



## Praying Luke

# **The Gospel in Voice and Vision**

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**Illustrations by Karen Pennison**

## A Word of Thanks

Something like *Praying Luke* does not happen by accident or alone! It was a team effort of Christ's servants dedicated to bringing you God's Word through prose, poetry and paintings. They have not asked for thanks but they richly deserve them.

So thank you, Karen Pennison, for your beautiful, evocative art work that does more than, merely tell the gospel story, but which interprets it for our hearts' enrichment.

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And thank you, church family in Brenham, for your constant support and common ministry in Jesus Christ. It is an honor to serve Him together with you.

Brad Munroe  
January 2001

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I decided to "re-publish" *Praying Luke* this year for the combined presbyteries; at least the first four chapters. I decided against trying to fit 25 devotionals into the first two chapters of Luke, which seemed like a bit much. Instead, I chose to tell the Story of Jesus birth up to the beginning of his adult ministry. As an Advent and Christmas devotional, I justify my decision to take the reader to the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry because as sweet as it is to tell the Story of Jesus' birth, his birth only has meaning because of the fullness of his life. The Incarnation begins at birth but is expressed as a fulsome humanity. May we never forget that Jesus came to the Cradle to journey to the Cross (and, well, the Empty Tomb, too).

Having this manuscript rise from the dust bin of my old computer files has been illuminating. I have noticed certain changes in me as compared to when I originally wrote *Praying Luke*. Some of my biblical insights and theological stress points have changed since 2001, yet it seems good to me to allow the text to stand as originally offered, if for no other reason than as a reminder of how God was at work during a season of my life yet is continually about the work of transformation, which seems appropriate for an author who lives and serves amidst "the Church Reformed, Always Being Reformed according to the Word of God."

Brad Munroe  
October 2019

The Story has been told many times in many ways of divine love alive among us, walking beside us, living, breathing, being. This is the Story told by those who were there of the things they saw with their eyes, things they heard, touched, felt, experienced.

This is the Story to which I have devoted my life, O Friend of God, I share this Story with you, so that you too may know it, so that you too may know him: The God who loved, the Man who lived, among us.

### **Considering the Word**

What makes the Story reliable to you? Who has made it reliable for you?

### **Praying the Word**

Eternal Word,  
Word before history,  
Word in history,  
Word with us:

Teach us how  
to see and to hear,  
to touch and to feel,  
to experience your Story.

Teach us the Story told first by those who were there,  
then handed down by faithful generations and revealed to us now.

Teach us what it means to be fellow eyewitnesses of your Word  
at work in our world,  
at work in our lives!

Teach us what it means to become a living part of the Story,  
your Story,  
our Story together!

The Story I have to share is part of the much older Story of God's work in the world yet the key moment in everything. It begins with Zechariah, who was a priest during the time Herod was king of Judea. Zechariah's wife was named Elizabeth; she too was from a priestly family. Both of them were filled with integrity and goodness before the Lord, yet their hearts were empty for Elizabeth could not have children. What was worse, they lacked any hope, for both were quite old, well past the age of childbearing.

## Considering the Word

Remember a time when you “lacked any hope.” What was your life circumstances when hope was deflated? How have you seen God’s grace amidst your journey from then until now?

## Praying the Word

It begins with disappointment, disillusionment, and despair.

Lord, have mercy!

Two servants, faithful and true, who have devoted their lives to God but to what end?

Christ, have mercy!

In the twilight of life, darkness approached them both, and still they remained steadfast.

Lord, have mercy!

And on a day like all others they learned all things are made new for those who love the Lord.

Praise be to God!

**December 3**

**Luke 1:8-17**

One day it was Zechariah's turn to be the one priest who would enter the Temple to burn incense, a symbol of the people's prayers. All the other priests and worshipers were outside praying when Zechariah entered the Temple. An angel appeared in the Temple just to the right of the place where Zechariah was to burn incense to the Lord. Zechariah was terror stricken when he saw the angel; he had no idea what was happening to him. But the angel said to him what angels often say to us humans,

Be not afraid, Zechariah, be not afraid.  
Rejoice, Zechariah, rejoice, for God has heard your prayer. Elizabeth will give you a son; you will name him John.

Then the angel began to sing a song of praise and thanksgiving to God:

John will be a great joy for you and a great servant for God. Many will rejoice at his birth; many will rejoice at the greatness of God!



Zechariah and the Angel Gabriel

John will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from birth, so no hard spirits for him. Many will turn back to the Lord; many will have their hearts turned to God!

John will come in the wisdom and power and spirit of Elijah. Many will be made ready; many will be prepared to serve our God!

## Considering the Word

Imagine Zechariah's hopes and fears: what similarities do you find between his and your own?

## Praying the Word

O God! How often have I missed an opportunity to see your face? How often have I forgotten-Refused! Neglected! – to hear your messenger? How often have I, like Zechariah, chosen fear rather than faith, doubt rather than trust? O God, please give me another chance! Send me a Gabriel. Or a John. Or a friend or a pastor or even a stranger. Teach me, my Lord, how you are writing your Story in the world, in my life, even here, even now.

**December 4**

**Luke 1:18-25**

But Zechariah had a problem. He wanted to respond to the angel's words with his head not his heart, and he didn't understand all the details. So he doubted. Zechariah asked the angel, "How can this happen? Elizabeth and I are old, well past the age of childbearing. What you say doesn't make sense to me."

But it made sense to the angel, who answered clearly, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I am God's messenger sent to tell you about your part in the Story. Now you will be silent until the day my words come true, for you have doubted God's Word."

Now the people praying outside were beginning to wonder and to worry. What was taking Zechariah so long? When Zechariah did appear, they knew something had happened, an event! He could not speak, yet he had something to say, a Story to tell.

When his work in God's Temple was complete, Zechariah returned home. Elizabeth became pregnant. For five months she remained in solitude, praying, thanking God, "The Lord has done this for me. The Lord has gifted me with this blessing. The Lord has taken away all my shame."

## Considering the Word

When have you experienced silence as a time of cleansing and renewal? How does silence infuse words and actions with meaning?

## Praying the Word

Into the silence of creation was the Word spoken,  
breaking the barrier between unseen and seen,  
between absence and Presence,  
between hoped for, longed for, waiting for,  
and incarnated.  
The incarnate One,  
dwells in our hopes and in our waiting,  
becoming Presence in our present,  
seen through the eyes and ears and heart of faith,  
the Word, speaking new creation and shattering the silence: Come, Lord Jesus!

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel visited the village of Nazareth in the area of Galilee. Gabriel went to Mary, who was a virgin and was engaged to Joseph, who was a long ago descendent of King David. Gabriel saw Mary, "Grace and peace be yours, for God is with you!" Mary was shocked and shaken, for she did not understand the significance of the greeting or why an angel should be greeting her at all. So the angel Gabriel said to her, "Be not afraid, Mary, be not afraid. I bring you good news. God will gift you with a child, a son, and you will call him Jesus. Then the angel began to sing a song of praise and thanksgiving to God:

He will be called great, a great gift to all people.

He will be called God's own Son, a gift from God's own hand.

He will be called Lord, a king to rule on David's throne now and forever.

### **Considering the Word**

How have you been surprised by joy? When have you experienced good news that is terrifying? How do you respond when presented with an overwhelming challenge that is exhilarating?

### **Praying the Word**

God of grace be with me in my hour of need;

God of peace be with me in my doubt and wonder.

God of grace be with me as I open myself to your work;

God of peace be with me as you use me to work your wonders.

God of grace be with me as I receive your great gift to all people;

God of peace be with me as I bear your great gift into the world.

Mary inquired of the angel, "How is this going to happen since I have remained pure and never slept with a man?"

Gabriel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will be with you, the transforming power of God will be upon you. Therefore, the child Jesus will be called holy, of God, God's own Son. And listen to this: Elizabeth also has conceived a son, even in her old age. She is six months into her pregnancy. You see, nothing is impossible for God; nothing is impossible with God."

Mary answered the angel, "I am God's servant. May what you say happen as you say it. I am willing." Then the angel Gabriel left her.

### **Considering the Word**

Mary answered, "I am God's servant." In what ways are you willing to take direction from God? In what ways do you need to be in control?

## Praying the Word

Lord, I am willing. I am willing! But I am also afraid.  
You alone know how often I am afraid,  
how often I hide my fear in bravado or busy-ness.  
You alone know how seldom I am willing to give myself  
to serve others if I am not the one in control.

Most Holy God,  
teach me how to let go and let you gift to me your grace and peace  
that I may be your willing servant.  
Teach my heart the eternal truths of this Scripture: nothing is impossible for you;  
nothing is impossible with you.

Be not afraid, O my soul, be not afraid.

**December 7**

**Luke 1:39-45**



Elizabeth and Mary

Mary went immediately to share in the good news of Elizabeth's joy, and to share her own! Elizabeth and Zechariah lived in the hill country of Judea. When Mary's voice reached Elizabeth's ears, her baby leapt for joy and Elizabeth laughed in praise to God:

Blessed are you among all women;  
Blessed is the child within you.  
Blessed am I that the mother of my Lord is here;  
Blessed is my baby who heard your voice and leapt for joy.

Blessed are you for believing the Lord's good news to you.

## Considering the Word

Count your blessings! Can you count to ten? To 50? To 100?

## Praying the Word

Blessed are you, Holy One of Israel, who forgets neither the old nor the young, who abandons neither those who are discouraged nor despair, whose love upholds both the humble and the weak, whose Spirit comforts both the grieving and those society has forgotten. As you have blessed me, make me an instrument of blessing to all who I will meet this day.

Mary also laughed in praise. She sang out a song of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord:

My soul laughs in praise to the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my savior;  
My soul laughs for he has gifted me with incredible blessing,  
and all generations will remember what the Lord has done for  
me; Holy is God's name for those who live in humility,  
Mercy is his name for those who live in his goodness;

God shows his strength with mighty deeds:  
scattering the proud,  
bringing down the powerful,  
lifting the humble,  
filling the hungry,  
sending the rich away empty of his blessing;  
remembering his mercy to Israel,  
remembering his promise to Abraham,  
being true to his Word forever.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then returned to her home.

### **Considering the Word**

What in Mary's song calls you to praise? What in Mary's song calls you to repentance?

### **Praying the Word**

My soul laughs in praise, O God, my soul laughs in praise.  
Not the laughter of a joke but the joy of a young child.  
Not the laughter of humor but the holy expression of joy that cannot be contained.  
Not what I create but what your Spirit gives.

It is a laughter  
borne of humility,  
borne of my own poverty,  
borne of your riches.

It is the laughter of praise to you, O God,  
that you lift the humble and fill the hungry.  
that you remember your promise.  
that your Word is true.

My soul laughs in praise, O God, my soul laughs in praise.

Elizabeth had her baby and all who knew her laughed with joy. "What a wonder," they thought, "is the Lord's mercy!" On the eighth day, in obedience to God's Law, the community gathered to name and circumcise the baby. Since Zechariah could not speak, the men debated among themselves, "Let's name him Zechariah," they concluded.

But Elizabeth stood firm, "No, he has already been named by God. He will be called John."

"But none of your family is named John," the men objected. "It makes no sense." Then Zechariah asked for something to write on: "His name is John," he wrote. Suddenly his silence burst into praise. Everyone was filled with the wonder of awe and a deep sense that God was at work. The only thing that anyone could talk about in the whole area was this boy named by God, this John, "What special work will this child do for the Lord?"

### **Considering the Word**

"The men debated among themselves": when have you witnessed men exclude the voices of women? If you are male, what helps you remember to support and encourage the voices of your mother, daughter, wife, or female colleague?

### **Praying the Word**

(Prayer for men): Good Lord, protect me from the sin of mansplaining! Keep my ears open and my mouth shut. Help me resist the temptation to communicate as competition, to feel justified in interrupting, to disregard the thoughts and contributions of those of Elizabeth's gender. After all, it was her niece, Mary, who brought Jesus into the world, so where would I be without her?

(Prayer for women): Lord of mercy, protect me from the slings and arrows of verbal assaults in every form: from slights and hostile sarcasm, from interruptions and senseless interrogations, from all the well-intended but clueless men in my life. Give me the strength of Elizabeth, who stood before a crowd *in the first-century* and stood her ground, politely insisting that your will be done.

Zechariah could hold his laughter in no longer. He sang out a song of praise to God:

Praise the Lord, the God of Israel,  
the God who redeems his people;  
the God who brings salvation;  
the God who is true to his Word.

Praise the Lord, the God of Israel,  
the God who saves us from our enemies and those who hate us;  
the God who shows mercy to our people and remembers his holy promise:  
the God who is true to his Word.

Praise the Lord, the God of Israel,  
the God who rescues his people,  
the God who makes us able to serve,  
the God who makes integrity and goodness a living possibility.

And you, my child, will be a messenger for God Most High,  
to prepare the people, to prepare their hearts and heads and hands,  
to proclaim salvation and the forgiveness of sins,  
to pronounce the tender mercy of our God,  
which causes the sun to shine upon us,  
which causes light to shine in the darkness,  
which causes the shadow of death to become the light of life.

And John grew in spirit and strength, devoting himself to the Lord.

### **Considering the Word**

When have you allowed silence to feed your soul? Consider practicing silence for a half-day or whole day mini retreat: what words of praise might you sing to God from out of silence?

### **Praying the Word**

O God Most High,  
you alone are the One who redeems;  
you are the One who saves;  
you are the One who is true.  
And I am filled with the wonder of awe.

May the work of John continue in my life:  
to prepare me to receive you,  
to make me ready to receive your mercy.

May the work of John continue through my life:  
to remind others that you are the God who rescues,  
to help us remember together that you are the God who remembers your holy promise.

O God Most High,  
I join my praise with the chorus of laughter  
sung by your people in ages past,  
sung forever for years to come.

Around this time of angel visitations, Caesar Augustus wrote a law that everyone in the Roman world should be counted. (This first census took place when Quirinius was Governor of Syria.) Everyone went to their family's hometown to be counted. Joseph also went up from where he lived, Nazareth, to his family's hometown, Bethlehem, because he was part of David's family. Joseph took Mary, his fiancé, who was pregnant. While they were in Bethlehem, Mary had her baby, her first child, a son. She wrapped him up in warm cloth and put him down in the manger, where the animals were fed, because the guest room was full.

### **Considering the Word**

Caesar Augustus represents "empire," "the culture," or "the world." How do you experience "empire" at odds with God's values, connecting with God's values, or being used by God in spite of what the "empire" desires?

### **Praying the Word**

Lord, I submit to your will:

Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

Your reign is not of this world:

The values that inspire the empire too often crush the soul,  
While the values of your reign are good news to the poor and oppressed.

Caesar speaks with an almost incessant drone,

but your still, small voice will I hear and will I heed,  
for you are the One before whom all empires pass away.

Out in the fields nearby, there were some shepherds watching over their flock of sheep that night. As they lounged around, half dozing, the Lord's angel appeared to them with glory shining around him, and they were not only filled with a deep sense of awe, they were terrified! The angel said to the shepherds, "Be not afraid, Shepherds, be not afraid. I come to tell you good news that will bring you great joy, and not only you but all people will rejoice. Today, in Bethlehem, a Savior has been born for you; he is the Christ, and he is Lord. This will show my words are true: you will find a baby wrapped up warm in cloth, not in the guest room but in a manger in the stable."

### **Considering the Word**

Shepherds, one of the lowest classes in society, were the first to hear the good news of Jesus' birth. Who in our society would be considered among the "lowest classes" today? What is God's message for them in this story?

## Praying the Word

While shepherds froze their behinds off, while threat of mortal danger lurked,  
into this cold world full of harm came your Son.  
Not to kings of empire or intellect or industry,  
but to the lowest of the low, those whom "good society" scorned.  
I wonder what the Religious thought when they heard the Story:  
Were they scandalized? Probably so.  
So why do I find the Story sweet and warm and nostalgic when I should be scandalized?  
For good society still scorns the lowly,  
mortal danger lurks around every corner, and  
the homeless still freeze their behinds off.

**December 13**

**Luke 2:13-14**

Without warning the night sky was filled  
with light, a whole squadron of angels were  
singing praise and thanksgiving to God:

Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
And on earth peace to all humankind,  
on whom God's generous love rests.

## Considering the Word

What to you is most amazing about the  
Christmas story as Luke tells it?

## Praying the Word

Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
glory to God in all the earth,  
glory to the God who brings his peace to us.



## Shepherds and the Heavenly Host

God of Glory, I thank you for the gift of the Christ Child, Jesus, who challenges every notion of human power and prestige. For the Christ Child came not in the power of might but in the power of love, his prestige was found not in a desire for greatness but in a willingness to be humble.

God of Glory, help us to hear this familiar story with hearts open to hear it in faith.  
Help us to hear it as the shepherds heard it:  
fresh and faithful,  
a joyous wonder for all.

The shepherds talked things over after the angels returned to heaven. There wasn't much debate, "Let's go see what just happened; let's see this gift from God's hand the Lord has told us about." So the shepherds ran quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and they found the baby just as the angels said they would, wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. When they left, the shepherds could not keep quiet; they told everybody everything about this child. And the people who heard the shepherds were themselves amazed. But Mary kept everything to herself. She reflected upon them in the deep places of her heart. Then the shepherds returned, laughing in praise to God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.

**Considering the Word**

About what kinds of events in your life, of good news, have you been unable to "keep quiet"? About what kinds of events in your life do you reflect "in the deep place of [your] heart"?

**Praying the Word**

Glorious God,

We let everyone know when we were accepted into school: we could not keep quiet.

We sent announcements of our graduation: we could not keep quiet.

We called our parents when the proposal was accepted: we could not keep quiet.

We celebrated far and wide at the birth of our children: we could not keep quiet.

We said a tearful but joyous good-bye when we retired: we could not keep quiet.

We gave thanks that their baptism was confirmed in their death: we could not keep quiet.

Jesus is borne! Alleluia! Will we keep quiet?

When the child was eight days old, Mary and Joseph, in obedience to God's Law, took him to the Temple to be named and circumcised. They called him Jesus, the name given by the angel even before he was conceived. After the 40-day period of purification required by God's Law was complete, Mary and Joseph again lived in obedience to God and took Jesus to Jerusalem to be dedicated in the Temple and to offer the customary sacrifice of "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

**Considering the Word**

Church stewardship can feel like "religious fund-raising," yet is intended as a gift and opportunity, as a holy invitation to obedience: to give thanks to God, as celebration of God's community, and as acceptance of the calling to love others in the world. Which of these perspectives on the gift and opportunity of stewardship are most compelling for you?

## Praying the Word

Merciful One, yes, I give out of obligation. Thank you for using my gift. I also give as a mindless custom. Thank you for nurturing my obedience as a habit. Sometimes I give begrudgingly. And yet you bless my offering nonetheless. And, at times, I cannot NOT give, for I am so overwhelmed with gratitude. Thank you for the gift and opportunity of giving.

**December 16**

**Luke 2:25-35**



### Simeon and the Christ Child

Sovereign and Merciful Lord, you have fulfilled your promise,  
and now I may pass in peace.

For I have seen your salvation with my own eyes,  
I have seen what all people shall see:

A light to reveal your grace and peace to all people,  
a light that will bring honor to your people Israel.

Mary and Joseph were delighted by these words, but their hearts paused when Simeon turned to them with this warning: "Your child's purpose on this earth cannot be denied; he will challenge all hearts to decide. Many will fall from God and many will be raised up because of how they respond to him. All hearts will be read. Even your hearts will be pierced with the sword of judgment that calls for a decision."

## Considering the Word

What were Simeon and Anna waiting for God to do? What are you waiting for God to do?

## Praying the Word

Laughter and weeping merge into one joy before you, O Sovereign and Merciful Lord.

I have waited so long, so long to know your salvation.  
I have seen glimpses, seen through the glass dimly. But now, in the Christ Child,

I see the fullness of your salvation.  
I see the divine love which has dwelled with us before the beginning of time,  
to which we were blind.

I see the dynamic activity, the creativity, the passion  
which has been working all along,  
if we had only had eyes to see.

But now I see it all:

I see Jesus.

And my laughter and weeping merge into one joy, O Sovereign and Merciful Lord.

## December 17

**Luke 2:36-40**

And there was a woman named Anna present also, a daughter of Phanuel of the family of Asher. Anna was very old, having lived to 84 as a widow after only seven years of marriage. Anna spent day and night in the Temple as a person of prayer, in deep thanksgiving and discernment before God. She approached Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and she too wept in praise to God and gave him thanks. She told all those around her to give thanks, "For this child is the redemption of Jerusalem."

Mary and Joseph were obedient in everything God's Law required, then they returned home to Nazareth in the area of Galilee. And the child grew and became full in strength and wisdom for God's grace was upon him.

## Considering the Word

Who are the Anna and Simeon figures in your life (the old grandma or grandpa type who always remembered you in prayer)? How did their witness shape, form, nurture and encourage your faith?

## Praying the Word

"If I didn't have my mom, who would pray for me?"

So said 13 year old Katie, a child of the covenant.

How wonderfully intricate is this web of faithful living,  
how delicate yet fiercely strong the sinews of prayer that bind the generations.

Thank you, Anna, and you, too, Simeon, saints of the faith, who longed for and waited,  
without knowing,  
only expectation.

Yours' is a faith I'd like to have some day.

Joseph and Mary took their family on their yearly trip to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Passover. They did this as usual when Jesus was twelve. Once the Passover had been celebrated, the family journeyed home, but Jesus' journey kept him in Jerusalem. Believing Jesus was with relatives, the family continued on their way, but after a while they began to worry. When they could not find Jesus among the relatives, Mary and Joseph searched for Jesus in Jerusalem. And there they found him, in the Lord's Temple, engaging the teachers with questions. All who heard Jesus were amazed at the depth and texture of his insight. When Mary found Jesus, she spoke as angry mothers speak: "Young man, didn't you ever stop to think how this would affect us? Your father and I have been worried sick looking for you."

Jesus replied, "Why did you search elsewhere? Didn't you know I must fulfill my purpose; I was compelled to be in my Father's house?" Mary and Joseph did not understand what Jesus was talking about, so they took him and returned to Nazareth. Jesus was obedient to his parents. But Mary reflected upon his words with wonder and curiosity in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and strength, respected by God and by all.

### **Considering the Word**

How are you actively engaging God? What does it mean for you to be seeking the Father?

### **Praying the Word**

Father you invite me in, you lay out the welcome mat, you offer me some good ol' fashioned, down home, country hospitality, yet too often I am too busy to appreciate the offer or accept the invitation. Please forgive me. Turn my heart away from the silly and shallow noises of life, and tune my heart to the deep rhythms of your Spirit. Teach me what it means to engage your Word with questions, what it means to be about the business of my Father's house, your house! Teach me to find my purpose in your will, revealed in your Son, empowered by your Spirit.

In the fifteenth year of Caesar Tiberius' rule – when Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor over Judea, Herod the Jewish ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip ruler over Iturea and Traconitis, Lysanias ruler over Abilene, and when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests over Israel – God's Word was spoken to John who was living in the desert. John went everywhere he could in that area telling others the Story of what God was doing, telling the people the good news of a baptism that could turn their lives around, lead them back to God, lead them to receive God's grace and peace upon them, the forgiveness of sins. This is what Isaiah was talking about:

A voice calls out to the people from the desert: "Prepare for the Lord!  
Get ready to walk straight with God!  
For God is going to make the low places level and the high places also.  
God is going to straighten out the curves and smooth out the bumps.  
Everyone will see the saving grace God is bringing."

## Considering the Word

Beyond reading this devotional, what are your holy habits, your spiritual rhythms, your daily bread that help you prepare for the Lord? What is something different you have always wanted to try out? (Hint, hint.)

## Praying the Word

Show me the Way, Lord, show me the Way!

Be for me the Way, Lord, be for me the Way!

Let me walk where you walk and talk as you talk.

Let me live as you lived, who came among us not to be served but to serve.

May I touch the outcast, reach out to the broken, and embrace the despairing.

May what I do and how I do it shine your light and love to all whom I meet.

**December 20**

**Luke 3:7-14**

John lashed out at the crowds of people coming out to hear him as if he were some kind of carnival act: "Snakes!" he called them. "Do you think hearing me can keep your scaly hides from judgment? It's not what you hear or where you live or what family you were born into that matters to God. It's what you do with your lives. Let me set the record straight: God can take these rocks and create children of Abraham, so consider yourselves warned. Metal upon wood, God's ax is ready to cut down forests of wickedness in order to plant one good tree. And believe me when I say God's fire will utterly consume the wicked wood."

The crowd was stunned into reflection: "What shall we do?" they asked.

John gave examples to everyone there of ways they could make God's justice a part of their daily living. To ordinary folk he said, "If you have more than you need, say, two warm coats, then share one of them with someone who needs one. Or if you have more food than you need, share that also." To the tax collectors who came to be baptized he said, "Be fair. Don't collect any more than you need." To some soldiers, he said, "Don't bully, threaten and manipulate people. And be satisfied with what you have."

## Considering the Word

If you asked John, "What should I do?" what might his response be? How, for you, is repentance experienced as an obligation and as an opportunity?

## Praying the Word

What shall I do, O Lord? What return can I make for all the goodness you have given me? The catalog of your grace is thick with pages. Yet, too often, my thanksgiving is but a pamphlet and my own generosity but a single page. Forgive me, Lord. Turn me away from the idol of abundance; turn me toward trusting in your provision. Help me to accept that I have all I need and then some. Help me to let go of my abundance of possessions that I may grab hold of your abundance of peace.

Everyone in the crowds wondered eagerly, the question was reaching a fevered pitch: "Could John be God's gift to the people, God's Christ?"

But John put an end to such speculation and rumor. He told everybody, "I baptize you with water, a symbol that God forgives you. But the key person in this whole Story is about to show up, and he will do much more than I could ever dream. I am unworthy even to be compared to him. He will baptize you into the life of God, into the awareness that God's Spirit can live in your soul. He will toss out every lie and clean up every sewer. Only what is true, only what is of God, will remain. Everything else will be burned like yesterday's garbage.

John told the Story to the people in so many ways, every way he could think to share the good news of what God was doing. But when John took aim at Herod, who had married his brother's wife, Herod came after John and added this sin to the many he had already committed: he put John in jail.

### **Considering the Word**

What is true in your life? What is of God that will remain? Give thanks for these things today.

### **Praying the Word**

Purgatory is not a place but a divine commitment, and one I whole-heartedly embrace.

That You promise to purge me of every lie I consider a gift.

That You covenant to clean me up I consider a blessing.

I do not fear a millennia "down under," for Your purgation is borne on the cross.

And so I humbly submit to Your pruning, painful though it is.

And though I will grumble a bit, I welcome the lessons I need to learn along the way.

Purgatory is not a place but a divine promise, and I give thanks for its embrace.

After everyone had been baptized, Jesus also was baptized. As Jesus was praying, heaven itself seemed to open, and from that place came the Holy Spirit, looking like a dove descending upon Jesus. And God's voice was heard: "You are my Son, my joy, the light of my love."

Jesus was about thirty years old when he began the journey of his ministry. Jesus traced the line of his family back through Joseph, (whose biological son many presumed he was), and through Joseph back 77 generations of both saints and sinners, including David the king; Jesse who was David's father; Obed who was David's grandfather and whose mother was Naomi the foreigner; Boaz who married Naomi; Perez whose mother was Tamar the daughter-in-law to Judah who prostituted herself to Judah in order to force him to fulfill his obligation to her; Judah who sought to rob Tamar of her rights; Jacob who was the deceiver; Isaac who was offered in sacrifice but saved by the Lord's angel; Abraham to whom God's promise was first given; Noah the builder of the ark; Adam the beginning of God's human creation; and, ultimately, to God.

## Considering the Word

What do you hear when you hear God speak to you? Put your name in place of Jesus and listen to the Father speak these words: "You are my child, my joy, the light of my love." What do you feel?

## Praying the Word

How I long to hear your words to me: "You are my child, my joy, the light of my love." Can this be true? At times my heart doubts this joyful word, yet I claim the promise of Christian faith: through Jesus Christ I am forgiven!

Through Jesus Christ, I have become your child, precious and beloved by you. Thank you, Father, for the gift of your love given through Holy Spirit. Teach my heart, O Divine One, to dwell in your love.

## The Living Word 23

**Luke 4:1-13**

Now Jesus, with his companion the Holy Spirit fully beside him, journeyed from baptism to temptation, from the Jordan River to the desert wilderness for forty days, where he was confronted by the devil. He ate nothing during his desert days, so he was hungry when the devil approached him with this test: "As God's Son, you can command these stones to become bread; feed yourself and be filled." Jesus answered, "God's Word says, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Again the devil tested Jesus. He took him up to a high place and showed him the lure of the world, saying, "I will give you all the power and authority you can desire, for it has been given to me and I can give it to you. And I will give it to you, but first you must worship me." Jesus answered, "God's Word says, 'Worship only God and serve only him.'"



The Devil Tempts Jesus

Yet again the devil tested Jesus. He took Jesus to the highest point of the Jerusalem Temple and said, "Prove you are who you say, the Son of God! Throw yourself down from this height, for the Word says, 'He will order his angels to guard your life; they will carry you in their arms and protect you even from stubbing your toe!'" But Jesus would not be baited, "And God's Word also says, 'Do not ask God for foolish things.'"

When the devil had finished these three rounds of testing, he left, but not for good. Instead, he waited to return for a moment when he thought Jesus would be weak.

## Considering the Word

To which of the three temptations Jesus encountered are you weakest: physical desires, desire for power and authority, or a desire for security? At what moment(s) are you weakest and therefore most open to temptation?

## Praying the Word

Holy One, teach me how to overcome the devil's temptations.

Teach me how to swim away from the world's lures,  
not to bite,  
to avoid being hooked, reeled in, caught.

Merciful One, I need your help for these temptations are great:

the pleasures of the body,  
the allure of power,  
the need for security.

God of Truth, I even create long and logical arguments for my personal accommodations;

"These things aren't so bad," I tell myself.  
"I haven't gone too far," I self-deceive.  
"I'm ok," I lie (to myself but knowing I do not fool You).

God of Grace, forgive me and correct me.

Teach me to seek only the best,  
seek only your will for my life,  
seek only you.

Give to me, Blessed Trinity,

desires fed by your Word,  
a will controlled by your Spirit,  
security found through trusting in you.

**December 24**

**Luke 4:14-19**

Jesus' journey took him from baptism to temptation to ministry, and so he returned to Galilee to begin it. He returned with the Holy Spirit bursting through him as he taught, and everywhere he went people were talking about him, praising his power, spreading the news.

On the Sabbath Jesus went to his home synagogue in Nazareth as he did every Sabbath day. He asked to read God's Word and Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He found the verse he was looking for and read:

God's Spirit is on me, filling me with power and purpose.  
God has sent me to tell the Story to the poor,

to declare to the prisoners, "Freedom!"  
to announce to the blind, "Sight!"  
to proclaim to the persecuted, "Release!"  
to trumpet long and loud: "Jubilee!"

Then Jesus closed Isaiah, handed it back and sat down. All eyes were on him. All ears were open. He spoke: "Today God's Word has happened; you have heard God's Word come true."

### **Considering the Word**

How can you trumpet Freedom!, Sight!, Release!, or Jubilee! to someone in your community?

### **Praying the Word**

Lord, I hunger for your Jubilee:  
to know your freedom,  
to receive your sight,  
to discover your release.

But dare I desire for others what I crave for myself?  
Lord, forgive my self-focus.  
Lord God, breathe into me your Spirit of power and purpose,  
Lord God Almighty, teach me that your good news is  
not only for me but for all,  
not only for here but for everywhere.

Lord God, breathe into me your Spirit of power and purpose  
that I may serve you today  
by inviting others to join together in Jubilee!

**December 25**

**Luke 4:19-30**

Everyone was pleased and amazed at the wonder of his words, proud to know him. "Isn't this Joseph's son," they asked, "the boy we know?" But Jesus, ever cautious of back-slappers, said to them, "You say that now, but one day you will quote me the proverb, "Physician, heal yourself!" One day my words will not be enough, and you will call for me to perform tricks for your amusement, to do here what you heard I did in Capernaum."

Jesus continued, "Don't be fooled! I'm not. A prophet has no honor if he's a hometown boy. Believe me, a prophet's best work is often among outsiders. There were plenty of hungry widows during Elijah's time when there was severe famine because no rain fell for three and a half years. But what did Elijah do? Did he go to an Israelite? No, he went to a Gentile, a widow from Zarephath in Sidon. Likewise there were many lepers in Israel, but Elisha didn't touch any of them. No, he cleansed the outsider, Naaman the Syrian."

Jesus' harsh words ignited the people's anger. The crowd stormed out, driving Jesus to the edge of the cliffs outside of town. But instead of throwing him down from the height, Jesus walked right through the crowd to continue the Story.

### **Considering the Word**

Who are the insiders and outsiders in your life? At church or the office? In your family or neighborhood? In your community or our nation? What does it look like when you celebrate an outsider be blessed of God?

### **Praying the Word**

Lord, give me your tired, your poor.

Lord God, use me to enfold in arms of love your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

Lord God Almighty, may I not look away

from the wretched refuse,

from the homeless, and

from the tempest-tossed.

God of Jesus, may I light the lamp of justice and joy

to those who have no reason to know and do not understand,

to those too broken, too wounded, too despairing to understand, and

to those who should know better but who still do not understand.

For the Story of Jesus is for us all,

and we are all invited to the Dance.