



2015 BISHOP'S SERIES:
HOLY INTRUSIONS



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NORTHWESTERN MINNESOTA SYNOD

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January: Starry Night



Bible Passage: [Genesis 15:1-21](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

Getting In A Word Edgewise

We human beings spend about a third of our lives asleep. It's startling simply to say that out loud. Our tendency is to think of "our lives" as our active engagement in the world around us; we tend to discount our "down time."

More happens when we're asleep than we often realize, though. We may be "out" for roughly eight hours a night, but there is One who neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4). Truth be told, sometimes God gets through to us best when we're not fully conscious, awake, seemingly in control of things.

During 2015 I'm offering the people of our synod a series of Bible studies on dreams and visions in the Bible. As we consider the faith practice of ***creatively imagining the contours of God's promised future*** we will do well to stop, look and listen to what God is doing in the world. Where is God leading us? How might we best align our own plans and energies with God's dream for the whole creation? This is what "mission planning" looks like for congregations filled with people of faith who believe God is always out ahead of us.

But it's not easy or automatic to "stop, look and listen" for God in this noisy, busy, hectic world. That's why God is always on the lookout for opportunities to get a word in edgewise with us. Often such opportunities arise when we aren't trying to manage the universe by ourselves. God seeks out times when we're vulnerable and open to what God wants to share with us.

This Bible study series will lift up eleven of such "holy intrusions"¹ that marked key turning points in the scriptural story.

God Starts Over With Abram

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are often called the pre-history (or primeval history) section of the first book of the Bible. These chapters (focused on creation, fall, and flood) set the stage for all that is to follow.

Starting with **Chapter 12** Genesis narrows the focus to God's method of choosing one nation—Israel—to be God's chosen people, the instrument of God's rescue and redemption of all humanity. Even though God could have taken any number of nations already in existence and made them God's chosen people, God decides to start afresh with a man and his wife and to fashion from them a people.

So in **Genesis 12:1-3** God focuses the story on Abram, a nobody-in-particular who lived in "Ur of the Chaldeans," probably located in present-day Iraq. Out of the clear blue—for no reason other than God's own free act of choice—Abram is commanded to leave his homeland and strike out for a land that God will show him. There God will make of Abram a great nation by whom "all the families of the earth will bless themselves."

In **Genesis 15** God reiterates and expands upon this in the context of a vision that Abram receives at night. Enjoining Abram not to be afraid, God proclaims, "I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." God meets Abram where he is at—vulnerable, uncertain—and pours gracious promises into Abram's hungry ears.

¹ I'm indebted to Walter Brueggemann for this pungent phrase. See his wonderful article from the June 28, 2005 issue of *The Christian Century* at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3218>

But Abram is not utterly passive in this vision. He responds honestly to God, naming the obstacle that seems to block his path: “I continue childless.” God, it seems, has chosen an empty vessel, ill-suited for becoming a “great nation.”

So God beckons Abram out into the night and directs his gaze toward the heavens: “Number the stars if you are able....So shall your descendants be.” Abram drinks in God’s promise of fertility-in-the-face-of-barrenness, and in this fashion Abram’s trust in God is “reckoned to him as righteousness.” That is, God counts Abram’s assent to God’s promises as constituting a life-giving relationship with God.

Then, in a somewhat bizarre scene of slaughtered animals and a floating fire-pot and flaming torch, God enters into a solemn agreement (God literally “cuts a covenant”, v. 18) with Abram in which Abram is promised

- **A land that he will possess** (the boundaries of which correspond to the extent of Solomon’s kingdom at the period of its greatest extent, cf. I Kings 4:21),
- **A deliverance of his descendants** in the distant future, after a time of sojourning in a “land that is not theirs” (i.e. a reference to the Israelites’ slavery in Egypt and the Exodus), and
- **A long life for Abram** that will see him “go to [his] fathers in peace...buried in a good old age.”

What’s remarkable about this strange dream is that in it “God himself enters a communal relationship with Abraham under the forms which among men guarantee the greatest contractual security.”² In other words, God “comes down” to earth, via this covenant with Abram, and is bound to Abram in the same way humans in that time made covenants with one another.

Holy Intrusions—Then and Now

God’s call to Abram in Genesis 12 and the vision of Abram in Genesis 15 illustrates well some of the characteristics of God’s “holy intrusions” throughout the Bible and in our own lives:

1. **“Holy intrusions” always reflect God’s surprising initiative in our lives.** There isn’t even a whiff of a hint that Abram did anything to deserve God’s intervention in

² Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary, Revised Edition* (1972, Westminster Press), p. 187.

his life! God simply seized the moment to start something new in the world, when Abram and his wife Sarai.³

2. **“Holy intrusions” often come when things look dark or uncertain.** Abram is keenly aware of a huge problem that makes God’s promises seem so improbable: his wife Sarai is barren. In his vision (Genesis 15:2-3), Abram is not passively mute but gives voice to the predicament God’s promises must confront: “I continue childless...a slave born in my house will be my heir.” Abram may have been asleep or in a trance-like state, but in his mind’s eye he was still trying to work things out, make things add up. God seeks out times like this to get a word in edgewise with Abram—God is always looking for such opportunities to address us, too. As Walter Brueggemann observes: “We do well in our management while we are awake, and we keep the light, power and control on 24/7. Except, of course, that we must sleep...Unbidden communication in the night opens sleepers to a world different from the one they manage during the day...[and] this unbidden communication is one venue in which the holy purposes of God, perplexing and unreasonable as they might be, come to us.”

3. **“Holy intrusions” mark key turning points in the story of God and God’s people.** Starting here with God’s call to Abram, the biblical story transitions from pre-history to the history of God with the people Israel. An unexpected future is opened up. From our perspective as Christians, the remainder of the Bible tracks the twisting, turning but always progressing adventure of how God made good on his promises to Abram and Sarai. This adventure continues beyond the pages of the Bible, into the ongoing history of God’s people in Christ. To cite an example closer in time to our own day, Brueggemann calls Martin Luther King Jr. “perhaps the greatest dreamer of the mid-20th century,” whose famous “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 “was a gift of imagination from beyond the realm of political realism...the product of study, of suffering and of long-term nurture in the black church.”

In these holy seasons of Christmas and Epiphany, we recall with great joy all the ways God has made good—and continues to make good—on his promises to Abram and Sarai. Through them and their greatest descendant Jesus the Christ, “all families of the earth shall be blessed.”

³ If the names “Abram” and “Sarai” sound strange to you, see Genesis 17:5, 15.

For reflection and discussion:

1. When is the last time you had a sense that God was “getting in a word edgewise” with you?
2. Recall a time when things looked dark or uncertain for your congregation (or another congregation you’ve been part of). What was that like? How did the congregation come through that time? How do you think God might have been involved?
3. Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad says, regarding Abram’s call by God, that “one must always remember that to leave home and to break ancestral bonds was to expect of ancient men almost the impossible.”⁴ Are there any ways in which your congregation might need to “leave home” to travel to a place God wants to show you? How might God be calling your congregation to leave its comfort zone and change for the sake of a new way to “be church” for the sake of God’s mission?

⁴ Von Rad, p. 161

February: Jacob's Ladder



Bible Passage: [Genesis 28:10-22](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

“The apple never falls far from the tree” is an aphorism that describes the continuity, from generation to generation, of certain family traits.

Sometimes, though, there's *dis*continuity in a family's story. For example, take Jacob the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. It's been said that Jacob is “the first real human being” in the Book of Genesis. Before Jacob arrives on the scene in Genesis 25, characters in the Genesis story seem to be more one-dimensional in that they “pretty much do what God says.”⁵

From the beginning, even in the womb of his mother Rebekah (see Genesis 25:22-26), Jacob is a troublemaker. In his youth he takes advantage of his older brother Esau and his aged father Isaac, tricking his brother out of his birth-right and deceiving his father into granting him the blessing that was intended for Esau (Genesis 25:29-34; 27:1-40).

⁵ Karla Suomala, [“Commentary on Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23; 28:10-17”](#) on Working Preacher; Accessed on January 19, 2015.

Jacob the Trickster

Jacob is, in short, a conniving *trickster*. “Breaking rules, upsetting customs, moving from place to place, using disguises, engaging in deception (and are usually deceived themselves in turn), and telling lies are part of the trickster’s job description.... Jacob crosses every line that presents itself in the story. No rule, no tradition, no relationship appears to be out of bounds as he schemes to get what he wants. In short order, he alters the line of inheritance, disrupts the chain of blessing, disrespects his father, and puts his brother in a vulnerable position, both socially and economically.”⁶

It’s little wonder that Esau threatens to kill Jacob for his conniving (Genesis 27:41) forcing Jacob to flee from his home, back toward Haran the original homeland of his grandparents.

So in Genesis 28 we encounter Jacob as a “vagabond somewhere between a conflict-ridden past and an uncertain future.”⁷ On the run and exhausted, he plops down on the ground in the middle of nowhere, so desperate for sleep that he grabs a rock for his pillow.

God Does Business With the Trickster

In such dire straits God intrudes upon Jacob’s miserable life with a dream of a ladder (actually more of a ramp-like structure connecting heaven and earth) on which angels of God were ascending and descending. As Jacob the dreamer beholds this amazing scene, God speaks to him, reiterating the promises that had been uttered years before to Abraham and Sarah.

Several things stand out in this “holy intrusion” for Jacob:

- God emphasizes that “God is not only the God of the first and the second generation [but that] God is also the God of Jacob.”⁸ Despite Jacob’s treacherous ways, God doesn’t hesitate to do vital business with him. Jacob thus “becomes part of an intergenerational relationship with God.”⁹
- The abundance of this relationship with God is revealed in the promise of land and numerous descendants. Jacob’s offspring will become as numerous as “the dust of the earth.” This stands in some contrast to the promise to Abraham that his

⁶ Suomala, *ibid.*

⁷ Juliana Claassens, “[Commentary on Genesis 28:10-19a](#)” on Working Preacher; Accessed on January 19, 2015.

⁸ Claassens, *ibid.*

⁹ Esther M. Menn, “[Commentary on Genesis 28:10-19a](#)” on Working Preacher. Accessed on January 19, 2015.

descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5). Here in Genesis 28 Jacob's descendants will become like "the loose dirt that covers the ground in every direction and provides the thin layer of fertility sustaining all life on earth....The humble imagery of topsoil adds an insight about the productivity of Jacob's family as a means for God's blessing of all families."¹⁰

- Aware that Jacob is still "on the run" from Esau, God adds a promise of "traveling mercies" for the journey ahead: "*I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you*" (Genesis 28:15). The good work that God began with his promises to Abraham and Sarah will be continued in the life of this scallywag named Jacob!

An Utterly Gracious Encounter

What we dare not miss about this remarkable story is how utterly gracious God is to Jacob. Jacob's dream "does not contain a word of judgment regarding Jacob's prior actions with regard to his brother and his father. Rather God's address to Jacob contains one unconditional promise after the other."¹¹

Insofar as this is the case, we realize how the beloved old spiritual, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" gets this dream dead wrong. The story of Jacob's ladder has nothing to do with you and me climbing a ladder up to heaven ("*ev'ry rung goes higher, higher!*"). Rather, it is about God's undeserved, condescending love toward the unlovable (symbolized by God's angelic messengers ascending *and descending*, from heaven to earth).

Such unfathomable grace does not leave Jacob unscathed, though. He awakens from his slumber, aware that "not only the place has been changed by God's presence, but also he is a changed man....In [his] vow, Jacob recapitulates God's statement in verse 15, showing something of the new sense of vocation that now marks his journey into the unknown that will be undertaken with God as traveling companion."¹²

Loving God, like Jacob, who dreamed of your promises, you have filled us with dreams, too.

¹⁰ Menn, *ibid.*

¹¹ Claassens, *ibid.*

¹² Claassens, *ibid.*

Show us your promises in our dreams, and give us ability to follow our dreams.
Amen.¹³

For reflection and discussion:

1. What is the significance of the fact that a trickster like Jacob is included in the “family tree” of the people of God?
2. Celtic (ancient Scotch-Irish) spirituality speaks of “thin places,” which are “locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we’re able to catch glimpses of the divine.”¹⁴ Jacob experiences the locale of his amazing dream as a “thin place,” which later becomes Israel’s shrine of Bethel (“house of God”). What are some “thin places” in your life with God? Where does God encounter you and speak to you?

¹³ Suomala, *ibid.*

¹⁴ New York Times, [“Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer.”](#) published March 9, 2012. Accessed on January 23, 2015.

March: The Call of Samuel



Bible Passage: [1 Samuel 3:1-10](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

You'd think that being called by God wouldn't be so hard. Hearing the voice of God speak should be easy, right? If God can't communicate clearly—who can? If you and I can't hear God talking to us—who will we hear?

Truth be told, hearing God is anything but easy. "Picking up the phone" when God decides to call us can be fraught with difficulty.

In this beloved Bible story, we see that young Samuel had at least three strikes against him when God tried to call him.

A Spiritual Drought

First, the *timing* of God's call was all wrong. Samuel had been dedicated to God's service before he was born (1 Samuel 1:9-11). He was living in the Israelites' shrine at Shiloh, serving the elderly priest Eli, when the call of God came to him during the night.

Samuel had no idea what was happening, though. Nothing in his experience prepared him for this, because *"the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread"* (1 Samuel 3:1).

God came, calling Samuel in the midst of a veritable drought—a long dry spell when no one was hearing God speak with any degree of frequency or familiarity. No wonder Samuel missed his cue; no one was *expecting* God to speak. Perhaps folks even thought that sort of stuff was a thing of the past, never to be repeated again.

Such periods of “spiritual drought” happen in the lives of individuals, groups, and societies. When Joy and I visited Germany earlier this year with the ELCA Bishops Academy, we heard that less than 20% of Germans today are people of faith.

The current “spiritual drought” in Germany—the homeland of Lutheranism!—reflects the fact that two successive generations of Germans have been raised in an atmosphere of atheism or hostility to Christian faith (i.e. the generation that came of age during the Nazi regime, and the following generation that grew up during the forty years of separation between East Germany and West Germany).

An Unlikely Hearer

Second, Samuel himself wasn’t exactly well-suited for hearing God. Our passage notes that “*Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.*” (v. 7)

Samuel was just a boy, perhaps no older than age 12. He brought no seasoned wisdom, no depth of spiritual experience, no training in recognizing the things of God. The conventional wisdom of that era was that God didn’t bother with one so young—God did vital business with elders, not children.

We sometimes imagine that God speaks only to those who are already attuned to God—to those who are primed to hear God. But in this Bible passage and in many others, we encounter God’s persistent calling of persons who are clueless about holy things. God doesn’t hesitate to wake up slumberers. Notice in this passage how God calls out to young Samuel *four times* before getting through to him!

An Unreliable Guide

Third, Samuel lacked a *reliable mentor* who could help him hear the voice of God. The priest, Eli, whom Samuel served was over the hill, way past his period of useful service to God.

Eli was a has-been as a priest; God was about to remove him from his holy office (I Samuel 2:27-36). Having failed to raise his own two sons right, what good could Eli possibly do for his young servant Samuel?

Nevertheless, this flawed vessel Eli was the only one available to coach young Samuel in the ways of God. Although it had been a long while since Eli transacted business with the Almighty One, the passage of time had not completely dimmed his recollection of what to do.

Slowly it came back to Eli what was happening here. Gradually it dawned on Eli what was transpiring with the nocturnal pesterings of his young apprentice.

As it turned out, Eli was the only one who could help Samuel hear the rare and precious Word of the Lord. So Eli coached Samuel, giving him the words to utter next time he heard the voice that was disturbing his fitful slumber: Next time you hear him calling say, *“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”* (v. 10)

Amazing. You’d think hearing God call you would be easy as pie—like falling off a log. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

- The timing: all wrong.
- The hearer: way too young and untested.
- The guide: a has-been, a leader in the process of losing his position, deservedly!

All wrong—all of it was wrong—but still God’s voice gets through. Hearing God’s call is always fraught with difficulty. This makes God’s call all the more astounding, all the more precious!

Those times when everything seems to be wrong could well be when God speaks most clearly and unmistakably. Why should that surprise us? God’s holiest intrusion in our world came, after all, on a dark Friday afternoon, with an agonizing cry from the lips of our crucified Lord Jesus: *“My God, my God where are you? Why have you forsaken me?”* (Mark 15:34)

God is faithful. God will get through to us. God will call us—as individuals and as congregations. Of that we can be sure!

Let us pray:

Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

ELW, p. 76

For reflection and discussion:

1. Recall a time when you were experiencing a personal “spiritual drought.” What was it like? How did God help you in this time?
2. What signs do you perceive that our nation is in a “spiritual drought?” How might God be calling us and our congregations in this critical time?
3. Name one of the most unlikely candidates whom you have seen God call.
4. How might you or members of your congregation cultivate the art of mentoring or guiding persons to hear God’s call more clearly?

April: God Refuses to Accept Elijah's Resignation



Bible Passage: [I Kings 19:1-18](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

This month, as our Jewish friends celebrate their annual Passover meal, the family table will have on it an empty cup for the prophet Elijah. This is a sign of hope for observant Jews—a mark of their longing for the Messiah, whose forerunner was to be Elijah (Malachi 4:5-6). If the mighty prophet who mysteriously left this earth in a whirlwind (II Kings 2:11) shows up for the Passover, can the Messiah be far behind?

Traditions like this dramatize the stature of Elijah, one of the Bible's heroic figures: a prophet who spoke truth to power and defended the majesty of the one true God in the face of the paganism that had infected the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of the wicked royal couple, Ahab and Jezebel.

I Kings 18 records Elijah's contest with 450 prophets of the false god Baal on Mt Carmel—a favorite Sunday School story for many of us. God demonstrates his power, Elijah emerges triumphant, and the prophets of Baal are slaughtered. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, rather than repenting, give orders to have Elijah hunted down and killed.

So one minute Elijah is the “man of the hour,” and the next minute he's a fugitive running for his life.

Here in I Kings 19 we pick up the story:

[Elijah] went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down

under the broom tree and fell asleep.

(vv. 4-5)

For reflection:

Elijah's situation reflects the way "church folks" sometimes feel. We participate actively, serve faithfully, give generously—while others seem like they could care less. Recall the last time you felt that way about your engagement in your congregation.

Elijah was so despondent that he wanted to live no longer. But God chose not to accept his letter of resignation. An angel awakens Elijah and provides miraculous food and drink that strengthens him for a 40-day-long journey to Mt Horeb. Mt Horeb, far to the south of Israel, was also known in the Old Testament as Mt Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments centuries earlier.

Having escaped from Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah collapses in a cave on Mt Horeb and falls asleep, exhausted.

God is not finished with Elijah though. The Holy One interrupts Elijah's slumbers with a piercing question: "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*" Old Testament scholar Richard Nysse urges us to perceive the emphasis as falling on the word "here." In seeking to escape from Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah was fleeing "also from his place of ministry and the struggles it entails."¹⁵ To use a military analogy, Elijah had left his post and gone AWOL.

Elijah misses the point of the question. All he can do is proclaim his virtue, blame the Israelites and sit on his pity-pot:

"I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

(v. 10)

God is not impressed! He orders Elijah out of his safe cave: "*Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.*" Elijah apparently pays attention but doesn't leave his fortress; he realizes that "standing before the LORD" can be an ominous prospect.¹⁶ Was God about to deliver him or judge him?

¹⁵ Nysse, Working Preacher commentary on this passage, accessible at workingpreacher.org

¹⁶ Nysse, *ibid.*

For reflection:

Do you find it unsettling that God doesn't seem more sympathetic toward Elijah? When have you found yourself "standing before the Lord," and how did that feel?

Still inside the cave, Elijah peers out as the LORD passes by, hearing the sound of great wind, shuddering at the tremors of an earthquake and wilting in the intense heat of a burning fire. Wind, earthquake, fire parade before his eyes—but none of these convey the full presence of God.

Instead Elijah hears "*a sound of sheer silence.*" The silence is so thick, so overwhelming, that Elijah finally does what God had told him to do: he ventures out of the cave, only to hear God repeat his question one more time: "What are you doing here, Elijah (far away from Israel where I've called you to prophesy in my name)?"

Still stuck in his old narrative, Elijah repeats his self-serving, whiny response from verse 10! Even after experiencing God's sustaining food, water and shelter—Elijah still wants to throw up his hands and toss in the towel!

For reflection: Why do you think God encounters Elijah, not in wind or earthquake or fire, but in a "sound of sheer silence?" How does your congregation take time to "stand in God's presence" and really listen to God?

But God will have none of this! Rather than trying to cajole Elijah into seeing things God's way or developing a more positive attitude, the LORD simply orders Elijah to get back into the fray: "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill."

Although God's stern willingness to order bloodshed in his name sounds off-putting to our sensitive 21st century ears, we perceive in these orders God's fierce intent not to molly-coddle Israel's soul-destroying idolatry and waywardness. God is proceeding with his plans to clean up Israel and undo the damage done by the likes of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.

Tucked into God's marching orders is a powerful promise that Elijah is nowhere near as forsaken as he feels.

Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.

(v. 18)

For reflection:

Why do you think God ordered Elijah to get back into the fray? What difference does it make to know we always have comrades in God's service? What are some ways your congregation could get off the dime, serving God's mission in the world?

Let us pray:

God, lift us up when we feel discouraged and worthless. Nourish us with your miraculous Word and Sacraments so that we might travel in your strength alone. Comfort us when that is what we need, but shape us up when we start pitying ourselves. When we become unsure about our calling to serve you, renew your invitation to us and order our days and our deeds in your service. Open our eyes to behold all the friends and allies who walk with us.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

For reflection and discussion:

- See above for the "For reflection" sections woven into this Bible study. If you use this Bible study in your congregation council or another committee or group, make sure that you spend time in the final "For reflection" section, toward the end of the study.

May: Ezekiel and the Valley of the Dry Bones



Bible Passage: [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

I attended all twelve years of school in the same building in my hometown—Amboy, Minnesota. When I was a second grader I heard something that really creeped me out: in the high school wing of the school building, way up in the biology lab, was big black box that contained a real human skeleton. It wasn't just a model of a human skeleton; it was the real thing. Instead of resting in peace in some cemetery, the real bones of a real man's were all tucked away in that creepy, black box.

What a wondrous thing this was for little elementary school children to whisper about out on the playground. But as we grew older the skeleton in the black box gradually faded from our imaginations. By the time we became sophomores, taking biology class, actually SEEING the skeleton was rather anticlimactic.

By then most of us had seen much scarier things. We had all seen at least one ancient aunt all dolled up and laid out in a casket up at the funeral home. Compared to viewing a recently-deceased person's body, the biology lab skeleton was just a pile of bone that weren't going anywhere. The man who once "wore" these bones was dead as a doornail.

Death Valley

Here in Ezekiel 37 it's not just one old biology lab skeleton that Ezekiel stumbles across (in a trance) out in the Babylonian desert—but a whole valley of dead-as-a-doornail bones.

God shows him this macabre scene, not to plant fear in Ezekiel, but to pose a question: *“Can these bones live [again]?”* (v. 3)

“You’re asking the wrong person,” Ezekiel responded. *“O Lord God, you know [the answer to this question].”* (v. 3) God and **God alone knew** if these dry bones could live again.

At this point the story gets even stranger. We halfway expect God to snap his fingers and instantly do something with all those bones. But instead, God makes use of Ezekiel, God’s prophet, God’s mouthpiece.

Preach to the Bones!

“Here’s what I want you to do,” God tells Ezekiel. *“Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.”* (v. 4)

Ponder this: Ezekiel is in a valley filled with dry bones. And God wants him to prophesy, to speak, to preach to the bones. How absurd—preaching to bones!

But Ezekiel plays along. Gazing out at all those bleached tibias, fibulas, scapulas and vertebrae, Ezekiel nervously clears his throat and opens his mouth.

Amazing: A valley of dry bones—and a man talking to those bones. But the speaking of a Word was absolutely essential here. God wasn’t interested in any sleight of hand tricks.

Just as in Genesis 1 God’s Word brought forth every single creature in the universe, so now, in this place of utter desolation, God’s Word—delivered through Ezekiel’s vocal cords—would be the recreating, renewing event that brings these bones back to life.

And that’s exactly what happens. Before the Word has scarcely left his lips, Ezekiel hears a rattling, as toe bones connect to foot bones, which connect to leg bones that connect to hip bones that connect to backbones that connect to neck bones that connect to head bones!

While the Word still echoes through that dry, dusty valley all the bones have gotten pieced back together—with muscles, ligaments, flesh and skin reappearing on those bones—like a movie played in reverse.

Prophesying to the Breath

There's just one thing that's missing. Bones and flesh and blood are not enough. God commands Ezekiel to speak once again: *“Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”* (v. 9)

Bones and flesh and blood need one indispensable thing for life to be restored. The breath, the wind, the Spirit of God must be added. Only the Spirit—the “Lord and Giver of Life” as we confess in the Nicene Creed—can bring these dry bones back to life.

What are we to make of this “holy intrusion” story? What does it mean? Clearly it was not about scaring the bejeebers out of Ezekiel. Rather, it was a preview of what Ezekiel's next prophetic assignment.

God wanted Ezekiel to go to the *“whole house of Israel.”*—in exile in the land of Babylon—a people feeling depressed and utterly abandoned, a people who thought of themselves as a pile of bleached ribs, femurs, sternums and other odd bones—*“dried up, . . . hope lost . . . cut off completely.”* (v. 11)

Ezekiel's next assignment was to project this scene on the imaginations of his people—so that they might be able to entertain again a glimmer of hope that God would take them (as good as dead!) and breathe life back into them, thereby opening up for them a future!

Preaching to Bones, Raising the Dead

We who speak for God today—like Ezekiel—are also called to do this sort of thing. Whenever God's Word sounds forth in our midst, it is always like preaching to bones.

God, after all, does some of his best work with lifeless things, dead persons. God starts out with a lump of clay named Adam. From all the nations of the earth, God singles out tiny Israel, a no-account people without many prospects in this world. God has a penchant for the nobodies, the runts of the litter—the barren Sarahs, the cowardly Gideons, the tagalong Davids.

God's specialty, you see, is resurrection! And the only persons eligible for resurrection are dead persons—starting with God's own beloved Son, slain by sinners, laid low in the grave, but raised up again—nevermore to die.

In raising up the crucified Jesus, God makes a pact with the whole world—a promise to continue being about the business of leading people from death back to life.

What God did through Ezekiel in the Valley of the Dry Bones...

What God did with the dead-and-buried Jesus on Easter morning...

What God did through those 120 disciples on the first Christian Pentecost....

What God did through Peter the denier, Peter the proclaimer...

What God has done with all those pieces of dead wood, dead bones, and dead ends....

...God keeps on doing with you and me, every time someone speaking in God's name says to us: *"Things are not as they seem to be. God's Spirit will not be contained—God's Spirit blows free and clear, wherever God wills."*

And now, even in this moment, God's Spirit is blowing, right in **your** direction.

For reflection and discussion:

- What causes persons or congregations nowadays to feel like dead, dry bones?
- How **has** your congregation (or another congregation you know about) experienced the movement from death to life?
- In what area(s) of its life **do you wish** your congregation could entertain hope that God would take you, breathe life back into you, and open up a new future for you?

June: The Call of Isaiah



"The Prophet Isaiah" by Marc Chagall. 1968. Oil on canvas, Musée National Marc Chagall, Nice, France.

Bible Passage: [Isaiah 6:1-13](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

When persons realize they're in God's presence, the normal response is to be scared witless. Perhaps that's why, the *Manual for God's Messengers* lists "Fear not!" as the first thing angels should say every time they encounter human beings. (I just made that up—but it rings true to the biblical witness.)

Here in Isaiah 6, the prophet finds himself suddenly transported into God's heavenly throne room. The vast space is filled up—just with the hem of God's royal robe! There's smoke in the air, the foundations shake, and a band of monstrous six-winged creatures are flying around and crying out: "Holy, holy, holy!" (v. 3)

Aghast at what's happening to him—utterly unprepared to find himself face to face with his Creator—Isaiah blurts out the first thought that pops into his head: "Woe is me! I am lost..." (v.5)

Awe in God's Presence

Isaiah experienced **awe** in God's presence. Awe is something that human beings and even some animals experience. Did you know that?

In a recent New York Times article, a couple of psychologists wrote:

"Here's a curious fact about goose bumps. In many nonhuman mammals, goose bumps — that physiological reaction in which the muscles surrounding hair follicles contract — occur when individuals, along with other members of their species, face a threat. We humans, by contrast, can get goose bumps when we experience awe, that often-positive feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends our understanding of the world."¹⁷

Awe—like food, clothing, shelter, air and water—is one of the necessities of life. Moments of awe, however and whenever they come our way, enrich us by pointing us beyond the ordinariness of life.

This human experience of awe is sharpened and focused when we're experiencing one of **God's** holy intrusions." Isaiah realized instantly that in the presence of the Holy One he was utterly vulnerable, exposed: *"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"*(v. 5)

Awe Evokes Confession

Standing in the presence of the Thrice-Holy-God, Isaiah is keenly aware of his **individual** waywardness and his **solidarity** with the sinners all around him. Chapters one through five of the Book of Isaiah flesh out the backstory here, offering a "detailed and stinging indictment of the people of Judah and their leaders."¹⁸

Isaiah's awe at seeing God face to face opens his mouth to confess his sinfulness. The Holy One, however, does not allow the prophet to wallow in his unworthiness.

¹⁷ Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner, ["Why Do We Experience Awe?"](#) in the New York Times (May 22, 2015)

¹⁸ J. Clinton McCann, ["Commentary on Isaiah 6:1-8"](#) at Working Preacher

“Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’” (vv. 6-7)

The conventional wisdom in Isaiah’s time was that sinful human beings cannot bear to be in the presence of our utterly Holy God. To see God is to die! (Exodus 33:20). But God turns this conventional wisdom on its head: God isn’t out to kill Isaiah. God intends to forgive Isaiah, to make him fit for God’s service, and to prepare him to speak to his people on behalf of God.

This itself is awe-inspiring! God is at the same time high and lofty—but also available and close at hand. God is the “holy, holy, holy” One. But God is not aloof or out of touch: *“the whole earth is full of God’s glory.”* (v. 3) Isaiah’s experience of God is both timeless and timely, happening within human history, *“in the year King Uzziah died.”* (v. 1) God is both far and near—to Isaiah in his vision—and to us in the hear-and-now.

Forgiven and Sent

Blown away by God’s awe-inspiring presence, cleansed by God’s gracious pardon, Isaiah is ready to hear what God has to say to the heavenly host around the Throne: *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* (v. 8) God needs nothing from us creatures who live on earth, and yet God’s passionate heart seeks us out, to save us.

Overhearing God’s question, posed to the whole celestial court, Isaiah again blurts out the first thing that comes to mind: *“Here am I! Send me!”* (v. 8) Professor Patricia Tull of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary observes that *“Isaiah’s response to a call that has not been issued suggests eagerness to bring a message to people with whom he identifies.”*¹⁹

Isaiah’s response is not unusual for someone who has experienced awe in God’s presence. Even psychologists have noticed and tracked the fact that *“awe is the ultimate ‘collective’ emotion, for it motivates people to do things that enhance the greater good. Through many activities that give us goose bumps — collective rituals, celebration, music and dance, religious gatherings and worship —*

¹⁹ Patricia Tull, [“Commentary on Isaiah 6:1-8”](#) at Working Preacher

*awe might help shift our focus from our narrow self-interest to the interests of the group to which we belong.*²⁰

No Easy Path

Isaiah's eagerness to share God's Word with his people must have been tempered by what he heard next from the Almighty One: *"Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand...'"* (v. 9)

What? Why would God—who was so eager to cleanse Isaiah's lips and forgive his sin—want now to send Isaiah to proclaim the Word in such a way that people would not comprehend or understand it?

Several possibilities come to mind:

- God wanted to prepare Isaiah for the kind of response his prophetic preaching would likely receive—*"that is, not with enthusiastic repentance, but rather with routine disregard (and often with outright hostility)..."*²¹
- God wanted to make it clear that the gift of faith is not something that Isaiah would bestow through his brilliance in flawlessly communicating God's Word;
- God needed Isaiah to realize that, as a prophet, he was in it for the long haul—the people would not finally turn around until they had fully experienced the full "death" of exile in Assyria so that they might be opened up to the eventual "resurrection" of their liberating return to their homeland.

As sobering as Isaiah's assignment was, there was still a note of hope to which Isaiah could cling:

*"Until I, God, get rid of everyone, sending them off,
the land totally empty.*

*And even if some should survive, say a tenth,
the devastation will start up again.*

*The country will look like pine and oak forest
with every tree cut down—*

²⁰ Piff and Keltner, *ibid.*

²¹ J. Clinton McCann, *ibid.*

Every tree a stump, a huge field of stumps.

But there's a holy seed in those stumps." (vv.11-13)²²

This powerful image of a holy seed—a branch shooting forth from a stump—witnessed to God's uncanny ability to bring life out of death. *"The early Church understood these texts to receive their ultimate fulfillment in the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the quintessential sign that the holy God will simply not separate God's own self from 'a people of unclean lips' (v. 5)."*²³

For reflection and discussion:

- Where and when have you experienced awe most recently?
- How does worship move us from awe to confession? From being forgiven by God to being sent by God?
- Psychologists Dacher and Keltner suggest: *"You could make the case that our culture today is awe-deprived. Adults spend more and more time working and commuting and less time outdoors and with other people. Camping trips, picnics and midnight skies are forgone in favor of working weekends and late at night."* Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Dacher and Keltner conclude their article by observing: *"We believe that awe deprivation has had a hand in a broad societal shift that has been widely observed over the past 50 years: People have become more individualistic, more self-focused, more materialistic and less connected to others. To reverse this trend, we suggest that people insist on experiencing more everyday awe, to actively seek out what gives them goose bumps..."* How might your congregation address "awe deprivation" and offer folks "more everyday awe?"

²² The Message paraphrase by Eugene Peterson, emphasis added

²³ J. Clinton McCann, *ibid.*

July: Gabriel Comes A' Calling



Henry Ossawa Tanner – The Annunciation, oil on canvas, 57 x 71.25 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art

Bible Passage: [Luke 1:5-20, 26-38](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

The archangel Gabriel is a “busy bee” here in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. Twice within the span of six months God dispatches him from heaven to earth, to deliver birth announcements to unsuspecting folks: “You aren’t expecting to have a child, but a child is coming to you nonetheless. It’s God’s idea. So, get ready!”

Same message, delivered twice, to persons totally flabbergasted by what they’re hearing. And yet the responses Gabriel receives following these two birth announcements couldn’t have been more different!

Zechariah: Full of Doubt

Zechariah the priest seems full of doubt, which is surprising—out of character for him. He was a holy man, after all. He was serving in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of Jerusalem’s Temple when the message was delivered. You’d think that if anyone would have believed “just like that” it would have been Zechariah!

But all that he can come up with is a skeptical question, filled with doubt. *“How will I know that this is so?”* (Luke 1:18) I’m not about to take this business at face value. What sign—what additional proof—can you give me?”

It’s not as though Zechariah was without reasons for being skeptical. He and his Elizabeth hadn’t been able to have children. They were past the normal age for child-bearing. Redecorating a room in the old house, turning it into a nursery wasn’t in their retirement game plan!

Zechariah demands proof, so Gabriel gives it to him. Gabriel gives him what he asks for. Gabriel in effect says to Zechariah: “Listen bub, I’m not some schlump who just hitch-hiked my way to your little one-horse town. *I am Gabriel.* (Luke 1:19) I have the highest of heavenly security clearances—I spend my days in God’s own Throne Room. Rather than opening your ears to what I have to say you insist on opening your mouth and demanding evidence. So I’ll give you evidence: *you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.* (Luke 1:20) I’ll shut you up for nine months. You’ll be able to observe what’s happening, but you won’t be able to respond until you’re ready to give voice to faith, not doubt.”

So, as Gabriel’s first prophecy comes to pass in Elizabeth’s swelling belly, her toothless old husband just sits there, occasionally moving his lips, but with no sound coming forth.

Mary: Full of Faith

Whereas Zechariah is full of doubt when Gabriel comes a’ calling, Mary is full of faith.

She does ask a logistical question, however: *How can this be, since I am a virgin?* (Luke 1:34) Mary isn’t married yet—she lacks a man to father her child. Gabriel responds to her query with an amazing promise: *“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.”* (Luke 1:35)

This teenage girl, this young woman just barely past childhood, this simple unschooled servant, untutored in the scriptures, bubbles forth with faith. *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word!”* (Luke 1:38)

In several ways Mary's faith is more surprising than Zechariah's skepticism. She is a nobody, a young girl probably not out of her teenage years. She lives in a backwater village. She lacks power as her world understands power.

But Mary, not Zechariah, receives and believes Gabriel's amazing message. Martin Luther once observed:

"There are three miracles [here]: that God and man should be joined in this Child [of Mary]; that a mother should remain a virgin; [and] that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her. The last [miracle] is not the least of the three....Had [Mary] not believed, she could not have conceived. She held fast to the word of the angel because she had become a new creature. Even so must we be transformed and renewed in heart from day to day. Otherwise Christ is born in vain."²⁴

Microwave Faith and Crockpot Faith

How might we make sense of the different ways Zechariah and Mary responded to the "holy intrusions" in their lives? I think it's crucial to remember that **there are different modes, different timetables according to which we come to faith in God.**

There's what we might call "**microwave faith.**" Mary exemplifies that. She doesn't take long—indeed, in just a few seconds she is ready to say YES to God. For whatever reason, God's messenger Gabriel met Mary at a point of readiness in her life—readiness to see past all the heartache and inconvenience this Child would bring to her—readiness to say Yes to God's intervention in her business.

But there is also what we might call "**crockpot faith.**" It takes a while for some of us to warm up to the idea that God is real and that God is doing vital business with us. God may need to soften us up a bit—remove objections, clear away obstacles—before our doubts are hushed and we're able to give voice to our faith.

²⁴ Luther quote from Roland H. Bainton in Martin Luther's Christmas Book (Augsburg, 1948).

If you asked me which of these two faith-types are more prevalent, I'd probably answer that I encounter more Zechariahs than Marys (certainly among Lutherans!) And yet it's important not simply to typecast ourselves or others in rigid Zechariah-or-Mary ways.

Truth be told, at different points in our lives we all have a bit of Zechariah or Mary in us. We all appreciate Zechariah's "slow cooker" faith in certain seasons of life, and we gravitate toward Mary's "microwave faith" ready-to-go response in other moments.

The same holds true for congregations. Some congregations (including plenty of Lutheran parishes!) live in Zechariah-mode a lot. We respond to God's call slowly and cautiously, anxiously seeking more and more evidence before we arrive at a decision. Sometimes that's good, but often it holds us back and makes us (or *keeps* us) stuck in the past.

Fortunately, congregations also are presented with Mary-like moments of daring decisiveness. I hope that when those clutch moments come our way we older folks (like me!) know when to hold our peace and pay attention to younger folks among us who are often more ready to trust God and venture out into uncharted territory.

Full-Throated Praise of God

The good news is that by God's grace both Mary-types and Zechariah-types wind up at the same place: a place of full-throated praise of God. God is the One who's responsible for that. God does whatever it takes to bring us to that place.

Zechariah may have taken his sweet old time about it—but eventually he did open his mouth again. And when that moment arrived, Zechariah's mouth was full of faith, moving quickly past the particulars of his life to discern and proclaim the mighty acts of God in history. Christians are still singing Zechariah's song, ***The Benedictus*** (Luke 1:68-79, which is found in Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Morning Prayer, p. 303).

Zechariah reaches virtually the same exact place where Mary arrives in her song, ***The Magnificat*** (Luke 1:46-55, which is found in Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Evening Prayer, pp. 314-315). It's just that Mary gets there a heck of a lot sooner!

When Mary bursts forth in song, she does not dwell on her herself. Mary's song wastes no time telling about the passing state of her soul. No! Mary is too bound up in "magnifying" God, making

God bigger, perceiving in Gabriel's birth announcement not simply a promised pregnancy but the contours of God's mighty, undefeatable, saving mercy in human history. Mary is so sure God's going to accomplish all of that, that she sings of it in the past tense, as if it had already happened.

That's finally where faith (whether of the microwave or the crockpot variety!) takes us: out of ourselves, beyond our fears and doubts, into the sure plans and sturdy purposes of God.

Indeed faith takes us beyond faith itself. Faith takes us to God—the huge, wide, deep God, who has met and keeps meeting us in Mary's Child, our Lord Jesus Christ.

For reflection and discussion:

- What have been some moments in your life when faith has come easily, quickly (microwave faith) and when faith has come amidst doubts, slowly (crockpot faith)?
- Recall a time when your congregation took a long time to decide on a new course of action in mission and ministry. What was good about that—and what was not so good?
- Recall a time when your congregation acted quickly and decisively to serve God's mission. What was helpful about that—and what was not helpful?

August: Joseph's Dilemma



Bible Passage: [Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

In the second parish I served, I received a phone call one December from a distressed mother in the congregation. “Pastor, you’ve got to help me,” she blurted out. “I’ve been reading the Christmas story to my kids at bedtime each night. Last night my 4-year-old asked: ‘Mom, if Mary is Jesus’ mother, and God is Jesus’ father, then who is Joseph?’”

Smart kid! Joseph, after all, is a pretty nondescript fellow in the Christmas story—sort of a “fifth wheel” in the story of our Lord’s Nativity. If Jesus’ birth story was being made into a movie, Joseph could easily be a “bit part.”

The gospel writer Matthew would beg to differ with that assessment of poor old Joseph. If Mary shines in Luke, chapters one and two, Joseph has his moment in the spotlight here in Matthew 1. And it’s much more than a supporting-actor-role!

Sizzling Scandal

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child...”

To make sense of the dilemma here, we have to know some things about engagement and marriage customs in first-century Israel. New Testament scholar Arland Hultgren offers the following:

According to the custom of the day, there were two stages for a couple to go through in what can be called a marital process. First came the betrothal...a marriage contract, typically arranged by the parents, that could be broken only by divorce....That was followed by a second step...considerably later (sometimes a year later), often including a marriage feast, after which the groom took his wife to his home....The drama of [Matthew 1:18-25], however, takes place between the two events in the lives of this young couple. The first step had taken place; the second is in jeopardy.²⁵

This situation had all the marks of a sizzling scandal. In this precarious moment between their engagement and their marriage ceremony Mary is “found” to be with child. “Found” by whom, we are not told—but Nazareth was a small town, and secrets are hard to hide in small towns.

Joseph Makes a Plan

What should Joseph do? Centuries before a simple solution had been available. In Deuteronomy 22 prescribed death by stoning for an engaged woman who becomes pregnant before marriage by someone other than her fiancée. In the first century this option had become a dead letter; the occupying Romans didn’t “cotton” to Jewish lynch mobs.

There was, however, a fate worse than death that Joseph could have brought upon Mary. He could have publicly denounced and divorced her, holding her up to the scorn of all the neighbors and ruining her prospects for marriage in the future—her child forced to bear the stigma of illegitimacy.

But Mary’s husband-to-be wasn’t put together that way. Joseph was made of better, nobler stuff. Matthew tells us that “being a righteous man” Joseph did not want to put Mary to shame. Instead he resolved to break off the engagement secretly, divorcing Mary quietly.

Righteousness, we often assume, is about being law abiding. In truth, though, righteousness is more about “right *relationship*.” **For Joseph, being righteous was less about obeying the letter of the law and more about acting in a spirit of mercy**—reflecting God’s own unfathomable mercy.

Joseph was one of those rare souls who could absorb into himself the hurt and anger of being sinned against (or so he thought), enduring the shame that had been brought upon him, while still

²⁵ Arland Hultgren, [“Commentary on Matthew 1:18-25”](#)

caring for the welfare of the woman he loved—even though he could no longer take her as his wife. Joseph worked it out in his mind—he had a plan.

God Alters Joseph's Plan

There's a saying that goes: "We make plans....and God laughs!" Joseph, having made his plan, decides to sleep on it. And that can be a dangerous thing to do, because (as we have seen in this series of *Holy Intrusions* Bible studies) God often gets a word in edgewise when we are fast asleep.

Just when he thought he had things under control, the angel of the LORD butts in with some new information and a fresh plan! Joseph learns in his dream that he has not been sinned against by Mary. Instead, he hears that Mary was pregnant "by the Holy Spirit." Joseph had been caught in the down-draft of God's incredible intervention in human history!

Joseph received a new plan, provided by God. Joseph would take Mary under his roof, act as the parent of her Child, make possible the semblance of a normal home for his beloved and her Offspring.

This would not be mere play-acting, either. By following the angel's directive to name the Child Jesus, Joseph effectively adopted the baby, incorporating him into the royal line of King David, Joseph's ancestor.

How About Us?

Joseph's story has so much to tell us about discerning God's guidance for our lives. For our purposes, two questions stand out.

We often succumb to the notion that God simply affirms the plans we've already made. Discernment thus can seem like little more than seeking confirmation of what we already think will work out best for us. **But what if our discernment leads us to go in the opposite direction we had intended to go?**

Here in Matthew 1 Joseph had seemingly figured it all out. He "resolved" on the best way to solve his dilemma; his mind was made up. Going to bed, he laid his plan before God—and God upended it all!

This poses a second question for our reflection: **How do we respond when God replaces our well-considered plan with God's fresh plan?** Like Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's classic novella, *A Christmas Carol*, Joseph could have written off the angel in his dream as the result of Joseph's own bed-time heartburn: *"You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato."*²⁶

Joseph helps us remember that often God's plan may take us in a direction we didn't intend to pursue. This is especially important for congregational leaders to remember. Wise planning for the ways a congregation seeks to serve God's mission remains open, every step of the way, to the possibility that God may nudge us in entirely unforeseen directions.

*"O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*²⁷

For reflection and discussion:

- Recall a time in your own life when God led you to alter your path and proceed in a direction you had no intention to pursue.
- Recall a time in the history of your congregation when folks struggled to discern God's will.
- Where in your congregation's present life might God be nudging you to take a fresh look at things or pursue a new direction?

²⁶ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (Bantam Books, © 1966), p. 17.

²⁷ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 304 (from the liturgy for Morning Prayer).

September: Reluctant Witness: The Call of Saul



"Conversion on the Way to Damascus" Oil on Canvas by Caravaggio, 1601

Bible Passage: [Acts 9:1-25](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

When I studied speech communication in college I took a required course in "Persuasion." In this class I learned about the concept of a *reluctant witness*.

A reluctant witness is the last person you'd expect to be advocating for a particular opinion or product. If a woman who had sold Skippy peanut butter for decades suddenly showed up as a spokesperson for Jif peanut butter—she would definitely be considered a “reluctant witness”—and therefore a *powerfully persuasive* witness.

Acts 9 features perhaps the most famous “reluctant witness” in history: the persecutor-of-Christians, Saul, who became an outspoken witness to Jesus Christ—and all because of a stunning vision Saul had on the road to Damascus!

Knocked to the Ground: Old Saul Dies

Saul had made quite a reputation for himself as a zealous attacker of early Christians. We first meet him in Acts 7 when the deacon Stephen is on trial for his life in front of the same Jewish high council that only weeks before had condemned Jesus.

“Then they dragged [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him.” (Acts 7:58-8:1a)

While Saul is on his way to Damascus to round up more followers of the Way of Jesus Christ, he has a life-changing, u-turn experience. *“Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’”*

When Saul inquires as to the identity of the voice, he hears: *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”* In other words, Jesus took Saul’s attacks on his followers very personally. Saul wasn’t just persecuting Christians. He was persecuting Jesus himself. As New Testament scholar Eric Barreto observes: “Whenever Christians are harassed and abused, Jesus is most palpably present with the oppressed.”²⁸

There is nothing subtle about the Holy Intrusion Saul experienced here. It was akin to losing his life: being knocked to the ground, blinded, needing to be led by the hand into Damascus where Saul

²⁸ Commentary on Acts 9:1-6 (7-20) at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1624

was—in effect—“buried” for three days (!) in darkness, without food or water. This was truly the death of the old Saul!

Raised Up in Baptism: New Saul Arises

Meanwhile, God is orchestrating another Holy Intrusion here. A vision comes to a Christ-follower in Damascus named Ananias: *“Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”* (Acts 9:11-12)

Ananias, however, is understandably reluctant to just trot off and do as he is told. “I’ve heard about this Saul, Lord, and he’s nothing but bad news. Are you sure you want me to go to *him*?”

But God broaches no objections:

“Go, for [Saul] is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” (Acts 9:15-16)

Luther Seminary emeritus professor James Boyce says: “The close parallelisms of the accounts of Saul and Ananias suggest that there are really two call stories and thus, two conversions taking place here.”²⁹

When Ananias shows up on Saul’s doorstep, the first two words he speaks are powerfully significant:

*“**Brother Saul**, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.”* Acts 9:17-19)

²⁹ Commentary on Acts 9:1-6 (7-20) at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1624

“Brother Saul!” This astounding address by Ananias “is a telling sign of the new relationship underway in fulfillment of the promise. It is sealed in baptism as the sign of the Spirit’s presence and outpouring.”³⁰

Community Disrupted–Roles Reversed

So far, so good. Both Saul the persecutor and Ananias the Christ-follower have powerful personal experiences of God’s intervening grace. But what happens when Saul “goes public” with his new identity?

First, we can only imagine how the community of Christians in Damascus was changed when their former Arch Enemy #1 suddenly was sitting among them and proclaiming the Good News about Jesus: *“He is the Son of God.”* (Acts 9:20) Talk about a reluctant witness!

Second, Saul goes almost overnight from being a persecutor to being persecuted. Roles are reversed. Saul the bounty hunter now has a bounty on his head:

“After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.” (Acts 9:23-25)

His Holy Intrusion on the Damascus road left Saul a basket-case! The story of Saul’s call to rethink everything he thought he knew about Judaism was so precious to the early church that the Book of Acts retold it three times: here in Acts 9 and again in Acts 22:6 -16 and Acts 26:12- 18.

Saul’s vision on the road to Damascus was more than a personal event, though. For centuries the whole church has commemorated Saul’s conversion every January 25th. We give thanks that *Saul the proud son of Judaism*, better known by his Roman name, *Paul the Apostle*, was opened up by God to persuade the early church to see that God’s work in Christ is meant for **all** people—Jews and Gentiles alike, which includes all of us!

Let us pray:

“O God, by the preaching of your apostle Paul you have caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world. Grant that we may follow his example and be witnesses to the truth of your

³⁰ Boyce, *ibid.*

Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”

(ELW, p. 55, the prayer of the day for the Conversion of Paul, January 25)

For reflection and discussion:

- Saul’s Holy Intrusion from God revealed how misdirected and destructive his former attitude toward Christians had been. Have you ever found yourself holding a strong belief that actually turned out to be wrong or misguided? What led you to change your mind?
- Ananias was commanded by God to do something—meet with Saul in Damascus—that terrified him. Recall a time when you felt called to go to an unexpected place or person, to do something you didn’t want to do? What happened?
- Imagine how the whole Christian story (Christian history) would be different, if God had not called Saul?
- Many American believers love to talk about their powerful spiritual experiences or deeply personal relationship with Christ. In light of the story in Acts 9, however, is there any personal experience of Christ that does not affect others when we “go public?”

November: Crossing Forbidden Boundaries: Peter and Cornelius



Peter baptizes Cornelius the centurion. (Photo Credit: Joe Alblas) from Episode 5 of The History Channel's "The Bible"

Bible Passage: [Acts 10](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

"Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe, Who has not made me...a goy [Gentile]...a slave....or a woman."

(The Siddur—Jewish Prayer Book)

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Galatians 3:27-28

The prayer of the pious Jewish man cited above is jarring to our ears. Imagine beginning every day by thanking God that you are not numbered among the most inferior of human beings: non-Jews, slaves or women!

This thanksgiving bespeaks the ancient division of humanity that we behold across the pages of the Bible. There are the Jews—God’s chosen people—and there is everyone else, i.e. Gentiles, and never the twain shall meet! The animosity between the two groups has been exacerbated by numerous pogroms conducted by Gentiles seeking to wipe out the Jews. This sharp boundary between Jews and Gentiles is the backdrop for this amazing story in Acts 10.

Cornelius’s Surprising Vision

This chapter in Acts features not one but two “holy intrusions” by God—visions that catch both a Gentile (Cornelius) and a Jew (Peter) off guard. Cornelius is a military officer of the Roman Empire stationed in the seaside city of Caesarea—a man of power, charged with keeping the peace in a far-flung corner of the Empire.

But he is also *“a devout man who feared God with all his household”* (v. 2). He was apparently one of many Gentiles *“in the Roman empire [who] admired the moral precepts of the Old Testament, and the principles enshrined in the ten commandments and other parts of the Torah.”* Such “god-fearers” were drawn to the faith of the Jewish people, while not fully incorporated into the Jewish people by being circumcised and obeying all the precepts of Judaism (including, for example, numerous kosher dietary regulations). “In effect, Gentiles had to become Jews before they could be accepted by God: there was no salvation outside the Jewish nation.”³¹

In Cornelius’s vision, an angel commands him to send some of his men to the city of Joppa to fetch *“a certain Simon who is called Peter”* (v. 5). He promptly dispatches three of his men to Joppa.

Peter’s Dramatic Wakeup Call

The next day, as Cornelius’s men are heading to Joppa, Peter has a strange mid-day vision of his own.

“He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord;

³¹ John Drane, *Introducing the Bible* (Fortress, 2005), p. 534.

for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’” (vv. 11-15)

Two things are notable about Peter’s vision:

First, the animals descending from heaven in *“something like a large sheet”* are a mish-mash of creatures, not all of them “kosher” according to the very detailed dietary restrictions set forth in Leviticus 11. A good Jewish boy like Peter couldn’t possibly eat all of the animals presented to him!

Second, this vision is repeated three times—as if God knew he needed to whack Peter on the head with the new insight that *“what God has made clean, you must not call profane.”*

Although it was not immediately apparent to Peter, we see unfolding a startling repeal of the Old Testament’s tight strictures on what was kosher and what was not. As if the repetition of this vision three times was not powerful enough, immediately when Peter awoke from his trance the three visitors from Cornelius the Gentile were knocking on his door!

Now the puzzle pieces start to come together for Peter, as it dawns on him that his vision and the appearance of the three Gentiles sent by Cornelius was no mere coincidence. In fact, even though Peter is still figuring it all out, he starts to act on the basis of his vision:

- He, a Jew, offers hospitality to the three Gentile visitors (v. 23);
- Peter, without hesitation, travels with the Gentiles to the very Gentile city of Caesarea (vv. 23-24);
- When he arrives in Caesarea, Peter enters Cornelius’s home, even though *“it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile”* (v. 28); and
- Peter articulates his growing awareness that his vision wasn’t just about dietary regulations, but that *“God has shown me that I should not call **anyone** profane or unclean”* (v. 28) [emphasis added]

Then, in response to Cornelius’s request that Peter share *“all that the Lord has commanded [him] to say”* (v. 33), Peter proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ in a manner that highlights Peter’s growing awareness that the age-old division between Jews and Gentiles is being transformed by the Gospel. Notice the inclusive words and phrases highlighted below in Peter’s proclamation:

*“I truly understand that **God shows no partiality**, but in **every nation anyone** who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is **Lord of all**. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and **healing all** who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of **the living and the dead**. All the prophets testify about him that **everyone** who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (vv.34-43)*

God Forces the Issue

Before Peter can even finish his message, God takes the bull by the horns, bestowing the Holy Spirit (likely evidenced by speaking in tongues or ecstatic praise) upon Cornelius and his whole household. God “forces the issue,” and Peter catches on immediately: *“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”* (v. 47).

We dare not miss how Acts 10 reflects “a massive shift in the trajectory of the church’s mission in its earliest days.”³² The first Christians all started out life as Jews. They assumed that Gentiles who heard the gospel of Jesus Christ would need to become Jews before they could become Christians. But here in Acts 10 God himself opened up a direct route for Gentiles to be incorporated into Christ’s family—no longer via the laws and practices of Judaism—but on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ, bestowed freely by the Holy Spirit.

The encounter between Cornelius (and his Gentile household!) and Peter (and the Jewish background believers) rocked the church while still in its infancy. As New Testament scholar Eric Barreto observes:

“In the end, Cornelius’ life does not change as dramatically as Peter’s and by implication, the church’s. In the end, God is the ultimate actor. God has moved ahead of the church to embrace all the world’s people. Indeed it is God’s initiative that sets Peter, Cornelius, and the church to this

³² Eric Barreto, [Commentary on Acts 10:34-43](#), Working Preacher (2012). Accessed on October 26, 2015

monumental juncture. Peter and the church are only playing catchup at this point in the narrative of Acts.”

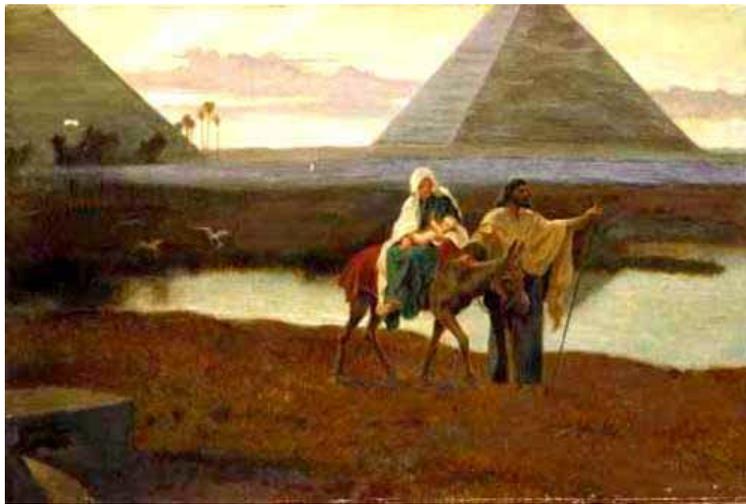
Barreto challenges us to ponder *“how the Spirit may be moving amongst us in unexpected and challenging ways...and...how the reverberations of the resurrection continue to be manifest around us.”*³³

For reflection and discussion:

- The ancient division between Jews and Gentiles was deeply rooted in the words and witness of the Old Testament. What made Peter willing to move beyond what he had always been taught, into uncharted territory?
- Who are some of the “outsiders” who formerly were unwelcome in the church but now are embraced with open arms? Who are some “outsiders” we still struggle to welcome into the fullness of Christ’s kingdom?
- The story in Acts 10 suggests that not everything we’ve always been taught about God is static or unchanging. Might God still be speaking to us today about how we might treat those whom we regard as outsiders?

³³ Ibid.

December: Flight to Egypt: Refugees Then and Now



Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt.

Bible Passage: [Matthew 2:13-18](#)

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life,* and the life was the light of all people....He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. **He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.**”

John 1:1-4, 10-11

The infant Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this month, was never welcome in this world.

We best remember that in this Advent season, lest our intoxication with holiday cheer blind us to some cold, cruel facts. Our newborn Savior was *imperiled* from the moment he took his first gasp of air in Bethlehem’s stable.

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. The evangelist John’s sober summary statement is fleshed out in the evangelist Matthew’s harrowing narrative. Alongside the welcome offered by angels and shepherds (in Luke’s gospel) and the homage paid by the gentile Magi (here in Matthew 2) are the bloodthirsty threats uttered by a crazy, despotic dictator.

Herod Is Overcome by Fear

Here's how it all began. A rumor was picked up by intelligence-gatherers at the Judean CIA and conveyed to the palace of Herod, the Roman Empire's puppet-king in Jerusalem: a pretender to his throne had come upon the scene, right under Herod's nose. Mysterious travelers from the East confirmed this rumor, claiming to have seen a portent in the sky—a star heralding the birth of a new King of the Jews.

If there's one thing we know about King Herod from the annals of ancient history it's his obsession hanging on to power at all costs. Not even his closest relatives were exempt from Herod's paranoid suspicions. He murdered a teenage brother-in-law, an uncle, an aunt, his mother-in-law, and three of his own sons — not to mention some 300 of his court officials, simply because he suspected they were plotting against him.

One ancient writer remarked: "Better to be Herod's pig than his son!" At the end of his life, Herod decreed that when he died one member in every family in Judea should also be killed—to make sure that the sounds of mourning would be heard throughout the land during Herod's funeral!

Slaughter of the Innocents

So the slaughter of Bethlehem's boy babies was entirely in keeping with Herod's track record. Instead of authoring a graphic description of the massacre itself, Matthew evokes the ancient, haunting image of Israel's matriarch Rachel weeping.

*"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,
because they were no more."*

Although we regard this story as a "downer" in the merry month of December, the church has never forgotten the wanton slaughter of Bethlehem's male infants at the hands of King Herod. Every December 28th we still observe the Feast of the Holy Innocents, Martyrs. With mother Rachel, we weep for them and all the little ones who have died at the hands of tyrants.

But we also recall, with thanksgiving, that **one of the Holy Innocents escaped!** The very one Herod sought to slay got away!

This great escape happened only because of another of God's Holy Intrusions—a dream that Joseph the husband of Mary had:

“Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.”

(Matthew 2:13-15a)

We must not miss exactly what happened here: the angel of the Lord made it clear that only by becoming **refugees in a foreign land** would the baby Jesus survive Herod's murderous threats.

Our Toxic Climate of Fear

I can't hear this story without pondering what's happening in our world right in this very moment. *“Today, for the first time since World War II, there are more than 50 million refugees in the world.”*³⁴ The best estimates are that over half of these global refugees are children—not unlike the infant Jesus who fled with his parents as refugees so long ago.

The refugee crisis of our time is calling forth a global response that cuts across divisions of race, religion, ethnicity and nationality. In Matthew 2 the angel of the Lord commanded Jesus' earthly father to flee with his family to Egypt—to depend for a time on the hospitality of strangers of a different nationality and faith. For tiny helpless Jesus to survive it was necessary not only that his parents obey the angel's instructions, but that they be welcomed by their Egyptian hosts. Matthew's gospel doesn't go into the details of how exactly that happened, but we know that somehow the Holy Family survived and returned to their home in Nazareth.

Today's global refugee crisis is exacerbated by a toxic climate of fear. This past September folks all over the globe were stunned by the drowning of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, from Syria, whose boat capsized in the Aegean Sea. Ten weeks later, after the terrorist attacks in Paris, a wave of

³⁴ <http://refugeesunday.lirs.org/>

*xenophobia*³⁵ has swept across the planet causing even countries like our own to back away from their commitment to resettling refugees from places like Syria.

In a dangerous, dog-eat-dog world safety and security is—understandably—regarded as being paramount. But we must beware of allowing fear to turn us aside from core Christian values like hospitality to strangers. As one of the pastors in our synod put it in a Facebook post: *“We have to take in refugees. That doesn’t mean we have to have open borders. It doesn’t mean that we can’t be prudent, wise as serpents and innocent as doves. It doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t obey and enforce the law, or fail to defend our citizens. But as Christians, we are commanded — by Scripture, by Tradition, by the Fathers and Reformers and all of Church history — to care for the alien and the exile. No one said it would be easy or without risk. But we answer to the King.”* (Pastor Ryan D.G. Stout of St Peter’s Lutheran Church, New York Mills, quoted from his Facebook page with his permission)

An Advent Invitation

In this season of Advent I invite you to pause, pray, reflect and visit with one another about our current global refugee crisis. Caring for refugees has been a long-standing part of our DNA as Lutherans (see the many fine resources available from our own [Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services](#)). As you remember the 50 million refugees across our world, recall that for a time Jesus our Lord was a refugee in Egypt who survived to carry out his ministry—because of the kindness of strangers.

God bless your days of Advent and Christmas in the name of our Lord Jesus who, *“though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”* (II Cor. 8:9)

For reflection and discussion:

- Have you or someone in your family tree or circle of friends been a refugee? What was their story and how did they come to a place of safety?
- Has your congregation or community been involved in the ministry of refugee resettlement? What did it cost to help one new immigrant/family find a home in America? How did this ministry affect those who participated in it?

³⁵ Xenophobia is the intense or irrational dislike or fear of people from other countries.

- Take time to learn about the ministry of refugee resettlement by visiting the website of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, lirs.org. Make time during Advent to remember refugees in prayer, through your advocacy with public officials, and with your financial contributions.