own personal experience into the larger narrative of God's power and love—past, present, and future. Mary's words are at once historical and timeless, courageous and faithful. She is exactly the person the Son of God needs to help him grow into the full stature of humanity.

The Rev. William Lupfer
Rector of Trinity Wall Street
New York City, New York

Questions

How has God surprised you with a challenge you thought was too much to bear?

Whom did you seek out to do the tough work of understanding the challenge as a blessing?

Was your response as faithful as Mary's and Elizabeth's?

Prayer

Dear God of surprise and delight, give us strength when you bless us in ways that seem too challenging to bear. As you did for Mary and Elizabeth, give us mentors and guides who can help us find our way to you, even as you stay close to our hearts. We ask this in the name of Jesus. *Amen.*

Luke 1:57-80

⁵⁷Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” ⁶¹They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” ⁶²Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire

hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: ⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of

our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy

of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” ⁸⁰The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Reflection

Luke tells the story of John's birth and early years in three units: the birth, circumcision, and naming of John (1:57-66); the Benedictus (1:67-79); and a summary statement (1:80). The three units have parallels with three units in the story of Jesus: the birth, circumcision, and naming (2:1-21), the Magnificat (1:46-55), and a summary (2:52). The parallels emphasize both the similarities and the differences between the two.

The focus of the story of John's birth is on the naming of John. The only evidence that we have for naming a child at the time of circumcision comes several centuries later. The Roman historian Josephus tells us that male children were often named after their grandfather (Life 1.5) and sometimes their father (The Jewish War 5.534), as our story presupposes. However, first Elizabeth and then Zechariah object and insist on keeping the instructions that Gabriel had given Zechariah in the temple by naming the child John. After Zechariah wrote his request, he regained his speech: the doubt that he had originally expressed had become faith. The story of John's birth is a story about the faith of his parents.

It was the faith of Zechariah that led him to break into a burst of praise. We know the song by the name of the first word in the Latin translation: Benedictus. The hymn in Luke consists of two parts: a prayer of thanksgiving (1:68-75) and a prayer for the newborn, a genethliakon (1:76-79). The hymn is a joyous expression of the faith that God works in human history. The summary reminds us that this messenger of God was a developing human.

Gregory E. Sterling
Dean of the Yale Divinity School
New Haven, Connecticut

Questions

These texts deliberately create a Jewish environment. How important is it for us to understand that the story of Jesus is anchored in Judaism?

What does this tell us about Jewish-Christian relations?

Prayer

God, thank you for the ways that you work among human beings. Help parents to come to the joyous and optimistic faith of Elizabeth and Zechariah. May the children whom we raise serve as lights in a world of darkness. Free our tongues to sing your praise. *Amen.*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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MARJORIE BROWN served a curacy in the East End of London and worked for ten years as a parish priest in a vibrant Hackney community with Muslim and Hasidic Jewish neighbors. She is now the vicar of St. Mary's Primrose Hill, where Percy Dearmer famously set new standards in congregational music and liturgical practice a century ago. She is also one of the directors of ordinands in the Diocese of London. (Days 21, 22)

MATTHEW CROASMUN is lecturer of theology and humanities at Yale University and the director of research and publication at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture. In 2007, he helped plant the Elm City Vineyard Church, where he currently serves as a staff pastor. His Yale dissertation, "The Body of Sin," was awarded the 2015 Manfred Lautenschläger Award for Theological Promise. (Day 50)

ROBERT S. DANNALS became the seventh rector of Saint Michael and All Angels Church in Dallas, Texas, in 2007. A graduate of Florida State University (BA in Religion) and Virginia Theological Seminary (M.Div.), he served churches in North and South Carolina prior to his move to Dallas. He also received his D.Min. from Drew University and a doctorate in practical theology from Graduate Theological Union, writing his dissertation on Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

A north Florida native, he is married to Valerie, and they have three adult daughters. (Days 29, 30)

MIGUEL ESCOBAR is senior program director of leadership resources at the Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF). A lay person, he is passionate about building the next generation of lay and clergy leaders in The Episcopal Church. He received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary in 2007. (Days 17, 18)

VICKI GARVEY serves as bishop's associate for lifelong Christian formation in the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago. Passionate about learning and teaching, she has taught at nearly every level from second graders through graduate school, but she has spent most of that teaching time at Bexley Hall Seabury Western Seminary Federation where she taught biblical languages and biblical theology. She is a popular speaker and workshop leader and serves the wider church as board member and committee member of several churchwide commissions and a deputy to General Convention. (Days 33, 34)

SCOTT HAYASHI is the eleventh bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Utah. He has contributed essays to collections published by The Episcopal Church. He has served in congregations large and small and was the canon to the ordinary in the Diocese of Chicago prior to his election as a bishop. Bishop Hayashi has written more than 750 daily Bible reflections that are posted to Facebook. He has extensive experience working with clergy through ten years as a conference leader for CREDO. (Days 13, 14)

STEPHEN HUBER is rector of All Saints' Parish in Beverly Hills, California. He served previously as the vicar of Washington National Cathedral, priest-in-charge of St. Columba's Church, Washington, DC, and development director of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale.

For ten years, he taught religious studies on the secondary school level in New Orleans and Boston, and for thirteen years, he worked in nonprofit advocacy fundraising for HIV/AIDS and LGBT human rights in Boston and Washington, DC. (Days 41, 42)

MIKE KINMAN is the dean of Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, Missouri, and the board president of Magdalene St. Louis, a two-year residential community of loving healing for women who have survived lives of prostitution, violence, and abuse. Michael lives with his wife, Robin, and sons, Schroedter and Hayden, in St. Louis. (Days 25, 26)

JEFFREY D. LEE has served since 2008 as the twelfth bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago. He leads 40,000 Episcopalians in 124 congregations across Northern Illinois. A charismatic preacher, liturgist, and spiritual leader, he is committed to helping the congregations of the diocese grow the church, form the faithful, and change the world. He is the author of *Opening the Prayer Book* in the New Church's Teaching Series; a member of the Board of Directors of Episcopal Relief & Development; a former member of the faculty of CREDO Institute; and has served on the board of Affirming Catholicism. He and his wife, Lisa Rogers Lee, have two children, Katherine and Jonathan. (Days 47, 48)

RUSSELL LEVENSON JR. and his wife, Laura, live in Houston, Texas, where Russ serves as rector of St. Martin's Episcopal Church. He has written widely for various publications and religious journals, and is the author of three books, *Provoking Thoughts* (a Lenten meditation book); *Preparing Room* (an Advent meditation book), and *Summer Times* (a devotional book for the summer). He and Laura have also written two Advent wreath devotional guides, one for adults and one for children. (Days 37, 38)

EDWARD S. LITTLE II has served as bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Indiana since 2000. His earlier assignments include parishes in the dioceses of Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Joaquin. A graduate of the University of Southern California and Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Bishop Little and his wife, Sylvia, are the parents of Gregory and Sharon and the grandparents of Taj and Lani. (Days 23, 24)

WILLIAM LUPFER is rector of Trinity Wall Street. He has been a parish priest for twenty-one years, serving in Oregon, Michigan, and Illinois. His focus has been on parish leadership development as a process of spiritual formation. He has been married to Kimiko Koga for twenty-five years. They have two children. (Days 1, 2)

JOHN M. MCCARDELL JR. is vice-chancellor and president of The University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee, where he has served since 2010. A historian by training and winner of the Allan Nevins Prize for his book, *The Idea of a Southern Nation*, he joined the faculty of Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont, in 1976 and served as president of the college from 1991 to 2004. He is a graduate of Washington and Lee University and earned his Ph.D. at Harvard University. (Days 27, 28)

ANDREW B. MCGOWAN is dean of the Berkeley Divinity School and McFaddin Professor of Anglican Studies at Yale. He is the author of *Ancient Christian Worship* and blogs at Saint Ronan Street Diary (abmcg.blogspot.com). (Days 31, 32)

CHRISTINE T. McSPADDEN is a graduate of the University of Virginia and Berkeley Divinity School at Yale and has served in congregations from New York City to San Francisco. She currently lives in London, England where she is a member of the clergy team of St. Paul's Cathedral. (Days 45, 46)

SARA MILES is the author of *Take This Bread, Jesus Freak: Feeding Healing Raising the Dead*, and *City of God: Faith in the Streets*. She is the director of ministry at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, California. (Days 39, 40)

KATE MOOREHEAD is the dean of St. John's Cathedral in Jacksonville, Florida. She is the author of four books: *Between Two Worlds*, *Organic God*, *Get Over Yourself: God's Here!* and *Resurrecting Easter*. Kate is married to JD Moorehead, a psychotherapist, and they have three boys. (Days 15, 16)

C. K. ROBERTSON serves as canon to the presiding bishop as well as distinguished visiting professor at General Theological Seminary in New York City. An active member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the National Council of Churches, and a fellow of the Episcopal Church Foundation, Robertson is general editor of the *Studies in Episcopal and Anglican Theology* series, and author of many books. His most recent book is *Barnabas vs. Paul: To Encourage or Confront*. (Days 19, 20)

MATTHEW SLEETH, MD, has spoken at more than 1,000 churches, campuses, and events, including serving as a monthly guest preacher at the Washington National Cathedral. Recognized by *Newsweek* as one of the nation's most influential evangelical leaders, Sleeth is the executive director of Blessed Earth, an educational nonprofit

focused on stewardship of the earth. He is the founder of the Seminary Stewardship Alliance and author of numerous books and articles. (Days 11, 12)

DABNEY T. SMITH is the fifth bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Southwest Florida. Before election as bishop he served in the dioceses of Central Florida, Northern Indiana, and Louisiana. Dabney and his wife, Mary, have five adult children and six wonderful grandchildren. (Days 43, 44)

MARTIN L. SMITH is well-known throughout The Episcopal Church and beyond as a preacher, teacher, and retreat leader. His explorations of contemporary spirituality have been made accessible to a wide readership in such books as *The Word is Very Near You*, *A Season for the Spirit*, *Reconciliation*, *Love Set Free*, and *Compass and Stars*. He resides in Washington, DC, and travels widely in his ministry of spiritual formation. (Days 7, 8)

GREGORY E. STERLING is the Reverend Henry L. Slack Dean and the Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School. He is a recognized expert in the study of Luke-Acts, Josephus, and Philo of Alexandria. He is an ordained minister in Churches of Christ and has served churches in several states. (Days 3, 4)

DAME MARY TANNER is a world-renowned ecumenist. Before retirement, she served as the general secretary of the Church of England's Council for Christian Unity. A lay theologian, she was a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and its moderator from 1991-1998, a member of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, and the president for Europe of the World Council of Churches. She has

been a visiting professor at the General Theological Seminary in New York City, the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem, and the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome. (Days 9, 10)

MIROSLAV VOLF is Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale Divinity School and the founding director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture. He has written or edited more than seventy scholarly articles and fifteen books, including *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996, winner of the 2002 Grawemeyer Award), *A Public Faith: On How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (2011), and *Allah: A Christian Response* (2011). He is actively involved in many top-level initiatives concerning Christian-Muslim relations and is a member of the Global Agenda Council of the World Economic Forum. (Day 49)

JESSE ZINK is a priest of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts and a doctoral student and assistant chaplain at Emmanuel College, Cambridge University, where his research focuses on the church in southern Sudan. He is a former Young Adult Service Corps missionary and the author of *Backpacking through the Anglican Communion: A Search for Unity*. (Days 35, 36)

ABOUT THE EDITOR

MAREK P. ZABRISKIE has served as rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, since 1995. Prior to that he served churches in Nashville, Tennessee, and Richmond, Virginia. In 2011, he founded The Bible Challenge, which has spread to over 2,500 churches in more than fifty countries with over 500,000 persons participating. He is the editor of several books, including *The Bible Challenge* published by Forward Movement and *Doing the Bible Better: The Bible Challenge and the Transformation of The Episcopal Church*.

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