



Don't be afraid.

I have rescued you.
I have called you by name;
now you belong to me.
When you cross deep rivers,
I will be with you,
and you won't drown.
When you walk through fire,
you won't be burned
or scorched by the flames.
To me, you are very dear,
and I love you.

—Isaiah 43:1–2, 4

WEEK 13

God Prepares the Way

Guide: The Promise

The early pages of Jesus' photo album show us God's patient and faithful preparation to send Jesus among us. We find the photo of God calling Abram and Sarai to leave their homeland to begin a new journey. There are the births of Isaac and Jacob/Israel. The album has page after page of photos of the long slavery in Egypt, of Moses's birth and life, the Exodus and liberation, the forty years of wandering in the desert, and the early years in the Promised Land. From desert nomads to a people with a covenant: *you be my people and I will be your God.*

God sent judges to adjudicate differences between the people and then God appointed kings to rule them and then prophets to challenge them and their corrupt kings. As with any family photo album, we are puzzled and perhaps shocked to see the incredible infidelity of the people, the division of the nation, and its demise in the Babylonian captivity. Then there is the rebuilding of the temple and those final years of occupation and relative peace that came with Rome's occupation.

There is an *Advent* feel to this week of the retreat. In our growing desire to know, love, and be with Jesus, we are taken

back to the years of anticipation. There's the *promise* of a land, of a king, of an everlasting kingdom. The prophets speak of what it will be like when "the day of the Lord" comes. This all tells us so much about the mission of Jesus. It will help us understand the confused expectations he will face, the rejection he will encounter, the paradoxical way he will fulfill those promises.

This week we let our minds and hearts listen to the story that prepared the way for Jesus to enter into our world and our lives. As lovers, we want to know everything about Jesus. Looking through all those early photos, we appreciate, perhaps as never before, God's fidelity and the enormous mission that Jesus was born to take up.

Throughout the background times this week, we reflect on whatever comes to our hearts. How much more do we understand who he is? How is our love growing? What do we feel drawn to express to the one who is showing us his incredible photo album?

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

One of the realities we have been more sensitive to over the past decades is the importance of our backgrounds, who we are. Lots of factors go into shaping who we are today, but the influence our ancestors had on us is very important. What we are doing this week is getting in touch with the ancestry of Jesus.

This is not an intellectual exercise. We don't have to be Scripture scholars to do this. It's really very simple. And our desire is clear. We've been loved by Jesus. We want to know Jesus more completely. We will spend a good number of weeks ahead going through the Gospels to get close to Jesus in the stories of what he did on earth. This week will give us a taste of who he is and the context he came into.

Throughout this week—in all the background moments we can find—we try to stay in a *sense* that Jesus' ancestry was *Jewish*. The way he thought about himself, the way he thought about God, the images that filled his consciousness, and the culture that shaped his identity were steeped in the Hebrew tradition.

Jesus' whole sense of reality was shaped by his sense that God called Abraham from his homeland and promised him a new home. Jesus' sense of trust in God was supported by the memory that God was faithful to promise after promise. Sarah's age was not an obstacle. Pharaoh's army didn't matter. The temple could be destroyed, but God would build it up again. When I want to really know Jesus, I need to really know the faith tradition that gave him such confidence in his mission.

It's more important just to think about what we already know about that Jewish tradition than to do a lot of reading. Read the stories from the Old Testament if that helps to refresh and give *color* to the memories.

Perhaps this week, at a time when I'm walking or driving from one place to another, perhaps frustrated or angry or feeling alone, I might turn to Jesus and ask, "How did your background prepare you for situations like this, Jesus?" The answers will be the bonding graces of this week. This interior dialogue between Jesus' story and my story will be rich in helping us know him, grow in love for him, and be moved more deeply to be with him in his mission.

Use the other resources of this week. Stay faithful to the pattern of reflecting on the material for this week, as soon as I put on my slippers or robe in the morning. Near the end of each day, find some moment to express some gratitude. Consider sharing any grace received with the others making this retreat.

For the Journey: Experiencing Simple Longing

Seasons change. This globe has been rocking and rolling in a come-here, go-away relationship with its source of energy and life.

As a human family, we have also had an approach-avoidance relationship with our source of light and life. At times of our human history we have wanted God very close to protect and nourish and assist us. At other times we have struggled for our collective independence and self-direction from that confining Power. Isaiah prayed humbly, "We have become like those over whom You never ruled, like those who are not called by Your name" (Isaiah 63:19).

This week we are invited to experience simple longing. We join the yearning cold world for warmth and light. We join the ancient ache of Israel for God's love and compassionate companionship. We unite ourselves with all men and women who have struggled to be god and have gratefully surrendered to their blessed reality of being children of the one God who may go by many names but remains faithful to those who seek.

This week our prayer can be influenced by our taking the opportunities to wait with which life presents us—at stoplights, checkout counters, airports, and waiting for special people to come home soon. There are empty and hollow places in our hearts and lives. We pray with them and stay with them, not filling them up so as to take our prayer away. We are learning to ache with the world and its ancient longing for return and unity with its loving Creator. This week we go to prayer, not to escape longing, but to embrace it. There must be room in our inn and a longing in our hearts if this Advent is not to be a frenetic disappointment. We listen to the ancient sighing, "How long, O Lord." We listen to our own sighing, "Come, Lord Jesus." As the sun changes its distance from the earth each day, we join the earth in this mystery of light in the midst of darkness.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

What a different kind of week! I've never thought of the Old Testament as your own family history, but it is the stories of all of the people who came before you, who had such a powerful influence on you. When I started this retreat, I showed you the photo album of my life, the high and low points, and I saw that you were always there with me. Now, as I feel closer and closer to you, I want to see your history, your stories. You are someone I love, and I want to hear the stories that shaped you.

There is so much expectation in these stories. So many ways your people have waited for you, patiently or impatiently, over the centuries. They were looking for a king, one who would come and rule them and save them. But you were such a different kind of king! They waited for glitz and glamour, and you showed them poverty and service.

Could you feel their disappointment? You knew so well the stories that had been there for centuries, about the king who would come. Was it hard for you to be so different from what they thought? I know it's so human to want to please others. Did you struggle at all with what you were, what you wanted to teach them?

Oh, Jesus. Thank you so much for loving us all, for loving me, so much that you chose this life on earth. I can only imagine your struggles to really get across your message to people who might have been disappointed. What kind of king were you? You weren't what they had been led to expect. But you stayed and you stayed faithful to your message.

Thank you for sharing your stories, your family. Please be with me this week as I carry a sense of your history with me, those wonderful and vivid Old Testament stories, and as I see that they are really the story of waiting for you, of you fulfilling the promise to us.

My dear friend, thank you for staying with me, even when I disappoint, when I am not all that I was created to be. Thank you for your utter faithfulness and love for me.

Scripture Readings

Genesis 12:1-7

Genesis 18:1-15

Genesis 37:1-36

Exodus 2:1-25

Exodus 15:1-18

Psalm 81