

Jesus and the Barbecued Fish Breakfast

A GOSPEL STORY SAMPLER
INSPIRED BY THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES
OF SAINT IGNATIUS

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone loves a good story. Families share stories about heroic grandparents who moved across the country to start a new life in the face of daunting obstacles. With great delight friends recount stories of shared misadventures during their time together in college. We get hooked on biographies of famous people whose early lives explain much about the history that follows and are equally fascinated by stories of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. And we love the movies, whether historical or make-believe. We crowd into theaters to enjoy big-budget productions that feature exceptional acting, amazing special effects, and, most especially, memorable stories.

The gospels are chock full of stories. Jesus was a master storyteller. He captivated the crowds with tales of wandering livestock, annoying neighbors, and devious employees. The stories were popular and memorable, passed down from one generation to the next and eventually preserved in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Of course, the gospel writers also included stories about Jesus and the people he encountered. They told stories about astrologers following a star, blind men regaining their sight, and Jesus sharing a meal with a collection of unsavory characters.

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This book is a sampler of memorable gospel stories. I invite you to imagine the shaggy, forlorn sheep, the skeptical Samaritan woman pouring a cup of cool water for Jesus, and the angry money changer whose table was just overturned. I also invite you to join me in pondering what these stories might mean for us.

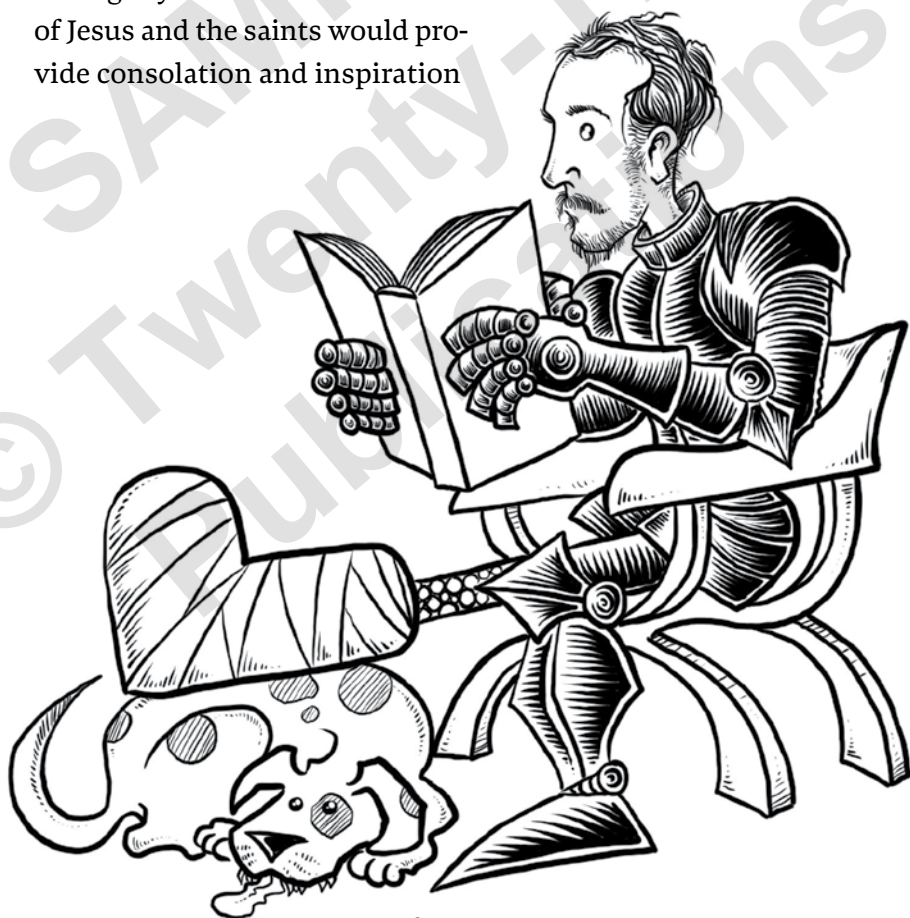
Stories are meant to be enjoyed. They also play a critical role in helping us understand our lives and our world and in connecting us with others. Family stories connect us with our histories and shape who we are. Engaged couples learn about each other and grow into an extended family through the tales they tell. We recount stories from our nation's history to remind us of who we are. Memorable stories from biographies or movies resonate with our own stories. They shed light on our experiences of courage, hope, or friendship. They tell us something about what it means to be human.

For those of us who are Christian, the gospels provide a special treasury of stories. These stories help us understand ourselves and the world from the perspective of faith. They help us know and grow closer to God and give direction to our lives. We believe that Jesus is God's great revelation to us and that we come to know Jesus through the stories about him. Moreover, the message Jesus wanted to share with us was very often in the form of stories. Jesus did not spell out many rules, really. He offered explanation and instruction on occasion but more often told us stories, stories to live by, stories that would shape our lives.

Included among those whose lives were forever changed by the gospel stories is St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. In 1521, while still a knight in the service of a

Spanish duke, Ignatius was wounded in the leg while helping to defend the city of Pamplona from French attack. During his recovery he began reading a book on the life of Christ and another on the lives of the saints to help pass the time.

Ignatius still daydreamed about knighthood and derring-do, but little by little his imagination was filled with stories of Jesus and the saints. Ignatius noticed a difference in his imaginings. Tales of knighthood would deliver some brief enjoyment but would leave him feeling dry and dissatisfied. Stories of Jesus and the saints would provide consolation and inspiration



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long after he finished reading them. Ignatius began to draw closer to God, to see his life in a different light, and to imagine new possibilities for the future.

Soon after he regained his health, Ignatius began composing a set of instructions that would help other people grow closer to God. Not surprisingly, gospel stories figured prominently in what would become his Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius invites us to contemplate gospel scenes, to put ourselves in the middle of the stories and let them play out. We hear what the characters say and watch what they do. We feel the hot sun, the wind, and the waves. We hear the possessed man bellow from the back of the synagogue and taste the fish cooked over an open fire. We are drawn into the story and share the hope, fear, or frustration of the characters. St. Ignatius knew that as we are drawn into the stories of the gospels, we begin making connections to other stories that have shaped our lives and start to see the world in a new way.

St. Ignatius also suggested that we simply ponder gospel stories to try to understand them a little better. We might consider a detail of the story that catches our attention, like the farmer busily building his new barn by lamplight while his family is having supper. We might wonder about the motivation of certain characters in the story, like the nine lepers cured by Jesus who never returned to say “thank you.” We spend some time reflecting on our own experiences in light of the story and ponder what the story might mean for us.

This gospel story sampler is inspired by the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Each chapter recounts one of the events in the life of Jesus or one of his captivating parables. I add details to help bring the stories to life. These details are

not included in the gospels but are consistent with what we know about Jesus and the world in which he lived. I invite you to be drawn into the stories and let your imagination explore.

I connect the gospel narratives to other stories that have special meaning to me and resonate with my experiences. The stubborn refusal of people to acknowledge that Jesus healed a blind man reminds me of the equally stubborn response that Copernicus received. The adventures of the lost sheep remind me of the time I wandered aimlessly through the Bronx. I hope that you will be able to recognize connections with your own favorite stories. Making such connections enriches and sharpens the gospel accounts and brings those narratives into the constellation of stories that tell us who we are.

Finally, I suggest what the gospel accounts might mean for us. I propose how overflowing barns in ancient Palestine might be related to contemporary savings accounts and how people in our own day reveal as much faith and hope as the Jerusalem widow who happily contributed her two copper coins.

The stories are ordered chronologically for those who might like to follow the narrative from the beginning through to the end. But you can sample the stories in whatever way you like. Perhaps you will want to start with a few of your favorites before sampling a few that are a little less familiar.

We all love good stories, and the gospels are chock full of them. Stories enlighten us, change us, and connect us to others. I hope that this book provides an opportunity for you to discover and delight in the gospel stories again.



1

LUKE TOLD THE STORY WELL

Luke 1:1-4

Luke sat in the small, dusty courtyard outside his home at a makeshift table with pen in hand trying to collect his thoughts. He was composing a grand narrative of the life and teaching of Jesus for his patron, Theophilus. The family goat trotted by chewing on a recently completed parchment. Luke yelled at the goat, but it was too late; Luke would have to rewrite that chapter. Luke's eight-year-old son and eleven-year-old daughter rushed into the courtyard in the midst of a big argument that they wanted their father to settle. Before Luke could even begin to formulate a response, his wife stepped out from the house, wiping her hands on a towel, and corralled the two children. She explained that their father

was trying to write a story. Such was life for our first-century Syrian author.

The author of the Gospel of Luke was a Greek-speaking Gentile living in Antioch, a large, bustling city in modern-day Turkey. He wrote the gospel sometime around AD 80. It is very likely that the author was Luke, one-time companion of Paul, who is briefly mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. Although anonymous authors commonly attributed their work to a famous disciple like Peter, Paul, or John, no other author would attribute his work to Luke because Luke was not famous at all. Little-known Luke wrote the story and signed his name to it.

He might not have been famous, but he was talented. He was a good writer and employed a classical Greek style. Luke was smart, well-educated, and creative. He was familiar with both Jewish and Greek tradition and culture. In fact, Luke used so many big words that people think he might have been a physician. Luke stitched together stories from Mark's gospel and other sources in an engaging narrative that captures the essence of who Jesus is. Storytelling is an art, not merely a recitation of historical events. The way one frames or describes those events provides the underlying meaning and interpretation. Luke was very good at it.

The Gospel of Luke reminds us of the importance of storytelling. Stories provide meaning to the events of our lives. A college professor in Denver teaches a history course titled "The Stories from Wartime." He recognizes that the experience and meaning of war are not captured by facts and figures alone. On college retreats, student leaders share stories about their lives that interpret key events. For all of us,

we grow in our faith and share faith with others through the stories we tell.

In writing the gospel story, Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit. We do not know exactly how the Holy Spirit guided Luke, but it is unlikely that the author was drawn into a peaceful, mystical trance by which words simply flowed onto the parchment. The Holy Spirit does not work like that, at least not very often. The Holy Spirit usually works through human hearts, minds, and wills in subtle ways. We have to be open to that Spirit. And we must discern that Spirit, as St. Ignatius Loyola would say, because it is not always clear when we are being guided by the Spirit and when we are being guided by our own agendas.

St. Luke stayed connected with God through prayer on a regular basis. He worked at overcoming his fears, angers, and prejudices so that he would be free to write as God might have it. If our work is going to become God's work, we have to do the same things. We have to stay connected with God and prayerfully discern where the Holy Spirit might be leading us.

Of course, one of the most notable things about Luke's gospel is that it has survived to our own day. Plenty of people were writing stories about Jesus that were popular for a while but gradually dropped out of use. The Church eventually settled on four gospels to be included in the New Testament. The criteria were pretty simple. The gospels had to go back to the time of the apostles, to express well what Christians had come to believe, and to be widely read by the faithful. The Gospel of Luke was commonly used by small, local communities when they gathered for liturgy, first in Antioch and then in lots of other towns too. Luke's

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account told the story well and helped make Jesus present to the communities when they read it. Personally, I am happy that Luke's gospel made the cut. It has some terrific stories not found anywhere else: stories of Martha and Mary and Zacchaeus, parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son, the annunciation, the visit of the shepherds, and the appearance on the road to Emmaus.

This part of the history reminds us that a good story requires at least two people: someone to tell the story and someone to listen to it. The telling and the listening were important back in the first century and are important still. Theophilus and the people of ancient Antioch got to hear the story first. Now it is our turn. When we hear, enjoy, and ponder Luke's account and the other gospels, our faith grows and Jesus becomes present to us. May we continue to profit from listening to the words of this wise and talented man. May we too be open to God's Spirit in the work we are called to do.

Questions to ponder

- *In writing his gospel account, how might Luke have known when he was being guided by his own agenda rather than by the Holy Spirit?*
- *What story from your own life helps explain who you are today?*
- *What is your favorite gospel story? Why do you like it?*

THE FIRST QUESTION AT THE END OF EACH CHAPTER PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION OF THE STORY. THE NEXT TWO QUESTIONS SUGGEST POSSIBLE CONNECTIONS WITH YOUR OWN LIFE.