

Guide to *Lectio Divina*

Choose a word or phrase of the Scriptures you wish to pray. It makes no difference which text is chosen, as long as you have no set goal of “covering” a certain amount of text. The amount of text covered is in God’s hands, not yours.

Read. Turn to the text and read it slowly, gently. Savor each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the “still, small voice” of a word or phrase that somehow says, “I am for you today.” Do not expect lightning or ecstasies. In *lectio divina*, God is teaching us to listen, to seek him in silence. God does not reach out and grab us but gently invites us ever more deeply into his presence.

Ponder. Take the word or phrase into yourself. Memorize it and slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas. Do not be afraid of distractions. Memories or thoughts are simply parts of yourself that, when they rise up during *lectio divina*, are asking to be given to God along with the rest of your inner self. Allow this inner pondering, this rumination, to invite you into dialogue with God.

Pray. Whether you use words, ideas, or images — or all three — is not important. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. Give to God what you have discovered during your experience of meditation. Give to God what you have found within your heart.

It is not necessary to assess the quality of your *lectio divina*, as if you were “performing” or seeking some goal. *Lectio divina* has no goal other than that of being in the presence of God by praying the Scriptures.

Fr. Luke Dysinger

Sunday, January 1, 2023

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that you read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, you helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to your voice in Creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of your resurrection and witness to others that you are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice and peace. We ask this of you, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us your Spirit. Amen.

Reading

A Key to the Reading:

The reason for Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem was the census imposed by Rome's emperor (Lk 2: 1-7). Periodically, the Roman authorities decreed these censuses in the various regions of their immense empire. It was a matter of registering people and knowing how many had to pay taxes. The rich paid taxes on land and goods. The poor paid for the number of children they had. Sometimes the tax was more than 50% of a person's income.

In Luke's Gospel we note a significant difference between the birth of Jesus and that of John the Baptist. John is born at home, in his land, in the midst of parents and neighbors and is welcomed by all (Lk 1: 57-58). Jesus is born unknown, away from his surroundings of family and neighbors and far from his land. "There was no room in the inn." He had to be left in a manger (Lk 2: 7).

Let us try to place and comment on our text (Lk 2: 16-21) in the wider context of the visit of the shepherds (Lk 2: 8-21). As we read, let us try to pay attention to the following: What surprises do we find and what contrasts appear in this text?

A Division of the Text to Help Us in Our Reading:

- Luke 2: 8-9: The shepherds in the field, the first persons invited
- Luke 2: 10-12: The first announcement of the Good News is made to the shepherds
- Luke 2: 13-14: The praise of the angels
- Luke 2: 15-18: The shepherds go to Bethlehem and tell of their vision of the angels
- Luke 2: 19-20: Mary's attitude and that of the shepherds concerning these events
- Luke 2: 21: The circumcision of the child Jesus

Gospel Text - Luke 2: 16-21

In the countryside close by there were shepherds out in the fields keeping guard over their sheep during the watches of the night. An angel of the Lord stood over them and the glory of the Lord shone round them.

They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Look, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And all at once with the angel there was a great throng of the hosts of heaven, praising God with the words: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace for those he favors. Now it happened that when the angels had gone from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us.'

So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds said to them. As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as they had been told. When the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus, the name the angel had given him before his conception.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What did you like best in this text? Why?
- What surprises and contrasts do you find in this text?
- How does the text teach us that the little ones are great in heaven and the poorest on earth?
- What is Mary's attitude and that of the shepherds concerning the mystery of God just revealed to them?
- What is the message Luke wants to communicate to us through these details?

To Go Deeper Into the Theme

The Context of Then and of Today:

The text of the feast of the Mother of God (Lk 2: 16-21) is part of the broader description of the birth of Jesus (Lk 2: 1-7) and of the visit of the shepherds (Lk 2: 8-21). The angel had announced the birth of the Savior and gave a sign of recognition: "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger!" They were expecting the Savior of a whole people and they were to recognize him in a newborn child, poor, who lies close to two animals! What a great surprise!

God's plan is fulfilled in an unexpected way, full of surprise. This happens today too. A poor child is the Savior of the people! Can you believe this?

A Commentary on the Text:

- Luke 2: 8-9: The first invited persons
The shepherds were marginalized people, not greatly appreciated. They lived together with the animals, separate from the rest of humanity. Because of their constant contact with animals, they were considered impure. No one would have

ever invited them to visit a newly born baby. But it is precisely to these shepherds that the Angel of the Lord appears to pass on the great news of the birth of Jesus. Seeing the vision of the angels, they are full of fear.

- Luke 2: 10-12: The first announcement of the Good News
- Luke 2: 13-14: The praise of the angels: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace for those he favors

A multitude of angels appears descending from heaven. It is heaven that bends itself towards the earth. The parts of this verse summarize God's project, his plan. The first part tells us what happens in the world up there: Glory to God in the highest heaven. The second part tells us what will happen in the world here below: On earth peace for those he favors! If people could experience what it means to be favored by God, everything would be different, and peace would dwell on earth. And this would be to the greater glory of God who dwells in the highest!

- Luke 2: 15-18: The shepherds go to Bethlehem and tell of their vision of the angels
The Word of God is no longer a sound produced by the mouth. It is above all an event! The shepherds literally say: "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us". In Hebrew, the expression *DABAR* may mean both word and thing (event), generated by the word. The word of God is a creative force. It fulfils what it says. At creation God said: "Let there be light, and there was light!" (Gen 1: 3). The word of the angel to the shepherds is the event of the birth of Jesus.
- Luke 2: 19-20: Mary's attitude and that of the shepherds concerning these events
Luke immediately adds that, "Mary treasured all these things (events) and pondered them in her heart." These are two ways of perceiving and welcoming the Word of God:
 - (i) The shepherds get up to see the events and verify the sign given by the angel, and then, they go back to their flocks glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard.
 - (ii) Mary, on the other hand, carefully keeps all these events in her mind and meditates on them in her heart. To meditate on things in one's heart means to ruminate them and throw light on them in the light of the Word of God so as to understand better their full significance for life.
- Luke 2: 21: The Circumcision and Name of Jesus
According to the norms of the law, the child Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day after his birth (cf. Gen 17: 12). Circumcision was a sign of belonging to the people. It gave the person an identity. On such an occasion each child received his name (cf. Lk 1: 59- 63). The child receives the name of Jesus that had been given him by the angel before his conception. The angel had said to Joseph that the name of the child had to be Jesus "he is the one who is to save his people from their sins" (Mt 1: 21). The name of Jesus is the same as Joshua and means God will save. Another name that will gradually be given to Jesus is Christ, which means Anointed or Messiah. Jesus is the awaited Messiah. A third name is that of Emmanuel, which means God with us (Mt 1: 23). The complete name is Jesus Christ Emmanuel!

Further Information:

The Role of the First Two Chapters of Luke's Gospel:

These are two rather well known but less deeply understood chapters. Luke writes them in imitation of the Old Testament. It is as though these two chapters were the last of the Old Testament so as to open the door for the coming of the New Testament. In these chapters, Luke creates an atmosphere of softness and praise. From beginning to end the

mercy of God is sung, God who finally comes to fulfil his promises. Luke shows us how Jesus fulfils the Old Testament and begins the New Testament. And he does so in favor of the poor, the *anawim*, those who knew how to wait for his coming: Elisabeth, Zachary, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna and the shepherds. That is why the first two chapters are history but not in the sense that we today give to history. They were more like a mirror where those, for whom they were written, the Christians converted from paganism, could discover who Jesus was and how he had come to fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament, satisfying the deepest aspirations of the human heart. These chapters were also a mirror of the events that were taking place within the communities in Luke's time. The communities originating from paganism will be born of the communities of converted Jews. But these were different. The New did not correspond to what the Old Testament imagined and expected. It was "the sign of contradiction" (Lk 2: 34), and caused tensions and was the source of much suffering. In Mary's attitude, Luke presents a model of how the communities could react to and persevere in the New.

A Key to the Reading:

In these two chapters Luke presents Mary as model for the life of the community. The key is given to us in the episode where the woman in the crowd praises the mother of Jesus. Jesus modifies the praise and says: "More blessed still are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Lk 11: 27-28). Herein lies the greatness of Mary. It is in the world where Mary knows how to relate to the Word of God that the communities contemplate the more correct way of relating to the Word of God: welcoming it, incarnating it, living it, deepening it, reflecting on it, giving it birth and making it grow, allowing oneself to be overpowered by it even when one does not understand it or when one suffers because of it. This is the vision underlying the two texts of chapters 1 and 2 of Luke's Gospel, which speak of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

An Application of the Key to the Texts:

- Luke 1: 26-38: The Annunciation: "Let it happen to me as you have said!" Opening oneself so that the Word of God may be welcomed and incarnated.
- Luca 1: 39-45: The Visitation: "Blessed is she who believed!" Recognising the Word of God in the events of life.
- Luke 1: 46-56: The Magnificat: "The Almighty has done great things for me!" A subversive and resistance hymn of hope.
- Luke 2: 1-20: The Birth: "She treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart."
There was no room for them. The marginalised welcome the Word.
- Luke 2: 21-32: The Presentation: "My eyes have seen the salvation!" Years of life purify the eyes.
- Luke 2: 33-38: Simeon and Anna: "A sword will pierce your soul" Being a Christian means being a sign of contradiction.
- Luke 2: 39-52: At twelve years: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"
They did not understand the Word of God addressed to them!

The Contrasts that Stand Out in Our Text:

- In the darkness of the night a light shines (2: 8-9).
- The world up there, heaven, seems to embrace our world here below (2: 13).

- The greatness of God manifests itself in the weakness of a child (2: 7).
- The glory of God is made present in a manger, close to animals (2: 16).
- Fear is generated by the sudden apparition of an angel and is changed into joy (2: 9-10).
- Those completely marginalized are the first invited (2: 8).
- The shepherds recognize God present in a child (2: 20).

Praying with the Psalm 23 (22)

"Yahweh is My Shepherd!"

Yahweh is my shepherd,

I lack nothing.

In grassy meadows he lets me lie. By tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit.

He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name. Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death

I should fear no danger, for you are at my side.

Your staff and your crook are there to soothe me.

You prepare a table for me under the eyes of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup brims over.

Kindness and faithful love pursue me every day of my life.

I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

The first thing the angel says is: Do not be afraid! The second is: Joy to be shared by the whole people! The third is: Today! Then the angel gives three names to indicate who Jesus is: Savior, Christ and Lord! Savior is the one who frees all people from all ties! The authorities in those days liked to use the title Savior. They attributed the title of Soter to themselves. Christ means anointed or messiah. In the Old Testament this was the title given to kings and prophets. It was also the title of the future Messiah who would fulfil the promises made by God to his people. This means that newly born child, who lies in a manger, has come to fulfil the hopes of the people. Lord was the name given to God himself! Here we have the three greatest titles imaginable. From this announcement of the birth of Jesus as Savior, Christ and Lord, can you imagine anyone with a higher standing? And angel says to you: "Be careful! I give you this sign of recognition: you will meet a child in a manger, in the midst of poor people!" Would you believe him? God's ways are not our ways!



Invest just five minutes a day, and your faith will deepen and grow—a day at a time.

01 JAN₂₀₂₃ And let it begin with me

"The world must be educated to love Peace, to build it up and defend it." With these words, Pope Paul VI in 1968 called us each to personal responsibility for keeping the peace. Since then, successive popes have related the quest for peace to fighting poverty, protecting creation, defeating racism, caring for migrants, supporting education, ensuring opportunities to work, and overcoming indifference. As the pandemic bloomed, Pope Francis described peace as cultivating a "culture of care." Building peace includes encountering people outside our typical social cocoons. It necessarily involves creating good politics and living with hope. Make peace your personal priority. OCTAVE DAY OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD; SOLEMNITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD

Today's readings:

Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21 (18).

"The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!"

02 JAN₂₀₂₃ Spirituality is a friendly endeavor

Is there anyone you regard as a "spiritual friend"? Someone with whom you share your Christian journey and who helps you grow in faith? Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen were two such friends who were monks together for a while and later both became bishops. They lived in a time—the fourth century—when there was great conflict and heresy, and the pair worked to keep the church united on the right path. Gregory wrote of their friendship: "We seemed to be two bodies with a single spirit ... Our single object and ambition was virtue, and a life of hope in the blessings that are to come ..." If it's true that you are the company you keep, choose wisely!

MEMORIAL OF BASIL THE GREAT AND GREGORY NAZIANZEN, BISHOPS, DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH

Today's readings:

1 John 2:22-28; John 1:19-28 (205).

"Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us?"

03 JAN₂₀₂₃ The name above all others

The Most Holy Name of Jesus occurs in early January to signify the eight days since Jesus' birth—when, as a Jew, he was presented in the Temple and given a name. As the Bible reminds us, an angel told Joseph: "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Today is also the main feast day of the Jesuit religious order, as their name derives from Jesus' name. Celebrate as suggested by today's most famous Jesuit, Pope Francis: "It means thinking like him, loving like him, seeing like him, walking like him. It means doing what he did and with his same sentiments."

MEMORIAL OF THE MOST HOLY NAME OF JESUS

Today's readings:

1 John 2:29—3:6; John 1:29-34 (206).

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

04 JAN₂₀₂₃ Stand firm for justice

Today, the church celebrates the feast of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first person born in the future United States to be canonized, and the de facto founder of America's Catholic school system. Seton was also a voice of reason in a time of rampant contradiction in the realm of human rights. Though her family owned slaves, Seton apparently rejected the practice and spoke lovingly of African Americans. Though her order did not protest the practice, and in some cases benefitted from the labor of enslaved individuals themselves, recent studies have found no evidence that Seton herself ever engaged in the practice—a rarity for her time and social class. Let's pray that a spirit of holy resistance will fill us all in the fight against injustice—in a world where up to 50 million people live in modern slavery.

MEMORIAL OF ELIZABETH ANN SETON, RELIGIOUS

Today's readings:

1 John 3:7-10; John 1:35-42 (207).

"The person who acts in righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous."

05 JAN 2023 Live and learn—and pass it on

Education was of supreme importance to both Saint John Neumann (1811-60), who is memorialized today, and to scientist and devout Christian George Washington Carver, who died on Jan. 5, 1943. Both men obtained an education long before it was seen as a birthright. Both made enormous social contributions as a result: Neumann to faith development of the masses; Carver to applied agricultural science impacting the country in numerous ways. For them, cleverness was never an end in itself; they both believed their talents were given by God to serve others. How does *your* education serve others?

MEMORIAL OF JOHN NEUMANN, BISHOP

Today's readings:

1 John 3:11-21; John 1:43-51 (208).

"'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.'"

06 JAN 2023 The door will be opened

Born frail and weak in 1845 near Montreal and orphaned at 12 when both parents died, André Bessette tried a number of trades as a young man, none with much success. He was initially turned away when applying to the Congregation of Holy Cross but was finally accepted and given the humble task of doorkeeper, messenger, and laundry worker at Notre Dame College in Montreal. There he faithfully served for decades. His life of devotion and healing presence eventually attracted legions of visitors and 80,000 prayer requests mailed in each year. "When I joined this community, the superiors showed me the door, and I remained 40 years," he quipped near the end of his long life. Make yours a life of simple service and devotion—and a sense of humor won't hurt either!

MEMORIAL OF ANDRÉ BESSETTE, RELIGIOUS

Today's readings:

1 John 5:5-13; Mark 1:7-11 or Luke 3:23-28 or 3:23, 31-34, 36, 38 (209).

"I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals."

07 JAN 2023 Signs of life

All that water at the wedding feast of Cana was used, the story tells us, for "Jewish ceremonial washings." Such washings were prescribed by the Jewish *Halakha*, or body of laws derived from the Torah. The fact that Jesus turned pure water for cleansing into wine for drinking would have sent a powerful message of the true nature of "living water" to the wedding guests. That same message is transmitted to us as simple table wine becomes the blood of Christ at every Eucharist. Like the wedding guests at Cana, don't hesitate to drink deeply from the cup of life Jesus offers.

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

Today's readings:

1 John 5:14-21; John 2:1-11 (210).

"Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs at Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory."