

Gafney imaginatively fills in narrative details that the gospels leave out, illuminating the meaning of stories written centuries ago. Jesus struggles to live up to his father's reputation as gifted carpenter; Peter and Paul debate dietary restrictions; Mary Magdalene feels fearful about visiting the tomb. Stories are followed by reflections, sample prayers and questions for group discussion. An essential companion for readers who wish to enhance and deepen the Christian spiritual journey.

HELEN KLEIN ROSS, *best-selling author of*
What Was Mine and The Latecomers

Scripture, stories, imagination, reflections, inspiration, and challenge—all this and more can be found in *I Am with You Always!* There might be a tendency to say, “I don’t need another book on living my faith.” How inaccurate that is. One of the greatest gifts embedded in these pages are the captivating, imaginative stories of what might have happened behind the scenes of many Scripture passages. These visionary tales connect Scripture and faith, then and now, and spirituality and our everyday life. Be prepared for new insights, challenging questions, and renewed fidelity.

JANET SCHAEFFLER, OP, *retreat and adult formation presenter;*
author of several books, including Let This Be the Time and
The Catechist’s Guide to Beloved Catholic Prayers

Gafney reflects here on treasured remarks of Jesus recorded in the New Testament, each of them spoken face-to-face to individuals or groups in the orbit of his influence. These words are gifts from Jesus to the early Church. Gafney’s reflections help us hear their power to nourish both

the faithful and the seeker. Anyone praying with these texts will hear other words with fresh ears, words in their own hearts, and inspiring words, too, spoken to them by others.

GEORGE BUR, SJ, *senior member of the
St. Joseph's University Campus Ministry Team*



I Am with You Always will be an excellent resource for individuals and Scripture-based faith sharing groups. In Part I, through expanded parables, readers are invited to enter into Jesus' first-century world, enabling a better understanding of Jesus' words. In Part II, through the use of twenty-first-century images, readers are encouraged to relate the Scriptures to our current world. Together, these parts will lead to fruitful mediation and faith sharing.

GARY AND BETH SCHWARZMUELLER,
Scripture-based faith sharing leaders, Westerville, OH



If you're looking to explore the historic truths of the gospel in ways relevant to contemporary life, consider Leo Gafney's creative new devotional book *I Am with You Always*. It offers two approaches, one presenting imaginative first-person narrations of the situations behind familiar biblical texts, the other explaining hard-to-grasp theological concepts by using varied and rich illustrations, ranging from the life cycle of monarch butterflies, to evolution and scientific knowledge. This engaging book, useful for personal or group study, will deepen your love of Scripture and enhance your life of prayer.

DR. RICH REIFSNYDER,
book author and Presbyterian minister

I Am with You Always

STORIES OF JESUS
TO INSPIRE DEEPER
PRAYER

Leo Gafney



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INTRODUCTION

This book has several interconnected goals. The first is to awaken in the Christian reader curiosity and interest in Sacred Scripture. It is unfortunately true that we as Catholics have generally not been committed Bible readers. Some of us shrug, “The Bible is for evangelicals, fundamentalists.” No, we should not think that way. The Bible, Sacred Scripture, is the word of God, given to instruct, encourage, and strengthen us in our faith as individuals and in community. Even more important, Scripture helps us pray; it gives us the words, stories, and situations that reveal God’s work in this world—the world we share with God.

But perhaps like many Catholics you have found it difficult to read Scripture. Either you have heard the stories a hundred times and they still don’t resonate with you, or if you are working at it, the language and situations are just strange enough to be off-putting. And so you can’t “get into it.”

I am very glad that you have this book in your hands. Let me tell you how it is different from other books and, more important, how it can help you to appreciate Scripture and to grow in faith. In the first section of the book, each chapter includes an incident, a short story perhaps, that is not historical. It is an exercise of the Christian imag-

ination, something I invented. But each of these fictional accounts is directly connected to a situation in the New Testament, generally an incident from the life of Christ. The stories lead into or grow out of the Scripture text. These stories are intended as aids to lead you the reader to wonder what was happening in the past and so to explore your faith in the present. I hope these exercises will lead to a greater love of the gospels and to a richer life of meditation and prayer. The situations are accompanied by readings from the gospels or other New Testament writings, as well as the reflections of Christians through the ages.

Everyone loves a story. Jesus knew this and so he crafted remarkable narratives—brief, to the point, and powerful. The good Samaritan comes upon an injured man and tends to him. The prodigal son goes off and squanders his inheritance. These stories hold our minds and hearts. They tell us something about what God is like and how we can come closer to God in Christ.

Creating stories about Jesus is not new. St. Ignatius Loyola suggests that when meditating on a gospel passage we use a “composition of place” to fasten our attention. We picture the scene, the people, the countryside, or the buildings; we imagine what the people are saying and how they respond to one another. He and many others over the centuries have imagined what might have been, even placing themselves in the situation.

In this book the imagined incidents are inspired by and build on gospel stories. They are not meant to stand on their own or simply to stir the imagination. The brief fictional accounts are meant to throw light on gospel encounters that are often very brief, leaving us wanting more. What kinds of people were these? Why did they do the things they did? How might they speak to us?

A few words are needed about centurions. Israel in Jesus’ time was an occupied country. Judea, the southern province was ruled directly by a Roman governor. Galilee, in the north, where Jesus grew up, is sometimes called a client state, ruled by Herod Antipas with the

help of mercenaries or auxiliaries—volunteers, a common arrangement across the empire. Galilee was, of course, also answerable to Rome. Some commentators opine that the “centurion” described in the gospels was likely such a mercenary. The centurions are in fact generally described in the New Testament in favorable terms. The one in the gospel incident we refer to is said to have been favorably disposed toward Israel and to have built a synagogue for the people. The question of whether centurions might have had wives while serving is much debated. There seems to be enough evidence, particularly in the mercenary situation to support the possibility of the story as invented and presented here.

After the fictional incidents and New Testament readings, we reflect on the situations, sometimes with comments of Christians who have reflected on the Scriptures. For example the *Letter to Diognetus*, written in the second century, gives advice still relevant, connecting us to centuries past and to the teachings of Jesus.

Happiness does not consist in ruling over one’s neighbors or in longing to have more than one’s weaker fellowmen. Nor does it consist in being rich and in oppressing those lowlier than oneself. No one can imitate God by doing such things. They are alien to his sublimity.

In the second part of the book we use our Christian imagination in a different way. We explore images and symbols. What might “light from light” mean? We can think of it as referring to the sun. What might be three dimensions that could help us think about and pray about the Father, Son, and Spirit?

We also look for new images and symbols that might help us understand the unseen world of the Spirit. We explore articles of faith and situations in Christian living based on our knowledge of the world around us. We do not expect to create images that are better than the ones Jesus left us. But as Christians we are compelled to con-

tinue seeking the meaning of his life and teachings in our midst and for our time. Each generation must reawaken the great insights and understandings of faith.

Each chapter contains questions. They can be used for group discussion or for you as an individual to consider what has been presented and how it might fit into your life. There is also a prayer at the end of each chapter that can be used by you as an individual or in a group context.

A Carpenter

BUILDING A SPIRITUAL LIFE

WE KNOW ALMOST NOTHING ABOUT WHAT HAS BEEN CALLED THE HIDDEN LIFE OF JESUS. Like Joseph, he was a carpenter until he was about thirty years old, when he began his public life with his baptism by John. We know from his stories, sayings, and parables that Jesus was an astute observer of the world around him—the world of nature, work, and personal relationships. He commented on the flowers, children at play, men involved in their businesses, and women at home. The following is based on our understanding of Jesus' personality and how he often responded to people. It takes place when he is in his late twenties. With the leadership qualities we see in the gospels, it is not hard to imagine Jesus as the leader of his work crew. Carpenters of the time were also builders.



Jesus and his coworkers had spent a long day rebuilding a neighbor's barn that had been worn down by the years and the weather. It was hard work, and as Jesus bid his workers a pleasant evening, he remembered that he had one more thing to do before going home. He walked across the village, then out of town for about ten minutes, to the home of Samuel, whom he knew but not very well. Jesus' cousin had told him that Samuel was not happy with a new door they had made and installed.

Jesus arrived at Samuel's property and found him collecting rocks—perhaps to clear the land or to expand his hearth. Samuel was not young, but he remained strong and vigorous.

Jesus spoke, "Good evening, Samuel, I trust you and your family are well?"

"Deborah and the girls are well, thank you, and your mother? She is, well, still missing Joseph, I think?"

"Yes, it has been nearly two years now, but we do miss him very much—at home and, of course, at work."

Samuel continued the thought, "He was a gifted carpenter. I mean you are good, hard working and all. But he . . ." His voice trailed off.

"It's true," said Jesus, "He made building seem effortless. He had a vision too. Whether it was a house, a barn, furniture, even toys. He could see what would work best and then know exactly how to do it. I was lucky to learn from him. It hasn't come as easily to me. As you say, he had a gift. The more I work, the more I appreciate him. In fact, I am still learning from what he taught me years ago. But what is the problem?"

"The problem," Samuel said, "is that the new door doesn't fit right. It scrapes on the bottom and leaves space at the top. It's crooked."

Jesus' crew had built a new door to replace the one that was worn and had recently been smashed in by soldiers making their rounds and inspecting. The old door had also stuck, Jesus remembered. Several of Jesus' crew had installed the door, and Jesus had not looked at it since.

"Let's have a look," Jesus commented as they walked toward the house. The door did indeed appear to be crooked. It stuck.

"Well?" Samuel asked.

"Well, I think we should do some measuring. And they did. Much to Samuel's surprise, the three measurements of the width—top, bottom, and middle were exactly the same. And measurements also showed that the height was not crooked or warped.

"One more." Jesus said. He measured the diagonal from top left to bottom right. This turned out to be the same as the other diagonal.

“There is nothing wrong with the door,” Jesus said. “Let’s measure the doorway.”

“You think the doorway is crooked? You think my whole house is crooked? Jesus, do you know who built this house?”

“I believe it was my father: I helped. It was a long time ago.” Jesus answered.

“Indeed, it was,” chimed in Samuel, “Some years ago, and as we have said, he was an outstanding carpenter and builder.”

Jesus listened but he also began measuring. The three measurements of the width of the doorway were the same, as were the three measurements of the height. But the diagonals were not. They were different by about the width of thumb.

“How can this be?” asked Samuel. “Joseph did not build crooked houses.”

“Was this plot for the house given to you by your father?” asked Jesus, seeming to change the subject. “And were your choices of where to place the house rather limited?”

“Indeed, that was the case, and so?”

“I think my father did as well as he could—or as well as anyone could have done. But this is loose and sandy soil. He sank posts and used rocks as well as he could for a foundation but over time the sandy base has shifted a little bit. It’s always better to build on rock—when we can. We will build a new doorway, but we also need to reinforce the house. You recall what happened to Shimon’s house a few years ago. It was built on sandy soil.”

“Well do I remember the collapse of Shimon’s house. It was a disaster. Yes, I do remember Joseph commenting on the spot where he had to build. But let me ask, will I be expected to pay for this fixing and new doorway?” There was the slightest edge in Samuel’s voice.

“I don’t think so,” said Jesus with an easy smile. “Suppose I come over with a few men after work for the next week or so, in the evening. Deborah might want to fix a light supper for the crew. And we will make straight your house, in honor of my father.”

Samuel smiled. “Agreed,” he said.

A few years later, Jesus spoke to his followers.

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, and the floods came and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall.

MATTHEW 7:24–27

REFLECTION

Many of Jesus’ parables and sayings have a sense of urgency about them. Now is the time, they say. Drop everything and follow me. Don’t think about tomorrow. You must act—today. This story is different. It talks about building a foundation, and this is compared to the one who hears Jesus’ words and “acts on them.”

Down through the ages, Christians who were serious about following Jesus understood that their lives would change. It would not be easy. Clement of Alexandria in the third century said that Christ, working with the believer, first converts, then disciplines, then imparts wisdom. Others through the centuries have developed different stages or schemas to describe the Christian’s spiritual journey. For example, the three stages of the spiritual life have been called the purgative, illuminative, and unitive way. The first, purgative, relates to the need to tame our unruly and wayward nature—to build a solid foundation. The second, illuminative, is the period of learning and practicing what it means to be a Christian. In the third stage, one is more closely connected to God

and acts perhaps more freely according to love rather than law.

The relationship to the parable of the house is, of course, that becoming a Christian takes time. A problem can arise when one thinks, *Aha! Now I have arrived at the unitive way. I am with God.* Spiritual pride and self-righteousness, as Jesus often pointed out, are among the worst kinds of evil. The three ways might best be considered as cyclical. We will always need to discipline ourselves; we can always learn more and better practice what it means to live as a Christian, and from time to time we will experience the joy of unity with Christ Our Lord, in God. It takes time and effort to lead a Christian life.

It helps to be in touch with those who came before us. Those of the earliest Christian communities had a sense of the very precious message that had been entrusted to them. The following is from the second-century *Letter to Diognetus*.

He revealed himself through faith. To faith alone is it given to see God. God, the Ruler and creator of the universe, he who made all things and arranged them in proper order, was man's friend and full of kindness and patience. This he always was, is, and always will be. When he had conceived the great and ineffable thought, he communicated it only to his son. Now, as long as he kept and guarded his wise counsel within himself as a secret, it could appear as if he were not concerned and did not care about us. But he disclosed what he had in mind from the beginning through his beloved son. Through him he revealed it. Thus he granted us all things at once, to share in his blessings, to perceive, and to understand.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you were a builder. Help us to build lives based on the love you have given. Help us to clear away the desire for money, the entertainments we chase, the ambition and desire to be noticed. Help us to spend our time and energy on Sacred Scripture. Help us to reach those in need with your healing presence. We know that you are with us and within us. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you think it might be true that Joseph was a better carpenter than Jesus? (There is no right answer. The question is meant to help us understand that Jesus was fully human.)
2. How have different practices been helpful to you as you build your life in Christ? Prayer? Spiritual reading? Helping one in need?
3. What times or situations made you think your spiritual world was threatened?
4. What parts of your spiritual “house” need repairs?
5. What do the stages “purgative, illuminative, and unitive” mean to you?
6. Which of these stages do you most often feel like you are in?
7. What are some of the understandings about God that we have received from Jesus Christ?
8. What aspects of God’s revelation in Christ are most important to you?

The Call of Matthew

WE ARE CALLED

THE CALL OF MATTHEW HAS BEEN FERTILE SOIL FOR THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION. It appears, based on the gospels, that Jews of the time hated tax collectors for several reasons. First, they were collaborators, instruments of Rome, earning their pay by joining in the oppression of their countrymen. Second, they seem to have been unsupervised, collecting what they might by guile, threats, or force. It is hard to think of a current equivalent. Perhaps collection agencies that are sometimes ruthless in their tactics have some of the same characteristics. But the repossession of homes and property is, in our day, often bureaucratic and faceless. Then, the tax collectors were real people. But we need not judge. Tax collectors were individuals.

The following conversation takes place a few days after the call of Matthew and the dinner party he gave for Jesus. Aaron, an enthusiastic and talkative partner, sees Matthew approaching and welcomes him in a loud voice.



“Levi, it is good to see you. Wonderful dinner you hosted for the rabbi. We really enjoyed it. But we wondered what happened to you. You are as regular as the rising and setting of the sun. I was worried. You are a rock, an honest businessman, one who knows money and

people. Like me, you don't manage all the observances, but we do the best we can.

"Well, I hope you got that mystical rabbi out of your system. We heard you were off with him. Jesus, isn't that his name? He is something. We listened to him. To him, up is down; poor is rich; sad is happy. Who can understand him? Either he is a fake, or he will burn out, or the Romans will nail him to a tree. Anyway, welcome. I do think you could get yourself a better-looking cloak, but there are lots of taxes to be collected. Let's get to work."

Matthew smiled faintly. He liked Aaron. They had been partners in business for a long time. But everything had changed. He spoke quietly, "I just came back to settle a few accounts and sell the rest of my things; then I will join the rabbi Jesus."

Aaron was afraid of this. He spoke in a still-friendly way but more earnestly, "Levi, how are you going to support yourself? You can't drive a nail straight or take the measurements for a house. You have no training as a carpenter, or anything else for that matter. Two hours in the sun and you are exhausted; so you are not a farmer. Will you open a shop? I don't think so. Think, man, you are giving up what you do, and do well. You are an honest tax collector. You do a lot of good in your work. People will miss you."

A hint of a smile remained as Levi/Matthew answered, "He called me. He wants me to help in his work. I never dreamed of such a thing. I am part of his selected group."

"Selected group," interrupted Aaron, "I saw them. We ate with them the other night. They are unschooled and unwashed, mostly fishermen. The rabbi may be a mystic but his judgment in followers, excepting you, of course, is rather—shall we say—questionable. Levi, you have some education. I have seen you reading Greek and Latin as well as Hebrew. You may be a tax collector but you are not like those others of his. The rabbi's followers will drive you crazy or bore you to death."

Matthew answered patiently, "I have spent a few days with them.

They are committed, unshakably bound to the rabbi. They are real, concerned about what he calls the kingdom.”

Aaron was concerned. “Yes, I have heard about the kingdom. But what is it? Where is it? Will he raise an army against the Romans? I don’t think so, although a few of his followers are known as revolutionaries, and that won’t help you. Levi, I guess I can’t stop you.”

“I can’t explain it to you, Aaron,” said Matthew, and yet he did try to explain, “Yes, he speaks with stories and sayings that are hard to understand. But he makes us think. He makes us want to see God in new ways—as a Father—and to care for those who are left out and to raise up the lowly. And when we begin to follow his way, we know deep down that it is right and good, that nothing is more important.”

“I see there is no changing your mind,” Aaron sounded perplexed but resigned. “Listen Levi, you have learning. Write things down. I don’t think this rabbi and his followers will amount to anything. But who knows, there may be a good story there.”

Matthew hugged his friend, “Yes, well, take care of yourself, Aaron, be honest with the taxes, try to do something for the ones who have trouble paying. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Levi.”

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up, left everything and followed him.

Then Levi gave a great banquet in his house; and there was a crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at table with him. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” LUKE 5:27-32

REFLECTION

In traditional Catholic thinking, the “Call of Matthew” was proposed as a model of the young man or woman who “left everything” to enter the religious life or seminary. For the religious life, the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience were seen as the wall separating those who chose to follow in this “more perfect life” from the others who were keeping the commandments and practicing a virtuous Christian life according to their best efforts and insights regarding God’s will in their lives. The founders and saints of the religious orders generally did lead lives exhibiting great virtue, and for them the vows did indeed help them to more closely follow Jesus Christ. And more generally, the religious orders often did accomplish important work—in education, the foreign missions, caring for the sick and aged, and other ministries. Some, like the Benedictines and Cistercians (Trappists), devoted themselves exclusively to prayer and work. Diocesan priests, of course, generally were engaged in parish work, particularly administration of the sacraments, and through celibacy and obedience to the bishop were also viewed as different and special.

The theology and spirituality surrounding the Second Vatican Council, as well as other changes, brought new thinking to these areas. All Christians are called as followers of Christ, proceeding on different roads. In addition, a better-educated laity meant that the priest was no longer accepted without question as the highest authority, even in matters of theology, church teaching, and practice.

How does a Catholic think about a “call” from Christ the Lord in today’s world? I tried to suggest in the narrative starting this chapter that Matthew may have faced some opposition as he embarked on his new life. Similarly today, one professing Christian belief may face quiet ridicule. And then there is the inner turmoil, the scattered hopes and dreams and fantasies that prevent us from following Jesus more closely. Francis Thomson wrote of the efforts to escape God’s call in *The Hound of Heaven*, which starts:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

Do we find God, or does God find us? Yes, God does find us. But in order to find us, each of us, God looks and pursues us. God is there in your life—hidden in plain sight. Try to make time to think, to pray, to look more closely at your life. It may be in your family or personal life; it may be in your work; it may be in your parish or other commitments that Christ is calling you to follow him more closely.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, I wonder at how you called Matthew. "Follow me," you said. You saw something in him. He saw something in you. Lord, please, you have called me. But please call me again. Help me, like Matthew, to leave the distractions of my work to follow you more closely, more completely. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What surprises you about the ways in which Jesus called his followers?
2. What were those at Matthew's dinner party complaining about?
3. Do you sometimes judge those who are not religiously observant?
4. In what ways do you feel Christ has called you?
5. How have you responded to the call?
6. In what new directions do you think the Church is called to go these days?
7. In what ways do we sometimes avoid or run from God's call?
8. How does God's call come to people in today's world?