

A Way to the Manger



DEVOTIONS FOR
ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

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FOREWORD

This book is meant to be a companion on the journey called the Way of Love. You are invited into a deeper level of pilgrimage, one that will help you to make more intimate connections with God and the world God creates and loves.

The method shared in these pages—and *method* comes from roots that mean “following the Way”—is itself a way to walk more closely with Jesus, who shows us the way. All spiritual practice depends on method, for we need curbs and guideposts and traffic signs to find the way of greater life. We *practice* because traveling this Way can’t be done theoretically. We have to get our feet dirty and occasionally blistered, learn to see looming thunderstorms and appreciate brightly lit clouds at midnight, and figure out how to stay the course with companions who challenge, bore, frustrate, and love us.

The Way of Love takes seven action-orientations as the foundations of a deeper walk with God: **TURN, GO, REST, WORSHIP, PRAY, BLESS, and LEARN.** The method offered here on the journey to the manger focuses on them in that order, yet they interweave and strengthen the web of relationship with God and neighbors, as we continue to visit and revisit each aspect of that seven-fold icon of faithful journeying.

Walking the Way of Love in the Advent-Christmas season offers different perspectives than other parts of the liturgical year. Part of the gift of liturgical seasons is the gift of a different lens. What can the early life of Jesus show and teach us about our own journey? How are we preparing and repairing ourselves for the birth of Christ’s light and life within us?

Each week of this season offers the witness of different participants in Jesus' birth story: angels, shepherds, Mary, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, Zechariah, Joseph. Each witness reflects and embodies one of these seven practices: **TURN, GO, REST, WORSHIP, PRAY, BLESS, and LEARN.** This guide is both simple and profound. It will invite new insights and connections in Bible stories that may seem familiar. It will prompt you to see new connections between the troubles of Jesus' day and our own, here at home and around the world. And, God willing, this book just might incline your mind, heart, soul, and strength toward greater love for God and deeper compassion for your neighbor.

God has given us a remarkable diversity of neighbors, and today's challenges are no different than those of Jesus' day, with the possible exception that we now learn almost instantaneously about the suffering and brokenness of neighbors across the globe. Those who follow this Way to the Manger and walk the Way of Love learn to turn toward those neighbors, go to their aid (including in prayer), rest in the love we know in God, give thanks for that love, and bless both God and neighbor.

May you find your walk strengthened, your heart enlarged, your will stiffened, and your hands and arms opened to human neighbors as well as others, like the ones who sheltered with Jesus in his birthplace. God calls each one beloved, including you! May you turn and do the same.

—Katharine Jefferts Schori
*XXVI Presiding Bishop,
The Episcopal Church*

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The Way of Love invites you to follow Jesus by incorporating into your life seven basic Christian practices: **TURN, LEARN, PRAY, WORSHIP, BLESS, GO, and REST.** If you pay attention, you will start noticing these practices in the stories of the Bible, in the lives of the saints of the church, and in your own life.

In this book, each of the seven practices is paired with events surrounding the birth of Jesus, as described in chapters 1 and 2 of Luke. Starting the first day of Advent, each week focuses on a specific “way” or practice. The authors explore the spiritual practice through the lens of a different character (or group of characters) from Luke’s account. Since we follow these characters as they appear in the gospel, the seven practices appear in an order that reflects the scriptural story. In fact, these practices can come in any order: They are not sequential legs of a journey but rather seven paths that support, cross, and complement one another, all leading to the same destination.

On the first day of each week, you are invited into the Bible story, with authors offering spiritual context and connection to that week’s Way of Love practice. On Day 2, we invite you to spend time in conversation with God—and then use that prayer daily for the rest of the week. Day 3 features a modern story, an example from today of people or events that reflect the spiritual practice and God’s call to us to live holy lives. The fourth day extends an invitation to act on the spiritual practice through service or social justice advocacy. Day 5 explores how

the practice is reflected in modern culture, through art, film, music, or another avenue. On Day 6 of each week, you are invited to reflect on a story from your own life, while on Day 7, we will examine ways in which the biblical characters and story cross paths and help illustrate other practices.

We structured the book so you can begin on the first Sunday of Advent and move through the first week of the Epiphany. Because the dates for Advent change each year, follow your current calendar; you may find some extra meditations around Christmas, or if the church year includes a second Sunday in the Christmas season, you may opt to revisit earlier meditations to fill in the days. Feel free to move through these in a way that works for you and for the particular season. Fortunately, regardless of the number of days between the first Sunday of Advent and the Feast of the Epiphany, the Way of Love practices offer a timeless path to a Spirit-led life.

Each week is structured the same but has been written by different authors. Their various voices and styles of writing reflect the wide diversity of people, cultures, and backgrounds found in the Episcopal Church.

May this book inspire you to walk with the shepherds and the angels, Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Anna and Simeon. May the Way of Love provide a way to the manger and lead us all to find Jesus in the stable and in our lives.

Hugo Olaiz
Editor

Advent I



TURN

*Pause, listen, and
choose to follow Jesus*

Zechariah



This week's author:

Hugo Olaiz

The Story

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the

wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all

their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

—Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

Zechariah's story is full of unexpected turns: As a priest, he enters the temple's sanctuary to offer incense but comes out deaf and mute; he and his wife are old, yet they conceive a child; everyone expects him to name his son after himself, yet he names him John.

God talks to Zechariah through an angel. How does God talk to us? For most of us, the experience of hearing God's call may feel nothing like Zechariah's. We may find comfort in the story of Elijah, who hears God not in a mountain-splitting wind, nor in an earthquake, nor in a roaring fire, but in "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12). Elijah's story seems to describe sound not in the way we understand it, of hearing through our ears, but rather through a voice in our mind and heart that we hear in the form of thoughts and feelings. God may also call us through the voice of others or through words we read—especially from the Bible. I believe these are God's preferred forms of call. For every Saul who is dramatically blinded on the road to Damascus, there must be thousands of Samuels who retire for the evening and hear someone quietly calling their name. For every Zechariah who is struck mute, there must be millions of Elijahs who hear God in "a sound of sheer silence."

There are things we can do to be more attuned to that voice. "Be still then," the psalmist wrote, "and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Many of God's early followers hear God's call in solitary or quiet places: the top of a mountain, the expanse of a desert, or the privacy of their own room. But God's call may come entangled in emotions that can be fleeting.

The story of Zechariah's **TURN** is not that of a person turning from sinfulness to rightfulness. Some may read it as a story about turning from skepticism to the realization that God's promise of a child was true. It seems to me, though, that the biggest turn in this story is how Zechariah goes from being a priest to being a prophet. At the beginning of the first chapter of Luke, Zachariah is obediently performing his priestly duties in the temple; by the end of the chapter, he is "filled with the Holy Spirit," prophesying that his son, John the Baptist, will "go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." This prophetic turn takes Zechariah from the center to the margins, from the public temple to his private home, from reading prophecies from the distant past to speaking as a prophet in his own time.

Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and all the other characters who appear in Luke 1-2 are ushering in a cultural revolution. God's voice does not come through priests seated in fancy chairs. Instead, God's voice comes through mystic men and women serving in the temple, through poor Judeans living in the countryside, and through humble shepherds keeping watch over their flocks in the fields. This revolution is not sanctioned by an institution, but it is fueled by the Holy Spirit.

This raises some difficult questions: Are we listening? And to what voices are we listening? Are we listening only to those voices that our culture validates and extolls or also to those voices speaking from the margins? Will we listen to those thoughts and internal voices that we've been trying to ignore when they nudge or nag us to turn and follow Jesus?

Prayer

Today, spend fifteen minutes in quiet prayer, using this prayer to begin your time with God. Then throughout the week, start and finish each day with this prayer:

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly thine, utterly dedicated unto thee; and then use us, we pray thee, as thou wilt, and always to thy glory and the welfare of thy people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 832-833