



Sauntering Through Scripture



“This may be the most delightful journey through Scripture I have ever taken. Sr. Genevieve brings us right into the dusty sheep pens, windy olive groves, and starry, starry nights of ancient Palestine, and then, with great warmth and laser-like insight, offers us the kind of practical spiritual wisdom we have long been seeking and never will forget.”

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A Meditation on the Mystery of the Mass*

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—Robert F. Morneau, Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus
of the Diocese of Green Bay

“This gentle book encourages us to encounter the people and stories of the Bible in our own lives. Sr. Genevieve Glen has a gift for making us see even familiar stories with fresh eyes. As a monastic she is immersed in Scripture, day in and day out, and this book strikes me as one fruit of that life. Sr. Genevieve invites us all to share in the wisdom she’s gleaned.”

—Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk*

Sauntering Through Scripture

A Book of Reflections

Genevieve Glen, OSB

A Give Us This Day Book



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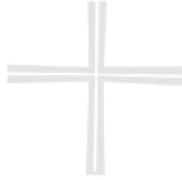
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Introduction 11

PASSAGES

Before the Fire 16

Exodus 3:1-5

Unzip that Tent! 18

Numbers 11:10; Psalm 106:25

In Our Town Tonight 20

Luke 2:4-7

The Ax at the Root 22

Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23

Learner 25

Luke 2:52

Too Small 27

Micah 5:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Ordinary 29

Matthew 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:16-30

The Logic of Paradox 32

Luke 14:28-33

The Company of Sinners 33

Matthew 9:10-11; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:29-32

The Paralytic: A Portrait in Miniature 35

Matthew 9:1-8

The Other Nine 37

Luke 17:12-19

Sheep, Goats, and Shock Therapy 39

Matthew 25:31-46

8 *Sauntering Through Scripture*

Finders Keepers 41

Luke 15:1-32

By Pickaxe or Angel 45

Matthew 27:57-28:15

What the Tomb Proclaims 48

Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20

The Bifröst 50

Luke 18:8

Long-Fingered Light 53

Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20

Ghost 55

Luke 24:36-37

PEOPLE

The Call of St. Matthew: A New Creation 58

Matthew 9:9-13

On the Brink: Zacchaeus 59

Luke 19:1-10

A Daughter of Abraham 61

Luke 13:10-13

Barn Builder 63

Luke 12:13-21

At the Pharisee's Dinner Party 65

Luke 7:36-50

Martha and Mary: Disciples of the Lord 69

Luke 10:38-42; John 11:17-27

The Woman Taken in Adultery 72

John 8:2-12

The Widow: Two Small Coins, So Many Questions 77

Luke 21:1-4

The Bethesda Story: The Man at the Pool 78

John 5:1-14

Judas: Mirror and Mystery 82

Matthew 26:14-16

The Cup: James and John 84

Mark 10:35-45

Sarah 86

A Story

Salt Tears 89

A Prose Poem

Palace Slave 90

A Memoir

The Rich Young Man 94

A Memoir

St. Lawrence of Rome 96

A Memoir

PRAYERS AND PSALMS

Hail, Holy Queen (*Salve Regina*) 102

In Paradisum 104

Anima Christi 106

Perpetual Light 108

O Wisdom 110

Tower of Ivory, Pray for Us! 112

Blessing of Work 114

Night Prayer for the Sick 116

A Prayer for All Seasons 118

Lamb of God: A Prayer of Fragments 120

Magnificat 122

Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary 124

Psalm 24: The Meeting 126

Psalm 81: God in the Storm 132

Psalm 121: Travel Prayer 137

Psalm 130: Prayer for the Dead (*De Profundis*) 139

Introduction

Let's go for a walk. I know a place. So do you. It's a country rich in landscapes of all sorts. And it's as close as your Bible. As we travel through these pages, we find ourselves in a small village here, and there in a busy commercial town by the sea. Here there's a sandy corral full of noisy sheep and goats milling around, and there lies a green garden where the dead find a peaceful resting place. The long, dusty roads will take us to nomads' tents, beside pleasant waters, past fruitful fields and olive groves, and through a stand of sycamore trees. We will visit a stable, a rich man's house, a royal palace, and on more than one occasion, the great Temple in the city of Jerusalem. Of course, we will inevitably find our way into the desert, where God led the chosen people millennia ago and calls us still. We will even follow the path to the very edge of the world of time to see if we can catch a glimpse of what lies beyond it.

On this expedition, though, we are not searching out scenery for its own sake. We are exploring not the topography of Palestine and its neighbors but the landscapes of human experience that unfold there. Whether we encounter Palestinian villagers or an Idumean king's household, we will soon discover that whoever or wherever the original protagonists, the experiences are our own. You have read the Bible, so you know that already.

No matter where in those pages our travel takes us, everywhere we go, we will find stories and the people who inhabit them. The Scriptures offer us a rich gallery of characters both factual and fictional. As we saunter through, we will stop and shake hands with a few of them: Lot's wife, Martha and Mary, James and John, the rich young man, St. Lawrence of Rome. Wait!

St. Lawrence of Rome? How did he get in there? He lived—and died famously—in Rome, in the third century, long after

the last pages of the New Testament had been written and the writers had laid down their styluses and quills. Truth be told, he arrived in my imagination one August 10, his liturgical feast day, wanting his story told, rather like a certain wizard boy who visited a then-unknown writer on an English train. St. Lawrence's story seems to read like an extension of the Gospels, so he seemed to fit with those who had gone before him. But the real reason he's here is that he insisted, and he deserved better than refusal. St. Lawrence is a fictional elaboration of a historical figure. I make no apologies. According to the literary scholars, the Scriptures offer us whole novellas centered on fictional characters: Jonah and Esther are well-known examples. And Jesus certainly makes up pithy short stories about characters like the woman who lost her coin and the barn builder, whom you will find in these pages. We call his stories parables, for so they are, but we often think and speak about their protagonists as if they had actually walked the roads of Palestine. The "prodigal son" seems as real to contemporary imagination as the kid next door who ran off with part of the family funds and wasted them all in clubs and fine restaurants and glitzy parties till hunger or remorse brought the wastrel home. So, near the end of the "People" section, when you come to a piece subtitled "A Story," "A Memoir," or "A Prose Poem," be warned: these are fictional vignettes spun around biblical characters or tales of the ones I call "the never-were," like the Palace Slave.

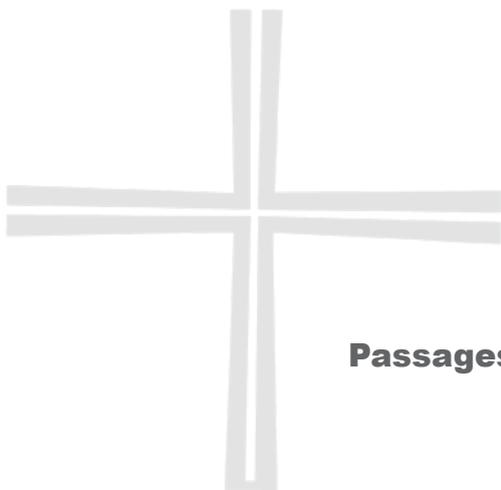
Biblical pilgrims must, of course, pray as we travel this land where all the ground is holy. The Scriptures provide us with a long-beloved prayer book in the psalter, but they have also inspired many later Christian prayers. You will find here a number of reflections on those prayers. You will also find reflections on some of the psalms themselves.

To a piece, these reflections are the fruit of my *lectio divina*, a centuries-old approach to the prayerful reading of Scripture.

I hope they will also support you in this ancient practice. Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, among others, has taught us the wisdom of *sauntering* through this land of Scripture—traveling slowly, booking no room for the night in advance, setting no deadline for arriving at journey’s end. The word “saunter” means “walk leisurely with no apparent aim” or “to walk along in a slow and relaxed manner” or “to walk about in an idle or leisurely manner.” Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) offers an etymology that illuminates the title of this book, though it is no longer widely accepted. He says that pilgrims headed for the “Sainte Terre” (the Holy Land) came to be called “Sainte-Terrers” or “saunterers.” A second etymology, also somewhat discredited, proposes a derivation from a Middle English word meaning “to muse” or “to wonder.” Both capture the spirit of this little venture.

One last note: Scripture scholars have increased by leaps and bounds our insights into the texts we read and pray in our liturgical and personal lives. We know far more than we used to about how texts may have come into being, by whom and for whom they may have been written, and why. We know better than we did the tricky decisions that confront translators. However, there comes a time when the scholars themselves would invite us to lay the work of archaeology, linguistics, and textual study aside in favor of simply reading and praying the histories and parables, the laws and the prayers just as they lie before us when we open the pages. Since this is a book of reflections, not of critical and informative studies, that is what I have chosen to do, enlightened, I hope, by the hard work of scholars but not, in these pages, continuing it.

So, let us go for a walk . . .



Passages

Before the Fire

Exodus 3:1-5

To someone living outside a monastery, the Benedictine commitment to stability might seem odd. Yet isn't stability a good state for everyone, no matter their vocation? Of course, but what Benedictines promise is stability of place. Those of us who live in monasteries promise to stay put there as the central locus of our monastic life. We may come and go, depending on the monastery's lifestyle, but we always remain members of this particular house.

Long before St. Benedict wrote his Rule, Moses stood as a primary figure of stability—with equal oddity when you consider it. Think about Moses' first encounter with God at Horeb. He catches sight of a bush burning without being toasted to cinders. Moses ambles over to take a look. God calls out to him from the heart of the bush: "Take off your shoes! The place where you're standing is holy ground!" (Exod 3:5). How strange! Do bare feet really show more reverence than sandaled ones? Most restaurants don't seem to think so: "No shirt, no shoes, no service." Islamic custom dictates taking off one's shoes to enter the mosque, but Christian churches are traditionally more concerned about covering up body parts than uncovering them. Why bare feet?

Whatever the original explanation of the story, we can see Moses' bare feet as a challenge to honesty and commitment. To allow a part of ourselves to be seen uncovered is to allow ourselves to be seen as we are, minus the masks and makeup. To take off our shoes, especially in a stony wilderness replete with nasty things like scorpions, is to make it impossible to run away. We accept a position of truthfulness, powerlessness, and stability on this holy ground, felt through the soles of our own bare feet.

Moses remained faithful to the commitment he made in taking off his shoes. Certainly, he put them back on again after a while. Certainly, he became a powerful leader. Certainly, he lived a nomadic life from that moment to the very end. But how could one constantly on the move be a model of stability? Quite simply, Moses lived all his life in unveiled truth before the Holy One in whose footsteps he traveled (Exod 34:34). He carried the center of his stability with him. Or rather, the center of his stability carried him (Deut 1:30-31). God traveled with the people always. And when God stopped, the people stopped and pitched their tents.

Geography is not the point, then. Stability of presence is. Wherever God goes, we go; wherever God stops, we stop. Wherever God is, the surrounding ground is holy, whether it looks holy to us or not. And not all holy ground lies outside us. In our spiritual lives, for example, we might not care for this style of liturgy, or that passage of Scripture, or this form of prayer. But if God is there for us, we had better be there for God—and take off our shoes, settle down, and feel the reality of the holiness that pervades this “place” through the soles of our naked and defenseless feet.

The Sinai wilderness was not, in Moses’ day, the Sinai Hilton: it was wild, threatening, low on human comforts—and holy, once the bush burst into flames there.

