



LIVING JESUS

THIS STORY LEADS A SIX-PART SERIES EXPLORING JESUS THROUGH THE LENS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION.

Formed by Christ

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It was an uncomfortable prayer practice. I was invited to prayerfully imagine that I was standing before Christ on the cross, asking three questions, “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?”

At first, I resisted mightily. I preferred Jesus off the cross. Actually, I realized, I preferred Jesus at a distance. I preferred Jesus from the back of the crowd, when I had time. I didn’t want to get too close. The intimacy of standing before the suffering Jesus was too much to bear. I wanted to look away.

This insight emerged toward the beginning of my nine-month journey through the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises several years ago. I had committed to a daily encounter with Christ through imaginative prayer with scripture, directed by a wise and gentle woman whom I met once a week. The instruction was to read a gospel story and let the scene come to life in my imagination. It was an exercise in entering and encountering the story, not just reading about it.

I struggled at first to release my analytical mind, which wanted to describe, explain, and assign meaning. My director would encourage me, “Where are you in this story? What do you say to Jesus? What does he say to you?”

This was a foreign prayer form for me. I had learned a lot about Jesus, but I had never had a direct conversation with him in prayer. Suddenly, I was spending time each day with Jesus - watching him interact with the Pharisees, inviting Zacchaeus down from the tree, healing Bartimaeus, feeding a large crowd and grumbling disciples, calming the storm, washing the feet of friends.

At first I felt like an imposter in the stories. I was an observer, usually in a dark corner somewhere, feeling slightly embarrassed and apologetic if Jesus glanced in my direction. Gradually, I let myself relax into the imaginative prayer form and began to talk with other scriptural characters—to let the stories of Jesus become my own stories. I wasn’t just observing or reading scripture; I was participating in scripture. It was becoming alive for me in surprising and transformational ways. I was getting to know Jesus, to befriend him, to walk with him, and slowly I was letting him get to know me. I was living the invitation from Mathew 11:29 (The Message):

Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it.

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

A relationship was growing, and I began to see my everyday life and interactions through the lens of the narratives that were forming me. Becoming steeped in the gospel stories, I returned to them as vibrant memories. They were shaping my life experience, challenging my choices, and defining my integrity. The mission of Jesus Christ no longer was a task I needed to accomplish. It was an invitation that flowed from a deep relationship with Christ, expressed in myriad ways throughout my daily living.

In *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*, M. Robert Mulholland Jr. describes spiritual formation as “a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”

Having a Jesus-lens in daily life can be disruptive and life-giving. In challenging relationships, would I cast stones of judgment or humbly recognize my own shortcomings? When my own opinions were clouding meaningful conversations, would I remove the log from my own eye? How could I pass by the man holding up a sign that said, “hungry, anything helps” after spending time in prayer with Jesus feeding the 5,000? Could my granola bar and trail mix be loaves and fishes for a stranger in need?

I began to recognize the power of St. Ignatius’ colloquy with Christ on the cross (the prayer I described at the beginning). It was about an intimate encounter with the suffering Christ that quickly could reveal and dissolve anything trivial or superfluous in my life. It demanded what was real and opened my eyes to see how my life and choices felt in the context of the reality of suffering in the world around me. It grounded and deepened my response. The question it asked of me has become familiar: “*What matters most?*”

It was hard truth offered tenderly. It sharply revealed what I most needed to see with unfathomable love and grace.

In a time when the name of Jesus is used to marginalize, harm, divide, and oppress, it is critical that Christians “reclaim Jesus” in ways that bring redemption, healing, transformation, and new life. Growing in our discipleship and learning more about Jesus as a historical person in his own context is a critical part of this necessary reclaiming. It also is critical that the church grow in relationship with Christ as a living reality in our lives and world today. The late John English of the Society of Jesus urged that:

...a significant dimension for a Christian community is its growth in intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ, who is the image and source of Christian ideals, desires, and hopes.... Intimacy, then, is a key element in a spirituality of action for our world...Jesus enters into our very life experiences, with all their messiness and limitations.

- Spiritual Intimacy and Community:
An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community

In his closing message of the 2019 World Conference, President Steve Veazey asked:

Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One? Or are we retreating from Jesus by reverting to our old humanity and its destructive ways of interacting with others and creation?

This isn’t just an intellectual exercise - it is a spiritual posture. This question is rich and powerful in the image it evokes. What does it really mean to be Community of Christ? Are our daily lives steeped in the reality and presence of Jesus incarnate here and now? Is the story of Jesus our own story?

Moving toward Jesus is more than doing and saying the right things. It is a continual conversion of heart to better align with Christ as the source of our identity and calling in our daily lives and choices. It is a spiritual practice we return to again and again.

Spiritual Practice: Imaginative Prayer

If you would like to practice the Ignatian way of praying with scripture, consider the following invitation and list of possible texts. Imaginative prayer is one of many spiritual practices that can create space for the Spirit to form us in the loving image of Christ.

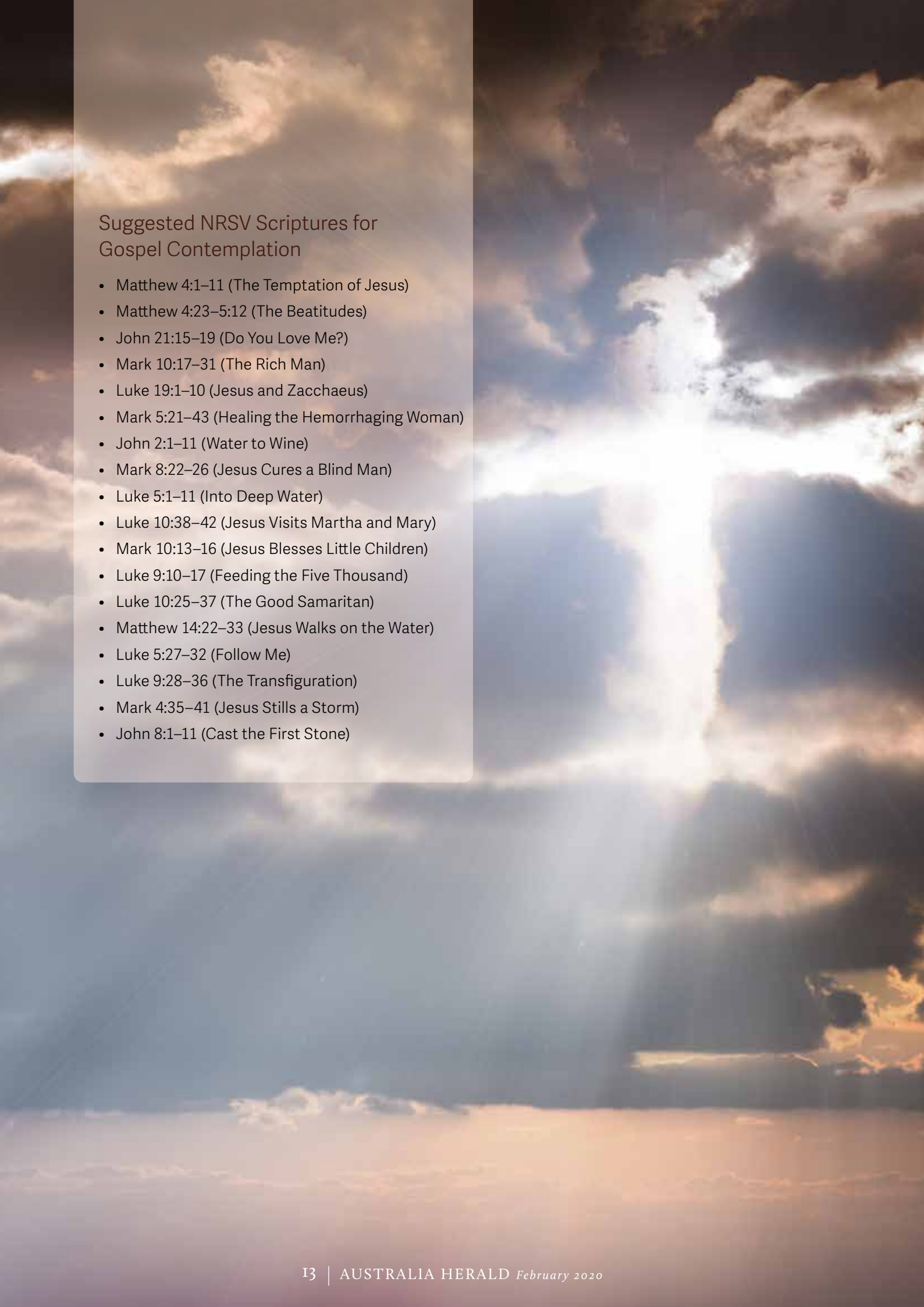
Settle into prayerful silence and read the text slowly. Enter the story by bringing it to life in your imagination. Notice your surroundings and engage your senses. What do you see, hear, smell, touch in your imagination that brings the story to life? Don’t worry about trying to replicate the scene with historical accuracy—it may take place in a modern context. Set your imagination free in prayer.

As you enter the scene, notice where you are in the story. Are you one of the characters? Are you an observer? Talk with the characters in the story. Notice what you ask or what is asked of you. Kevin O’Brien of the Society of Jesus reflects:

...the Holy Spirit makes present a mystery of Jesus’ life in a way that is meaningful for you now. Use your imagination to dig deeper in the story so that God may communicate with you in a personal, evocative way.

- The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in Daily Life





Suggested NRSV Scriptures for Gospel Contemplation

- Matthew 4:1–11 (The Temptation of Jesus)
- Matthew 4:23–5:12 (The Beatitudes)
- John 21:15–19 (Do You Love Me?)
- Mark 10:17–31 (The Rich Man)
- Luke 19:1–10 (Jesus and Zacchaeus)
- Mark 5:21–43 (Healing the Hemorrhaging Woman)
- John 2:1–11 (Water to Wine)
- Mark 8:22–26 (Jesus Cures a Blind Man)
- Luke 5:1–11 (Into Deep Water)
- Luke 10:38–42 (Jesus Visits Martha and Mary)
- Mark 10:13–16 (Jesus Blesses Little Children)
- Luke 9:10–17 (Feeding the Five Thousand)
- Luke 10:25–37 (The Good Samaritan)
- Matthew 14:22–33 (Jesus Walks on the Water)
- Luke 5:27–32 (Follow Me)
- Luke 9:28–36 (The Transfiguration)
- Mark 4:35–41 (Jesus Stills a Storm)
- John 8:1–11 (Cast the First Stone)