

Beginnings



# Imagining Scripture

1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–16

*Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,*

*“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the human heart conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love  
him”—*

*these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.*

*Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.*

“For who has known the mind of the Lord  
so as to instruct him?”

*But we have the mind of Christ.*

I am a teacher of centering prayer, a prayer that goes beyond thoughts and images to God dwelling in the center of our being. We encourage folks to spend an hour a day in prayer, little enough for God who gives us the twenty-four hours.

How do we spend the hour? First, we “center” twice a day for twenty minutes at a time. Centering prayer is based on faith—by faith we know that God dwells within us, with all God’s creative love, and wants our love. And faith comes through hearing. So we also spend some time each day in *lectio*, listening to the Lord in his inspired word, especially in the holy Gospels.

It is here—as we listen to the Lord in Scripture—that our imagination comes into play. Some get the idea that because we encourage centering prayer, which goes beyond images, we must be against the use of the imagination. By no means. There is a time and place to use this wonderful faculty God has given us.

If we may speak so anthropomorphically, just think of the imagination God has exercised in creating this wonderful world of ours. How he must have delighted in making all the different flowers and trees with their varied colors, especially in the fall, not to speak of the ever-changing clouds. Think of the animal kingdom, the tropical fish beyond counting, and you and me and all our sisters and brothers—what variety, what imagination!

Perhaps God’s most imaginative act was when he decided himself to become a Jewish carpenter, born of a

virgin, and to die on a cross to give an ultimate sign of love. And what imagination we see in Jesus. Think of his many stories and parables: the workers in the vineyard, the prodigal son, the good shepherd, the searching housewife, and so many more. Everyday things became fabric for his canvas—"Which of you when your child asks for an egg would give the child a stone?" And there are his many "signs." Did not his imagination reach a summit when he undertook to change bread into his very self and give us to eat? What a sign of self-giving and nurturing love!

His church, the one he founded, continued to use imagination in surrounding this eucharistic sign with a rich, symbolic liturgy taking many forms, ever adapting itself to different peoples and changing times. Imagination is behind the whole sacramental system and the never-ending challenge to find the language (a collection of creative symbols) to express the inexpressible.

The Scriptures resort to imaginative stories and myths to express what is too big for our logical concepts. Letting the Scriptures come alive in our imagination, we have the challenge to hear what they are saying to us today and to share that with others.

Yes, it is not only for the church as a whole, the church as the divinely constituted teacher, but for each one of us to use our imagination to enter into what is beyond and to share what we receive.

My nephew claims to have watched *The Lion King* twenty-three times with his little daughter. Little ones never tire of images and flights of imagination. Jesus said, "Unless you become as little ones, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." We need to let the Scriptures fill our imaginations and give us the images that will stir our emotions and motivate our wills to seek

wholeheartedly what is beyond, but what alone can satisfy our hearts, which are made for the divine.

With *lectio* we are prepared truly to seek God at the center, beyond all the thoughts and images, which are too small for God but which point the way and urge us on. There is a time to imagine. And there is a time to leave images behind.

## 2 | *Awesome and Humble*

PSALM 85

*LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin. Selah  
You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.*

*Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us.  
Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?  
Will you not revive us again,  
so that your people may rejoice in you?  
Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.*

*Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.  
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.*

*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
The LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.*

*Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.*

**W**e have been baptized into Christ. Our true life is our life in Christ. We live this life in liturgical mystery as the church year unfolds.

In early December, during the first days of Advent, we live in the expectation that comes from the promise of our God that we sinners do have a Savior. In the days that follow, we celebrate the coming of our Savior, a celebration that reaches its completion in the Feast of the Presentation on February 2. Mary, in fulfillment of the law of promise, brings her Son, the Son of God, into the midst of his chosen people. The scene tells us graphically of the role of the holy Virgin in the economy of salvation. It is through her that all comes to us. And the gift is met with Simeon's troubling prophecy: Mary's Son is set for the rise and fall of many.

As the green days following the Presentation begin to unfold, we experience our Savior's humanity. As he brings his good news to the multitudes, he is in danger of being mobbed. He seeks help. He uses Peter's small fragile bark as a pulpit—a symbolic act indeed. And Peter's humble service is amply rewarded: fish in abundance. Peter must shout for the help of others. Again, a most significant act: Peter needs the help of others to care for the Lord's catch.

This One who can herd fish by the hundreds into a net, he is the awesome One who set Isaiah trembling, in need of a fiery coal to purify his lips before he could speak of him (Isaiah 6:1–7). He is the awesome One, and now he needs a poor little boat to serve him. He created all and gave all, and he rewards the simple use of one of his gifts.

It is difficult to put it all together. Awesome God—humble preacher. We tend to fall on one side or the other. We keep him at a distance, in his heavens. We adore him, worship him, tremble before him, and for the most part try to forget him, because it is no fun to live trembling. Or we bring him down to our size: a good man, understanding, ready to help, not too demanding. Certainly not to be feared.

It is not either/or. It is both/and.

What do we do with this?

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the first Cistercians, gave some good advice flowing out of his own experience. Commenting on the Song of Songs, he developed the idea of our responding to the divine love with a kiss. He went on to speak of a kiss of the feet, of the hands, and finally of the lips. Moving on with his imagery, he says that the Lord has two feet: one of justice, the other of mercy. And then he speaks of his experience: If I cling too long to the foot of justice, I become full of fear and am close to despair. I must quickly move to the foot of mercy. But if I cling too long to the foot of mercy, I soon become very lax and remiss and in danger of losing my Lord. So I sing both of his mercy and of his justice.

Yes, Christ is the awesome God of Sinai, of Isaiah's visions, of the Book of Revelation. He is to be adored, and feared, and worshiped, and gratefully loved as the source of all that we are and have. And Christ is equally the gentle, loving carpenter from the hill town of Nazareth, who went about spreading good news, healing and comforting and forgiving all who turned to him. Undoubtedly, someday—maybe only in the vision to come—this will all come together for us. For now, if we would not fall on one side or the other, we, like Bernard,

need to watch ourselves, keep our balance, and sing of both the mercy and the justice of the Lord, of both the awesome God and the humble Son, who comes to us in love.

# 3 *Mary Brings Jesus*

LUKE 1:39–45

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

**F**or me one of the inspiring, courageous stories of the Bible is the story of the event that we call the Visitation. A beautiful young woman who has just become pregnant, who has just been told she is the mother of God, forgetting herself, heads off across an alien land to bring succor to an aged cousin.

I daresay most women, on becoming pregnant, especially with their first pregnancy, begin to center a bit more on self. Should the mother of God be running off to serve the mother of her son's

forerunner? Should it not be just the opposite? At least, should she not be allowed to rest at home in safety, surrounded by loving care? And how was Joseph going to handle this? Shouldn't she stay and work this out with him before her condition becomes obvious? And what of the dangers of the journey? The hostility of the Samaritans was proverbial, and she would be traveling alone.

The angel didn't tell Mary she should go. The divine messenger only announced her cousin's condition. Mary was certainly in a unique position to accompany her elderly cousin in her extraordinary pregnancy, and no doubt a part of Mary longed to have a female friend with whom she could share her own growing experience. But her compassionate heart was for her cousin. So off she went.

Only on seven occasions do the Gospels recount a word from the mouth of the mother of God. But on this occasion we are not even told what the words were. Perhaps it is to leave the space open, for when Mary comes to us her presence is expressed in so many different ways. In any case, cousin Elizabeth clues us in: "As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting . . ." The simple experience of Mary's presence was all that mattered.

Then what? The child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy, being filled with Holy Spirit. Elizabeth herself was filled with a discerning spirit, calling Mary "the mother of my Lord"—she recognized her at once.

I believe this particular incident is recounted in the opening pages of the Gospel, as our Savior begins his salvific mission, to invite us to be aware of Mary's oft-hidden but very important role in the story of salvation.

It is she who brings Christ, to sanctify, to fill with leaping joy, to enlighten, to console and comfort and strengthen. This is Mary's mission in history and in the life of each one of us.

It is Mary who brings Christ to us. And she brings us a faith that can withstand even the test of a Holy Saturday, when the faith of all others seems to fail. When we sense her presence, we gain courage, comfort, hope, and joy and direction.

We do not know how Elizabeth, who had concealed herself during this time of wondrous pregnancy, and Mary spent the next three months. But we can well imagine the sharing that went on. It was all new for Elizabeth, though she was a few months ahead of her young cousin in the maternal experience. But Mary was the one of blessed faith, a faith Elizabeth's elderly husband had failed to bring her, and Mary's faith helped to make sense of Elizabeth's mysterious pregnancy.

If we give Mary a chance, not only will she bring Christ ever more fully into our lives with the joy of salvation, she will abide with us. She will be our life, our sweetness, and our hope. Mary will be with us as we face the vicissitudes and mysteries of life. If we have the ears to hear them, the words of the dying Christ still ring in our ears: "Behold your mother." Mary will come into our lives with her divine Son to the extent that we are open and ready to welcome them.

# 4 | *John the Baptizer, Witness and Friend*

LUKE 1:57–66

*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.*

**I**t was the talk of Jerusalem and all the region. After all, the child’s father had been struck dumb right in the temple. His mother was well on in years. Then suddenly his father could speak again. And they gave the child a curious name, at least curious for that priestly family. The people

who heard about John's birth didn't need to hear about Mary's visit, they didn't need to know that this was the long-awaited prophetic moment, to know that something mysterious was happening. What was going on? Who was this child—another Samuel or Samson? What did the future hold for him? And for them?

Even today, John's birth is uniquely celebrated (his birthday is celebrated on June 24). Along with his cousin and Savior, and the Savior's mother, his is the only birth so celebrated throughout the Christian world.

Monks and nuns have always looked to John as a special patron and model. Like him, they go apart, seeking solitude for prayer and communion with God. His ascetical ideals inspire them, and can indeed inspire all Christians. It was a rigorous asceticism—I don't know what modern nutritionists would say about a diet of honey and wild locusts. Maybe it contains all the necessary nutrients. It did turn out a man of exceptional vigor. In any case, John can call all of us to a simpler life.

But of greater significance to us is that he was "a burning and shining lamp" (John 5:35). All his austerity was in service of a mission: to be a clear witness to Christ, a person who would show others how to prepare for Christ, how to find Christ. Even to the first apostles, it was he who pointed the way. John gives witness to us, and he shows us that witness should be an important part of our lives as Christians.

One reason why monks and nuns go apart is to be clear signs, clear witnesses to Christ and his teaching, a prophetic witness that there is a God and that God is worthy of our all. Likewise, every Christian, as he or she walks through this world, wants to be a clear sign pointing to Christ, witnessing to what he taught, this not so much by words, though they have their place, but more

by the way the Christian lives, speaks, and responds to others.

When Jesus spoke of John, he pointed to something more significant than the prophetic witness. He spoke of John as his friend—the friend of the Bridegroom. John’s whole life was centered on Christ. He shared profoundly in Christ’s life and mission from the very beginning, even in the womb. Like a good “best man,” his concern was to do all he could to facilitate things for the Bridegroom. With selfless love he proclaimed: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). The selfishness and self-centeredness in our lives must indeed decrease, so that Christ can fill our lives more and more, so that the Christ within us may shine forth more clearly and powerfully. But more, there is to be between each one of us and the Lord a tender, deep, rich intimacy—a true friendship.

The Cistercians have always called their monasteries “schools of love.” For this, above all, they go apart: to learn how to be true friends with the Lord, to grow into that friendship, to decrease so he can increase; not only by spending time in prayer, Scripture, and contemplation, but in a total gift of themselves to the community in loving service. Every Christian community should be a school of love, where each comes to know and love Jesus as Friend, and to love and serve him in each other, in the least of his sisters and brothers.

May John, the man from the desert, the ascetic, the burning and shining lamp, help us all to be true friends.

# 5 *Tension in the Holy Family*

LUKE 2:40–52

*The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

*Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.*

*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*

On the Feast of the Holy Family (the Sunday after Christmas) we hear the Gospel account of the loss and finding of Jesus at the time of his family's pilgrimage to Jerusalem, when he was twelve, a story that has many touching aspects

What family could be holier than this family? And yet here Jesus causes worry, tension, and anxiety, and Mary gives vent to her anger—with all the pathos of a good Jewish mother.

By God's mercy and grace, our monastic community is a holy family, and we come from holy families. Yet some of us monks have painfully had to live through the experience of causing disappointment and anger in our families, when we left them and joined our monastic family. Many of those whom we loved saw our joining this family as something like a bad marriage—at least until they got to know this wonderful family we had joined.

Within the daily life of our monastic family, as in any family, some cause tension and others give vent to their anger. Looking to the Holy Family, we need to remember that this can be done without any fault or sin. Certainly Jesus was sinless. It may seem to us that he could have warned Mary and Joseph. He didn't. Why? Perhaps circumstances were such that this was not possible. The occasion and inspiration to be about his Father's business arose, and he could not get to them in time.

Even if we grant that, I must confess that if I were the father of that twelve-year-old and he answered his mother's expression of anguish the way Jesus did, I would have been sorely tempted to let him experience a bit of my anger. The fact is, we often do not really understand what is going on in the other. What seems to us as dead wrong, they, according to their lights, see as the right

thing to do. And they find it hard to understand why everyone else doesn't see it that way too.

We cannot control all the emotions that rise in us. What we can do is this. As persons guided by our reason, enlightened by faith and by Holy Spirit through the gifts of the Spirit, we can decide what we will do with our emotions. Mary on this occasion, and perhaps on many other occasions with her teenager, decided to express her anger, or at least her distress. "Child, why have you treated us like this?" (I can easily hear my own mother's voice here.)

If for a while there was tension, incomprehension, and even anger, in the end full harmony and due order were restored. The family returned home, and Jesus was subject to his parents. This was the climate for growth. And Jesus grew in wisdom, age, and grace. Here is the important point of this teaching (and the gospel stories are meant not so much to relate historical events as to teach): It is human to have misunderstandings, to cause tension and pain, to feel deeply about things. But whatever the misunderstanding, pain, or grievance, whatever the feelings and emotions, we need to let them go, and go on being a family of caring love.

If this Holy Family could experience such tension and anger, then indeed we should not be surprised to find a certain amount of the same in our own holy families. If we can accept that even the holiest and sinless do cause tension, and do express their frustration and anger—accept it and pass beyond it and go on in a climate of love and care—we will have families in which we all grow in wisdom, age, and grace.

## 6 *Good Work*

1 THESSALONIANS 4:9–12

*Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.*

**S**t. Benedict certainly held labor in high regard: “When they live by the labor of their hands, like our Fathers and the Apostles, then they are truly monks.” He could have chosen a yet even more sublime model: the Lord Jesus himself. The greater part of the short time Jesus, God’s own Son, spent on earth was spent as a laborer, planing wood and fitting it, delivering orders and bringing in supplies. Later he would choose mostly laborers to form his chosen band, though “white collar” workers were not left out. Paul, that apostle-come-lately, though a well-educated rabbi, prided himself on living by the labor of his own hands. The Fathers of Egypt, the