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Study guide:

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# Our favorite Bible characters & stories

By Robert C. Blezard

There's a reason that figures and stories from the Bible endure over generations and centuries: They give us insight into who we are as children of God who live in a world that so desperately needs God's love, care and mercy. In the end, the stories and figures we encounter in the Bible are about how God equips and accompanies men and women like us to engage the world.

## Exercise 1: Your favorite

Share with your study group the story of your favorite Bible figure and explain why that character is important to you. In preparing your answer, go back and review that person's story. Reading over the passages, do you notice anything new? How did faith in God come into play? How did God guide, empower, protect or affect the character? Share what intrigues you, piques your interest and draws you to this Bible figure. Explain the qualities you admire, how their actions or words affect you. Talk about the parallels between this figure and your life.

## Exercise 2: Figures of character

The wide range of figures in the Bible are known for different distinctions of character. For each of the qualities listed below, think of as many Bible figures as you can who demonstrated that characteristic. Share that person's story (look up the Bible passages if you need to refresh your memory).

The qualities are: courage, strength, sacrifice, dedication, loyalty, cunning, love, intelligence, perseverance, tenacity, creativity, insight and kindness (and you can think of others). How did that characteristic assist the figure in accomplishing God's purposes?

## Exercise 3: Role models

By filling different roles as children of God, Bible figures also may provide insight into the roles expected for today's faithful.

Think of as many Bible figures as you can who served in the following roles (look up the Bible passages if you need to refresh your memory): protector, servant, parent, liberator, comforter, warrior, prophet, agitator, slave, healer, martyr, friend, builder, follower, teacher, innovator, conqueror, spy, writer, sage, poet and king (and you can think of others).



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# Study guide: **Bible favorites**

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What did they do well? What could they have done better? How was God a central part of their story? How did their faith figure in? How did they accomplish God's purposes?

## Exercise 4: Bible heroes

Looking for a Bible figure to emulate or appreciate? Check out the stories of some Bible figures, both well known and obscure.

From the Hebrew Scriptures: Shifrah and Puah, Jethro, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Jacob, Hannah, Joseph, Tamar, Samuel, Eli, David, Isaiah, Elijah, Qohelet, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Ruth, Esther and Job.

From the New Testament: John (the Baptizer), Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Peter, Paul, Thomas, Mary of Magdala, Martha, Lazarus, the woman with the hemorrhage, the woman at the well, the *Syrophoenician woman*, Barnabas, Paul, Silas, Appolos, Timothy, Philip, the Ethiopian eunuch.

Then discuss:

- What made them notable?
- What characteristics did they show?
- How was God part of their story?
- How did God use them to accomplish good things?
- What can we learn from them?

## Exercise 5: Enter the story

It's easy to fall into the habit of looking at a Bible story superficially—dwelling long enough only to glean the most obvious meaning. In writing about their most inspiring Bible figures, contributors to this article had to enter deeply into the stories and explore the complex dynamics. Practice entering a Bible story by closely examining Scripture involving a favorite figure (such as Zechariah's comeuppance in Luke 1:5-20, 57-80, or the journey of the magi of Matthew 2:1-12).

- What happens on the surface?
- Who are all the players, major and minor?
- What is their stake in the story?
- What energizes the drama?
- What's happening behind the scenes?
- How is it resolved?
- What purpose of God is accomplished?



### About the study guide author:



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## Exercise 6: Motivation

“What’s my motivation?” you hear the stereotypical actor cry, trying in frustration to vivify a stage or film character. Indeed, a key to understanding human beings is figuring out why people do what they do, think what they think and say what they say. Discerning motivation from figures in the Bible requires some knowledge of the historical and social context of the story in which they appear, but mostly our own insights into human behavior.

Look at the motivation of a Bible figure in a particular story (such as Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25, or Mary in Luke 1:26-38). Discuss:

- What can you deduce about the figure’s character from details in the story?
- What dilemma does he or she face?
- What’s at stake for the figure, and why?
- What are the possible alternative courses of action available, and what are the potential ramifications of each?
- What does the figure choose? Why?
- What does that choice reveal about the figure?

## Exercise 7: Your life

Share with your study group the kind of path your life has taken so far.

- What are the hardest challenges you have faced?
- What opportunities and obstacles have you encountered?
- How did you handle them?
- How have they helped you grow into the person you are?
- What Bible figures have faced similar challenges?
- How did they handle their opportunities and obstacles?
- How did they grow?
- Discuss the similarities and differences between their stories and yours.
- What purposes of God did the Bible figure accomplish?
- What’s the parallel in your life?

# Our favorite Bible characters & stories

Earlier this year, *The Lutheran* invited readers to submit reflections on their favorite Bible characters and stories. We chose to share this collection in Advent as we ponder the Word becoming flesh to be among us.

From the Hebrew midwives who risked everything to protect baby Moses to the story of the bronze serpent, the Bible characters and stories readers chose weren't what we expected. Yes, there were some classic stories and characters, but where were Peter, Jonah and Martha? What about the story of the great flood or, my personal favorite, the story of the prodigal son?

No two entries were alike. Instead, this was a kaleidoscope of carefully selected biblical people and stories that reflect the diversity of the body of Christ. And the submissions were highly personal, often weaving Scripture into everyday realities. The responses were so powerful that rather than pull out snippets and highlight trends (which would have been near impossible), we selected a handful of complete reflections to edit and publish.

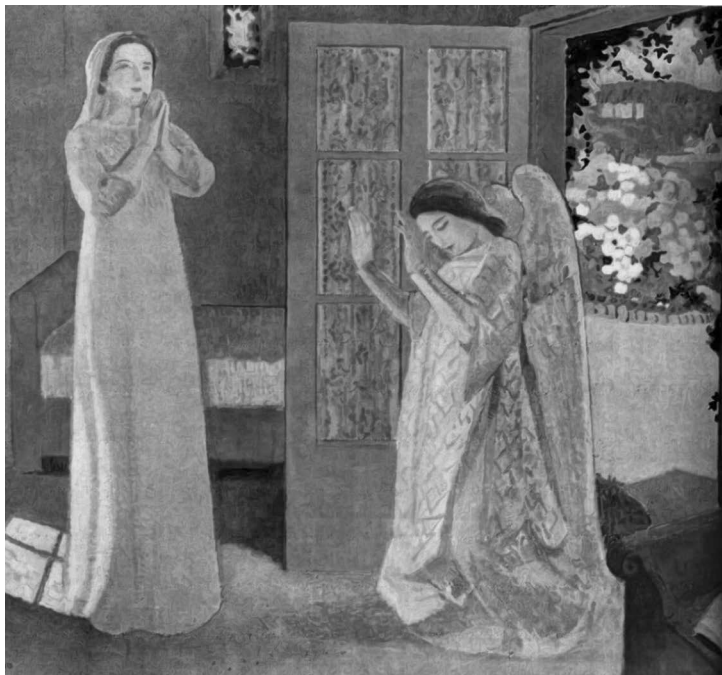
We are grateful to readers for their responses and regret that we can't share all of them. We hope these selections and the artwork that appears alongside them will comfort and inspire you this season.

The surprising nature of this collection of reflections is fitting for the season. May they, and the art that accompanies them, remind you of the many ways God's Word comes into the world and challenges us in unexpected, uncomfortable ways. Could this tiny newborn in a lowly manger really be our savior? Yes. Astonishingly, yes. Such is the heart of our life of faith.

*Erin Strybis is an associate editor of The Lutheran.*

"Merode Altarpiece Triptych," center panel (c. 1425-1428); oil on wood panel by Robert Campin (1375-1444; Flemish); Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y.





“Annunciation” (1913);  
oil on canvas by  
Maurice Denis  
(1870-1943; French).

## Mary

*Luke 1:26-38*

In December, when the chill of winter begins to blow through my door as I retrieve my morning paper, young Mary haunts my reveries. Mary doesn't barge into Advent with a shout in the desert and the scent of locusts and honey on her breath. She, a newly betrothed teenager, arrives quietly. Martin Luther thought she may have been doing housework when her life changed—something ordinary, like sweeping the floor.

“Greetings!” says the angel with all the subtlety of the pesky neighbor who knocks on your door too early in the morning and asks, “Is this a bad time?” *Of course* it's a bad time. It's a bad time for a teenager who has barely known her first kiss to be told that she, of all people, has been chosen to bear God's own child.

A shudder runs through Mary's heart. “Do not be afraid,” the angel Gabriel says, and those words make all the difference. She does not fear. She *wonders*. In an age plagued by fear and skepticism, Mary wonders at this gospel.

Could there have been other homes Gabriel visited? Could there have been other Marys whom this light-robed messenger urged not to fear, only to have the door slammed in his face? But this Mary wonders and then says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

*Terry L. Morgan attends Christ the King Lutheran Church in Centerville, Ohio, and is supply preacher for Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Germantown, Ohio.*

“Exodus”; woodcut by  
Azariah Mbatha (1941-; South Africa),  
who has lived in Sweden since 1969.

## Moses at the Red Sea

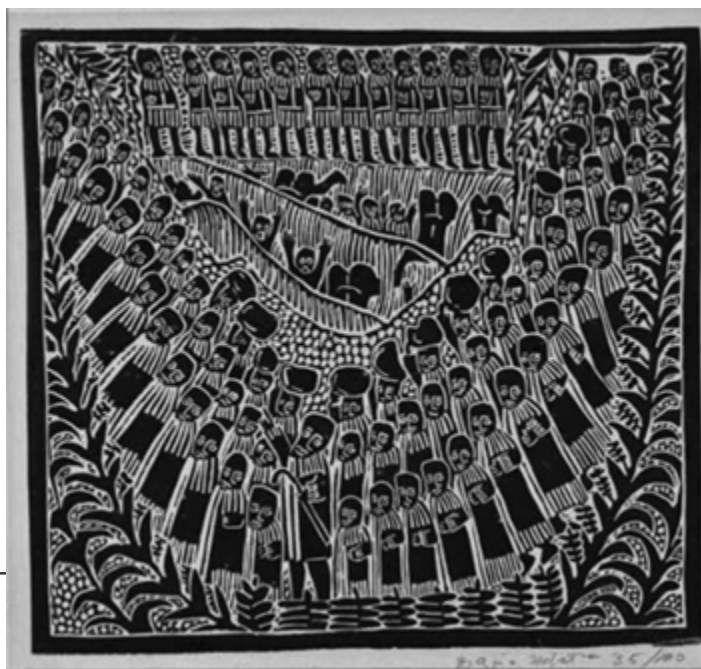
*Exodus 14*

One of my favorite Bible stories is Moses and the Israelites at the Red Sea. Faced with a seemingly impossible situation with nowhere to turn, Moses tells the people: “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today” (Exodus 14:13).

If you trust in the Lord and “stand firm,” God will deliver you from seemingly impossible situations. I love that promise and reassurance. Moses continues: “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still” (Exodus 14:14).

Wow. What a comfort to know that the Almighty Creator of the universe is fighting on our behalf. Turn your cares, worries and concerns over to God—trust in the Lord to deliver you in the time of your greatest need.

*George M. Brickley attends First Lutheran Church in Malden, Mass.*



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“The Widow,” plate 4 from “War” (Krieg) series (1921-22, published 1923); woodcut by Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945; German); Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.

“The Story of Joseph” detail, “Joseph Interprets Pharaoh’s Dreams” (1986); serigraph in 34 colors by John August Swanson (1938-), the son of a Mexican mother and Swedish father who now lives in Los Angeles.



© 1986 BY JOHN AUGUST SWANSON

## Parable of the widow and the unjust judge

**Luke 18:1-8**

When I was young I used to race sailboats. The only way to win was to keep my eye on the mark and get there first. The wind, tide and other sailors worked hard to get me off course. Sometimes I won, sometimes I lost, but I always tried. There was great satisfaction in trying.

Today I live in quiet desperation. I am unwell and often in pain. My goals are different now. Winning is when I get the daily newspaper sudoku right or make good banana bread.

My body is not much use, but believing that love is even greater than life itself, I pray for my family, for those in pain, and for justice and healing in our broken world. When I am weak and feel like giving up, when the wind is just too strong, I remember a verse from the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, where Jesus tells of the need to “pray always and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

That widow in Luke’s parable had no status or power. She must have been unimaginably desperate to not only confront a judge who notoriously cared little for other people, but to continually return until he gave up and heard her case. Today I return again and again to God, a just judge, with my petitions. Sometimes I see my prayers answered and sometimes not.

Unlike the widow I’m lucky to have a wonderful husband, children and friends who care, but my struggles are all mine. No one else can take on that burden—except God. There’s great satisfaction in praying.

*Jane McKinley attends Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lakewood, N.J.*

## Joseph Genesis 40

In a society that judged one’s intrinsic worth on social status, Joseph’s career went up and down like a yo-yo. He was the No. 1 son and then sold into slavery. He became his master’s right-hand man and then went to prison. He later found himself as Pharaoh’s right-hand man. Perhaps Joseph’s life informed Jesus’ teaching about each person’s unchanging, infinite worth: “The last will be first” (Matthew 20:16) and “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26).

Throughout his life, Joseph maintained continuous awareness of God’s presence and grace toward him, and so managed to excel at every task to which he put his hand. Above all, he let go of the many serious injustices he had suffered and lived as one without any grievances. Thus, for example, he had sufficient presence to reach out to other prisoners in need (Genesis 40:6-7).

For 30 years I prospered working in various professional capacities before becoming homeless. I’m still homeless. But Joseph’s example encourages me that, through grace and presence, God can and will continue to use my gifts, regardless of my circumstances. I can still be light to the world.

*William Tell lives in Baltimore and blogs at [www.williamatell.wordpress.com](http://www.williamatell.wordpress.com).*



## Bathsheba

### 2 Samuel 11

Was she the innocent victim of rape by a king? Or a bored soldier's wife deliberately tempting a bored king who was ordered not to go into battle? Of course, we'll never know. But over the years there have been movies, books and much speculation about King David and the beautiful Bathsheba, his eighth and last official wife.

Her beauty and charm must have really enthralled him from a one-night stand to marriage and the promise that their second son Solomon would be king instead of his firstborn Absalom.

I admire Bathsheba's boldness to inform King David of the results of their brief encounter, knowing at best she'd become part of his sizable harem and at worst ignored. Amazingly he married her after first deviously ordering her husband, Uriah the Hittite, to be put in the front line of battle to ensure his death and her official widowhood. Did she grieve for her husband? Or was she too overwhelmed by her good fortune to care much?

Was she happy? Content? God only knows. But she upset the royal genealogy and Bible history. Or was it God's plan all along?

*Patricia M. Kenning is from Littleton, Colo.*

"Christ's Pity of the Sick" (1970); mingei (folk art) print on kozo paper by Sadao Watanabe (1913-1996; Japan).



"David and Bathsheba" (2012), created using Photoshop by Jon Deviny (1982-), who lives in Bellingham, Wash.

## The healing of a boy with a spirit

### Mark 9:14-27

A father brings his son to the disciples for healing, but they're unsuccessful. The father approaches Jesus directly and makes it plain that he is bringing his child to him specifically. Then he gives a medical history like any parent speaking to a doctor might do on behalf of his nonverbal child.

As the parent of a nonverbal son who had seizures, every detail of this story rings true to me. I can relate to the father's frustration with the disciples.

Jesus' response to the father seems impatient. The only part the father really hears is when Jesus says, "Bring [your son] to me" (Mark 9:19).

I remember many doctors and therapists who said discouraging things before they agreed to see my son.

Seeing his son in the throes of yet another seizure, the father exclaims, "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us" (22). Jesus' answer that all things are possible to one who believes evokes from the father one of the great expressions of New Testament faith—"I believe; help my unbelief" (24).

Many times I have prayed that as I cared for my son or faced other challenges in my life.

Then things happen quickly. The crowd presses in. Jesus rebukes the spirit that had been causing the boy's

seizure. The boy falls limp. Cynics are already writing him off as dead. Jesus takes the boy's hand and the two of them stand together. The evangelist doesn't tell us what the father is doing. But I know. He is crying and praising God with all his being.

I read this story often during the 26 years I cared for my son. It helped me understand how Jesus shares our struggles. In 2012, Jesus took Matthew's hand, raising him up to be with him. This was the Gospel story read at his funeral.

*Susan B. Bianchi attends Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Hershey, Pa.*

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“Jesus Healing the Woman with an Issue of Blood”; mosaic in the Basilica di Sant’Apollinare Nuovo (sixth century), Ravenna, Italy.

## Jesus the Good Shepherd

*Psalm 23; John 20:11-18*

My favorite image of Jesus is as the Good Shepherd. In John 10, the Good Shepherd tells us that he knows his sheep and his sheep know him, and that he leads them forth by calling each by name. Hearing their names spoken by a familiar voice, they follow him. The key elements in this passage are voice and name.

One of my favorite Bible stories where this is lived out is the meeting of the Good Shepherd and one of his sheep on Easter morning, as told by John. Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus’ sheep, was crying outside the empty tomb when Jesus appeared. She mistook him for the gardener and didn’t recognize his voice. Then came the Good Shepherd moment. Jesus drew near and spoke one word—“Mirjam” (Mary). Hearing her name uttered in that familiar voice, Mary exclaimed, “*Rabbouni*” (teacher). This was the “aha” moment. Jesus knows us and calls us by name.

This story is so dear to me that when I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in 1977, after climbing the Calvary steps and then standing inside the empty tomb, I made a brief visit to the chapel that marks the traditional site of this sacred encounter.

*Terrance J. Thompson II of Coconut Creek, Fla., attends three Christian congregations in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.*

## The woman who touched Jesus

*Mark 5:25-34*

Scripture doesn’t reveal to us how old she was, nor does it give her name. It does confirm she had been dealing with chronic hemorrhaging for years and not getting better. In biblical times, a bleeding woman was considered unclean and untouchable, ostracized from family and community, and perhaps even dependent on charity for a living. I can only imagine how alone she must have felt.

It’s easy for me to empathize with the woman’s situation and her desperate need to find healing and wholeness. In boldly touching Jesus’ garment she expressed her faith that he was the one who could help her. And he did.

What endears me to this story is the woman’s boldness in approaching Jesus—no words, simply a touch made the connection for her. Jesus’ loving response and her courage remind me that anyone can approach the Lord with a problem. Even me.

*Vivian J. Becker, Arlington Heights, Ill., is a retired pastor. She attends St. Mark Lutheran Church, Mount Prospect, Ill.*



“Do Not Hold on to Me” (2013); Japanese gouache color and Chinese ink on Korean rice paper by He Qi (1948-; Chinese).



# Who in the Bible are you?

By Diane L. Jacobson

You have undoubtedly noticed that Jesus teaches most often through parables. Have you also noticed that when Jesus does this, you are invariably drawn to and identify with one of the characters? Sometimes you are the prodigal son and sometimes the elder brother. At times you aspire to be the good Samaritan, and other times you know yourself to be the wounded man fallen by the wayside.

Through the parables, Jesus teaches us that stories matter. Stories draw us in by naming our sins and gifts, shining a light of recognition and calling us to be what God intends us to be. As you've seen from this collection of reader reflections, the biblical characters often invite us to understand ourselves more deeply and dig into who we are in relation to others and to God.

So here is a challenge:

**First**, think of one character from a biblical story with whom you identify. For example, are you like Naomi, a widow who has lost her husband and sons and feels lost and lonely? Are you like the rich young man who comes to Jesus asking questions? Open up the Scripture and be inspired. There are myriad possibilities.

**Second**, read your character's story (or stories) multiple times, exploring all the details. Let the

story pose questions and wonderments. Dwell with the story; inhabit your character from different angles.

**Third**, give yourself over to the study of your story and your character—for a month, six months or even a year. Read study notes, articles, books or even novels.

Think about the historical and literary context of your character's story(ies). Talk about your character with friends and family.

Perhaps you can share with a study partner who is exploring his or her own chosen biblical character. Talk with people of different ages and cultures and listen to their insights about your character. Look for music (hymns or popular songs), film and art that express your story. Be playful and let your biblical imagination take flight.

**Throughout this process ask yourself some questions:** What am I learning about myself from my chosen character? What are my failings and strengths? Is this character more about who I have been or what I want to become? What am I being called to be, say or do?



## Author bio:

Jacobson is professor emerita of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., where she taught from 1982 to 2010.

How is this exploration of my character helping me to better understand myself as a child of God?

Try a similar exercise with your whole congregation. Check out *Story Matters: Naming, Claiming and Living Our Biblical Identity* at [www.bookoffaith.org/dwelling.html](http://www.bookoffaith.org/dwelling.html) (click on "Story Matters PDF").

When the time comes and your heart is full, the Bible will be newly alive to you since you lived each day accompanied by your biblical counterpart. Perhaps you'll start the process all over again with a brand new character.



"The Return of the Prodigal Son" (c. 1900); etching by Jean-Louis Forain (1852-1931; French); from the Jerry Evenrud Prodigal Son Collection at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.