



# Draw Close to Jesus

40 Encounters  
*with the Savior*  
*for the Sacred*  
Season of Lent

Heidi Chiavaroli

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To Sarah and Mike Pudlo and my brothers  
and sisters at Journey Christian Church.  
Thank you for helping to challenge  
and grow my faith in and love for Jesus.

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# Glossary

**abba**—Father

**Adonai**—Lord

**bet ha-midrash**—“House of study,” higher learning to study the Torah

**bet sefer**—“House of the book,” synagogue school

**calamus**—Writing reed

**gabbai**—Collector of taxes

**haphtarah**—Selection from one of the books of the Prophets read in synagogue after the reading of the Torah

**HaShem**— “The name,” as in the name of God; often spoken in place of YHWH, the name revealed to Moses in Exodus, which was considered too holy to be uttered

**hazzan**—Guardian of the sacred books and minister of the synagogue

**huppah**—Wedding canopy

**ima**—Mother

**ketubah**—Marriage contract

**mezuzah**—Small parchment scroll upon which the words of the Shema are written

**Migdal Eder**—“Tower of the Flock,” a watchtower located on the road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem

**prutah**—Small coin, equivalent to a thousandth of a pound

**rabboni**—Teacher

**Ruach Hako’desh**—The Holy Spirit

**Shabbat**—Sabbath

**shalom**—“Peace,” a greeting or farewell

**Shavuot**—“Festival of Weeks,” commemoration of Moses receiving the law on Mount Sinai

**Shekinah**—The divine presence of God

**Shevat**—Winter months

**shiva**—Weeklong period of mourning

**shofar**—Ram’s horn

**tali**—Historic Roman version of knucklebones

**tefillin**—Small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah, worn during weekday morning prayers

**terni lapilli**—Early variation of tic-tac-toe

**Trisagion**—Three times holy

**tzitzit**—Prayer tassels

**yahrzeit**—The anniversary of a death

**Yerushalayim**—Jerusalem

# Introduction

## *Encountering Jesus Through Imaginative Remembering*

I will never forget the year I walked away from the church. After a flourishing relationship with Christ and an impressive résumé of service to my local church, I woke up one day, nearly fifteen years into the journey, to realize with fearful clarity that I'd lost something along the way. Something quite important.

I was incredibly fearful I had lost Jesus himself.

I wasn't serving God. I was doing what I thought was expected of me. I was serving in order to get outcomes. I'd stopped spending time in the Scriptures. Prayer was an afterthought. I dreaded going to church.

I'd gotten so caught up in doing things *for* Jesus, I neglected to spend time *with* Jesus.

I'd like to tell you I recognized the problem right away and turned to God to set my motivations straight. But that was not the case. This was a long, painful journey where I groped

around in the dark with my doubts for what had once been mine—the joy of knowing Jesus.

During that time, the thought of church created an anxiety so thorough I couldn't bear to go back. Like a spoon-fed toddler, I could only handle small bits of Scripture. Too often, I equated God and his Word to the hurt I'd experienced and to the stress I'd placed on myself surrounding my church duties.

One small passage that came to me during this time, however, was enough to keep my hope alive. Beautiful, grace-drenched words from Jesus in Matthew 11:28–30: “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

*Come to me.*

*I am gentle and humble.*

*I will give you rest.*

This is not what I had been living. Then again, I hadn't been tarrying with Jesus—I'd been seeking the approval of religious culture. But this invitation to rest in my Savior? *I wanted that.*

It just so happened that this new calling found me in the season of Lent. And with immense gratitude, I stoked to life the embers of a sacred season laid dormant with my childhood. I embraced the slowing down. The liturgy. The church calendar. Repentance. Fasting. Measures of charity and justice. The unhurried intentionality of it all. I hungered for the timeless truths and practices of the Christian faith, and I savored that hunger. I stumbled into a sea of grace contained within the magnificent rhythms of the church year—rhythms that reminded me of the gospel story. Rhythms that reminded me of God's immeasurable grace. Birth to life, death to resurrection.

Lent was about finding the breath of the Spirit and losing myself, repenting not just in a onetime Sinner's prayer, but repenting as a rule of life so that Jesus might sweep in and renew my spirit with the grace of true spiritual rest that leads to restoration again and again, every minute of every day.

As I reread the four Gospels with fresh eyes, I found a renewed appreciation for this Jesus who attracted the tired, the poor, the outcast, the tax collector, the leper, the stubborn fisherman, the staunch zealot, the uncertain Pharisee.

Through the Gospel stories, God pushed back the curtain of church hurt and gave me fresh hope. He restored my faith. He did not abandon me in that desperate place.

As I read, I remembered why I'd come to Jesus in the first place all those years ago. I remembered my own spiritual poverty. Away from the product that had become my Christianity, I saw who Jesus was. And I wanted nothing more than to walk with him.

I thought of the many accounts of needy humanity meeting Jesus, and even of the accounts that were not written (see John 20:30). I thought of a child who comes to him but is brushed aside by a well-meaning disciple. A Roman centurion who drives the nails into Jesus's hands and yet, miraculously, is granted forgiveness. A Bethlehem woman who receives an unexpected guest on the thirtieth anniversary of her babe's death at the hands of Herod's soldiers.

Each person had an entire story I could only imagine. And imagine I did.

I am a writer, after all. Imagination comes with the territory. What better use for it than to place myself in the skin of those whose lives Jesus touched? Those who were drawn to this carpenter from Nazareth who upset political expectations,

performed audacious miracles and healings, and ultimately claimed to be the Son of God?

To my delight, I discovered these imaginative exercises were not as uncommon as I initially assumed. From Brother Lawrence (1611–91) to St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), I discovered holy practices fueled by the imagination.

What's more, it seems it might not be far off from what the original authors of the Bible were trying to convey. In the foreword to the New American Standard Bible, the translators say that "Greek authors frequently used the present tense for the sake of heightened vividness, thereby transporting their readers in imagination to the actual scene at the time of occurrence" (The Lockman Foundation, 2020).

I love what these Greek authors were trying to do! They were placing their readers in the story by the choice of their words. In a culture that valued retelling their history in the stories of their heritage, they were asking their readers to imagine and remember. To *remember* what they came from in order to be restored to the Lord, to be refreshed.

After rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the Lord told them to *remember* what he had done for them. To play it out, again and again. To imagine it in their minds' eyes. Even Jesus, during the Last Supper, instructed his disciples to break bread together, saying, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

Remember. Don't forget. Run the script over and over again so that it becomes a part of you, until the power and experience of that memory writes itself into the present, where you live today. Until it writes itself into your heart, mind, soul, and very being.

In a contemporary world where our screens are constantly imagining for us, there's value in remembering Jesus through

the power of our own imaginations. There's value in meditating and savoring the biblical stories in order to behold his beauty. In slipping into the shoes (or more accurately, sandals!) of those who walked with Jesus on earth, we are able to enter the story ourselves. In doing this, I am thoroughly convinced we will draw closer to him.

The season of Lent helped me recover the intended beauty of the liturgy and of the church. This is a season for repenting. But it's also a season for remembering. For aligning ourselves with the workings of the Lord. For coming to the one who stepped into our sin, our inadequacies, and our shortcomings. For remembering and then anticipating because we know the amazing splendor of the empty grave is upon us. Death is defeated. Grace sweeps in.

In this book, you will find forty imaginative retellings—one meant to be read for each day of Lent. While these stories are based on Scripture and historical research, they are fictional narratives *based* on biblical accounts. I pray these retellings draw you deeper into the Gospel stories but would not replace your time in God's Word. I pray they stir you to marinate *in* the Scriptures, to answer Jesus's call when he says, "Come to me."

May God's glory abound in your life, my sibling in Christ, and may this season of Lent find you resting—and remembering—in him.

With hope,  
Heidi

# The Virgin's Secret

*Inspired by Matthew 1 and Luke 1:26-56*

Mary bids farewell to the family she has traveled with from Ein Karem, her middle trembling like the threads on her cousin Elizabeth's loom. Already, she misses her older kinswoman—the bond she found with her, the wisdom she offered . . . the acceptance.

Will she find any of that here in Nazareth?

She bites her lip, thinking of Joseph. Perhaps she should have told him of the angel's visit before she left for Zechariah and Elizabeth's home. But she'd been filled with doubts. She hadn't even told her mother. Only Salome knows her secret.

A secret everyone in Nazareth would soon know.

She walks down the dirt road with bone-weary limbs, the flowered hills and purple haze of Mount Carmel doing nothing to ease the tension in her chest. Shouldering her leather bag with the precious gift of the swaddling cloths Zechariah gave her, Mary walks past the empty flat-roofed synagogue.

She remembers Elizabeth's beautiful words—words that cast aside her doubts and sealed the truth of all she'd experienced within her heart.

*Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!*

“Mary!”

Her sister runs toward her, the dust from the road puffing up the hem of the younger woman's tunic, her headscarf flying behind her. When Salome's arms come around her, Mary sinks into them. She inhales the scents of hay and lemons and fresh-baked bread.

All too soon, Salome pulls back. Her eyes widen at Mary's stomach. No robe can hide her secret any longer.

“You . . . you are . . .” For the first time, Mary's younger sister appears at a loss for words. “The angel. He spoke truth?”

Mary presses her lips together, wonder and dread swirling through her in a thunderous tumult. “Elizabeth is also pregnant.”

A smile brightens Salome's face. “Just as Gabriel proclaimed!”

“Our cousin knew I was with child before I told her.”

Salome pulls Mary toward their home. “Have you seen Joseph?”

“No.”

Mary follows Salome up the street where lines of sand-colored houses embrace terraced gardens and soft palms. Twisted fig trees and graceful olives stand in the background, an entrance to fertile pastureland brimming with flax flowers alongside pale gold fields of barley.

They climb the stairs to Mary's childhood home, a stone and mud structure cut into the rocky hillside. She raises her fingers to the mezuzah fixed to the doorpost before bringing them to

her lips. The warmth of the fire greets her. Her mother stands at the kiln, taking out a loaf of barley bread. When she sees Mary, she nearly drops the loaf into the hot coals.

“Child!” She rushes to embrace her. Mary closes her eyes, the child moving within as if sensing the presence of his grandmother. A longing for Mary’s father fills her. She thinks of his body resting in their family’s grave with their ancestors. The last act of his life was securing a ketubah with Joseph ben Jacob for his oldest daughter.

Her mother gasps and pulls back, her face pale in the firelight. Her gaze drops to her oldest daughter’s middle. “Mary.” She gropes for a chair. “How can this be? Did Joseph . . .”

Mary falls to the beaten earth at her mother’s feet. “No, Ima. Joseph has not laid a hand upon me.”

“Who, then, child? A soldier? A rebel on the road to Ein Karem? I knew I should not have agreed to you leaving us! We are ruined.” She breaks into sobs.

“Ima, please listen to me.” Mary grasps her mother’s wrinkled hands, calloused from turning the millstones to grind barley grain into flour. “Before I left to see Elizabeth, I was visited by the angel Gabriel.”

“Mary.” Shame fringes the older woman’s voice.

“He told me I was to bear a child. That the Ruach Hako’desh would come upon me, and I would bear the Son of the Most High.”

Her mother looks as if she will tear her tunic. Mary rushes on. “He said Elizabeth was with child as well, and Ima, she is! I speak the truth.”

Salome drops to the floor alongside Mary. “She does, Ima. Mary told me before she left. It must be true, for Elizabeth is pregnant, even in her old years!”

Their mother shakes her head. “I do not see. I do not see how this could be at all. Your abba would be disgraced. Joseph . . . he is a righteous man. He will not stand for this. Mary, you could be stoned.” Her last word begins a desperate wail.

“I speak the truth,” Mary says again.

“Mary?”

She stands at the sound of the familiar voice. Joseph.

He is ordinary in height and looks, and yet she has grown fond of him since their betrothal. He helped their small family when her father died, even sneaking their goat extra grain from his pockets when no one was looking. She has missed the sight of him, how his dark hair curls at his neck, how his eyes lighten when he bids her shalom on her way to the well.

Now, his hair and beard are freshly combed and oiled. No doubt he has wondered over her absence.

His eyes fall to her stomach. Disbelief carves his features. His crestfallen expression pierces her heart.

He bunches his fists at his side, his face red as ocher. “Mary?”

She longs to go to him, to assure him she has not been unfaithful. Instead, she stays put.

Her touch will not be welcome.

“I am so sorry, Joseph.” Mary’s mother does not say they cannot repay the money he gave upon the signing of the ketubah. He knows.

Joseph bites his lip, looks wildly around the room. Mary does not mistake the wetness in his eyes. He does not care about the money he will lose.

He loves her.

The realization makes all this more difficult.

*Adonai, how will I raise the Son of the Most High on my own?  
Why should this good man be wounded by this child?*

Joseph sets his jaw, avoiding Mary. "I will divorce her quietly."

Her mother's fingers flutter to her throat. "Thank you. Thank you, Joseph, for your mercy."

He raises wounded eyes to Mary.

"You are a righteous man. Thank you, Joseph," Mary says before he turns and rushes from her home.

That night, tears course onto the stone pillow beneath Mary's head. She longs for Elizabeth. She longs for the light in Joseph's eyes she will never know again. Yes, she is sure of HaShem's provision, but a terrible dread comes upon her that although the angel proclaimed she was blessed among women, that blessing does not preclude the immanent pain that comes with this responsibility.

She is alone. Her friends will want nothing to do with her. Her firstborn will have no father to recognize his legitimacy after he has been washed and rubbed with salt. She will never know what it is like to lie next to Joseph as his wife. To have a home of her own. To be loved by a man.

She wonders if she will be subjected to the trial of bitter water laid out in Torah.

*Adonai, give me strength to be your servant to the end.*

She remembers Elizabeth's words. She remembers the song tucked close to her heart.

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant . . .*

Salome wraps her arms around her, her sister's warm body a comfort in the darkness. Adonai *has* provided her with at least one person who believes her. For that, she is grateful.

"We will pray, yes?" Salome whispers.

Mary falls asleep to Salome's prayer, one they long ago memorized from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Her sleep is deep, and she does not wake until sunlight shines in her room and a knock sounds at the door.

She rubs her back as she walks through the empty house to open the door.

Joseph stands at the threshold.

She stumbles back. Has he changed his mind? Will he drag her to the town square to be stoned before the synagogue?

But he does not look angry. His eyes are bright. The light she never thought to know again—the light of his favor—is alive in his gaze. He practically bounces on his heels.

“Mary.”

“Joseph?”

He grasps her hands, and she sinks into the warm calluses of his skin, into the security and acceptance his touch provides.

“He will be called Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

---

### **Reflection Questions**

Read Mary's song in Luke 1:46–55. What reflection of Jesus do you see in his mother's words? Use your imagination to picture the role she is to play in his upbringing.

Joseph went above the law to claim a nobler form of justice in not divorcing Mary. When might religious expectations restrict us from loving how God loves?

---

## Prayer

*Heavenly Father, thank you for Mary's and Joseph's obedience to your calling. Grant us eyes and hearts for the outcast among us, that we might extend your love to the downtrodden and ashamed. Help us see our own spiritual poverty as we look with fresh eyes to those around us. Amen.*

---

## Suggested Reading

Matthew 1

Luke 1:26–56

# The Shepherd's Tale

*Inspired by Luke 2:8-20*

**H**e eases the lamb from its mother's womb, uttering words of encouragement to the ewe that has labored for the better part of the night to push her offspring into the world.

"There you are, Ima. Your babe is almost here."

He lays the swaddling cloths on the ground. The lamb slides forth in a bloom of liquid white.

A male. He is beautiful, perfection.

The ewe stands to clean off her firstborn and Rani watches the tender exchange, his chest lurching at the knowledge that this perfect lamb will not grow to adulthood. Like all the animals surrounding Yerushalayim, this one too will be consecrated to HaShem. And, being a male, he will make a suitable offering on the altar during Passover.

He takes the lamb in his arms and tucks the swaddling cloths around it. The fabric will keep the babe warm and its tender

skin safe from bruising, preserving the small animal as a worthy temple sacrifice.

He tries not to think of the lamb's soft throat being slit by a temple priest on its eighth day of life, of its body being burned on the altar in the Court of the Priests. He once made the mistake of speaking such thoughts to Father.

"If you do not wish to watch a lamb perish on your behalf, then do not sin." His father had said the words with a sarcastic sneer.

Do not sin.

While every ancestor of Abraham and Jacob knows this to be impossible, he and his father know Rani to be especially hopeless in this area. It's a pity the older man never lets his oldest son—his only son—forget it.

Rani looks off toward the watchtower of Migdal Eder, the burial place of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. Rani himself is a descendant of Levi ben Jacob, and his family has taken on the mantle of Levitical shepherds for centuries.

The lamb squirms in his arms and he remembers the first time he'd helped birth a lamb. The first time he'd wrapped a precious, pure animal in swaddling cloths. That day, his eight-year-old brother, Benesh, had begged to join him. Although Rani had agreed, he resented Benesh's company. At eleven, Rani wanted to prove to their father he could tend the flock by himself.

But all that was forgotten when the ewe had brought forth a spotless lamb. In truth, Rani had done little to help, but the lamb was born on his watch, and so he could lay claim to it.

After the allotted seven days with its mother, he gathered the lamb in fresh swaddling cloths. Though Benesh despised being alone in the fields, Rani handed him his rod and staff, instructing his brother to stay with the sheep, to keep them

together and protect them from wild beasts. He had not waited for Benesh's agreement before rushing toward the city to find his father.

The older man would be pleased to see the spotless young lamb, to know he could trust his oldest son with such an important task. At the city gates, Rani heard Benesh calling after him. He silently cursed his brother for leaving the sheep. As always, though, his brother followed him. Rani ran faster through the sloping cobbled streets, the lamb still cradled in his arms. Benesh called again, but Rani ignored him. It would be just like his younger brother to claim recognition for the lamb's birth. As the last child their mother bore before her death, Benesh could commit no wrong in Father's sight.

When Rani ducked around the chariot of the imperial family to escape Benesh, he had not expected his small brother to follow. To get caught beneath the heavy wheels.

He had not expected the sacrifice for his pride to be the death of his little brother. A brother who wanted nothing more than his presence.

Now, Rani swallows back emotion. He has offered many sacrifices the past six years for his sin, but the guilt remains. Father ensures it, as does his own heart.

Will he forever provide animal sacrifices for other people's forgiveness, but never find forgiveness for himself?

A great flash lights the sky, and the newborn lamb, warm in his arms, quivers. Rani waits for a chorus of thunder, but none comes. The light brightens the blue-black heavens, obliterating the moon and the stars with its brilliance, blanketing the fields and the Migdal Eder in a light purer than the sun's.

Rani's limbs tremble. The ewes bleat and stomp their hooves. Will all of Judah end in this moment?

And then there is the blast of a threefold trumpet, reminiscent of the Trisagion that sounds when a sacrifice is laid upon the altar. Heaven and earth meld into one, and a man in a robe whiter than that of a temple priest's descends upon the fields, enveloping Rani's flock and his cousins in what can only be the glory of the Shekinah.

Rani stands on quivering legs, his rod and staff forgotten on the ground, nothing but the lamb in his arms.

The angel speaks.

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

The words solidify in Rani's mind like dew appearing on night grass. How can this be?

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

The Messiah? The Messiah born this night? A Savior wrapped in humble swaddling cloths, just like the lamb in his arms?

The sky lights with a host of angels so large they number the stars. The most beautiful music sounds around Rani, drawing forth an ache of longing in his chest.

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

And then they are gone, nothing but their words lingering in the cool of the starry night air.

*Peace to those on whom his favor rests.*

That the angels would bring this message to a dreadful sinner like himself overwhelms him. He sinks to the ground, the lamb tucked beneath his arm.

"Cousin!" Abel runs toward him, waving his staff. "HaShem has blessed us. Let us go and see that which the angels spoke of."

Another of his cousins hurries to them. “My helper will watch our flocks until we return from Bethlehem.”

Yes, of course. Bethlehem. The scroll of Micah told of the Savior to be born in the city, but never had Rani thought to see it with his own eyes. He stumbles south with the other shepherds.

The moon rises higher as they make their way to the small city. Most of the homes are dark, but one shines with light, and they rush toward it. A woman with a bucket of water opens the door, stopping short at the sight of them.

Abel trips over his words about the angels, begs the woman to let them inside to worship the Messiah.

When she agrees, they spill into the humble home. The main room holds a donkey and there, in the feeding trough by his parents, is a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths identical to those that wrap the lamb in Rani’s arms.

Rani falls to his knees, tears pricking his eyes at the sight of the perfect babe in such a humble state. The Messiah. A Savior for his people.

He looks down at the beautiful white lamb still snug in his arms.

All he knows is what the swaddling cloths represent. All he knows is the angel’s words.

*I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.*

He bows low, the depth of his need causing a well of gratitude to burst within him.

HaShem has made a way not only for his people but, it seems, for Rani as well.

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## Reflection Questions

Read 1 John 1:5–2:2. What does John say about sin?

These Levitical shepherds likely knew their Old Testament well. They knew the Messiah would be born near their home, and yet when the angels found them, they were doing their ordinary work. How can you honor God through your ordinary work?

---

## Prayer

*God Almighty, sometimes we don't fully comprehend the gravity of our sin and sometimes we feel buried beneath its weight. Help us find the delicate balance between acknowledging our iniquity and knowing our worth in your eyes. Thank you for the life and freedom we find in Jesus. Amen.*

---

## Suggested Reading

Luke 2:8–20