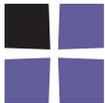


# exploring

## THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY 2019

VOLUME 28 | NUMBER 5 | WRITTEN BY **Alice Camille**



### OPENING PRAYER

Lord God, you make your love known to us in stories: those on the pages of Scripture and those written on the pages of our lives. Make us attentive to the truths etched into every saga of the past, as well as onto every little drama we call “today.” Grant this through Christ our Lord, your Word. *Amen.*

**February 3** | LECTIONARY 72  
FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## THE NATIVES ARE ALWAYS RESTLESS

### FIRST READING

JEREMIAH 1:4-5, 17-19

**But do you gird your loins; stand up and tell them all that I command you.**

I’m always cheered when a passage from Jeremiah pops up in the rotation. Not that Jeremiah is a cheery prophet. No, he’s young, whiny, high maintenance, a real complainer. Of his 52 chapters, only three are optimistic (chapters 30-33, if you want to check them out). If ever a holy man was also a drama queen, Jeremiah is that guy.

So why do I like him? Because he’s more like us than the rest of the prophets, who seem so ready and willing to suffer for sacred truths. I can assure you, when God calls me to do some noble thing, I’m fifty percent likely to actually do it. But I’m one hundred percent likely to complain about it, to put the back of my hand to my forehead and swoon like a 1920s silent screen star all the while. What makes Jeremiah my homeboy is that he protests—yet he goes. Like that kid in the parable of Jesus who says no to his father but does yes. What God requires of Jeremiah is tough stuff, no

walk in the park, and in the end he’ll be murdered by his countrymen for it. So I say, let him howl about it.

» *Are you mostly cheery or mostly grouchy about doing the things that God requires?*

### SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 12:31–13:13

**Love is patient, love is kind.**

Paul is another one: a moody character for sure. Has there ever been a more zealous missionary of the gospel? Paul single-handedly ensured a future for Christianity beyond the first generation. He was a scholar of Jewish holy books before he wrote what would become a crucial part of the collection of Christianity’s holy book. To call Paul the principal architect of the Church’s understanding of Jesus is no exaggeration.

Yet Paul was also given to fits of rage, unbecoming and dangerous self-righteousness, a master of sarcasm. At the drop of a hat, he would gladly recite the list of his virtuous qualities and heroic deeds on behalf of Jesus. All of

them were brutally true, just as Paul was often, not always, brutally correct in his choice of enemies. Paul’s personality unfortunately multiplied his enemies. Yet despite it all, through it all, and because of it all, he was able to write the most sublime description of love ever penned. Paul knew that love is patient and kind because he sometimes wasn’t. This gives us all great hope!

» *Are you a clashing cymbal, a tolling gong, or one who endures all things? Use Paul’s meditation as an examination of conscience and checklist of things yet to do.*

### GOSPEL

LUKE 4:21-30

**When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury.**

So now who’s tetchy? Jesus speaks the plain truth to his neighbors in Nazareth. Their immediate response is to want his blood on their hands. Of course,

the difficult truth is that they will have it, just as we each will have it. Jesus dies because all of us prefer not to listen to or accommodate God's truth in our lives.

So maybe Jeremiah's a drama queen and Paul's a hothead; but how might we describe the citizens of Jesus' hometown? We have to be careful, here. We're describing ourselves in the same breath.

Are they simply in denial that God shows interest in and compassion toward outsiders? Do they resist the implications of outsiders welcoming prophets that they have themselves rejected? Is Nazareth self-righteous, self-involved, xenophobic, petty in taking offense, or easily given to violent solutions?

No matter what we say about Nazareth,

it doesn't reflect well on us. Jesus comes into our midst to tell us the truth. What we do with it is up to us.

» *What is your final verdict on Nazareth? How are they/we putting Jesus to death along with truths we cannot face about ourselves?*

# February 10 |

## GOING TO BAT WITH A ROOKIE

LECTIONARY 75  
FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

ISAIAH 6:1-2A, 3-8

**"Here I am," I said: "send me!"**

Where you ever as eager to take up a task as Isaiah is when summoned to prophesy? Of course, his first reaction is to protest his unsuitability to speak for God. The cosmic response is to scorch his mouth with a burning ember. Maybe Isaiah learned something in all this: show a little more enthusiasm next time God asks you to do something!

Was it only humility that initially made Isaiah hesitate? This vision comes to him the year King Uzziah died. Uzziah reigned over a long, rare peace in Jerusalem. A decent and competent king—that puts him on a short list of Judah's rulers—Uzziah was perhaps a little too successful. One day he decided he was worthy to offer the Temple sacrifice without a mediating priest. Immediately, Uzziah developed leprosy and was obliged to leave the city, spending the rest of his life outside Jerusalem's gates. It's another 700 years before his bones will be buried with the rest of the kings. Representing God is perilous, demanding, and humbling. Know this before you sign on the dotted line.

» *Many vocations are demanding: marriage, parenting, priesthood, religious life. What are the rewards of such sacrifices?*

### SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11

**For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle.**

We meet Paul today in a humbler moment. Among his fascinating traits is the ability to switch from boasting to confessing without blushing. How does he do it? You and I can't go from proud to self-abasing without serious soul-searching. Paul did, in fact, spend some years in Arabia between his lightning-fast Damascus conversion and the start of his mission. We might imagine Paul spent a few of those seasons getting comfortable with the idea that sometimes he was really, really wrong about the way God works.

What made it possible for Paul to embrace both the depths of his sinfulness and the heights of his achievements is that he trusted Jesus. Totally. I mean *totally*. The Jesus he met on the Damascus road chose Paul, persecutor of the Church, to spread that Church across Asia Minor. If Jesus could choose him so personally and forgive him so powerfully, who was Paul to deny himself that acceptance? Jesus knew Paul inside and out—and wanted him. That was good enough for Paul, and should be good enough for us.

» *Jesus knows you inside and out—and wants you. How do you respond to that?*

### GOSPEL

LUKE 5:1-11

**"Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."**

Imagine being the head of a large corporation. You have your pick of employee candidates from around the world. You can tap all the talent available, reach into anyone else's territory, and select the plum personnel for your organization. So how do you start? Who do you go after: the smartest, the most skilled, the ones with the most experience?

Chances are you don't place a call to the guy who can't speak well (Moses), or shoot an email to the fellow aiming to take down your organization (Paul). You don't court a person whose net worth is literally in his nets and the unpredictable daily catch (Peter, Andrew, James, John). You don't tap candidates with self-eliminating health issues (Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary Magdalene), the inexperienced (Jeremiah, Mary), folks with honesty issues (Abraham, Jacob), or lacking in basic loyalty (Saul, David, Peter, Judas). Do you really want people representing you who will do absolutely anything to meet their objectives (Sarah, Tamar, Judith, Simon the Zealot)? Do we sense a pattern here?

» *Name three reasons God shouldn't hire you. Name three reasons why God did.*

# THE YIN AND YANG OF HOLY LIVING

## FIRST READING

JEREMIAH 17:5-8

**Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.**

When I pray on Sunday mornings, I try to give God a sabbath from all of my usual asking and pleading. Instead, I resolved years ago that on Sundays, I'd limit my prayers to praise and thanksgiving. After all, Eucharist means thanksgiving. And besides, God gets an earful of what I want and need from

## SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 15:12, 16-20

**How can some of you say there is no resurrection from the dead?**

Just as our days are routinely composed of blessings and curses (but we're mostly aware of the curses), we also experience episodes of life that are death-dealing or life-giving. We're acutely aware of our losses and keep them freshly in mind. How readily can we recall the resurrections we've

## GOSPEL

LUKE 6:17, 20-26

**"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."**

I get letters sometimes from readers who work hard, acquire wealth, and don't like to hear that poverty is somehow automatically virtuous, while wealth is intrinsically nasty. Aren't there beatitudes for rich people? Shouldn't there be Lucan woes for the lazy or immoral poor?

The Gospel of Luke is, honestly, very down on the well-heeled set. Luke was writing specifically for a benefactor, Theophilus, who presumably paid his bills so he could write his gospel and Acts. You'd think he'd go a

little easier on folks with discretionary income! Yet in fact, this patronage seemed to inspire Luke to press a little harder on his comfortable audience.

Matthew's beatitudes don't include a list of woes. Luke adds several parables in which rich or powerful people figure badly. Still, across the length of the Bible, wealth is deemed first and foremost a blessing from God. It becomes a curse only when the rich exploit or ignore the poor. The first beatitude of the well-off? Blessed are you who give and help and see and care.

- » *Try your hand at writing beatitudes for the rich, the middle class, for lawyers or teachers or parents or whatever social group best describes you.*

IT'S NOTHING SHORT OF A MIRACLE THAT WE'VE MADE IT THIS FAR, ANY OF US.  
**EACH DAY IS A RESURRECTION OF HOPE AND POSSIBILITY.**

Monday through Saturday.

Each Sunday has become an opportunity to count my blessings. I'm regularly surprised how hard this is—not that I haven't been blessed. I've got a terrific family, loyal friends, work I love, and enough money to cover the bills. I like my apartment, my pastor's a neat guy, my health is good, and on many days, the sun is shining. So why don't my Sunday prayers last as long as my other ones?

We don't count blessings as often as we tabulate the curses of living. While I manage to compose a paragraph of thank-yous weekly, every day I produce mountains of laments, complaints, and demands. Maybe if I didn't spend only one day a week listing blessings, I'd be better at it.

- » *How much of your prayer is that of petition, and how much is devoted to praise or thanks?*

witnessed or undergone ourselves?

I've been fired from jobs—and hired again. I've lost money on bad investments and stupid purchases, yet managed to stay afloat. I've made terrible mistakes, alienated friends, and lost a few for good. I've also redeemed relationships through forgiveness, as well as acquired new companions. My love has sometimes been betrayed but more often rewarded.

Some things that are lost aren't ever restored. My left shoulder will always hang a little more gingerly than my right. Some scars won't fade, and no matter what I do, I'll never be twenty again. Or fifty. But it's nothing short of a miracle that we've made it this far, any of us. Each day is a resurrection of hope and possibility.

- » *List some of your most memorable comebacks. Would you consecrate any as miraculous?*

## BEST WAY TO TREAT AN ENEMY

### FIRST READING

1 SAMUEL 26:2, 7-9

**“God has delivered your enemy into your grasp this day.”**

We all encounter individuals who are antipathies to us—think the opposite of “sympathies,” and you get the idea. Antipathies aren’t like us, they don’t get us, and they oppose our every move. As spiritual writer Jean Vanier says, when confronted with antipathies, it becomes almost impossible for us to breathe.

When two people experience an antipathetic relationship, it’s often not a real barrier. Nothing actually exists between them and, say, the possibility of friendship. Some echo of past enmity may be transferred to an antipathy: they have a mistrusted uncle’s nose, or they speak in the accent of an old opponent. They may remind us of a tyrant or terror from childhood. So we’re repulsed by them, no matter what they say or do.

King Saul loathed David irrationally, turning an ally into an adversary. Yet when David had the opportunity to spear Saul in his sleep, he spared his life. Saul wouldn’t have done the same. David is free to choose. Those under the spell of antipathy are never truly free.

» *When have you encountered an irrational revulsion from or for another person? How do you deal with antipathies?*

### SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 15:45-49

**The first Adam was from the earth; the second Adam, from heaven.**

Talk about antipathies! Could there be two people less naturally in tune than Adam and Jesus? The name Adam comes from the Hebrew word for mud or clay. Adam is literally scraped from the ground, according to the account in Genesis 2. Jesus means “God saves,” and his other name, Emmanuel, declares “God is with us.” So Paul rightly calls Adam the man from earth and Jesus the one from heaven.

Can earth and heaven be reconciled? That good question is answered in the story of the Bible. Earth is an imperfect realm. Actually, it’s an appalling mess of a place in many respects, which Scripture does not hesitate to outline in sagas of disloyalty, lies, betrayals, and violence. The farther our history moves from its origins in God, the worse life on earth becomes.

If the movement of the earth-person were the only trajectory of Scripture, we’d call it condemnation history. However, it becomes salvation history because of the movement of the heavenly person. Jesus gathers all the fragments of our sad past and offers hope of a redeemed and restored future. Earth and heaven will befriend each other once more!

» *How much of your day reveals the brokenness of earthly living? How much reveals the hope of unity and bridge building?*

### GOSPEL

LUKE 6:27-38

**“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”**

You were waiting for this. If you’ve spent any time in church, you know any discussion that starts with the word “enemy” is going to wind up with love. And let’s be honest: we’re not comfortable with this. Enemies are for hating, and love is reserved for family, friends, and allies. It seems highly unlikely these two words can show up together in the same phrase and make any kind of sense.

In our divided hearts, enemies are jailed on one dark side of our passion; love is on the other. It’s unreasonable for Jesus to ask us to mix those two together. Why does he, then? Very simply because Jesus agrees with us. You can’t love an enemy. If you love people, they are not your enemies. They become something else. Under the transforming power of love, they become your loved ones. Love bonds us together as brother and sister, parent and child. Jesus is asking us not to have enemies. Approached with love, the former antipathy must be viewed as family. This is how love literally changes the world.

» *Have you ever tried to love someone whom you naturally dislike—or who disliked you? What happened?*

### LET US PRAY...

Merciful God, you know the burdens we carry: sick loved ones, broken relationships, anxiety, fear, and regret. We place our concerns in your hands and trust that your love is stronger than anything, even the power of death. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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