

JUDITH



Arphaxad Fortifies Ecbatana

1 It was the twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh. In those days Arphaxad ruled over the Medes in Ecbatana. ²He built walls around Ecbatana with hewn stones three cubits thick and six cubits long; he made the walls seventy cubits high and fifty cubits wide. ³At its gates he raised towers one hundred cubits high and sixty cubits wide at the foundations. ⁴He made its gates seventy cubits high and forty cubits wide to allow his armies to march out in force and his infantry to form their ranks. ⁵Then King Nebuchadnezzar made war against King Arphaxad in the great plain that is on the borders of Ragau. ⁶There rallied to him all the people of the hill country and all those who lived along the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the Hydaspes, and, on the plain, Arioch, king of the Elymeans. Thus, many nations joined the forces of the Chaldeans.^a

Nebuchadnezzar Issues Ultimatum

7 Then Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians, sent messengers to all who lived in Persia and to all who lived in the west, those who lived in Cilicia and Damascus, Lebanon and Antilebanon, and all who lived along the seacoast, ⁸and those among the nations of Carmel and Gilead, and Upper Galilee and the great plain of Esdraelon, ⁹and all who were in Samaria and its towns, and beyond the Jordan as far as Jerusalem and Bethany and Chelous and Kadesh and the river of Egypt, and Tahpanhes and Raamses and the whole land of Goshen, ¹⁰even beyond Tanis and Memphis, and all who lived in Egypt as far as the borders of Ethiopia. ¹¹But all who lived in the whole region disregarded the summons of Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians,

Read Judith 1:1–6

The story of Judith is set within the context of a clash between two mighty kings of the ancient Near East: Nebuchadnezzar and Arphaxad. The obvious historical inaccuracies of these verses suggest that the text is didactic fiction. Actually, the narrative is a thinly disguised description of the threats to Jewish existence posed by Antiochus IV in the middle of the second century BC. Judith's story is an affirmation of faith in God who does not abandon the Jews in their desperation.

Reflect: While great dramas and conflicts take place on the world's stage, God determines not to let the Jewish people be swept aside. It is God's will that the descendants of Abraham survive every threat to their existence.

Pray: Christians have been among the most fierce persecutors of the Jewish people. Ask God to forgive the great sin of anti-Semitism committed by so many Christians.

Act: As encouraged by the Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate*, commit yourself to the effort to overcome past prejudices, misunderstandings, indifference, and the language of contempt and hostility between the Jewish people and the church.

^a Syr: Gk *Cheleoudites*

Read Judith 1:7–12

Nebuchadnezzar wishes to form a grand coalition of nations to move against Arphaxad. Among those nations is Judea. The nations do not wish to get involved in Nebuchadnezzar's war. Their refusal enrages Nebuchadnezzar, who swears that he will avenge his honor.

Reflect: Nations ought to unite for peace rather than war. The refusal of the nations to get involved in Nebuchadnezzar's scheme is commendable. Governments need to learn new ways of settling differences, ways that do not involve war and the inevitable loss of innocent lives.

Pray: Ask for God's blessings upon the United Nations and other international organizations that try to bring about peace and understanding among the nations of the world.

Act: Support the United Nations and non-governmental organizations like Franciscans International that try to bring about peace through justice.

Read Judith 1:13–16

Despite the refusal of any nation to join Nebuchadnezzar, he is successful. He captures Ecbatana and has his rival Arphaxad killed. Nebuchadnezzar's army takes the opportunity to relax after their victorious campaign.

Reflect: Wars rarely settle matters. Though the fighting may stop, the seeds for the next war are germinating just below the surface. The respite that Nebuchadnezzar's army is enjoying is temporary. Genuine peace among warring nations is difficult to attain.

Pray: Nations that have been at war need to strive for authentic reconciliation. Ask God to give enemy nations the gift of peace based on reconciliation.

and refused to join him in the war; for they were not afraid of him, but regarded him as only one man.^a So they sent back his messengers empty-handed and in disgrace.

12 Then Nebuchadnezzar became very angry with this whole region, and swore by his throne and kingdom that he would take revenge on the whole territory of Cilicia and Damascus and Syria, that he would kill with his sword also all the inhabitants of the land of Moab, and the people of Ammon, and all Judea, and every one in Egypt, as far as the coasts of the two seas.

Arphaxad Is Defeated

13 In the seventeenth year he led his forces against King Arphaxad and defeated him in battle, overthrowing the whole army of Arphaxad and all his cavalry and all his chariots. ¹⁴ Thus he took possession of his towns and came to Ecbatana, captured its towers, plundered its markets, and turned its glory into disgrace. ¹⁵ He captured Arphaxad in the mountains of Ragau and struck him down with his spears, thus destroying him once and for all. ¹⁶ Then he returned to Nineveh, he and all his combined forces, a vast body of troops; and there he and his forces rested and feasted for one hundred twenty days.

The Expedition against the West

2 In the eighteenth year, on the twenty-second day of the first month, there was talk in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians, about carrying out his revenge on the whole region, just as he had said. ² He summoned all his ministers and all his nobles and set before them his secret plan and recounted fully, with his own lips, all the wickedness of the region.^b ³ They decided that every one who had not obeyed his command should be destroyed.

⁴ When he had completed his plan, Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians, called Holofernes, the chief general of his army, second only to himself, and said to him, ⁵ "Thus says the Great King, the lord of the whole earth: Leave my presence and take with you men confident in their strength, one hundred twenty thousand foot soldiers and twelve thousand cavalry. ⁶ March out against all the land to the west, because they disobeyed my orders. ⁷ Tell them to prepare earth and water, for I am coming against them in my anger, and will cover the whole face of the earth with the feet of my troops, to whom I will hand them over to be plundered. ⁸ Their wounded shall fill their ravines and gullies, and the swelling river shall be filled with their dead. ⁹ I will lead them away captive to the ends of the whole earth. ¹⁰ You

^a Or a man

^b Meaning of Gk uncertain

Act: Make certain that units on peacemaking are part of the religious education curriculum in your parish. After all, Jesus said: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Mt 5:9).

Read Judith 2:1–13

This passage introduces Holofernes, whom Nebuchadnezzar chose to be his instrument of vengeance against the nations that had refused to join his coalition. Holofernes is charged with being merciless in the fulfillment of his duties to the king.

Reflect: The waging of war inevitably brings with it the commission of atrocities such as those to be committed upon the nations that did not join in Nebuchadnezzar’s war of conquest. Wars are difficult to contain. Innocent people always suffer.

Pray: Intercede for the innocent victims of war and violence. Pray also for relief workers who try to alleviate the suffering of innocent victims of armed conflicts.

Act: Support the relief efforts of non-governmental agencies such as churches and medical and charitable organizations that come to the aid of victims of war.

Read Judith 2:14–28

Holofernes sets out on a military campaign to carry out Nebuchadnezzar’s orders to bring destruction and death upon those countries that did not join his coalition against Arphaxad. The route that Holofernes takes makes no geographical sense, but the narrative is not a historical account, as has been clear from the very beginning of the book.

shall go and seize all their territory for me in advance. They must yield themselves to you, and you shall hold them for me until the day of their punishment. ¹¹ But to those who resist show no mercy, but hand them over to slaughter and plunder throughout your whole region. ¹² For as I live, and by the power of my kingdom, what I have spoken I will accomplish by my own hand. ¹³ And you—take care not to transgress any of your lord’s commands, but carry them out exactly as I have ordered you; do it without delay.”

Campaign of Holofernes

¹⁴ So Holofernes left the presence of his lord, and summoned all the commanders, generals, and officers of the Assyrian army. ¹⁵ He mustered the picked troops by divisions as his lord had ordered him to do, one hundred twenty thousand of them, together with twelve thousand archers on horseback, ¹⁶ and he organized them as a great army is marshaled for a campaign. ¹⁷ He took along a vast number of camels and donkeys and mules for transport, and innumerable sheep and oxen and goats for food; ¹⁸ also ample rations for everyone, and a huge amount of gold and silver from the royal palace.

¹⁹ Then he set out with his whole army, to go ahead of King Nebuchadnezzar and to cover the whole face of the earth to the west with their chariots and cavalry and picked foot soldiers. ²⁰ Along with them went a mixed crowd like a swarm of locusts, like the dust^a of the earth—a multitude that could not be counted.

²¹ They marched for three days from Nineveh to the plain of Bectileth, and camped opposite Bectileth near the mountain that is to the north of Upper Cilicia. ²² From there Holofernes^b took his whole army, the infantry, cavalry, and chariots, and went up into the hill country. ²³ He ravaged Put and Lud, and plundered all the Rassisites and the Ishmaelites on the border of the desert, south of the country of the Chelleans. ²⁴ Then he followed^c the Euphrates and passed through Mesopotamia and destroyed all the fortified towns along the brook Abron, as far as the sea. ²⁵ He also seized the territory of Cilicia, and killed everyone who resisted him. Then he came to the southern borders of Japheth, facing Arabia. ²⁶ He surrounded all the Midianites, and burned their tents and plundered their sheepfolds. ²⁷ Then he went down into the plain of Damascus during the wheat harvest, and burned all their fields and destroyed their flocks and herds and sacked their towns and ravaged their lands and put all their young men to the sword.

²⁸ So fear and dread of him fell upon all the people

^a Gk sand

^b Gk he

^c Or crossed

Reflect: Holofernes is clearly carrying out an immoral command by engaging in an offensive war against nations that present no threat to Nebuchadnezzar. Their offense was their refusal to join Nebuchadnezzar in making war against Arphaxad. Of course, Holofernes would defend his actions by asserting that he is simply following orders. Still, the abdication of one's moral judgment to follow orders is no defense.

Pray: There is no shortage of mercenaries and regular military forces who are willing to carry out the commands of their leaders no matter how unjust and immoral such commands may be. Pray for the innocent victims of this misplaced loyalty.

Act: Organizations such as Catholic Relief Services and the International Red Cross exist to aid the innocent victims of disasters caused by nature and by human beings. Such organizations deserve financial and personal support.

Read Judith 3

Though the nations against whom Holofernes marched quickly surrendered to his overwhelming force, he still devastated their land. What is most significant for the biblical author was Holofernes's actions to suppress local religious practices in order to replace these with the worship of Nebuchadnezzar. The chapter ends with Holofernes encamped in lower Galilee. This does not bode well for the Jews who were concentrated in Judea to the south of Galilee.

Reflect: The biblical narrative describes Holofernes engaging in a purely punitive campaign against the nations that refused to join Nebuchadnezzar's war against Arphaxad. By all moral standards, such a campaign is immoral—especially since the peoples in question surrendered to Holofernes's forces. Again, it is clear that war tends to have a life of its own. It cannot be controlled once it begins.

who lived along the seacoast, at Sidon and Tyre, and those who lived in Sur and Ocina and all who lived in Jamnia. Those who lived in Azotus and Ascalon feared him greatly.

Entreaties for Peace

3 They therefore sent messengers to him to sue for peace in these words: ²“We, the servants of Nebuchadnezzar, the Great King, lie prostrate before you. Do with us whatever you will. ³See, our buildings and all our land and all our wheat fields and our flocks and herds and all our encampments^a lie before you; do with them as you please. ⁴Our towns and their inhabitants are also your slaves; come and deal with them as you see fit.”

⁵ The men came to Holofernes and told him all this. ⁶ Then he went down to the seacoast with his army and stationed garrisons in the fortified towns and took picked men from them as auxiliaries. ⁷ These people and all in the countryside welcomed him with garlands and dances and tambourines. ⁸ Yet he demolished all their shrines^b and cut down their sacred groves; for he had been commissioned to destroy all the gods of the land, so that all nations should worship Nebuchadnezzar alone, and that all their dialects and tribes should call upon him as a god.

⁹ Then he came toward Esdraelon, near Dothan, facing the great ridge of Judea; ¹⁰ he camped between Geba and Scythopolis, and remained for a whole month in order to collect all the supplies for his army.

Judea on the Alert

4 When the Israelites living in Judea heard of everything that Holofernes, the general of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Assyrians, had done to the nations, and how he had plundered and destroyed all their temples, ² they were therefore greatly terrified at his approach; they were alarmed both for Jerusalem and for the temple of the Lord their God. ³ For they had only recently returned from exile, and all the people of Judea had just now gathered together, and the sacred vessels and the altar and the temple had been consecrated after their profanation. ⁴ So they sent word to every district of Samaria, and to Kona, Beth-horon, Belmain, and Jericho, and to Choba and Aesora, and the valley of Salem. ⁵ They immediately seized all the high hilltops and fortified the villages on them and stored up food in preparation for war—since their fields had recently been harvested.

⁶ The high priest, Joakim, who was in Jerusalem at the time, wrote to the people of Bethulia and Beto-

^a Gk all the sheepfolds of our tents

^b Syr: Gk borders

Pray: The last one hundred years have witnessed too many wars like the one described in the book of Judith. Pray that God will raise up peacemakers who will bring an end to the senseless and immoral conflicts that have brought nothing but death and destruction to so many people.

Act: Resist the temptation to seek retribution for real or imagined hurts. This merely keeps the cycle of violence going and draws innocent people into that destructive cycle.

Read Judith 4:1–8

The first impulse when faced with a military threat is to respond in kind. The people of Judea under the leadership of their high priest begin preparations to defend themselves against Holofernes's army: they post guards, fortify villages, and defend mountain passes.

Reflect: From the book's description of Holofernes's forces and the victories they enjoyed, the reader can conclude that the defensive preparations taken by the Jews will be ineffectual. Still, the actions of the Jews, though futile, are understandable. The human response is to return violence for violence.

Pray: Jesus advises his followers to love their enemies (see Mt 5:44). Pray for the strength to break the cycle of violence by returning good for evil.

Act: List all those with whom you have serious differences and then develop strategies to defuse the ill feelings that exist.

Read Judith 4:9–15

In a scene reminiscent of the book of Judges, the people of Judea cry out to God for deliverance from Holofernes. The whole people are united in prayer. They cover themselves with ashes and don sackcloth. God hears their cry and the reader wonders how the people will be delivered from the threat of destruction.

mesthaim, which faces Esdraelon opposite the plain near Dothan, ⁷ordering them to seize the mountain passes, since by them Judea could be invaded; and it would be easy to stop any who tried to enter, for the approach was narrow, wide enough for only two at a time to pass.

Prayer and Penance

8 So the Israelites did as they had been ordered by the high priest Joakim and the senate of the whole people of Israel, in session at Jerusalem. ⁹And every man of Israel cried out to God with great fervor, and they humbled themselves with much fasting. ¹⁰They and their wives and their children and their cattle and every resident alien and hired laborer and purchased slave—they all put sackcloth around their waists. ¹¹And all the Israelite men, women, and children living at Jerusalem prostrated themselves before the temple and put ashes on their heads and spread out their sackcloth before the Lord. ¹²They even draped the altar with sackcloth and cried out in unison, praying fervently to the God of Israel not to allow their infants to be carried off and their wives to be taken as booty, and the towns they had inherited to be destroyed, and the sanctuary to be profaned and desecrated to the malicious joy of the Gentiles.

13 The Lord heard their prayers and had regard for their distress; for the people fasted many days throughout Judea and in Jerusalem before the sanctuary of the Lord Almighty. ¹⁴The high priest Joakim and all the priests who stood before the Lord and ministered to the Lord, with sackcloth around their loins, offered the daily burnt offerings, the votive offerings, and freewill offerings of the people. ¹⁵With ashes on their turbans, they cried out to the Lord with all their might to look with favor on the whole house of Israel.

Council against the Israelites

5 It was reported to Holofernes, the general of the Assyrian army, that the people of Israel had prepared for war and had closed the mountain passes and fortified all the high hilltops and set up barricades in the plains. ²In great anger he called together all the princes of Moab and the commanders of Ammon and all the governors of the coastland, ³and said to them, "Tell me, you Canaanites, what people is this that lives in the hill country? What towns do they inhabit? How large is their army, and in what does their power and strength consist? Who rules over them as king and leads their army? ⁴And why have they alone, of all who live in the west, refused to come out and meet me?"

Reflect: By resorting to prayer and penance, the Jews recognize that the invasion led by Holofernes is not a manifestation of power politics but the consequence of their failure to live in obedience. We create our future by the moral decisions that we make.

Pray: Like the Jews, we ought to recognize the evil powers that we have released by our selfishness and sin. We pray for forgiveness and restoration.

Act: We can be the means by which God answers prayers for peace and deliverance. We need to support efforts to end war and violence, efforts that use political action to foster rejection of war as a means of settling differences among nations.

Read Judith 5:1–4

Holofernes learns of the preparations that the Jews have made to resist his invasion of their towns and villages in the central highlands of Palestine. He asks the military leaders of Judea's neighbors whom he had drafted into his army to give him some insight into the Jewish psyche. What makes the Jews different from the nations that had surrendered to him without a fight?

Reflect: Faith in God's fidelity to the promises made to their ancestors led the Jews to oppose Holofernes when such opposition seemed to be futile. That is the power of faith. How does our faith shape our world view and our moral decisions?

Pray: Ask God for the kind of faith that enables believers to look toward the future with confidence and assurance in God's promises made to us through Jesus Christ.

Act: Be ready to take a course of action that, while on the surface may appear to be ill-considered, involves stepping out in faith as you use your potential and talents for the good of your brothers and sisters.

Achior's Report

5 Then Achior, the leader of all the Ammonites, said to him, "May my lord please listen to a report from the mouth of your servant, and I will tell you the truth about this people that lives in the mountain district near you. No falsehood shall come from your servant's mouth. ⁶ These people are descended from the Chaldeans. ⁷ At one time they lived in Mesopotamia, because they did not wish to follow the gods of their ancestors who were in Chaldea. ⁸ Since they had abandoned the ways of their ancestors, and worshiped the God of heaven, the God they had come to know, their ancestors^a drove them out from the presence of their gods. So they fled to Mesopotamia, and lived there for a long time. ⁹ Then their God commanded them to leave the place where they were living and go to the land of Canaan. There they settled, and grew very prosperous in gold and silver and very much livestock. ¹⁰ When a famine spread over the land of Canaan they went down to Egypt and lived there as long as they had food. There they became so great a multitude that their race could not be counted. ¹¹ So the king of Egypt became hostile to them; he exploited them and forced them to make bricks. ¹² They cried out to their God, and he afflicted the whole land of Egypt with incurable plagues. So the Egyptians drove them out of their sight. ¹³ Then God dried up the Red Sea before them, ¹⁴ and he led them by the way of Sinai and Kadesh-barnea. They drove out all the people of the desert, ¹⁵ and took up residence in the land of the Amorites, and by their might destroyed all the inhabitants of Heshbon; and crossing over the Jordan they took possession of all the hill country. ¹⁶ They drove out before them the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Shechemites, and all the Gergesites, and lived there a long time.

17 "As long as they did not sin against their God they prospered, for the God who hates iniquity is with them. ¹⁸ But when they departed from the way he had prescribed for them, they were utterly defeated in many battles and were led away captive to a foreign land. The temple of their God was razed to the ground, and their towns were occupied by their enemies. ¹⁹ But now they have returned to their God, and have come back from the places where they were scattered, and have occupied Jerusalem, where their sanctuary is, and have settled in the hill country, because it was uninhabited.

20 "So now, my master and lord, if there is any oversight in this people and they sin against their God and we find out their offense, then we can go up and defeat them. ²¹ But if they are not a guilty nation, then let my lord pass them by; for their Lord and God will de-

^a Gk they

Read Judith 5:5–21

One of the military leaders of the nations that Holofernes took into his army gives a schematic chronology of Israelite history to illustrate one principle: when Israel is unfaithful they are subject to divine judgment administered by the nations; however, when the Israelites are faithful, God protects them from all harm. Holofernes can ignore this principle at his own peril and that of his army.

Reflect: There are consequences to ignoring the divine will. There are blessings that come to those who are obedient. This is a basic assumption of the biblical tradition. We, then, bring evil upon ourselves and others by our selfishness and sin. By our obedience, we reverse the effects of our disobedience.

Pray: The lesson of Achior's speech is that we create our future through the decisions we make. We ought to pray for God's help to make the kinds of moral decisions that bring honor to God and effect good for our brothers and sisters.

Act: Recognizing that we create our future, let us resolve to choose to live by the ideals of the gospel by choosing the good of our brothers and sisters over our narrow, individual concerns.

Read Judith 5:22—6:9

The soldiers of Holofernes's army respond to Achior's speech with words of scorn. They are supremely confident that they will defeat the Jews despite Achior's suggestion that they may not be able to do so. Holofernes adds that he will send Achior into Jewish territory so that he can share the fate of the Jewish people.

fend them, and we shall become the laughingstock of the whole world.”

22 When Achior had finished saying these things, all the people standing around the tent began to complain; Holofernes' officers and all the inhabitants of the sea-coast and Moab insisted that he should be cut to pieces. ²³They said, “We are not afraid of the Israelites; they are a people with no strength or power for making war. ²⁴Therefore let us go ahead, Lord Holofernes, and your vast army will swallow them up.”

Achior Handed over to the Israelites

6 When the disturbance made by the people outside the council had died down, Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army, said to Achior^a in the presence of all the foreign contingents:

2 “Who are you, Achior and you mercenaries of Ephraim, to prophesy among us as you have done today and tell us not to make war against the people of Israel because their God will defend them? What god is there except Nebuchadnezzar? He will send his forces and destroy them from the face of the earth. Their God will not save them; ³ we the king's^b servants will destroy them as one man. They cannot resist the might of our cavalry. ⁴ We will overwhelm them;^c their mountains will be drunk with their blood, and their fields will be full of their dead. Not even their footprints will survive our attack; they will utterly perish. So says King Nebuchadnezzar, lord of the whole earth. For he has spoken; none of his words shall be in vain.

5 “As for you, Achior, you Ammonite mercenary, you have said these words in a moment of perversity; you shall not see my face again from this day until I take revenge on this race that came out of Egypt. ⁶ Then at my return the sword of my army and the spear^d of my servants shall pierce your sides, and you shall fall among their wounded. ⁷ Now my slaves are going to take you back into the hill country and put you in one of the towns beside the passes. ⁸ You will not die until you perish along with them. ⁹ If you really hope in your heart that they will not be taken, then do not look downcast! I have spoken, and none of my words shall fail to come true.”

10 Then Holofernes ordered his slaves, who waited on him in his tent, to seize Achior and take him away to Bethulia and hand him over to the Israelites. ¹¹ So the slaves took him and led him out of the camp into the plain, and from the plain they went up into the hill country and came to the springs below Bethulia. ¹² When the men of the town saw them,^e they seized their weapons and ran out of the town to the top of the hill, and all the

^a Other ancient authorities add *and to all the Moabites*

^b Gk *his*

^c Other ancient authorities add *with it*

^d Lat Syr: Gk *people*

^e Other ancient authorities add *on the top of the hill*

Reflect: Prophets are not usually accepted by the people to whom they relate the divine will. We prefer prophets to support the decisions that we have already made and the courses of action that we have determine to take. How receptive are you to the words of today's prophets?

Pray: Pray for the wisdom to hear not only words of comfort and support but also words of challenge. Pray too for the courage to act on the message that today's prophets speak to us.

Act: Make a list of contemporary men and women whom you consider prophets for today. Why do you consider them prophets? Have you acted on the message that they proclaim?

Read Judith 6:10–21

Holofernes has Achior sent into Jewish territory for his audacity in suggesting that the Jews might successfully resist the invasion. The Jews find Achior and are, at first, wary about a person who belongs to a people who are enemies of the Jews. After questioning Achior, however, they are convinced of his sincerity and come to regard his presence among them as a sign of God's favor.

Reflect: Achior was an Ammonite, a member of a group of people who vied with ancient Israel for hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean region. Still, the Jews were able to overcome old animosities and hatreds. They welcomed Achior into their midst after hearing his story. Welcoming the stranger is common in the biblical tradition. How open are we to the "other"?

Pray: Pray for a heart that is open to the stranger—a heart that is able to overcome distrust and prejudice in order to treat each person as an individual.

slingers kept them from coming up by throwing stones at them. ¹³ So having taken shelter below the hill, they bound Achior and left him lying at the foot of the hill, and returned to their master.

14 Then the Israelites came down from their town and found him; they untied him and brought him into Bethulia and placed him before the magistrates of their town, ¹⁵ who in those days were Uziah son of Micah, of the tribe of Simeon, and Chabris son of Gothoniel, and Charmis son of Melchiel. ¹⁶ They called together all the elders of the town, and all their young men and women ran to the assembly. They set Achior in the midst of all their people, and Uziah questioned him about what had happened. ¹⁷ He answered and told them what had taken place at the council of Holofernes, and all that he had said in the presence of the Assyrian leaders, and all that Holofernes had boasted he would do against the house of Israel. ¹⁸ Then the people fell down and worshiped God, and cried out:

19 "O Lord God of heaven, see their arrogance, and have pity on our people in their humiliation, and look kindly today on the faces of those who are consecrated to you."

20 Then they reassured Achior, and praised him highly. ²¹ Uziah took him from the assembly to his own house and gave a banquet for the elders; and all that night they called on the God of Israel for help.

The Campaign against Bethulia

7 The next day Holofernes ordered his whole army, and all the allies who had joined him, to break camp and move against Bethulia, and to seize the passes up into the hill country and make war on the Israelites. ² So all their warriors marched off that day; their fighting forces numbered one hundred seventy thousand infantry and twelve thousand cavalry, not counting the baggage and the foot soldiers handling it, a very great multitude. ³ They encamped in the valley near Bethulia, beside the spring, and they spread out in breadth over Dothan as far as Balbaim and in length from Bethulia to Cyamon, which faces Esdraelon.

4 When the Israelites saw their vast numbers, they were greatly terrified and said to one another, "They will now strip clean the whole land; neither the high mountains nor the valleys nor the hills will bear their weight." ⁵ Yet they all seized their weapons, and when they had kindled fires on their towers, they remained on guard all that night.

6 On the second day Holofernes led out all his cavalry in full view of the Israelites in Bethulia. ⁷ He reconnoitered the approaches to their town, and visited the

Act: Let us listen to the stories of those seeking welcome. By listening to their stories, we will see individuals who want the same things as we do from life. Treating people individually is the way to overcome prejudice.

Read Judith 7

The deliverance of the Jews will not be the result of some miraculous intervention; rather, it will take its time in coming. Holofernes begins his march against Bethulia. The topography of Palestine's central highlands and the tactical advantages that it offers to defenders makes a siege rather than a frontal assault a more prudent approach. The first step in besieging the town is to take control of the source of its drinking water—which is precisely what Holofernes does. The siege of Bethulia causes the townspeople great suffering. They conclude that the only way to end their suffering is by surrendering to Holofernes. Their reaction is reminiscent of the murmuring in the wilderness during the journey from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. Uzziah asks the people to be patient and wait for the Lord's deliverance.

Reflect: Notice how long the Jews of Bethulia will have to wait for their deliverance. They will experience no miraculous deliverance. Waiting for God is an important spiritual discipline. Faith involves confidence in God who wants only what is best for us.

Pray: The Lord's Prayer asks that God retake this world from the powers of evil that hold it in subjection. Pray the Our Father with the confidence that God hears and answers prayers.

Act: Waiting for God is not a passive process. Faith urges us to take action to usher in the kingdom of God. What are you doing to hasten the day of the Lord's final victory over sin? Look for the evidence of evil's presence in people's lives and do what you can to overcome that power.

springs that supplied their water; he seized them and set guards of soldiers over them, and then returned to his army.

8 Then all the chieftains of the Edomites and all the leaders of the Moabites and the commanders of the coastland came to him and said, ⁹“Listen to what we have to say, my lord, and your army will suffer no losses. ¹⁰This people, the Israelites, do not rely on their spears but on the height of the mountains where they live, for it is not easy to reach the tops of their mountains. ¹¹Therefore, my lord, do not fight against them in regular formation, and not a man of your army will fall. ¹²Remain in your camp, and keep all the men in your forces with you; let your servants take possession of the spring of water that flows from the foot of the mountain, ¹³for this is where all the people of Bethulia get their water. So thirst will destroy them, and they will surrender their town. Meanwhile, we and our people will go up to the tops of the nearby mountains and camp there to keep watch to see that no one gets out of the town. ¹⁴They and their wives and children will waste away with famine, and before the sword reaches them they will be strewn about in the streets where they live. ¹⁵Thus you will pay them back with evil, because they rebelled and did not receive you peaceably.”

16 These words pleased Holofernes and all his attendants, and he gave orders to do as they had said. ¹⁷So the army of the Ammonites moved forward, together with five thousand Assyrians, and they encamped in the valley and seized the water supply and the springs of the Israelites. ¹⁸And the Edomites and Ammonites went up and encamped in the hill country opposite Dothan; and they sent some of their men toward the south and the east, toward Egrebeh, which is near Chusi beside the Wadi Mochmur. The rest of the Assyrian army encamped in the plain, and covered the whole face of the land. Their tents and supply trains spread out in great number, and they formed a vast multitude.

The Distress of the Israelites

19 The Israelites then cried out to the Lord their God, for their courage failed, because all their enemies had surrounded them, and there was no way of escape from them. ²⁰The whole Assyrian army, their infantry, chariots, and cavalry, surrounded them for thirty-four days, until all the water containers of every inhabitant of Bethulia were empty; ²¹their cisterns were going dry, and on no day did they have enough water to drink, for their drinking water was rationed. ²²Their children were listless, and the women and young men fainted from thirst and were collapsing in the streets of the town and

in the gateways; they no longer had any strength.

23 Then all the people, the young men, the women, and the children, gathered around Uzziah and the rulers of the town and cried out with a loud voice, and said before all the elders, ²⁴ “Let God judge between you and us! You have done us a great injury in not making peace with the Assyrians. ²⁵ For now we have no one to help us; God has sold us into their hands, to be strewn before them in thirst and exhaustion. ²⁶ Now summon them and surrender the whole town as booty to the army of Holofernes and to all his forces. ²⁷ For it would be better for us to be captured by them.^a We shall indeed become slaves, but our lives will be spared, and we shall not witness our little ones dying before our eyes, and our wives and children drawing their

last breath. ²⁸ We call to witness against you heaven and earth and our God, the Lord of our ancestors, who punishes us for our sins and the sins of our ancestors; do today the things that we have described!”

29 Then great and general lamentation arose throughout the assembly, and they cried out to the Lord God with a loud voice. ³⁰ But Uzziah said to them, “Courage, my brothers and sisters!^b Let us hold out for five days more; by that time the Lord our God will turn his mercy to us again, for he will not forsake us utterly. ³¹ But if these days pass by, and no help comes for us, I will do as you say.”

32 Then he dismissed the people to their various posts, and they went up on the walls and towers of their town. The women and children he sent home. In the town they were in great misery.

Read Judith 8:1–8

The narrator introduces a new character into the story: Judith, a religiously observant woman, who was widowed as a young woman. She is rich and beautiful. Her name means simply “Jewess.” She will play a completely unexpected role in Bethulia’s deliverance.

Reflect: God’s ways are often surprising. God’s power is revealed when he chooses as instruments of deliverance people who seemingly have no power to change a situation. Consider how many times you have been surprised by God.

Pray: Thank God for answering prayers in ways that you did not expect. Praise God’s graciousness in responding to you in your need by providing help in surprising ways.

Act: We are to be instruments of God’s love in people’s lives. Resolve to surprise people by unexpected acts of kindness and love. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16).

The Character of Judith

8 Now in those days Judith heard about these things: she was the daughter of Merari son of Ox son of Joseph son of Oziel son of Elkhiah son of Ananias son of Gideon son of Raphain son of Ahitub son of Elijah son of Hilkiah son of Eliab son of Nathanael son of Salamiel son of Sarasadai son of Israel. ² Her husband Manasseh, who belonged to her tribe and family, had died during the barley harvest. ³ For as he stood overseeing those who were binding sheaves in the field, he was overcome by the burning heat, and took to his bed and died in his town Bethulia. So they buried him with his ancestors in the field between Dothan and Balamon. ⁴ Judith remained as a widow for three years and four months ⁵ at home where she set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house. She put sackcloth around her waist and dressed in widow’s clothing. ⁶ She fasted all the days of her widowhood, except the day before the sabbath and the sabbath itself, the day before the new moon and the day of the new moon, and the festivals and days of rejoicing of the house of Israel. ⁷ She was beautiful in appearance, and was very lovely to behold. Her husband Manasseh had left her gold and silver, men and women slaves, livestock, and fields; and she maintained this estate. ⁸ No one spoke ill of her, for she feared God with great devotion.

Judith and the Elders

9 When Judith heard the harsh words spoken by the people against the ruler, because they were faint for

^a Other ancient authorities add *than to die of thirst*

^b Gk *Courage, brothers*

Read Judith 8:9–27

While the people are ready to surrender if God takes no action to lift the siege in five days, Judith stands alone in challenging their timidity before Holofernes. She asserts that it is not their place to determine when or how God will act. Rather than testing God, the people ought to thank God for testing them as God tried their ancestors.

Reflect: The passage claims that the suffering that the people of Bethulia are undergoing is not a sign of God's displeasure with them. On the contrary, it is a sign of their closeness to God, who "scourges those who are close to him" (v. 27). This is an example of faith coming to grips with the mystery of evil's power. The text then tries to help its readers make sense out of what is the non-rational power of sin to cause havoc.

Pray: The powerful presence of evil in the world is one of the great mysteries that perplex believers. Pray for the final and complete defeat of evil's power that will be the result of Christ's return. Pray too that you may have a place in that new world—a world of justice, peace, and love.

Act: Like Judith, we too are called to strengthen the faith of our brothers and sisters. Speak words of support and encouragement to a person who clearly needs to hear such words.

Read Judith 8:28–36

Uzziah's response to Judith is patronizing. While he ostensibly recognizes her wisdom, the king actually dismisses her advice and asks her to pray while he takes action to alleviate the people's suffering. Judith responds by asserting that she has a plan to end Holofernes's threat. All she requires is the trust of the people and their leaders.

lack of water, and when she heard all that Uzziah said to them, and how he promised them under oath to surrender the town to the Assyrians after five days,¹⁰ she sent her maid, who was in charge of all she possessed, to summon Uzziah and^a Chabris and Charmis, the elders of her town.¹¹ They came to her, and she said to them:

"Listen to me, rulers of the people of Bethulia! What you have said to the people today is not right; you have even sworn and pronounced this oath between God and you, promising to surrender the town to our enemies unless the Lord turns and helps us within so many days.¹² Who are you to put God to the test today, and to set yourselves up in the place of^b God in human affairs?¹³ You are putting the Lord Almighty to the test, but you will never learn anything!¹⁴ You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or understand the workings of the human mind; how do you expect to search out God, who made all these things, and find out his mind or comprehend his thought? No, my brothers, do not anger the Lord our God.¹⁵ For if he does not choose to help us within these five days, he has power to protect us within any time he pleases, or even to destroy us in the presence of our enemies.¹⁶ Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading.¹⁷ Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our voice, if it pleases him.

18 "For never in our generation, nor in these present days, has there been any tribe or family or people or town of ours that worships gods made with hands, as was done in days gone by.¹⁹ That was why our ancestors were handed over to the sword and to pillage, and so they suffered a great catastrophe before our enemies.²⁰ But we know no other god but him, and so we hope that he will not disdain us or any of our nation.²¹ For if we are captured, all Judea will be captured and our sanctuary will be plundered; and he will make us pay for its desecration with our blood.²² The slaughter of our kindred and the captivity of the land and the desolation of our inheritance—all this he will bring on our heads among the Gentiles, wherever we serve as slaves; and we shall be an offense and a disgrace in the eyes of those who acquire us.²³ For our slavery will not bring us into favor, but the Lord our God will turn it to dishonor.

24 "Therefore, my brothers, let us set an example for our kindred, for their lives depend upon us, and the sanctuary—both the temple and the altar—rests upon us.²⁵ In spite of everything let us give thanks to the Lord our God, who is putting us to the test as he did our

^a Other ancient authorities lack *Uzziah and* (see verses 28 and 35)

^b Or *above*

Reflect: Help can come from the most unlikely sources. The author of Judith describes how a woman saves Judea though the story is set in a man's world. Judith saves the Jews despite the patronizing attitude that the leadership of the Jewish community displays toward her. Believers should be ready to be surprised by the way God acts in our world, for God often chooses the least likely instruments of salvation.

Pray: Ask God for the humility to recognize the instruments that God has chosen to bless God's people. Often these go unrecognized and unappreciated, since they do not fit our preconceived notions of how God acts in our world.

Act: Listen to the voices of the poor, those on the margins of society, all those whose voices are routinely ignored. The voices of these people too can be authentic instruments of God in our world.

Read Judith 9

The author of Judith, consciously imitating the psalms, presents her at prayer. Though the book is about *action* that Judith took to save the Jews, the time the heroine spends in prayer is important, implying that what Judith accomplishes is done with the power of God. The prayer assumes that, in this instance, violence is necessary to secure Judea's deliverance from the power of Holofernes.

Reflect: For the believer, prayer is an essential component of the action that is necessary to ensure the defeat of evil and the triumph of good. The time devoted to prayer is never wasted time, since it empowers the believer for action. This is especially true when the odds appear to be stacked against the triumph of the good.

ancestors.²⁶ Remember what he did with Abraham, and how he tested Isaac, and what happened to Jacob in Syrian Mesopotamia, while he was tending the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother.²⁷ For he has not tried us with fire, as he did them, to search their hearts, nor has he taken vengeance on us; but the Lord scourges those who are close to him in order to admonish them."

28 Then Uziah said to her, "All that you have said was spoken out of a true heart, and there is no one who can deny your words.²⁹ Today is not the first time your wisdom has been shown, but from the beginning of your life all the people have recognized your understanding, for your heart's disposition is right.³⁰ But the people were so thirsty that they compelled us to do for them what we have promised, and made us take an oath that we cannot break.³¹ Now since you are a God-fearing woman, pray for us, so that the Lord may send us rain to fill our cisterns. Then we will no longer feel faint from thirst."

32 Then Judith said to them, "Listen to me. I am about to do something that will go down through all generations of our descendants.³³ Stand at the town gate tonight so that I may go out with my maid; and within the days after which you have promised to surrender the town to our enemies, the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand.³⁴ Only, do not try to find out what I am doing; for I will not tell you until I have finished what I am about to do."

35 Uziah and the rulers said to her, "Go in peace, and may the Lord God go before you, to take vengeance on our enemies."³⁶ So they returned from the tent and went to their posts.

The Prayer of Judith

9 Then Judith prostrated herself, put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing. At the very time when the evening incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem, Judith cried out to the Lord with a loud voice, and said,

2 "O Lord God of my ancestor Simeon, to whom you gave a sword to take revenge on those strangers who had torn off a virgin's clothing^a to defile her, and exposed her thighs to put her to shame, and polluted her womb to disgrace her; for you said, 'It shall not be done'—yet they did it;³ so you gave up their rulers to be killed, and their bed, which was ashamed of the deceit they had practiced, was stained with blood, and you struck down slaves along with princes, and princes on their thrones.⁴ You gave up their wives for booty and their daughters to captivity, and all their booty to be divided among your beloved children who burned with

^a Cn: Gk loosed her womb

Pray: Prayer is the way in which believers acknowledge God's presence and power over every circumstance. Pray, because victory over the powers of evil depends not on your potential but on the grace of God.

Act: Make prayer a regular part of your daily routine. Do not fall into the trap of acting without the support of regular prayer. Set aside times for prayer and be faithful to this spiritual discipline.

Read Judith 10:1–10

How Judith will end the threat posed to the Jews by Holofernes's army is becoming clearer. She puts aside her widow's clothing, bathes, anoints herself with oil, does her hair, puts on festive attire, and adorns herself with jewelry. Apparently Judith intends some act of seduction. The people of the town are surprised at Judith's transformation and they wish her success. The elders of the town do nothing but stand and watch as Judith makes her way to the camp of Judea's adversaries.

Reflect: While the men of Judea were ready to surrender to Holofernes, it took a widow to vanquish the enemy. Judith uses the only weapon she has available to her: her beauty. What gifts do we have that we are ready to use for the benefit of God's people? Do we recognize the power that God's gifts have given us?

Pray: It is prayer that helps us realize the power that God's gifts have given us. Pray that you may use your talents wisely to bring about good for the people of God.

Act: Take an inventory of your strengths and weaknesses. Be honest with yourself, asking how you use those gifts for the good of others.

zeal for you and abhorred the pollution of their blood and called on you for help. O God, my God, hear me also, a widow.

5 "For you have done these things and those that went before and those that followed. You have designed the things that are now, and those that are to come. What you had in mind has happened; 6 the things you decided on presented themselves and said, 'Here we are!' For all your ways are prepared in advance, and your judgment is with foreknowledge.

7 "Here now are the Assyrians, a greatly increased force, priding themselves in their horses and riders, boasting in the strength of their foot soldiers, and trusting in shield and spear, in bow and sling. They do not know that you are the Lord who crushes wars; the Lord is your name. 8 Break their strength by your might, and bring down their power in your anger; for they intend to defile your sanctuary, and to pollute the tabernacle where your glorious name resides, and to break off the horns^a of your altar with the sword. 9 Look at their pride, and send your wrath upon their heads. Give to me, a widow, the strong hand to do what I plan. 10 By the deceit of my lips strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman.

11 "For your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful. But you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope. 12 Please, please, God of my father, God of the heritage of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer! 13 Make my deceitful words bring wound and bruise on those who have planned cruel things against your covenant, and against your sacred house, and against Mount Zion, and against the house your children possess. 14 Let your whole nation and every tribe know and understand that you are God, the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel but you alone!"

Judith Prepares to Go to Holofernes

10 When Judith^b had stopped crying out to the God of Israel, and had ended all these words, 2 she rose from where she lay prostrate. She called her maid and went down into the house where she lived on sabbaths and on her festal days. 3 She removed the sackcloth she had been wearing, took off her widow's garments, bathed her body with water, and anointed herself with precious ointment. She combed her hair, put on a tiara, and dressed herself in the festive attire that she

^a Syr: Gk horn

^b Gk she

Read Judith 10:11–23

Judith sets her plan into motion by crossing over into the Assyrian camp, pretending to be a conduit of information that will ensure a quick and easy Assyrian victory. She manages to beguile the Assyrians with her beauty. It never even occurs to the Assyrians that a woman might be in a position to undermine their plans for conquest. Judith's prostration before Holofernes serves to confirm that notion.

Reflect: Are your social and cultural assumptions preventing you from seeing the contribution that women can and have made to the church? Do you believe that their contributions are limited to their roles as wives and mothers?

Pray: Praise God for the contributions that religious and lay women have made to church and society. Thank God for the good that these women do.

Act: Do not underestimate the good that women can do for church and society. Support and encourage the women that you know to follow their best instincts in using their gifts for the good of others.

used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. ⁴ She put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets, bracelets, rings, earrings, and all her other jewelry. Thus she made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her. ⁵ She gave her maid a skin of wine and a flask of oil, and filled a bag with roasted grain, dried fig cakes, and fine bread;^a then she wrapped up all her dishes and gave them to her to carry.

⁶ Then they went out to the town gate of Bethulia and found Uziah standing there with the elders of the town, Chabris and Charmis. ⁷ When they saw her transformed in appearance and dressed differently, they were very greatly astounded at her beauty and said to her, ⁸ "May the God of our ancestors grant you favor and fulfill your plans, so that the people of Israel may glory and Jerusalem may be exalted." She bowed down to God.

⁹ Then she said to them, "Order the gate of the town to be opened for me so that I may go out and accomplish the things you have just said to me." So they ordered the young men to open the gate for her, as she requested. ¹⁰ When they had done this, Judith went out, accompanied by her maid. The men of the town watched her until she had gone down the mountain and passed through the valley, where they lost sight of her.

Judith Is Captured

¹¹ As the women^b were going straight on through the valley, an Assyrian patrol met her ¹² and took her into custody. They asked her, "To what people do you belong, and where are you coming from, and where are you going?" She replied, "I am a daughter of the Hebrews, but I am fleeing from them, for they are about to be handed over to you to be devoured. ¹³ I am on my way to see Holofernes the commander of your army, to give him a true report; I will show him a way by which he can go and capture all the hill country without losing one of his men, captured or slain."

¹⁴ When the men heard her words, and observed her face—she was in their eyes marvelously beautiful—they said to her, ¹⁵ "You have saved your life by hurrying down to see our lord. Go at once to his tent; some of us will escort you and hand you over to him. ¹⁶ When you stand before him, have no fear in your heart, but tell him what you have just said, and he will treat you well."

¹⁷ They chose from their number a hundred men to accompany her and her maid, and they brought them to the tent of Holofernes. ¹⁸ There was great excitement in the whole camp, for her arrival was reported from tent to tent. They came and gathered around her as she

^a Other ancient authorities add *and cheese*

^b Gk *they*

stood outside the tent of Holofernes, waiting until they told him about her. ¹⁹ They marveled at her beauty and admired the Israelites, judging them by her. They said to one another, “Who can despise these people, who have women like this among them? It is not wise to leave one of their men alive, for if we let them go they will be able to beguile the whole world!”

Judith Is Brought before Holofernes

20 Then the guards of Holofernes and

all his servants came out and led her into the tent. ²¹ Holofernes was resting on his bed under a canopy that was woven with purple and gold, emeralds and other precious stones. ²² When they told him of her, he came to the front of the tent, with silver lamps carried before him. ²³ When Judith came into the presence of Holofernes^a and his servants, they all marveled at the beauty of her face. She prostrated herself and did obeisance to him, but his slaves raised her up.

Read Judith 11:1–8

Judith begins laying her trap for Holofernes by playing to his vanity. After he spares Judith's life because he believes that she is a traitor to her people, she tells the general just what he wants to hear about himself, namely, that he is a wise, experienced, and successful general.

Reflect: Judith sets up Holofernes for a fall by first engaging in obvious flattery. Are we prepared to hear the truth about ourselves or do we want to hear only words of praise and admiration?

Pray: Pray for the grace of authentic self-knowledge that can recognize your failures as well as your successes, that can accept both praise and criticism, and that can learn from unfavorable judgments as well as from favorable judgments.

Act: Seek the opinions of people who disagree with you as much as you seek the opinions of those who usually agree with you.

11 Then Holofernes said to her, “Take courage, woman, and do not be afraid in your heart, for I have never hurt anyone who chose to serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of all the earth. ² Even now, if your people who live in the hill country had not slighted me, I would never have lifted my spear against them. They have brought this on themselves. ³ But now tell me why you have fled from them and have come over to us. In any event, you have come to safety. Take courage! You will live tonight and ever after. ⁴ No one will hurt you. Rather, all will treat you well, as they do the servants of my lord King Nebuchadnezzar.”

Judith Explains Her Presence

5 Judith answered him, “Accept the words of your slave, and let your servant speak in your presence. I will say nothing false to my lord this night. ⁶ If you follow out the words of your servant, God will accomplish something through you, and my lord will not fail to achieve his purposes. ⁷ By the life of Nebuchadnezzar, king of the whole earth, and by the power of him who has sent you to direct every living being! Not only do human beings serve him because of you, but also the animals of the field and the cattle and the birds of the air will live, because of your power, under Nebuchadnezzar and all his house. ⁸ For we have heard of your wisdom and skill, and it is reported throughout the whole world that you alone are the best in the whole kingdom, the most informed and the most astounding in military strategy.

9 “Now as for Achior's speech in your council, we have heard his words, for the people of Bethulia spared him and he told them all he had said to you. ¹⁰ Therefore, lord and master, do not disregard what he said, but keep it in your mind, for it is true. Indeed our nation cannot be punished, nor can the sword prevail against them, unless they sin against their God.

11 “But now, in order that my lord may not be de-

^a Gk *him*

Read Judith 11:9–23

After flattery, Judith employs theological argumentation to put Holofernes at ease. She says that the notion that Israel is invincible when faithful to God is correct. But Judith notes that Holofernes's siege is leading the Jews to violate their moral code. This will lead to their defeat. Again, Judith tells Holofernes just what he wishes to hear and he promises her a reward.

Reflect: Holofernes promises Judith a reward for what appears to be her support for his siege of Bethulia. Do you look for rewards from the world or are you content with the joy that comes from authentic discipleship? Judith recognized Holofernes's words for what they were. Do you recognize as empty the promises offered by the world?

Pray: There are some who must use their wits to survive among others who are opposed to the gospel. Remember in prayer those people for whom the practice of religion is a dangerous act.

Act: Witness to your faith in Jesus Christ. Do not be afraid to speak up for the values of the gospel. Without being argumentative or tedious, help others to appreciate what you find attractive in the gospel.

feated and his purpose frustrated, death will fall upon them, for a sin has overtaken them by which they are about to provoke their God to anger when they do what is wrong. ¹²Since their food supply is exhausted and their water has almost given out, they have planned to kill their livestock and have determined to use all that God by his laws has forbidden them to eat. ¹³They have decided to consume the first fruits of the grain and the tithes of the wine and oil, which they had consecrated and set aside for the priests who minister in the presence of our God in Jerusalem—things it is not lawful for any of the people even to touch with their hands. ¹⁴Since even the people in Jerusalem have been doing this, they have sent messengers there in order to bring back permission from the council of the elders. ¹⁵When the response reaches them and they act upon it, on that very day they will be handed over to you to be destroyed.

¹⁶“So when I, your slave, learned all this, I fled from them. God has sent me to accomplish with you things that will astonish the whole world wherever people shall hear about them. ¹⁷Your servant is indeed God-fearing and serves the God of heaven night and day. So, my lord, I will remain with you; but every night your servant will go out into the valley and pray to God. He will tell me when they have committed their sins. ¹⁸Then I will come and tell you, so that you may go out with your whole army, and not one of them will be able to withstand you. ¹⁹Then I will lead you through Judea, until you come to Jerusalem; there I will set your throne.^a You will drive them like sheep that have no shepherd, and no dog will so much as growl at you. For this was told me to give me foreknowledge; it was announced to me, and I was sent to tell you.”

²⁰Her words pleased Holofernes and all his servants. They marveled at her wisdom and said, ²¹“No other woman from one end of the earth to the other looks so beautiful or speaks so wisely!” ²²Then Holofernes said to her, “God has done well to send you ahead of the people, to strengthen our hands and bring destruction on those who have despised my lord. ²³You are not only beautiful in appearance, but wise in speech. If you do as you have said, your God shall be my God, and you shall live in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar and be renowned throughout the whole world.”

Judith as a Guest of Holofernes

12 Then he commanded them to bring her in where his silver dinnerware was kept, and ordered them to set a table for her with some of his own delica-

^a Or chariot

Read Judith 12

The setting of the story now changes as Judith is invited to a banquet by Holofernes. It is clear that he intends to seduce her—charmed as he is by her beauty. The irony is that Judith is seducing him. Gradually she leads Holofernes to put aside all hesitancy in dealing with a woman who comes to him from the people he plans to conquer. Step by step Judith is preparing to strike a blow for her people.

Reflect: In the midst of an enemy camp, Judith is faithful to Jewish religious practices regarding diet and ritual purity. How faithful are we to the practice of our faith when such practice seems inconvenient? Are our moral decisions informed by the values of the gospel or are we too quick to defer to the values of the world?

Pray: Pray for the grace of perseverance. Ask the Holy Spirit to empower you to live by the values of the gospel even when our contemporary American culture may reject some of these values.

Act: Bring the values of the gospel to bear on your personal moral decisions. Examine these to ensure that they are shaped by gospel values rather than by expediency or conformity to contemporary culture.

cies, and with some of his own wine to drink. ² But Judith said, “I cannot partake of them, or it will be an offense; but I will have enough with the things I brought with me.” ³ Holofernes said to her, “If your supply runs out, where can we get you more of the same? For none of your people are here with us.” ⁴ Judith replied, “As surely as you live, my lord, your servant will not use up the supplies I have with me before the Lord carries out by my hand what he has determined.”

⁵ Then the servants of Holofernes brought her into the tent, and she slept until midnight. Toward the morning watch she got up ⁶ and sent this message to Holofernes: “Let my lord now give orders to allow your servant to go out and pray.” ⁷ So Holofernes commanded his guards not to hinder her. She remained in the camp three days. She went out each night to the valley of Bethulia, and bathed at the spring in the camp. ⁸ After bathing, she prayed the Lord God of Israel to direct her way for the triumph of his ^b people. ⁹ Then she returned purified and stayed in the tent until she ate her food toward evening.

Judith Attends Holofernes’ Banquet

¹⁰ On the fourth day Holofernes held a banquet for his personal attendants only, and did not invite any of his officers. ¹¹ He said to Bagoas, the eunuch who had charge of his personal affairs, “Go and persuade the Hebrew woman who is in your care to join us and to eat and drink with us. ¹² For it would be a disgrace if we let such a woman go without having intercourse with her. If we do not seduce her, she will laugh at us.”

¹³ So Bagoas left the presence of Holofernes, and approached her and said, “Let this pretty girl not hesitate to come to my lord to be honored in his presence, and to enjoy drinking wine with us, and to become today like one of the Assyrian women who serve in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar.” ¹⁴ Judith replied, “Who am I to refuse my lord? Whatever pleases him I will do at once, and it will be a joy to me until the day of my death.” ¹⁵ So she proceeded to dress herself in all her woman’s finery. Her maid went ahead and spread for her on the ground before Holofernes the lambskins she had received from Bagoas for her daily use in reclining.

¹⁶ Then Judith came in and lay down. Holofernes’ heart was ravished with her and his passion was aroused, for he had been waiting for an opportunity to seduce her from the day he first saw her. ¹⁷ So Holofernes said to her, “Have a drink and be merry with us!” ¹⁸ Judith said, “I will gladly drink, my lord, because today is the greatest day in my whole life.” ¹⁹ Then she took what her maid had prepared and ate and drank be-

^a Other ancient authorities lack *in the camp*

^b Other ancient authorities read *her*

fore him. ²⁰ Holofernes was greatly pleased with her, and drank a great quantity of wine, much more than he had ever drunk in any one day since he was born.

Read Judith 13:1–10a

Judith does what she thinks is necessary to end the threat to Bethulia: she kills Holofernes, believing that his death will demoralize his troops and end the siege of her hometown. The general stupor brought on by overindulgence in wine gives Judith the edge she needs to kill the enemy of her people.

Reflect: Do you believe that violence is ever an appropriate response? Violence usually begets violence, perpetuating a cycle that destroys rather than saves. The storyteller here is operating from hindsight. The Jews did manage to gain victory over the Seleucids and temporarily end Greek rule over Judea. But the Greeks were followed by the Romans, so the Jewish victory was short-lived.

Pray: Call upon the Holy Spirit to empower you to be an instrument of peace and reconciliation. The stakes are much higher today than they were at the time the book of Judith was written. We cannot afford to continue the cycle of violence. Saving God's people today must involve nonviolent means.

Act: Christians ought to show the way to nonviolent reconciliation of enemies. Learn the way of non-violence and practice it.

Judith Beheads Holofernes

13 When evening came, his slaves quickly withdrew. Bagoas closed the tent from outside and shut out the attendants from his master's presence. They went to bed, for they all were weary because the banquet had lasted so long. ² But Judith was left alone in the tent, with Holofernes stretched out on his bed, for he was dead drunk.

³ Now Judith had told her maid to stand outside the bedchamber and to wait for her to come out, as she did on the other days; for she said she would be going out for her prayers. She had said the same thing to Bagoas. ⁴ So everyone went out, and no one, either small or great, was left in the bedchamber. Then Judith, standing beside his bed, said in her heart, "O Lord God of all might, look in this hour on the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. ⁵ Now indeed is the time to help your heritage and to carry out my design to destroy the enemies who have risen up against us."

⁶ She went up to the bedpost near Holofernes' head, and took down his sword that hung there. ⁷ She came close to his bed, took hold of the hair of his head, and said, "Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!" ⁸ Then she struck his neck twice with all her might, and cut off his head. ⁹ Next she rolled his body off the bed and pulled down the canopy from the posts. Soon afterward she went out and gave Holofernes' head to her maid, ¹⁰ who placed it in her food bag.

Judith Returns to Bethulia

Then the two of them went out together, as they were accustomed to do for prayer. They passed through the camp, circled around the valley, and went up the mountain to Bethulia, and came to its gates. ¹¹ From a distance Judith called out to the sentries at the gates, "Open, open the gate! God, our God, is with us, still showing his power in Israel and his strength against our enemies, as he has done today!"

¹² When the people of her town heard her voice, they hurried down to the town gate and summoned the elders of the town. ¹³ They all ran together, both small and great, for it seemed unbelievable that she had returned. They opened the gate and welcomed them. Then they lit a fire to give light, and gathered around them. ¹⁴ Then she said to them with a loud voice, "Praise God, O praise him! Praise God, who has not withdrawn his mercy from the house of Israel, but

Read Judith 13:10b–20

Judith succeeded in defending Bethulia when the men of the town had failed. The men were resigned to defeat while Judith, believing in God's continuing love for Israel, chose to take action that would end the threat to Bethulia. Uzziah is utterly amazed at Judith's achievement and calls the people to join him in blessing God and praising Judith.

Reflect: It is a biblical commonplace to describe how God acts through people who are judged to be unlikely instruments of the divine. The people of Bethulia certainly did not regard a widow as a likely means of saving their town. Think of examples of times when the presence and power of God were manifest in your life in unexpected ways.

Pray: Ask God to enable you to recognize the divine presence, especially when it is manifest in people who are not usually regarded as instruments of the divine. Thank God for the people in your life who have revealed to you God's presence and power.

Act: Make a list of people you consider to have been instruments of God's presence in your life. Express your gratitude to them for the contribution they have made to your life with God.

has destroyed our enemies by my hand this very night!"

15 Then she pulled the head out of the bag and showed it to them, and said, "See here, the head of Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army, and here is the canopy beneath which he lay in his drunken stupor. The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman. ¹⁶As the Lord lives, who has protected me in the way I went, I swear that it was my face that seduced him to his destruction, and that he committed no sin with me, to defile and shame me."

17 All the people were greatly astonished. They bowed down and worshiped God, and said with one accord, "Blessed are you our God, who have this day humiliated the enemies of your people."

18 Then Uzziah said to her, "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies. ¹⁹Your praise^a will never depart from the hearts of those who remember the power of God. ²⁰May God grant this to be a perpetual honor to you, and may he reward you with blessings, because you risked your own life when our nation was brought low, and you averted our ruin, walking in the straight path before our God." And all the people said, "Amen. Amen."

Judith's Counsel

14 Then Judith said to them, "Listen to me, my friends. Take this head and hang it upon the parapet of your wall. ²As soon as day breaks and the sun rises on the earth, each of you take up your weapons, and let every able-bodied man go out of the town; set a captain over them, as if you were going down to the plain against the Assyrian outpost; only do not go down. ³Then they will seize their arms and go into the camp and rouse the officers of the Assyrian army. They will rush into the tent of Holofernes and will not find him. Then panic will come over them, and they will flee before you. ⁴Then you and all who live within the borders of Israel will pursue them and cut them down in their tracks. ⁵But before you do all this, bring Achior the Ammonite to me so that he may see and recognize the man who despised the house of Israel and sent him to us as if to his death."

6 So they summoned Achior from the house of Uzziah. When he came and saw the head of Holofernes in the hand of one of the men in the assembly of the people, he fell down on his face in a faint. ⁷When they raised him up he threw himself at Judith's feet, and did

^a Other ancient authorities read *hope*

Read Judith 14:1–10

Judith takes command, telling the men of Israel how they can exploit the confusion in the Assyrian army that will result when her assassination of Holofernes is discovered. Achior sees the head of Holofernes and realizes the significance of Judith's action. He is transformed from someone who is simply acquainted with and sympathetic toward Jewish beliefs to someone who believes in Judaism and acts on that belief.

Reflect: We cannot remain neutral after witnessing the manifestation of God's presence and power in our lives. Like Achior, we have to take our stand with God. We are called not only to believe but also to act on our beliefs.

Pray: We ought to thank God for the gift of faith and ask for God's help as we make the kinds of moral choices that reflect our faith in the God revealed through the scriptures.

Act: Volunteer to participate in your parish's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and offer your testimony to strengthen the faith of those who are preparing to become believers in Jesus Christ.

Read Judith 14:11—15:7

With the discovery of Holofernes's headless body, the Assyrian army's world is turned upside down. A widow defeats a general; a slave overcomes her master. The Assyrians are unable to cope with the news of their general's assassination and begin an unorganized retreat from Jewish territory.

Reflect: How do you cope when you get news that turns your world upside down? Does your faith in God's goodness help you to deal with disconcerting news? We need to believe that God wants only what is best for us. The problem of evil—of innocent suffering—is one of the greatest philosophical and theological problems we have to face. How do you deal with that problem?

obedience to her, and said, "Blessed are you in every tent of Judah! In every nation those who hear your name will be alarmed. ⁸Now tell me what you have done during these days."

So Judith told him in the presence of the people all that she had done, from the day she left until the moment she began speaking to them. ⁹When she had finished, the people raised a great shout and made a joyful noise in their town. ¹⁰When Achior saw all that the God of Israel had done, he believed firmly in God. So he was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel, remaining so to this day.

Holofernes' Death Is Discovered

¹¹As soon as it was dawn they hung the head of Holofernes on the wall. Then they all took their weapons, and they went out in companies to the mountain passes. ¹²When the Assyrians saw them they sent word to their commanders, who then went to the generals and the captains and to all their other officers. ¹³They came to Holofernes' tent and said to the steward in charge of all his personal affairs, "Wake up our lord, for the slaves have been so bold as to come down against us to give battle, to their utter destruction."

¹⁴So Bagoas went in and knocked at the entry of the tent, for he supposed that he was sleeping with Judith. ¹⁵But when no one answered, he opened it and went into the bedchamber and found him sprawled on the floor dead, with his head missing. ¹⁶He cried out with a loud voice and wept and groaned and shouted, and tore his clothes. ¹⁷Then he went to the tent where Judith had stayed, and when he did not find her, he rushed out to the people and shouted, ¹⁸"The slaves have tricked us! One Hebrew woman has brought disgrace on the house of King Nebuchadnezzar. Look, Holofernes is lying on the ground, and his head is missing!"

¹⁹When the leaders of the Assyrian army heard this, they tore their tunics and were greatly dismayed, and their loud cries and shouts rose up throughout the camp.

The Assyrians Flee in Panic

15 When the men in the tents heard it, they were amazed at what had happened. ²Overcome with fear and trembling, they did not wait for one another, but with one impulse all rushed out and fled by every path across the plain and through the hill country. ³Those who had camped in the hills around Bethulia also took to flight. Then the Israelites, everyone that

Pray: Remember in your prayer those people who are dealing with difficult situations, that they may feel God's comforting presence in their lives. The prayer of intercession is an act of faith in God's love.

Act: God answers prayers through the lives of believers empowered by the Spirit to be God's instruments. Look for ways in which you can be a source of comfort and support for people who have to deal with difficult situations in their lives.

Read Judith 15:8–13

Following the utter rout of the Assyrian forces, the highest leaders of the Jewish community offer their congratulations to Judith, thus approving her assassination of Holofernes. The entire Jewish community—and the women in particular—form a chorus praising Judith's actions. After all, she saved the Jewish community, ensuring its continued existence and service of God.

Reflect: How often do we affirm the actions of those who serve the community of faith with dedication and distinction? Do we take their ministries on our behalf for granted?

Pray: Thank God for the people who are ministers of God's grace in your life—priests, spiritual directors, retreat masters, teachers, and catechists. Ask God's blessings on their lives and ministries.

Act: Write short notes of thanks to those who have been God's instruments in your life. Tell them how much you have appreciated their ministry.

was a soldier, rushed out upon them. ⁴Uzziah sent men to Betomasthaim^a and Choba and Kola, and to all the frontiers of Israel, to tell what had taken place and to urge all to rush out upon the enemy to destroy them. ⁵When the Israelites heard it, with one accord they fell upon the enemy,^b and cut them down as far as Choba. Those in Jerusalem and all the hill country also came, for they were told what had happened in the camp of the enemy. The men in Gilead and in Galilee outflanked them with great slaughter, even beyond Damascus and its borders. ⁶The rest of the people of Bethulia fell upon the Assyrian camp and plundered it, acquiring great riches. ⁷And the Israelites, when they returned from the slaughter, took possession of what remained. Even the villages and towns in the hill country and in the plain got a great amount of booty, since there was a vast quantity of it.

The Israelites Celebrate Their Victory

⁸Then the high priest Joakim and the elders of the Israelites who lived in Jerusalem came to witness the good things that the Lord had done for Israel, and to see Judith and to wish her well. ⁹When they met her, they all blessed her with one accord and said to her, "You are the glory of Jerusalem, you are the great boast of Israel, you are the great pride of our nation!" ¹⁰You have done all this with your own hand; you have done great good to Israel, and God is well pleased with it. May the Almighty Lord bless you forever!" And all the people said, "Amen."

¹¹All the people plundered the camp for thirty days. They gave Judith the tent of Holofernes and all his silver dinnerware, his beds, his bowls, and all his furniture. She took them and loaded her mules and hitched up her carts and piled the things on them.

¹²All the women of Israel gathered to see her, and blessed her, and some of them performed a dance in her honor. She took ivy-wreathed wands in her hands and distributed them to the women who were with her; ¹³and she and those who were with her crowned themselves with olive wreaths. She went before all the people in the dance, leading all the women, while all the men of Israel followed, bearing their arms and wearing garlands and singing hymns.

Judith Offers Her Hymn of Praise

¹⁴Judith began this thanksgiving before all Israel, and all the people loudly sang this song of praise.

16 ¹And Judith said,

Begin a song to my God with tambourines,
sing to my Lord with cymbals.

^a Other ancient authorities add *and Bebai*

^b *Gk them*

Read Judith 15:14—16:17

The theme of Judith's hymn is found in 16:5 ("But the Lord Almighty has foiled them by the hand of a woman."). The hymn combines the manifestation of God's power in the experience of a threat from the Assyrians with the manifestation of God's power over creation. While God rules over the forces of nature directly, God uses human instruments like Judith to carry out the divine will among human beings.

Reflect: Judith's hymn celebrates her great achievement in turning aside the threat posed by Holofernes and his army. What makes this victory even more spectacular is that it was achieved by someone who was believed to be powerless. Think about the ways in which God manifests divine power through the powerless.

Pray: Join in Judith's praise of God who protects and saves believers. Praise the power of God manifest through those considered powerless by human standards.

Act: Contribute your moral and financial support to individuals and groups that lobby for just and humane treatment of the poor and powerless in our society. Advocate for fair housing, affordable health care, just wages, welfare reform, and immigration reform.

- Raise to him a new psalm;^a
 exalt him, and call upon his name.
- 2 For the Lord is a God who crushes wars;
 he sets up his camp among his people;
 he delivered me from the hands of my pursuers.
- 3 The Assyrian came down from the mountains of
 the north;
 he came with myriads of his warriors;
 their numbers blocked up the wadis,
 and their cavalry covered the hills.
- 4 He boasted that he would burn up my territory,
 and kill my young men with the sword,
 and dash my infants to the ground,
 and seize my children as booty,
 and take my virgins as spoil.
- 5 But the Lord Almighty has foiled them
 by the hand of a woman.^b
- 6 For their mighty one did not fall by the hands of
 the young men,
 nor did the sons of the Titans strike him down,
 nor did tall giants set upon him;
 but Judith daughter of Merari
 with the beauty of her countenance undid him.
- 7 For she put away her widow's clothing
 to exalt the oppressed in Israel.
 She anointed her face with perfume;
- 8 she fastened her hair with a tiara
 and put on a linen gown to beguile him.
- 9 Her sandal ravished his eyes,
 her beauty captivated his mind,
 and the sword severed his neck!
- 10 The Persians trembled at her boldness,
 the Medes were daunted at her daring.
- 11 Then my oppressed people shouted;
 my weak people cried out,^c and the enemy^d
 trembled;
 they lifted up their voices, and the enemy^d
 were turned back.
- 12 Sons of slave-girls pierced them through
 and wounded them like the children of
 fugitives;
 they perished before the army of my Lord.
- 13 I will sing to my God a new song;
 O Lord, you are great and glorious,
 wonderful in strength, invincible.
- 14 Let all your creatures serve you,
 for you spoke, and they were made.
 You sent forth your spirit,^e and it formed them;^f
 there is none that can resist your voice.

^a Other ancient authorities read *a psalm and praise*

^b Other ancient authorities add *he has confounded them*

^c Other ancient authorities read *feared*

^d Gk *they*

^e Or *breath*

^f Other ancient authorities read *they were created*

Read Judith 16:18–25

This is the epilogue of Judith's story. Her unwillingness to remarry despite many offers reflects loyalty to the memory of her dead husband. It reminds the Jews of the loyalty that they owe to their ancestral deity. Her long life is another sign of God's favor.

Reflect: Our life with God must be marked by the same kind of loyalty and commitment that marked the life of Judith. That commitment led her to undertake a course of action that appeared to be foolhardy and doomed to failure, but the lesson of the book is that God honors loyalty.

Pray: Ask for the grace of perseverance so that your life with God may be marked by loyalty to your baptismal commitment. Make your participation in the Eucharist a recommitment to God.

Act: Show your loyalty to God by making moral and ethical choices that may not be easy but do reflect the values of the gospel.

- 15 For the mountains shall be shaken to their foundations with the waters;
before your glance the rocks shall melt like wax.
But to those who fear you
you show mercy.
- 16 For every sacrifice as a fragrant offering is a small thing,
and the fat of all whole burnt offerings to you is a very little thing;
but whoever fears the Lord is great forever.
- 17 Woe to the nations that rise up against my people!
The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment;
he will send fire and worms into their flesh;
they shall weep in pain forever.

18 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they worshiped God. As soon as the people were purified, they offered their burnt offerings, their freewill offerings, and their gifts. ¹⁹ Judith also dedicated to God all the possessions of Holofernes, which the people had given her; and the canopy that she had taken for herself from his bed-chamber she gave as a votive offering. ²⁰ For three months the people continued feasting in Jerusalem before the sanctuary, and Judith remained with them.

The Renown and Death of Judith

²¹ After this they all returned home to their own inheritances. Judith went to Bethulia, and remained on her estate. For the rest of her life she was honored throughout the whole country. ²² Many desired to marry her, but she gave herself to no man all the days of her life after her husband Manasseh died and was gathered to his people. ²³ She became more and more famous, and grew old in her husband's house, reaching the age of one hundred five. She set her maid free. She died in Bethulia, and they buried her in the cave of her husband Manasseh; ²⁴ and the house of Israel mourned her for seven days. Before she died she distributed her property to all those who were next of kin to her husband Manasseh, and to her own nearest kindred. ²⁵ No one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death.

BLANK PAGE 696