Lectionary Year B
Scripture Background
**Table of Contents**

**Source of Commentaries**

*Overview of Advent* .............................................................................................................. 7

**SEASON OF ADVENT** .................................................................................................................. 9

- FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT ................................................................................................... 9
- SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT ............................................................................................... 15
- THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT B ............................................................................................. 22
- FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT B ........................................................................................... 29

**SEASON OF CHRISTMAS** ........................................................................................................ 35

- THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD At the Vigil Mass ................................................................. 36
- Mass at Midnight A B C ........................................................................................................ 44
- Mass at Dawn A B C ............................................................................................................... 50
- THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS MARY AND JOSEPH .......................................................... 58
- MARY, THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD God’s Many Blessings ........................................... 63
- THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD .............................................................................................. 68

**LENT** ..................................................................................................................................... 75

- Ash Wednesday ..................................................................................................................... 77

**SEASON OF LENT** .................................................................................................................... 81

- FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT B ................................................................................................... 81
- SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT .................................................................................................... 87
- THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT ....................................................................................................... 94
- FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT .................................................................................................. 101
- FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT ....................................................................................................... 108

**HOLY WEEK** .......................................................................................................................... 115

- PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD’S PASSION ........................................................................ 115

**EASTER TRIDUUM** .................................................................................................................. 128

- HOLY THURSDAY A B C Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper ........................................... 130
- GOOD FRIDAY OF THE LORD’S PASSION A B C ........................................................... 137
- Holy Saturday *No Daily Mass Celebrated* ........................................................................ 151
- EASTER SUNDAY A B C ......................................................................................................... 151
- THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD AT THE EASTER VIGIL
  IN THE HOLY NIGHT OF EASTER....................................................................................... 151
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B</td>
<td>376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST THE KING</td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEAST DAYS AND SOLEMNITIES</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESENTATION OF THE LORD</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD A</td>
<td>445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PENTECOST SUNDAY A, Mass during the Day</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, Apostles</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL SAINTS</td>
<td>492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, December 8th</td>
<td>499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Source of Commentaries

The Commentaries for all the Sundays and Feast that can fall in a Liturgical Year B are included. Refer to a liturgical calendar for the appropriate designation, e.g., *Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time*. That enables the commentaries to be applicable to any year B.

Those commentaries which are with yellow background come from: “Ehle, Mary A. . Scripture Backgrounds for the Sunday Lectionary, Year B: A Resource for Homilists . LTP. Kindle Edition.”

The notes for individual lines of scripture have a blue background. They were taken from the USCCB website “Books of the Bible” section.

The notes in Goldenrod color are from John Pilch, S.J. from his three volume Year B series: “The Cultural World of the Prophets;” “The Cultural World of the Apostles;” and “The Cultural World of Jesus.” Pilch informs us of the social, economic, religious and cultural world that surrounded the people of Israel when Scripture was being written. He thus provides us with an understanding of how the original audiences of the scripture understood it in their own context.

These notes are compiled in the hope of providing background material to better understand the content of the scripture of Year B of the Lectionary.

To automatically go to any particular Sunday or Feast Day, just click on that day in the Table of Contents, and the document will go to that page. Hope it makes it easier

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Overview of Advent

Advent is a time for looking back at the ancient promises fulfilled in Christ, for seeking to deepen our awareness of his presence, and for looking forward to Christ’s return at the end of time. The readings for the first week of Advent in Year B are remarkable for how they combine those thrusts, seemingly summarizing the focus of the season as they remind us of the eternal fatherhood of God, our dual longing for and celebration of God’s presence, and the great unknown of the moment and effects of Christ’s return at the end of time. Advent’s liturgies celebrate the season as one of radical hope. That is a mood we can only attain when we take the time Advent offers us to reflect and pray. As we remember the grace of our collective past, Advent calls us to deepen our longing and cry out, “Lord Jesus, come in glory!”

FIRST READINGS

Throughout Advent, most of the Old Testament readings come from the book of the prophet Isaiah. In the Year B Sunday readings, we hear from Isaiah three times and once from the Second Book of Samuel. These readings follow a progression from the urgent cry, “Rend the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 63:19), to a word of comfort for God’s people, the promise that God’s Chosen One will care for all the poor, and, finally, God’s promise to raise up a Savior from the house of David. Each of these readings contributed in its own way to sustain Israel’s hope for salvation and the coming of the Messiah.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The psalms of Advent correspond beautifully with the messages of the First Readings. In Psalm 80 on the First Sunday of Advent, after crying, “Rouse your power, and come!” (v. 3), we beg to see the saving face of the Lord. Responding to Isaiah’s words of comfort on the Second Sunday of Advent, Psalm 85 announces the nearness of salvation. On the Third Sunday, we sing with Mary in her Magnificat that Isaiah’s promises have been fulfilled. Finally, on the last Sunday before Christmas, we sing Psalm 89 to proclaim God’s kindness and that the throne of his Son will last forever. At the same time, these psalms look forward to the Gospel messages of hoping for Christ’s presence and watching for his return.

SECOND READINGS

Advent’s SECOND READINGS are chosen from four different letters and underscore the themes of each of the Sundays. What unites them is their unwavering focus on God’s promises. From the First Letter to the Corinthians, we hear of God’s faithfulness. The Second Letter of Peter reminds us that God has promised new heavens and earth. On the Third Sunday, the First Letter to the Thessalonians tells us to rejoice because God can bring us to holiness. Finally, in the Letter to the Romans, Paul calls us to give glory to the God whose mystery we have seen revealed.

GOSPEL READINGS

In Year A of the Sunday Lectionary readings, the GOSPEL READINGS mainly come from Matthew’s account, and in Year C, they are mostly from the Gospel according to Luke. In this liturgical year, Year B, the GOSPEL READINGS are derived mainly from the Gospel according to Mark. During Advent, however, we hear from Mark on the first two Sundays, from John on the third, and from Luke on the fourth. The reason for this, as we shall see throughout this year, is that Mark’s account of the Gospel is significantly
more compact than the others. Mark says less than the others about John the Baptist and has no infancy narrative at all.
The progression of these GOSPEL READINGS seemingly reverses our understanding of chronological order. We begin with a focus on Christ’s coming at the end of time. After that, we have two presentations of John the Baptist’s witness to Jesus, the one who will come after him. Finally, we hear the narrative of the Annunciation in which Mary speaks the words that summarize her life: “May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). From beginning to end, the message is clear: the Christ who came will return, and his kingdom will have no end.
First Sunday of Advent Be Alert! The Messiah Comes Lectionary #2B ISAIAH 63:16B–17, 19B; 64:2–7 The prophet Isaiah was writing to the Israelites at a time of national disaster, as they returned to rebuild their community after long years of exile in Babylon. Isaiah admonished them to remember that God had saved them in the past and would do so again. In return, they must be faithful, crying out to God to lead them to salvation. By confessing their guilt and putting themselves into God’s hands, they will know God’s presence among them again. As God’s people, they must lead lives that are faithful and holy as they fulfill their part of the covenant with God.

FIRST READING
Where the Gospel prods us to attention this First Sunday of Advent, the letter from Paul assures us of God’s faithful initiative and action. Paul’s words, written around AD 54 from Ephesus to the community of believers at Corinth, are assuring to us, too, as we await God’s revelation in our lives this Advent. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians are characterized by their explanations of how the members of a community of brothers and sisters are to treat one another. A community that acts with love for others is a reflection and a sign to the world of God’s love. Such a community is a true witness to Jesus Christ, who gave his very life for all and who showed us the kind of love we are to offer one another through his suffering, death, and Resurrection. As communities, we are called to remind ourselves at Advent to pay attention to how we act in the world; in essence, to be alert every moment for God’s reign of peace and justice in order to fulfill Paul’s prodding to love. When we do this, we are signs of God’s love to the world.

The concluding verses are a well-known image: “we are the clay and you our potter: / we are all the work of your hand” (64:7). The message to be ready at all times to put oneself in God’s hands is echoed in the Gospel exhortation from Mark: “Be watchful! Be alert!” (Mark 13:33). By remembering the covenant and entrusting their lives to God’s hands, the people of Israel would know the joy of redemption. This Advent, we, too, can place our lives in God’s hands and invite him to shape us into faithful followers.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (63:16b–17, 19b; 64:2–7)
You, LORD, are our father, our redeemer you are named forever. Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage.
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for such as they had not heard of from of old. No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for him.
Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways! Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind.
There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you; for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us up to our guilt.
Yet, O LORD, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.
Two questions are raised at the approach of a majestic figure coming from Edom. It is the Lord, his garments red with the blood from the judgment battle. Edom (its capital Bozrah) plundered Judah after the fall of Jerusalem; cf. 34:5–17. Wine press: here a symbol of a bloody judgment; cf. Lam 1:15; Jl 4:13.

This lament of the exilic community recalls God’s protection, and especially the memories of the exodus (vv. 7–14), before begging the Lord to come once more to their aid (63:15–64:3), as they confess their sins (64:4–11). The prayer is marked by God’s “holy spirit” (63:10, 14) and fatherhood (63:8, 9, 16; 64:7).

The hardening of the heart (Ex 4:21; 7:3) serves to explain Israel’s sins—a motif to induce the Lord to relent.

A new theophany, like Sinai of old, is invoked so that Israel’s enemies will be humbled by God’s intervention.

The translation here omits some words repeated in the Hebrew from 63:19 (“would that you would come down, with the mountains trembling before you”).

The motifs of father (63:16) and creator (clay and potter, 29:16; 45:9) are adduced to move the Lord to action in view of the damage done to his “holy cities” and “glorious house.”

All the Old Testament readings for the Sundays of Advent speak of the Messiah. The majority are drawn from the prophet Isaiah. Today’s verses from Third Isaiah are part of a community lament sung sometime after the return from Exile. The lament (63:8-64:4a) is followed by a confession and appeal to God (64:4b-6). The community laments its predicament. The return from Exile has been disappointing. It has not fulfilled their hopes. The Temple is still in ruins. Whose fault is it? They recognize and admit it is theirs, of course! "We are sinful ... I There is none who calls upon your name, I who rouses himself to cling to you." Why do they behave like this? That's God's fault! "Why do you ... harden our hearts so that we fear you not?" What can God do to remedy this? "Rend the heavens and come down." These returnees seek a theophany even more wonderful than that of Sinai (see Exodus 19). At Jesus' baptism, this will in-deed occur: the heavens will be rent and God will speak (Mark 1:10), but at this moment in history, the returnees can only hope to stir God by their confession of guilt to become present among them again.

They liken their sinful condition to a very serious and shameful cultural breach of purity, that of a woman in her period ("all our good deeds are like polluted rags"; see Lev 15:19-24). While in modern Western culture this is a normal experience for women, in ancient Israel it was a polluting condition that made one unclean. The experience required physical separation from the community and from the community's God; it also called for purification so that one might resume one's place in community and before God. The involuntary condition constituted a failure to be holy and pure as God is holy and pure. As serious as the condition of sin, alienation from God, might be, these people pray for perseverance in their resolve to reform and serve God faithfully: "Would that you might meet us doing right, / that we were mindful of you in our ways" (Isa 64:5). This notion links the first reading with today’s gospel (Mark 13:33-37): "May he [the lord of the household, or the Lord] not come suddenly and find you sleeping. . . . Watch!"

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 80:2–3, 15–16, 18–19)

PSALM 80:2–3, 15–16, 18–19 (4) The antiphon of this Sunday’s psalm, “Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved” (v. 4) calls upon God to make us do two things: return to him and be faithful, and turn our lives around in order to improve our situation. We hear in the psalm how this will happen. We ask God to show compassion to us, be kind to us, protect us, and save us. Psalm 80 is a prayer of a nation that has been beset by calamity and disaster. Yet, the image in the first stanza of God as the guiding shepherd reminds us that we are not abandoned, but saved. God has saved his people in
the past and he will do so again. It remains for us to offer our faithful response by turning toward the God who saves us.

**Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.**

O shepherd of Israel, hearken, from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth. Rouse your power, and come to save us. Once again, O LORD of hosts, look down from heaven, and see; take care of this vine, and protect what your right hand has planted the son of man whom you yourself made strong. May your help be with the man of your right hand, with the son of man whom you yourself made strong. Then we will no more withdraw from you; give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

* [Psalm 80] A community lament in time of military defeat. Using the familiar image of Israel as a vineyard, the people complain that God has broken down the wall protecting the once splendid vine brought from Egypt (Ps 80:9–14). They pray that God will again turn to them and use the Davidic king to lead them to victory (Ps 80:15–19).

The sentiments of these selected psalm verses complement the first reading rather well. The psalm reflects the period of the Assyrian invasion of Israel, the northern kingdom, either in 733/32 or 722/21 B.C.E. Despite the experience of shocking loss and devastation in these historical circumstances, Israelites stand firm in their loyalty to God. They plead for God to look after the planted vine (Isa 5:1-7; Ezek 1:5-8), to rouse divine power and come to save them. "Give us new life, and we will call upon your name." What is the basis of this fidelity to God? The Jerusalem Temple still stands. Perhaps some shrines in the north still survive. The refrain of this psalm, which is also the refrain of this response, highlights the people's consciousness of God being present in the Temple services in Jerusalem yet painfully absent in the national life at this time in the northern kingdom.

**SECOND READING**

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (1:3–9)

Brothers and sisters:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge, as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

* [1:1–9] Paul follows the conventional form for the opening of a Hellenistic letter (cf. Rom 1:1–7), but expands the opening with details carefully chosen to remind the readers of their situation and to suggest some of the issues the letter will discuss.

* [1:1] Called...by the will of God: Paul's mission and the church's existence are grounded in God's initiative. God's call, grace, and fidelity are central ideas in this introduction, emphasized by repetition and wordplays in the Greek.

* [1:6] The testimony: this defines the purpose of Paul's mission (see also 1 Cor 15:15 and the note on 1 Cor 2:1). The forms of his testimony include oral preaching and instruction, his letters, and the life he leads as an apostle.
This letter was probably written about the year 54 A.D. from Ephesus. These verses are a statement of "thanksgiving," a customary segment in most of Paul's letters. Of special interest here is that he engages in subtle criticism, paying a left-handed compliment as it were. Ordinarily, Paul acknowledges that God's grace in a community is manifest in faith (Rom 1:8), or faith, hope, and charity (1 Thess 1:3), but in Corinth Paul points to "all discourse and all knowledge" (v. 5). The Corinthians boasted of their spiritual gifts, and Paul does indeed acknowledge these in v. 7. The fact that he does not mention faith, hope, or charity would likely be noticed by the letter's recipients. They were somewhat deficient in these matters.

Notice how Paul emphasizes the initiative and activity of God in these verses. "Were enriched" and "was confirmed" are theological passives. The passive voice is a way of speaking about God without mentioning the divine name. The Corinthians must not forget that their graces are gifts from God and not the result of personal effort and achievement. Moreover, Paul reminds them that fulfillment, perfection, completion are yet to come ("as you wait" for the parousia, that is, the Second Coming of Christ).

With God's assistance, the Corinthians will be found irreproachable, holy, pure on the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. Earlier in his letters (e.g., 1 Thess 5:1-6), Paul referred simply to the Day of the Lord, that is, God. Now he uses the word Lord as a reference to Jesus. But the Corinthians, for all their weaknesses and shortcomings, must remember that God is unswervingly loyal (faithful). God will not let them down after having called them to common union or fellowship with Jesus.

The sentiments of these verses explain why believers ought not fear Jesus' exhortation to vigilance in today's gospel (Mark 13:33-37). God is loyal to those who serve the deity faithfully. Such have nothing to fear or worry about.

**ALLELUIA (Ps 85:8)**
Show us Lord, your love; and grant us your salvation.

**GOSPEL**

This passage sounds like the last judgment and end of the world, and indeed it is sometimes referred to as "the little apocalypse." No one knows when the Messiah will come; therefore, Jesus is clear in his warnings to disciples to watch, stay awake, and be alert. These are Jesus' last words to his disciples before the beginning of his Passion. There are many times in our lives when we are alert and watchful, such as when we are cooking something that can burn easily, patrolling on guard duty, hovering over a sick child, or trying to drive and follow directions. We know what it feels like to stay alert because if we don't, we may miss a crucial moment Jesus does not want disciples to miss the opportunity; he does not want distractions to get in the way of our seeing the presence of God in our midst. Seeing God and knowing that he is present despite perils or hardships gives us hope that God's saving power can be found clearly among his people. We read this passage with anticipation, reminding ourselves that once again we remember that the Messiah comes to save. As we proclaim in the refrain of today's psalm, our response is to turn our face to God and be saved.

**+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (13:33–37)**
Jesus said to his disciples: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. Watch, therefore; you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning."
May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”

* [13:3–37] Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple (Mk 13:2) provoked questions that the four named disciples put to him in private regarding the time and the sign when all these things are about to come to an end (Mk 13:3–4). The response to their questions was Jesus’ eschatological discourse prior to his imminent death. It contained instruction and consolation exhorting the disciples and the church to faith and obedience through the trials that would confront them (Mk 13:5–13). The sign is the presence of the desolating abomination (Mk 13:14; see Dn 9:27), i.e., of the Roman power profaning the temple. Flight from Jerusalem is urged rather than defense of the city through misguided messianic hope (Mk 13:14–23). Intervention will occur only after destruction (Mk 13:24–27), which will happen before the end of the first Christian generation (Mk 13:28–31). No one but the Father knows the precise time, or that of the Parousia (Mk 13:32); hence the necessity of constant vigilance (Mk 13:33–37). Luke sets the Parousia at a later date, after “the time of the Gentiles” (Lk 21:24). See also notes on Mt 24:1–25:46.

According to Mark's Jesus, nobody knows about "that day or hour" in which the Son of Man will return, neither the an-gels in heaven, nor Jesus himself, but only the Father (v. 32). Yet Jesus assured his immediate audience that they would not "pass away until all these things have taken place" (v. 30). His thrice-repeated exhortation, "keep awake, stay alert:' highlights the urgency of the situation. To appreciate Jesus' exhortation, a modern Western reader needs to understand the Middle Eastern view of time and the relationships between master and servants.

TIME

Mediterranean cultures are oriented primarily to the present. Future events are very difficult to imagine and nearly impos-sible to grasp. Activities that do not have to take place at the present moment (e.g., cooking the next meal, getting dressed to start the day) are routinely put off. For the Spaniards there is mañana, and for the Italians, domani. The popular song lyrics say, "Let's forget about domani." Even Jesus re-minded his followers not to "worry about tomorrow, for to-morrow will have worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matt 6:34).

Yet the Middle Eastern concept of the present includes to-morrow. Jesus taught his believers to pray: "Give us tomor-row's bread today" (Matt 6:11; Luke 11:3).

So what is the point in today's gospel? In Mark 13, Jesus has announced an event that is imminent, along with its accompanying signs. But none of these signs was yet visible to his listeners, and the normal cultural tendency would be to put such an exhortation and event out of mind. "Today's trouble is enough for today!"

People with a strong cultural orientation to the present need to be nudged to think more about the future, even if only tomorrow, just as Americans whose cultural orientation is primarily toward the future need to be reminded to think about the present, today, this very moment.

MASTER AND SLAVES

It is important to translate the word here as "slave" and not "servant:" because in the first-century world these people were indeed "slaves:" that is property of the owner. At the same time, Americans must realize that "slavery" in the an-cient Mediterranean world had nothing in common with New World slavery.

The relationship of dominance and dependency charac-teristic of slavery was regulated by varied and extensive laws and legal traditions in all the Mediterranean cultures that thrived in the New Testament period. The institution was so prevalent, it was easily adopted into faith traditions as well. Ancient Israelites viewed themselves as "slaves of God" because the Lord had liberated them or their ancestors from bondage in Egypt (Lev 25:55). Freeborn persons in the New Testament period who
became Christians viewed themselves as having become "slaves of Christ" (1 Cor 7:22) or "slaves of God" (1 Pet 2:16).
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Further, because the Mediterranean cultures are group centered, the slave's worth derived from the group served. All the slaves mentioned in the New Testament are members of an extended household. This means they are considered to be members of the family. Accordingly, Christian slaves are cautioned against taking advantage of being "brothers" or "sisters" of Christian owners but are instead to "serve all the better" (1 Tim 6:2).
It is precisely the slave's status as member of an extended household that helps a modern believer to grasp the impor-tance of Jesus' parable. These slaves are family. The master who goes on a long journey expects every member of the household, every family member, to do the work they are assigned (v. 34). They must not put it off for tomorrow.
The doorkeeper, too, is to keep watch for the master's re-turn, lest he find the family fast asleep instead of eager to greet and welcome the returning head of household. Anyone who has returned home after a long absence at a late hour mows the difference between being greeted by a loved one and entering a house where all are asleep.
Mark's Jesus urges his listeners and subsequent generations of believers to be ever watchful for the return of a beloved family member. It is, after all, a fact of our faith: the beloved Master will indeed return and expect to be welcomed by fam-ily in fitting fashion. Are we ready?

**Connections to Church Teaching and Tradition**
- “God calls lay people to witness and share their faith in the midst of the world. By their Baptism they share in Christ’s priesthood and are sealed by the Spirit. They are thus called to holiness, to a prophetic witness in the world, and to a kingly resolve to sanctify the world by their words and deeds” (USCCA, 138).
- “Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity. Love — caritas — is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace” (CIV, 1).
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FIRST READING

God brings comfort to those who have toiled in work and felt burdened by sin. Nothing will stop the advent of this mighty God. No rugged pathway, no plunging valley, no insurmountable height will keep God from coming to a beloved people who prepare the earth — and themselves — to meet him. The same passage portrays God as a loving shepherd who feeds the hungry flock and scoops into his arms those who crave a gentle sign of his love. The tenderness and unmitigated joy of this prophecy shows why Advent is beloved by many Christians. As the calendar year draws to its close and the pressures of the holidays are heaped upon the usual burdens and demands of life, the faithful hear prodigious words of consolation. God knows of their struggles and rushes to lift their burdens.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (40:1–5, 9–11)

Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated; indeed, she has received from the hand of the Lord double for all her sins. A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Go up on to a high mountain, Zion, herald of glad tidings; cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good news! Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by his strong arm; here is his reward with him, his recompense before him. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care.

* [40:1–55:13] Chapters 40–55 are usually designated Second Isaiah (or Deutero-Isaiah) and are believed to have been written by an anonymous prophet toward the end of the Babylonian exile. Isaiah, who is named frequently in chaps. 1–39, does not appear here; the Assyrians, the great threat during the eighth century, hardly appear; the Judeans are in Babylon, having been taken there by the victorious Babylonians; Cyrus, the Persian king, is named; he will defeat Babylon and release the captives. Second Isaiah, who sees this not as a happy circumstance but as part of God's age-old plan, exhorts the Judeans to resist the temptations of Babylonian religion and stirs up hopes of an imminent return to Judah, where the Lord will again be acknowledged as King (52:7). Because the prophet proclaimed the triumph of Persia over Babylon, his message would have been considered seditious, and it is very likely for this reason that the collection would have circulated anonymously. At some point it was appended to Is 1–39 and consequently was long considered the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem of the eighth century. But the fact that it is addressed to Judean exiles in Babylon indicates a sixth-century date. Nevertheless, this eloquent prophet in many ways works within the tradition of Isaiah and develops themes found in the earlier chapters, such as the
holiness of the Lord (cf. note on 1:4) and his lordship of history. Second Isaiah also develops other Old Testament themes, such as the Lord as Israel’s redeemer or deliverer (cf. Ex 3:8; 6:6; 15:13; 18:8).
* [40:1] The “voices” of vv. 3, 6 are members of the heavenly court addressing the prophet; then v. 1 can be understood as the Lord addressing them. It is also possible to translate, with the Vulgate, “Comfort, give comfort, O my people” (i.e., the exiles are called to comfort Jerusalem). The juxtaposition of “my people” and “your God” recalls the covenant formulary.
* [40:2] Service: servitude (cf. Jb 7:1) and exile.
* [40:3–5] A description of the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem (Zion). The language used here figuratively describes the way the exiles will take. The Lord leads them, so their way lies straight across the wilderness rather than along the well-watered routes usually followed from Mesopotamia to Israel. Mt 3:3 and gospel parallels adapt these verses to the witness of John the Baptist to Jesus.
* [40:9] Herald of good news: i.e., of the imminent restoration of the people to their land. This theme of the proclamation of the good news occurs elsewhere in Second Isaiah; cf. also 41:27; 52:7.

These verses from the first of seventeen lyrical and persuasive speeches by Second Isaiah (40-55) are carefully balanced. The scene is set in a heavenly assembly. In an altered state of consciousness, the prophet makes a sky journey to this assembly. In such divine assemblies, God determines what must happen on earth. In contrast, assemblies of pagan gods were raucous, often dominated by a vocal minority. They usually ended in an uneasy compromise between the parties. Here, the Lord God is in charge. Second Isaiah is directed (v. 2) to console Israel now that she is exiled in Babylon. Through the prophet God announced that Israel is forgiven.

Verses 3-5 set the pattern for verses 9-11. The prophet cries out (v. 3) God’s command to prepare a highway for God (vv. 4-5). The imagery is familiar from leveling a bumpy road: ruts (valleys) are filled in and bumps (hills) are made low (levelled). The glory, honor, or reputation of the Lord will be revealed on this road. Zion/Jerusalem also is to announce in a loud voice (v. 9) the coming of the Lord with might. The Lord will be surrounded with royal glory while leading the exiles back to Jerusalem (vv. 10-11).

Anyone who has visited the Middle East knows that its deserts are not just sand but especially places of mountains and deep valleys. Think of the Dead Sea region, Qumran, Jericho, Beer Sheba. They are sterile places whose death-dealing character makes them unfit for human life. But God levels the hills, lays down a road, brings in water, and makes the place habitable. What was once entirely lifeless is now the seat of the glory of the Lord!

Creation and exodus themes are readily apparent in these verses. When God speaks, peace results. Heavenly messengers obey, earthly messengers are appointed. Zion/Jerusalem is the place where the Lord resumes residence.

This reading is linked to the gospel (Mark 1: 1-8) by the verse Mark adapts from Isaiah. The prophet said to prepare the way of the Lord in the desert. Mark (1:3) says: a voice cries out in the desert (likely John the Baptist): prepare the way of the Lord. Our ancestors in the faith regularly made creative applications of their traditions.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 85:9–10–11–12, 13–14)

PSALM 85:9–10, 11–12, 13–14 (8)  God comes into the world with a message of justice and peace. The particular verses of Psalm 85 chosen for today provoke the same emotional release offered in the First Reading. Kindness, truth, justice, and peace are all meeting as the Lord who created the world renews the many benefits he provides it. The antiphon this week uses the word salvation — another key word for Advent. Because the name Jesus means “Savior,” when the refrain has the community sing, “grant us your salvation,” it is praying for the coming of Christ. The meeting of heaven and earth in verse 12 — “Truth shall spring out of the earth, / and justice shall look down from heaven” — serves as a prophecy
for the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who will take flesh to advance the salvation of the faithful.

**Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.**

I will hear what God proclaims; the LORD—for he proclaims peace to his people.
Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him, glory dwelling in our land.
Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss.
Truth shall spring out of the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven.
The LORD himself will give his benefits; our land shall yield its increase.
Justice shall walk before him, and prepare the way of his steps.

* [Psalm 85] A national lament reminding God of past favors and forgiveness (Ps 85:2–4) and begging for forgiveness and grace now (Ps 85:5–8). A speaker represents the people who wait humbly with open hearts (Ps 85:9–10): God will be active on their behalf (Ps 85:11–13). The situation suggests the conditions of Judea during the early postexilic period, the fifth century B.C.; the thoughts are similar to those of postexilic prophets (Hg 1:5–11; 2:6–9).
* [85:11–13] Divine activity is personified as pairs of virtues.

The central verses of this psalm selected for today's liturgy very likely date from the early days after the return from exile. Israel has learned its lesson. The glorious promises of Second Isaiah have not been fulfilled. During the first years back in the land, Israel experienced drought and poor crops (Haggai; Zechariah 1-8; Isaiah 56-59). The repetition of certain words (e.g., land, peace, justice) reflect covenant themes. Israel is pleading with God to reinstate the covenant bond that manifests the reliability of God's good will, kindness, and faithfulness.

**SECOND READING**

2 PETER 3:8–14 In contrast to the messages of comfort emanating from the First Reading and the psalm, the Second Letter of Peter carries a more disturbing message: the day of the Lord is coming like a thief. The heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and elements will be dissolved in fire. To drive home this harrowing message, the writer asks, “What sort of persons ought you to be?” (v. 11). This passage explores the moral implications of the anticipated return of Christ. Echoing Jesus' own admonition in last Sunday's Gospel, this reading aims to put the reader on notice. Advent serves as a kind of alarm clock for the faithful. It disturbs the restful sleep of a complacent people. At first, it may seem that this passage belongs better with the themes of last Sunday. It prepares worshipers, however, for the introduction of one of the most important Advent figures: John the Baptist.

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Peter (3:8–14)

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day.
The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard “delay,” but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.
But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out.
Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be,
conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of
God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames and the elements melted by fire.
But according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.
Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before
him, at peace.

* [3:8–10] The scoffers’ objection (2 Pt 3:4) is refuted also by showing that delay of the Lord’s second coming is not
a failure to fulfill his word but rather a sign of his patience: God is giving time for repentance before the final
judgment (cf. Wis 11:23–26; Ez 18:23; 33:11).
* [3:10] Like a thief: Mt 24:43; 1 Thes 5:2; Rev 3:3. Will be found out: cf. 1 Cor 3:13–15. Some few versions read, as
the sense may demand, “will not be found out”; many manuscripts read “will be burned up”; there are further
variants in other manuscripts, versions, and Fathers. Total destruction is assumed (2 Pt 3:11).
* [3:11–16] The second coming of Christ and the judgment of the world are the doctrinal bases for the moral
exhortation to readiness through vigilance and a virtuous life; cf. Mt 24:42, 50–51; Lk 12:40; 1 Thes 5:1–11; Jude
20–21.
* [3:12] Flames...fire: although this is the only New Testament passage about a final conflagration, the idea was
common in apocalyptic and Greco-Roman thought. Hastening: eschatology is here used to motivate ethics (2 Pt
can help bring the promised day of the Lord; cf. 2 Pt 3:9. Some render the phrase, however, “desiring it earnestly.”
* [3:13] New heavens and a new earth: cf. Is 65:17; 66:22. The divine promises will be fulfilled after the day of
judgment will have passed. The universe will be transformed by the reign of God’s righteousness or justice; cf. Is

This pseudonymous letter is more in the form of a farewell address than an epistle (for other farewell
addresses in the New Testament see Mark 13 and parallels; John 13-17; Acts 20:17-35; 2 Timothy). It
therefore presumes to be Peter’s "last will and testament;" as it were, and in content it most closely
resembles Jude. It is most likely the latest composi-tion of the New Testament written sometime in the
first quarter of the second century by someone in Peter’s name.
False teachers have denied the Lord’s power and author-ity and scoffed at the Lord's coming. In these
verses, the pseudonymous author presents reasons for the delayed re-turn of the Lord (vv. 8-9) and the
implications this has on Christian behavior (vv. 10-13). Time, as we know, is a men-tal fiction with a
foundation in reality. If time were real, we could not "spring" forward or "fall" back, nor could we call
"time out." Nevertheless, the mental fiction controls life in every culture. As anthropologists observe,
that which func-tions as reality is real. Thus, the sacred author argues against the scoffers by noting that
God who lives outside time meas-ures it differently than humans (with the Lord one day is like a
thousand years, see Ps 90:4). Further, what appears to be "delay" is a sign of patience. He allows plenty
of opportunity for repentance.
The next verses ( 10-13) concern behavior rather than de-tails of the end. Nowhere else does the Bible
mention a final 4 The Cultural World of the Apostles
conflagration of all that exists, but this notion does reflect Greek thought. Association of fire with the
day of the Lord and final judgment (e.g., Isa 66:15-18; Mal 4:1; Zeph 1:18) probably contributed to the
blending of Israelite and Greek imagery (see 1 Enoch 1:6-7). The proper behavior for believ-ers at the
present moment, therefore, is to wait p’atiently for the new heavens and new earth characterized by
righteous-ness. They are to live good lives by believing God's promises about the parousia (v. 12). They
should lead lives of obedi-ence and faithfulness to God and Jesus, but also to prophets, preachers, yes,
and even to the author of this letter! They are to remember the tradition and think correctly about
difficult matters such as the day of the parousia (v. 8) or its delay (vv. 9, 15). Thus, they should wait patiently and be prepared (vv. 12, 13, 14) and definitely hold fast (v. 17). By living good lives after this fashion, believers can hasten the day (see Isa 65:17; 66:22; Rev 21:1). This reflects rabbinic thinking that if all Israel kept all the commandments for two successive Sab-baths, the Messiah would come (see Acts 3:19-20).

Today's gospel (Mark 1:1-8) presents the Baptist's preach-ing and how the listeners are to prepare themselves for the coming of the one mightier than he. The epistle advises be-lievers how to prepare for the return of the Lord. What other advice is needed?

**ALLELUIA (Lk 3:4, 6)**
Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths: all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

**GOSPEL**

John the Baptist makes his Advent entrance in the proclamation of today’s Gospel. St. Mark quotes the prophecy of Isaiah that served as today’s First Reading. It was not just any voice encouraging people to prepare the way for the Lord. That voice was fulfilled on the lips of John. John proclaims “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4). He is asking people to make themselves ready for the appearance of Jesus. If they wish to hear his message and follow after him, it will take some preparation on their part. John’s clothing and diet also place him in the ambit of prophets. He bridges the Old and New Testaments — the last of the great prophets, appearing a step ahead of the sacred feet of Jesus. As the First Sunday of Advent prepares the faithful for the Second Coming of the glorified Christ, the Second Sunday recalls how John prepared people for the first coming of the adult Christ. This basic theme will recur next week. The Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent tells of the events leading up to the birth of the infant Christ. The message this week helps us see how people in Jesus’ own day prepared for his coming. The readings encourage us to reform our lives while maintaining the joyful expectation that Christ will bring the salvation for which we long. Whatever our struggles, his coming brings peace.

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (1:1–8)
The beginning of the GOSPEL of Jesus Christ the Son of God.
As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;*

*he will prepare your way.*

*A voice of one crying out in the desert:*

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,*

*make straight his paths.”*

John the Baptist appeared in the desert
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

People of the whole Judean countryside
and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem
were going out to him
and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River
as they acknowledged their sins.

John was clothed in camel’s hair,
with a leather belt around his waist.
He fed on locusts and wild honey.
And this is what he proclaimed:
“One mightier than I is coming after me.
I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.
I have baptized you with water;
he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

* [1:1–13] The prologue of the Gospel according to Mark begins with the title (Mk 1:1) followed by three events preparatory to Jesus’ preaching: (1) the appearance in the Judean wilderness of John, baptizer, preacher of repentance, and precursor of Jesus (Mk 1:2–8); (2) the baptism of Jesus, at which a voice from heaven acknowledges Jesus to be God’s Son, and the holy Spirit descends on him (Mk 1:9–11); (3) the temptation of Jesus by Satan (Mk 1:12–13).
* [1:1] The gospel of Jesus Christ [the Son of God]: the “good news” of salvation in and through Jesus, crucified and risen, acknowledged by the Christian community as Messiah (Mk 8:29; 14:61–62) and Son of God (Mk 1:11; 9:7; 15:39), although some important manuscripts here omit the Son of God.
* [1:2–3] Although Mark attributes the prophecy to Isaiah, the text is a combination of Mal 3:1; Is 40:3; Ex 23:20; cf. Mt 11:10; Lk 7:27. John’s ministry is seen as God’s prelude to the saving mission of his Son. The way of the Lord: this prophecy of Deutero-Isaiah concerning the end of the Babylonian exile is here applied to the coming of Jesus; John the Baptist is to prepare the way for him.
* [1:8–9] Through the life-giving baptism with the holy Spirit (Mk 1:8), Jesus will create a new people of God. But first he identifies himself with the people of Israel in submitting to John’s baptism of repentance and in bearing on their behalf the burden of God’s decisive judgment (Mk 1:9; cf. Mk 1:4). As in the desert of Sinai, so here in the wilderness of Judea, Israel’s sonship with God is to be renewed.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark reports no genealogy for Jesus, yet he accomplishes the same thing they do: establishing Jesus’ honorable status and authority.

SON OF GOD

The word commonly translated "gospel" in verse 1 (“the begining of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah”) is more fittingly translated “proclamation!”

Ancient Mediterranean people were familiar with proclamations. They were generally made on behalf of or about rulers (e.g., announcing the birth of a new ruler, reporting a recent military victory by the ruler). Mediterranean people would immediately wonder: who is this Jesus, and by what right does he make proclamations?

If this person is simply Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee (Mark 1:9), he would have little claim to honor. Recall Nathanael’s incredulous question: "Can anything honorable come out of Nazareth?" Jhn 1:46). A village artisan has no authority to make proclamations.

Mark has a ready answer: Jesus is Son of God. This statement announces Jesus' status, the basis of his acquired honor by reason of which he can speak and act on behalf of God.

The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (no. 12) urges all who interpret the Bible to "investigate what the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed." Mark actually expressed the phrase "Son of God." What did he intend to express?

In Hebrew and other Semitic languages, the phrase "son of so-and-so" means "having the qualities of so-and-so!" The phrase "son of man" means having the qualities of a man or person, hence in a word it means "human!" The ancients understood thunder as the voice of God (see Ps 29:3-9), hence "sons of thunder" describes "those who echo the voice of God" (see Mark 3:17). A son of God is one who has
"the quality or qualities of God:' hence one who is divine or di-vine-like. This is more than sufficient justification for Jesus' behavior as a proclaimer.

MARK
And who is this person who presumes to narrate the story of this extraordinary Jesus? What do we know about him? The gospel does not identify its author, but tradition (since Papias) has suggested a certain "Mark:' companion of Peter in Rome (1 Pet 5:13). The belief is that Peter or his recollections stand behind this gospel no matter who "Mark" really is. From a cultural perspective, that would be beside the point. Whatever his identity, this author presents an honorable per-sonal status as strong as Jesus' status. In the second verse, the evangelist demonstrates ability to quote Scripture creatively. While citing explicitly only Isaiah, he has also included Malachi, demonstrating not only familiarity with the sacred traditions but creative ability to reshape them. Such skill was immediately recognized, highly regarded, and admired.

JOHN THE BAPTIZER
The third honorable figure to appear in this prologue is dressed like Elijah (v. 6; see 1 Kgs 1 :8), preaches reform, and announces the advent of the Messiah. Yet for all his boldness, the Baptist displays the appropriate and expected cultural humility. He describes the coming one as "more powerful than me" and declares himself "not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals" (v. 7). An honorable per-son never presumes to usurp the honor of another.
As a preacher, John is a smashing success. He addresses head on the day-to-day concerns of his predominantly peas-ant audience. The theme of John's preaching was "remission of debts" (translated "forgiveness of sins"). Jesus echoed this in the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4).
Peasants from the Judean countryside were deeply in debt. In first-century Palestine, as much as 35 to 40 percent of total agricultural production was eaten up by a variety of taxes. Peasants unable to pay lost ownership of the land and became sharecroppers. As demands on them became even greater, many fled the land. Many became artisans. Thus, artisans and non-elites from Jerusalem were not much better off than the peasants.
That honorable preachers like John and Jesus would pro-claim remission of debts is good news. Advent is an opportune time for all Christians to address the burning issues of life courageously.

Connections to Church Teaching and Tradition
- “However, until there shall be new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells,1 the pilgrim Church in her sacraments and institutions, which pertain to the present time, has the appearance of this world which is passing and she herself dwells among creatures who groan and travail in pain until now and await the revelation of the sons of God”2 (LG, 48).
- “The Church’s social doctrine is presented as a ‘work site’ where the work is always in progress, where perennial truth penetrates and permeates new circumstances, indicating paths of justice and peace” (CSDC, 86).
- “This invitation to repentance, which had often been sounded by the prophets, prepared people’s hearts for the coming of the kingdom of God through the voice of John the Baptist, who came ‘preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’”3 (RP, 1).
THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT B

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 61:1–2a, 10–11  As ancient Israel saw the end of its exile, a glorious future opened before the Chosen People. Those who refused to lose hope saw their dreams fulfilled. The spirit of the Lord fell upon the prophet who faithfully announced the good tidings of healing, liberty, and vindication. God makes justice and praise spring up. Justice signifies the restoration of a community in its social dignity, and also in its spiritual union. Praise results from these actions. It is the only fitting response of a people redeemed. Many Christians recognize this passage as the one that Jesus read in the synagogue at the beginning of his ministry in Luke’s account of the Gospel. Today it stands on its own to further the character of Advent.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (61:1–2a, 10–11)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,
to heal the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
to announce a year of favor from the LORD
and a day of vindication by our God.
I rejoice heartily in the LORD,
in my God is the joy of my soul;
for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation
and wrapped me in a mantle of justice,
like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem,
like a bride bedecked with her jewels.
As the earth brings forth its plants,
and a garden makes its growth spring up,
so will the Lord GOD make justice and praise
spring up before all the nations.

* [61:1–2] The prophet proclaims that he has been anointed by the Lord to bring good news (cf. 40:9) to the afflicted and to comfort Zion. The background to the “year of favor” is the jubilee year of release from debts (Lv 25:10–11; Is 49:8).
* [61:10–11] The new life of the restored Zion is expressed in nuptial (cf. also 62:5) and agricultural (cf. v. 3; 60:21) imagery.

Chapters 60-62 of Third Isaiah (56-66) were very likely written by a devoted disciple of Second Isaiah. Isaiah 61:1-2 echoes the servant songs of Second Isaiah: anointing by the spirit (42:1) for a ministry of mercy (42:2-3, 6-7); a “jubilee year” or year of favor (49:8). As noted in Leviticus 25, such a jubilee year was proclaimed every fifty years for the purpose of having debts canceled, granting general forgiveness, and for recovering lost property. These words are spoken by the prophet himself. That he declares himself anointed is an in-teresting point. While Ezekiel made much of the spirit anoint-ment of priests so
that they would prophesy, Third Isaiah extends the spirit’s activity beyond royalty and the priest-hood to the laity who will be named “priests of the Lord” (vv. 4-6; Exod 19:6; I Pet 2:5). In verses 9-11, Jerusalem speaks and revels in the restoration and fulfillment of love between herself and YHWH (54:5-8; Jer 33:10-11). Careful readers will distin-guish the two speakers in these paired verses (1-2 and 10-11). Curiously, the verses omitted from this reading (vv. 4-6) make the best link with the gospel, where John, the son of a priest, decided not to take up his inherited status but rather takes on the prophet’s mantle to critique the aristocratic Jerusalem priesthood.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Lk 1:46–48, 49–50, 53–54.)

Mary’s canticle, the Magnificat, proclaims the greatness of a God who has upended the injustices of the world. The hungry are filled; the rich are empty. God has returned to lift Israel from slavery to mercy. Normally the response that follows the First Reading is drawn from the Book of Psalms, but there are occasions when a canticle from another book fills in. Today’s passage might seem more fitting as a Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, which recounts the events immediately preceding the birth of Christ. In fact, it is the Gospel whenever December 22 falls on a weekday. Today, however, it joins with the First Reading to serve as a prophecy for the significance of the coming of Jesus Christ. He will bring justice to a world in need. So tightly connected are the themes of these first two elements of today’s Liturgy of the Word that one verse from the First Reading is the refrain for the responsory. The Lectionary links Mary’s canticle to the Book of Isaiah to connect the prophecies for the coming of justice to the coming of Jesus Christ.

My soul rejoices in my God.
My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: My soul rejoices in my God. The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.
My soul rejoices in my God.
He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
My soul rejoices in my God.

* [1:5–2:52] Like the Gospel according to Matthew, this gospel opens with an infancy narrative, a collection of stories about the birth and childhood of Jesus. The narrative uses early Christian traditions about the birth of Jesus, traditions about the birth and circumcision of John the Baptist, and canticles such as the Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55) and Benedictus (Lk 1:67–79), composed of phrases drawn from the Greek Old Testament. It is largely, however, the composition of Luke who writes in imitation of Old Testament birth stories, combining historical and legendary details, literary ornamentation and interpretation of scripture, to answer in advance the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” The focus of the narrative, therefore, is primarily christological. In this section Luke announces many of the themes that will become prominent in the rest of the gospel: the centrality of Jerusalem and the temple, the journey motif, the universality of salvation, joy and peace, concern for the lowly, the importance of women, the presentation of Jesus as savior, Spirit-guided revelation and prophecy, and the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. The account presents parallel scenes (diptychs) of angelic announcements of the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus, and of the birth, circumcision, and presentation of John and Jesus. In this parallelism, the ascendency of Jesus over John is stressed: John is prophet of the Most High (Lk 1:76); Jesus is Son of the Most High (Lk 1:32). John is great in the sight of the Lord (Lk 1:15); Jesus will be
Great (a LXX attribute, used absolutely, of God) (Lk 1:32). John will go before the Lord (Lk 1:16–17); Jesus will be Lord (Lk 1:43; 2:11).

* [1:46–55] Although Mary is praised for being the mother of the Lord and because of her belief, she reacts as the servant in a psalm of praise, the Magnificat. Because there is no specific connection of the canticle to the context of Mary’s pregnancy and her visit to Elizabeth, the Magnificat (with the possible exception of v. 48) may have been a Jewish Christian hymn that Luke found appropriate at this point in his story. Even if not composed by Luke, it fits in well with themes found elsewhere in Luke: joy and exultation in the Lord; the lowly being singled out for God’s favor; the reversal of human fortunes; the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. The loose connection between the hymn and the context is further seen in the fact that a few Old Latin manuscripts identify the speaker of the hymn as Elizabeth, even though the overwhelming textual evidence makes Mary the speaker.

The familiar words of Mary’s poetry are appointed as the RESPONSORIAL PSALM for this reading with the refrain echoing Isaiah 61:10b as the lectionary indicates. A key idea in these verses is reversal: the hungry are fed, the greedy (this is the usual meaning of "rich" in the Bible; people who refuse to share their surplus) are sent away empty. This is a common theme in ancient near eastern literature and in the Old Testament whence Mary’s poem draws its inspiration. This is a fitting response to the reading from Third Isaiah in which Jerusalem proudly announced its own reversal of bad to good fortune.

SECOND READING

St. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to rejoice always and constantly give thanks. By retaining what is good and refraining from evil, the Thessalonians may be preserved “blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:23). That phrase explains why this passage has been chosen for our meditation this weekend. The people were awaiting the coming of the Lord, just as Christians today do. As Paul encouraged his readers to be blameless, so we receive the same advice. This letter is possibly the very first piece of literature composed for the New Testament — the oldest of Paul’s epistles, older than each of the four Gospel accounts. In it can be seen the early anticipation of the imminence of Christ’s return. The opening word, rejoice, sounds the traditional theme of this Gaudete Sunday. The same word appears in the refrain for the responsory, which in turn comes from the First Reading.

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians (5:16–24)

Brothers and sisters:
Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.
In all circumstances give thanks,
for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.
Do not quench the Spirit.
Do not despise prophetic utterances.
Test everything; retain what is good.
Refrain from every kind of evil.
May the God of peace make you perfectly holy
and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body,
be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you is faithful,
and he will also accomplish it.
* [5:19–21] Paul’s buoyant encouragement of charismatic freedom sometimes occasioned excesses that he or others had to remedy (see 1 Cor 14; 2 Thes 2:1–15; 2 Pt 3:1–16).
* [5:23] Another possible translation is, “May the God of peace himself make you perfectly holy and sanctify your spirit fully, and may both soul and body be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In either case, Paul is not offering an anthropological or philosophical analysis of human nature. Rather, he looks to the wholeness of what may be called the supernatural and natural aspects of a person’s service of God.

This earliest of all the New Testament documents (c. 50 A.D.) is also our introduction to Paul. We meet him and his companions for the first time, approximately 20 years after Paul accepted Jesus as Messiah. Scholars think two letters have been combined into one. (Letter A= 2:13-4:2 written from Athens; and B = 1:1-2:12 and 4:3-5:28 written from Corinth). There is no doubt that today's verses were selected because of the traditional name of this Sunday in Advent: Gaudete Sunday. The staccato character of Paul's concluding exhortations, again a customary part of his letters, has prompted Calvin Roetzel, an eminent American Pauline scholar, to describe this as "shotgun paraenesis!" (Paraenesis is exhortations or instructions on how or how not to live.) Christian Life ought to be characterized by joy, a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), and by ceaseless prayer which also proceeds from the Spirit (Rom 8:15-16). Gratitude ("give thanks") is not the same as saying "thank you." In the Middle East, one never says thank you unless one intends to terminate a relationship. "Thank you" means "I won't need you anymore." So long, it's been good to know you! That would be equiva-lent to suicide, since one never knows when one will need a benefactor again. Gratitude in the Middle East is expressed by broadcasting the merits of one's benefactor far and wide, at every opportunity.

The exhortation not to quench the Spirit requires special reflection. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17). Paul urges the Thessalonians: let freedom prevail! For this to happen, social structure and group control would be reduced to a very low level. If this occurred, it would promote an individualism which neither Paul nor his culture admire. Paul was seriously concerned with good order in the community, group orientation rather than individualism, and edification of all community members. This is very evident in the Corinthian correspondence.

A close look at the verses may help resolve this puzzle. The concluding verses ("May the God of peace . . .") clearly look to a people set apart, a people pure and holy (blameless) in preparation for the advent of the Lord Jesus Messiah. Such people would surely be imbued with the Spirit, and some among them may prophesy. Here, it seems, is the critical point. Quenching the Spirit might result in quenching prophecy. The preferable course of action is to allow freedom but to test everything for authenticity. Retain what is good, discard the rest. Eventually Paul would develop this (in Corinthians) in terms of edification of the community. If it builds up the community, retain it. If freedom destroys the community, it is evil. Refrain from it.

In the gospel John 1:6-8, 19-28), fellow ethnics had to make a judgment about John the Baptist and his activities. Was this of God and deserving of trust? Or was it a fraud? The passage we read doesn't tell us their conclusion about the Baptist. Paul's exhortations propose one way to decide. Don’t squelch the Spirit, don’t squelch freedom, but test everything to see whether it builds or destroys community, whether it is life-giving or death-dealing. Judge accordingly.

**ALLELUIA** (Is 61:1 [cited in Lk 4:18])
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor.
Today’s passage from John parallels the account heard last week from Mark. It is in two parts — the body following a brief introduction. The introduction is taken from the prologue of the Gospel according to John, a poetic proclamation of the mystery of the divine Word. Embedded into the prologue is a narrative about John, distinguishing him from Christ. Those few verses are proclaimed today ahead of the actual appearance of John in the unfolding account of Jesus’ ministry. John the evangelist provides information about the conversation between John the Baptist and the priests and Levites from Jerusalem. They probe to find out just who he is. John cannot answer that without proclaiming who Jesus is. The Third Sunday of Advent sounds two concurrent themes. One of them is gaudete (rejoice), as seen in the other elements of today’s Liturgy of the Word. The other is the message of John (the Fourth Gospel never calls him “John the Baptist”). So central is John’s preaching to Advent that the GOSPEL READING for both the Second and Third Sundays always tell of him. Historically, he was preparing his contemporaries for the arrival of Jesus. Biblically, he prepares us to meet Christ at the end of time.

* A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (1:6–8, 19–28)

A man named John was sent from God.
He came for testimony, to testify to the light,
    so that all might believe through him.
He was not the light,
    but came to testify to the light.
And this is the testimony of John.
When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, “Who are you?”
He admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, “I am not the Christ.”
So they asked him,
    “What are you then? Are you Elijah?”
And he said, “I am not.”
“Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.”
So they said to him, “Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us?
What do you have to say for yourself?”
He said:
    “I am the voice of one crying out in the desert,
        ‘make straight the way of the Lord,’
    as Isaiah the prophet said.”
Some Pharisees were also sent.
They asked him,
    “Why then do you baptize
        if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?”
John answered them,
    “I baptize with water;
        but there is one among you whom you do not recognize,
        the one who is coming after me,
        whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.”
This happened in Bethany across the Jordan,
    where John was baptizing.

* [1:1–18] The prologue states the main themes of the gospel: life, light, truth, the world, testimony, and the preexistence of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Logos, who reveals God the Father. In origin, it was
probably an early Christian hymn. Its closest parallel is in other christological hymns, Col 1:15–20 and Phil 2:6–11. Its core (Jn 1:1–5, 10–11, 14) is poetic in structure, with short phrases linked by “staircase parallelism,” in which the last word of one phrase becomes the first word of the next. Prose inserts (at least Jn 1:6–8, 15) deal with John the Baptist.

* [1:6] John was sent just as Jesus was “sent” (Jn 4:34) in divine mission. Other references to John the Baptist in this gospel emphasize the differences between them and John’s subordinate role.

* [1:7] Testimony: the testimony theme of John is introduced, which portrays Jesus as if on trial throughout his ministry. All testify to Jesus: John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, scripture, his works, the crowds, the Spirit, and his disciples.

* [1:19–51] The testimony of John the Baptist about the Messiah and Jesus’ self-revelation to the first disciples. This section constitutes the introduction to the gospel proper and is connected with the prose inserts in the prologue. It develops the major theme of testimony in four scenes: John’s negative testimony about himself; his positive testimony about Jesus; the revelation of Jesus to Andrew and Peter; the revelation of Jesus to Philip and Nathanael.

* [1:19] The Jews: throughout most of the gospel, the “Jews” does not refer to the Jewish people as such but to the hostile authorities, both Pharisees and Sadducees, particularly in Jerusalem, who refuse to believe in Jesus. The usage reflects the atmosphere, at the end of the first century, of polemics between church and synagogue, or possibly it refers to Jews as representative of a hostile world (Jn 1:10–11).

* [1:20] Messiah: the anointed agent of Yahweh, usually considered to be of Davidic descent. See further the note on Jn 1:41.


* [1:23] This is a repunctuation and reinterpretation (as in the synoptic gospels and Septuagint) of the Hebrew text of Is 40:3 which reads, “A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord.”

* [1:24] Some Pharisees: other translations, such as “Now they had been sent from the Pharisees,” misunderstand the grammatical construction. This is a different group from that in Jn 1:19; the priests and Levites would have been Sadducees, not Pharisees.

* [1:26] I baptize with water: the synoptics add “but he will baptize you with the holy Spirit” (Mk 1:8) or “…holy Spirit and fire” (Mt 3:11; Lk 3:16). John’s emphasis is on purification and preparation for a better baptism.

* [1:28] Bethany across the Jordan: site unknown. Another reading is “Bethabara.”

**PRIEST OR PROPHET?**

Why should the religious authorities in Jerusalem show concern for a marginal figure attracting crowds to the wilderness and baptizing repentant sinners in the Jordan?

In cultures guided by honor, persons are expected to behave according to their inherited status. The Baptist’s status or acquired honor derived from the fact that his father, Zechariah, was a devout rural priest.

But the Baptist is not behaving like a priest. Instead, he looks very much like a member of the numerous groups of alienated priests that emerged as early as the sixth century B.C.E. These groups found themselves increasingly separated from the aristocratic priests in Jerusalem. The historian Josephus indicates that the gulf between the latter and the large number of lower clergy was very great just before the outbreak of the Judaic rebellion against Rome in the mid-sixties C.E.

A major cause of alienation was the widely known and very evident luxury in which the Jerusalem priestly aristocracy lived in contrast to the conditions of the rural clergy. In 1976, a report on excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem described a Herodian house of two thousand square feet, and a larger one the excavators called "The Mansion." In the mansion they found
a stone with the name "Bar Kathros:' one of four priestly families described in the Talmud (Pesah 57a) as exploiting the people and beating them with rods. The contents of these homes together with their unusually large size illustrates the luxury of the Jerusalem aristocracy in the first century.

By his dress and diet, the Baptizer distances himself from this luxury and his rural priestly heritage and presents himself more like a prophet, a spokesperson who declares the will of God for the here and now. The Jerusalem priests wonder whether John is an "action prophet" (a spokesperson who also leads a popular movement hoping that God will intervene in liberating action) or an "oracular prophet" (one who only pronounces words of redemption or judgment).

After interrogating John, the delegation from the Jerusalem authorities conclude that he is only an oracular prophet. He explicitly says he is not the light but only the witness to the light. He denies that he is the Messiah, Elijah, or "the prophet" who was to return at the end of time. He is but the voice crying in the wilderness exhorting his listeners to prepare the way of the Lord. Because Jesus has not yet been baptized nor initiated his ministry, the delegation isn’t interested in the "coming one" John announces.

REFORM AND BAPTISM
The second concern of the delegation is John’s baptism. "If you are not one of these expected figures, then why do you baptize?"

Baptism was rather common in antiquity even outside of Judaism. The mystery cults of Isis, Mithras, and Eleusis contained baptismal rites. In the Old Testament, Naaman was cleansed of his skin problem by bathing in the Jordan (2 Kgs 5:14). The high priest was required to engage in a purification rite before and after the rites of atonement (Lev 16:4, 24), and Leviticus 15 prescribes it for menstruating women. The Qumran community, too, practiced a form of baptism. In each case, the meaning of the baptismal rite derives from the ritual context, or instruction, or tradition.

The Jerusalem delegation understands John’s baptismal rite to be a symbolic action. They want to know what it means. Mark and Luke identify it as a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins:" a rite symbolizing purification and cleansing, a return to God.

The evangelist John implies yet another dimension. The Baptist baptizes with water, but one who is to come after him will bring a more radical purification to those willing to repent (see Luke 3:16-17).

Americans can comprehend this more radical reform by drawing an analogy with contemporary efforts to reform the American health-care system. Current ideas echo many that were proposed by reformers but defeated over the past twenty years. Current conditions require more radical reforms. Ultimately, "one who is stronger" will succeed.

Connections to Church Teaching and Tradition

■ “The candles [of the wreath] represent the four weeks of Advent, and the number of candles lighted each week corresponds to the number of the current week of Advent. The rose candle is lighted on the Third Sunday of Advent, also known as Gaudete Sunday” (Catholic Household Blessings & Prayers, p. 73).

■ “Looking to the heart of Mary, to the depth of her faith expressed in the words of the Magnificat, Christ’s disciples are called to renew ever more fully in themselves ‘the awareness that the truth about God who saves, the truth about God who is the source of every gift, cannot be separated from the manifestation of his love of preference for the poor and humble, that love which, celebrated in the Magnificat, is later expressed in the words and works of Jesus” (CSDC, 59).
FIRST READING

The words in Samuel are like an epic sketch of the history of God’s promise. David wants to build a house for God, but instead God responds that he will build the house: “I will fix a place for my people Israel; I will plant them so that they may dwell in their place” (v. 10). God promises David that this house and kingdom will be firm forever. We hear the fulfillment of that promise in the Gospel story of Mary’s obedience. The house of David also means the household, family, or relations of David. David’s salvation does not come to him as an individual or even as a king. Rather, it comes in community, among people who are in relationship with one another. In God’s decision to tell David that it is he who will build the house, God expanded the relationships within the house. In our relationship to God as daughters and sons, we find that we are locked in an embrace with all God’s sons and daughters, making us all sisters and brothers. This family relationship will be all the more emphasized by Jesus’ image of how we treat our brothers and sisters.

A reading from the second Book of Samuel (7:1–5, 8b–12, 14a, 16)

When King David was settled in his palace, and the LORD had given him rest from his enemies on every side, he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent!”

Nathan answered the king, “Go, do whatever you have in mind, for the LORD is with you.”

But that night the LORD spoke to Nathan and said: “Go, tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD: Should you build me a house to dwell in? I was I who took you from the pasture and from the care of the flock to be commander of my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you went, and I have destroyed all your enemies before you. And I will make you famous like the great ones of the earth. I will fix a place for my people Israel; I will plant them so that they may dwell in their place without further disturbance. Neither shall the wicked continue to afflict them as they did of old, since the time I first appointed judges over my people Israel. I will give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD also reveals to you that he will establish a house for you. And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm.”
I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.
Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever.’”

* [16:25–27] This doxology is assigned variously to the end of Rom 14; 15; 16 in the manuscript tradition. Some manuscripts omit it entirely. Whether written by Paul or not, it forms an admirable conclusion to the letter at this point.
* [16:25] Paul’s gospel reveals the mystery kept secret for long ages: justification and salvation through faith, with all the implications for Jews and Gentiles that Paul has developed in the letter.

This passage is one of three forms (see Psalm 89 and 1 Chronicles 17) in which Nathan’s oracle concerning the foundation of Davidic messianism has been recorded. In 2 Samuel, Nathan uses a clever play on words to deliver his message. While David intended to build a "house" (Hebrew: bayith) for the Lord, namely the Ark, the Lord will instead build a "house" or dynasty (bayith) for him. This dynasty is God’s chosen human agent of salvation in human history. In Nathan’s oracle, salvation is presented as political achievement to be wrought by a successor to David. Luke’s allusion to this passage in today’s gospel (Luke 1:26-38) expands its meaning. Just as God watched over David, the head of the dynasty, so does God watch over Jesus, successor to David in the dynasty.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 89:2–3, 4–5, 27, 29 (2a) Psalm 89, a royal psalm, includes prayers for the king because it is through him that the people of God are blessed. Therefore, how the king behaved as a servant of the Lord was significant. Prophets often approached the king, calling upon him to change his behavior to be more faithful to his royal heritage. The full text of Psalm 89 laments over the suffering of the king, possibly because of his defeat and disgrace in battle. Yet in the verses we hear on this Advent Sunday, we hear no laments but only praise for the God of the covenant. The opening line announces the theme of God’s faithfulness over all time. Terms like forever and all generations convey the lasting depth of the covenant and reflect God’s continual promise to David’s house. Seen in light of a possible military loss, it is certain that despite defeat, God’s love for David does not change. This Sunday, we sing praise and proclaim the faithfulness of God for the entire world to know.

For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.
The promises of the LORD I will sing forever; through all generations my mouth shall proclaim your faithfulness.
For you have said, “My kindness is established forever”; in heaven you have confirmed your faithfulness.
“I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant: forever will I confirm your posterity and establish your throne for all generations.”
“He shall say of me, ‘You are my father, my God, the Rock, my savior.’
Forever I will maintain my kindness toward him, and my covenant with him stands firm.”

* [Psalm 89] The community laments the defeat of the Davidic king, to whom God promised kingship as enduring as the heavens (Ps 89:2–5). The Psalm narrates how God became king of the divine beings (Ps 89:6–9) and how the Davidic king became king of earthly kings (Ps 89:20–38). Since the defeat of the king calls into question God’s promise, the community ardently prays God to be faithful to the original promise to David (Ps 89:39–52).
David’s dynasty is to be as long-lasting as the heavens, a statement reinforced by using the same verbs (establish, stand) both of the divine love and loyalty and of the Davidic dynasty and throne, cf. Ps 89:29–30.

This psalm is a liturgical lament over a military defeat. Any such defeat is viewed as a threat that would jeopardize God’s promises to David. The verses selected for today reflect chiefly on God’s steadfast love and fidelity, which guarantee the endurance and success of David’s dynasty and God’s plan. Verses 2–5 form a solid unit. An “inclusion” (repetition of words or phrases signaling the beginning and end of a unit) is marked by the words “forever” and “all generations?” Moreover, the words “establish” and “confirm” are so situated in their verses as to form a chiasm (an “X” shaped arrangement of words or phrases called a chiasm because the name of the Greek letter “X” is chi), further strengthening the unit. The idea: God’s steadfast love and fidelity are quite visible in creation and in the Davidic dynasty. Verses 4 and 5 clearly borrow from 2 Samuel 7. Verse 27 repeats the ideas of 2 Samuel 7:14, and verse 29 affirms the lasting nature of the dynasty. The psalm refrain is a very suitable response to the goodness of YHWH upon which the lamenting nation knows it can always count.

SECOND READING

Found at the end of Paul’s epistle, these verses are a doxology or a benediction, a hymn of praise and glory to God. This reading echoes connections to the other readings in images of the endless mystery of God to be proclaimed to all nations. Paul emphasizes that all Jews and Gentiles now share in the promise of salvation fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In proclaiming this gracious and generous message of covenantal relationship and compassion to all, it will become known to the world that God is indeed faithful. While this message may seem impossible to some, to others this Good News of Jesus Christ will be seen as the fulfillment of the enormous capacity and power of the Lord.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans (16:25–27)

Brothers and sisters:
To him who can strengthen you,
according to my GOSPEL and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages
but now manifested through the prophetic writings and,
according to the command of the eternal God,
made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith,
to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ
be glory forever and ever. Amen.

* [16:25–27] This doxology is assigned variously to the end of Rom 14; 15; 16 in the manuscript tradition. Some manuscripts omit it entirely. Whether written by Paul or not, it forms an admirable conclusion to the letter at this point.
* [16:25] Paul’s gospel reveals the mystery kept secret for long ages: justification and salvation through faith, with all the implications for Jews and Gentiles that Paul has developed in the letter.

Scholars are nearly unanimous in the opinion that this doxology was added to Paul’s epistle at a later date when his letters were gathered together. One reason is the hymnic style that suggests a derivation from liturgical settings. Another reason is the use of the word “mystery” applied to the salvation of non-Israelites (“all nations”), which is characteristic of the Deutero-Paulines, the six letters attributed to Paul.
but very likely not written by him but after his lifetime (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus).

"Mystery" refers to God's eternally conceived but hidden plan. Privileged persons in the past (e.g., prophets, visionaries) had access to it through a variety of altered states of consciousness experiences (dreams, trances, visions, and the like, including sky-journeys). The function of such experiences is to comfort and assure believers, especially as they endure trials and tribulations. Specifically in the Deutero-Pauline epistles, the word "mystery" becomes almost a technical term to express what God has accomplished in Jesus (Col 1:26-27; 2:2; Eph 3:3-6, 9). The point in today's verses is that non-Israelites now share in salvation which hitherto had been considered to pertain only to Israel. Of course, this is a point Paul argues in the letter, so the concluding doxology written by another hand after his time serves as an apt conclusion.

The verses also pair well with the gospel (Luke 1:26-38), which reports the angel Gabriel's message to Mary that the son she will conceive and bear will be heir to the throne of David and be called Son of the Most High. Mary's discussion with the angel is an experience that takes place in an altered state of consciousness.

ALLELUIA (Lk 1:38)
Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.

GOSPEL

LUKE 1:26–38 The revelation in this Sunday’s Gospel must have seemed unimaginable to Mary. It was impossible for her to conceive a child and impossible for her barren cousin, Elizabeth, to bear a child. Yet, she believed: “Nothing will be impossible for God” (v. 37). God has promised salvation to his people, and it has begun with these two women with their willingness to accept impossibly good news. We are entering the final week of Advent, our final preparation for the celebration of the Incarnation, God’s willingness to walk among humanity. In telling Mary’s story on this last Sunday, the Church highlights her response to the overwhelming power of God’s Spirit. In her acceptance and trust of God’s promise, Mary responded as a faithful servant of the line of David. There had been no kings in the Davidic line for over five centuries, since before the Babylonian exile, yet God is faithful and has found a way to allow the Son of the Most High to inherit David’s throne. Mary’s simple statement of obedience did not come without fear or anxiety or challenge, yet it came: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). As in the psalm, we hear images of the eternal and a kingdom with no end. Mary has responded as a faithful disciple and, because of her willingness to allow God to enter into her very self, salvation will be seen upon the earth.

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Luke (1:26–38)

The angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,
and the virgin’s name was Mary.

And coming to her, he said,
“Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.”
But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Then the angel said to her,
“Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.

“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

But Mary said to the angel,
“How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?”

And the angel said to her in reply,
“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore the child to be born
will be called holy, the Son of God.

And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,
has also conceived a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God.”

Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word.”

Then the angel departed from her.

* [1:26–38] The announcement to Mary of the birth of Jesus is parallel to the announcement to Zechariah of the birth of John. In both the angel Gabriel appears to the parent who is troubled by the vision (Lk 1:11–12, 26–29) and then told by the angel not to fear (Lk 1:13, 30). After the announcement is made (Lk 1:14–17, 31–33) the parent objects (Lk 1:18, 34) and a sign is given to confirm the announcement (Lk 1:20, 36). The particular focus of the announcement of the birth of Jesus is on his identity as Son of David (Lk 1:32–33) and Son of God (Lk 1:32, 35).

**VIRGINITY AND HONOR**

In the ancient Mediterranean world, people believed that unless prevented by appropriate measures, a man and a woman who found themselves alone together would inevitably have sexual relations. This is why the culture prescribes that men (fathers, husbands, brothers) watch, guard, and protect the women in their care (Sir 26:10-12).

There are a variety of strategies for carrying out this concern. One is to ensure that a woman is always in the company of other women and children (girls and boys) younger than the age of puberty. Another is the structure of the houses where the inner room or courtyard secluded from the view of people (men) in the outside world is reserved as the proper place for unmarried women.

In Luke’s account of the annunciation, a presumably masculine angel visits Mary who seems to be quite alone. Very likely, she is in the innermost quarters of her family’s home, the proper place for an unmarried young woman. The angel is an intruder, and the scene would strike any Mediterranean person as suspicious, angel notwithstanding.

Moreover, Mary is betrothed (a more accurate word than the misleading "engaged") to Joseph. Betrothal was a family event rather than an event between two individuals. Marriage in the ancient Middle East was arranged by the parents with the intention of joining and strengthening two families. In Middle Eastern villages today, the marriage contract is negotiated by the mothers to make certain the
families are of equal status and that neither family is taking advantage of the other. The patriarchs will ultimately ratify what has been negotiated. Mary thus finds herself in an embarrassing and potentially shameful situation. Should anything happen to her in the family home, her father and brothers would be shamed for not taking proper care of her (see Sir 42:9-10). The family’s shame would increase on the marriage evening if no tokens of virginity could be produced (see Deut 22:13-21).

It is interesting to examine paintings of this scene by Mediterranean artists. Mary invariably holds her hands up in a defensive gesture. The angel is separated from Mary by a prie-dieu, or a doorway, or a similar solid object. There must be some indication that honor is not being compromised. The honorable angel first recognizes her honorable status: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!” Then this male intruder sets her at ease (”Do not be afraid”) and proceeds to explain God’s will for her.

Notice that despite all the honorable assurances from the messenger, Mary is still properly concerned about her honor status: ”How can this be, since I am a virgin?” She is fully aware of the significance and consequences of the angel’s message. In a flash, she recognizes the new challenges that will emerge in her betrothal and the crisis into which this pregnancy could throw both families (see Deut 22:13-21 and Num 5:11-31).

The angel reminds Mary, ”Nothing is impossible with God:’ Mediterraneans recognize in the angel’s explanation two in-dications that God is going to play the role of traditional husband for Mary. He will ”empower” her (”the spirit will come upon you”) and ”protect” her (”overshadow you”), two duties of a Middle Eastern husband. The meaning is not lost on Mary, the Mediterranean maiden.

Her concluding remark is a typical Middle Eastern cultural response when one has lost an argument, or decides to con-close a discussion that is going nowhere. The sentiment ”let it be done to me according to your word” is more commonly stated, ”As you wish:’ At this stage of the story, there still remains much for Mary to face. She may be as perplexed after the angel departs as she was when he arrived. Historians frequently point to figures in the ancient world whose origins sound just like Jesus’. For instance, Asclepius, the healing deity, had a human mother, Coronis (or Arsinoe), and a divine father, Apollo. From their twentieth-century, theologically enlightened perspective, modern Christians find the fact that Jesus had no human father not to be troubling. Attempting to enter the first-century world and culture of Palestine to understand and appreciate this scene in Luke leads to a more sympathetic view of the unsettling experience it must have been for Mary. Even for saints, faith is not easy.

Connections to Church Teaching and Tradition

■ Mary is the Mother of Christ and the Mother of the Church (CCC, 963–975).

■ “Despite all this, then, humanity is able to hope. Indeed it must hope: the living and personal Gospel, Jesus Christ himself, is the ‘good news’ and the bearer of joy that the Church announces each day, and to whom the Church bears testimony before all people” (CL, 7).

■ “In the Church’s liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive his presence and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives. He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing . . . since he has ‘loved us first,’ love can also blossom as a response within us” (DCE, 17).
Overview of Christmas Time
While the secular world may observe Christmas as a season starting right after Thanksgiving and lasting until Christmas Day, the Catholic Church observes Christmas as a season that starts with Evening Prayer on Christmas Eve and that will last through the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Christians have celebrated the Lord’s nativity since the fourth century, choosing this date as an alternative to the Roman celebration of the unconquered sun, and using the feast to combat the Arians, who denied that Christ was fully divine. Since then, Christmas Time has grown to be one of the most important feasts that we celebrate as a Church. “After the annual celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the Church has no more ancient custom than celebrating the memorial of the Nativity of the Lord and of his first manifestations, and this takes place in Christmas Time” (Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the General Roman Calendar, 32).

FIRST READING
Most of the FIRST READINGS in this season come from the prophet Isaiah, whose exuberance can hardly be contained as he proclaims what God will accomplish for the people. The message is both particular to his people and universal. Christians have interpreted these proclamations of salvation through the Chosen People as prophecies about Christ. On January 1, the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, we hear a blessing from Book of Numbers. It is particularly appropriate for the beginning of the new year and the annual World Day of Peace.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM
Like Isaiah’s theology, the psalms we sing for Christmas interpret Israel’s prayer in the light of Christ. As in Advent, we recall that the covenant is eternal. Even more than that, with such phrases as “the Lord . . . comes to rule the earth” (Psalm 96:13) and “He shall rule the world with justice” (96:13), we celebrate the universality of salvation in Christ. Most of all, when we sing, “Sing joyfully to the Lord, all you lands” (98:4) and “The Lord is king; let the earth rejoice!” (97:1), we express the joy of Christmas. These twenty-five-thousand-year-old hymns offer a wonderful alternative to much of contemporary Christian music.

SECOND READING
The core message of Christmas Time’s SECOND READING can be culled from the opening line of Hebrews, which we hear in the Mass during the Day on the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas): “In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son” (1:1). Each of the readings emphasizes a distinct dimension of the mystery of the Incarnation. On the Christmas Masses during the Night and at Dawn, Titus proclaims the universality of salvation and God’s mercy. On January 1, in Galatians, we find Paul’s only mention of the Mother of God, the person through whom God acted in the fullness of time. Finally, on the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, Ephesians reiterates the revelation that everyone is called to be a copartner in the promise of Christ.

GOSPEL READING
The GOSPEL READINGS take us through the Christmas narratives. By paying close attention to the readings, we discover that Matthew and Luke, the only two evangelists who recount the events of Jesus’ birth, relate very different details. We begin and end the season with Matthew. At the Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve, Matthew’s genealogy emphasizes that Jesus is a son of the covenant. Interestingly, Matthew includes four “outsider” women through whom God worked to save the people. The story of the Magi, which we hear on the Epiphany of the Lord, also emphasizes the universal significance of Jesus’ birth, as another set of “outsiders,” this time foreigners, are called to visit the newborn king. The Lucan narrative, which we hear during the Christmas Mass at Dawn, focuses more on the shepherds and
Mary, representatives of the lowly and poor, the first to collaborate in and benefit from the coming of the Savior. At the Mass during the Day, we hear the prologue to John’s account of the Gospel describe Christ as the Eternal Word who took flesh to dwell among us. In simple stories and mystical theology, these GOSPEL READINGS lead us to contemplate again the mystery of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD
At the Vigil Mass
FIRST READING

Darkness, vindication, royalty, and pregnancy are images that run through this prophecy of Isaiah, who envisions the restoration of a devastated Israel. The passage works well for the Vigil Mass of Christmas, which is still awaiting the birth of Christ. In parishes, the crowds participating at Mass in the late afternoon or early evening of Christmas Eve are coming in order to celebrate Christmas, but the liturgical texts in the Lectionary and in The Roman Missal all imagine that the birth has not yet happened. People have gathered at the Vigil for one last opportunity to pray before the great Mass during the night, which more properly celebrates the birth of Christ. The Lectionary permits some flexibility when choosing readings for pastoral reasons, and if most of the people coming to this Mass are not coming back for another one tomorrow, it may be judicious to select a different set of readings. Still, these have their beauty. Through Isaiah the prophet, God promises not to be silent until Jerusalem’s vindication shines forth like the dawn — a brightness that, for Christians celebrating Christmas, has not yet dawned in the darkness of Christmas Eve. Vindication is coming for those who hoped for a Messiah. When he comes, he shall be a glorious crown, a royal crown, in God’s hands. Again, the passage presumes that the Messiah has not yet come: it speaks of what he will be. Finally, the passage includes images of pregnancy — God has espoused a land that will become fruitful, as when a young man marries a virgin. Christians believe that God miraculously became flesh in the womb of a virgin, and the community has gathered this night to await news of a spectacular birth that will bear the fruit of redemption.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (62:1–5)
For Zion’s sake I will not be silent,
    for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet,
until her vindication shines forth like the dawn
    and her victory like a burning torch.
Nations shall behold your vindication,
    and all the kings your glory;
you shall be called by a new name
    pronounced by the mouth of the LORD.
You shall be a glorious crown in the hand of the LORD,
    a royal diadem held by your God.
No more shall people call you “Forsaken,”
    or your land “Desolate,”
but you shall be called “My Delight,”
    and your land “Espoused.”
For the LORD delights in you
and makes your land his spouse.
As a young man marries a virgin,
your Builder shall marry you;
and as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride
so shall your God rejoice in you.

* [62:1–12] As in chap. 60, the prophet addresses Zion, announcing the reversal of her fortune. Several motifs reappear: light and glory (60:1–3, 19–20), tribute of nations (60:11), and especially the marriage (61:10; cf. also 54:5–8).

These verses appear to capture the prophet's meditation on chapters that Second Isaiah, his master, had composed (Isaiah 40; 51; 54). In these verses Third Isaiah sings about Israel rising to new life from its destruction. The imagery that dominates these verses is drawn from espousals. Zion/Jerusalem's good fortune will break forth as suddenly and brightly as a desert dawn. In antiquity, deities often wore a crown that imitated the walls of their city on earth. Here God is holding such a crown; God is indeed in charge of this glorious restoration. One of the names by which the city once could be described ("forsaken") is the name of a queen-mother (Azuba; 1 Kgs 22:42). Cities were considered to be feminine. The new names carry similar symbolism. For example, "my delight" (Hephzibah) is another queen-mother (2 Kgs 21:1), but the names portray a reversal of destiny. The forsaken woman (city) is now God's delight. This is especially evident in the name "espoused" (be'ula), which forgets Israel's whoring ways as described by Hosea 2:18.

In this culture, an unfaithful wife would have to be set aside or killed (see Num 5:11-31; Deut 22:13-21). The ideal marriage partner is a patrilateral cousin. What if there is no other available female cousin to replace the unfaithful partner? The man would have to remain unmarried and alone. In the real world of this culture, it is preferable to swallow one's pride, bear the shame, and keep the faithless partner than to be absolutely correct but lose one's partner. So, too, with God. Since all God-talk is based upon and rooted in human experience culturally conditioned, God can be expected to swallow pride, put up with the disappointment, and, as the prophet says, "as a young man marries a virgin, / your Builder shall marry you;'

The link to the gospel (Matt 1:1-25) is rather clear. Joseph knew Mary was pregnant, and he knew that he was not the father. He would be a thief to claim the child, but Joseph was a holy man who strove to please God always. God's messenger assures Joseph that keeping Mary as spouse is God's plan for him. In Matthew's genealogy, the four women who appear are non-Israelites and some are of dubious character yet each won a place in God's plan. These women possess "acquired honor;" thus making Jesus completely honorable since his ancestors in his genealogy possess both ascribed and acquired honor.

**RESPONSORIAL PSALM**  *(Ps 89:4–5, 16–17, 27, 29.)*

In this evening's royal psalm, we hear that God remembers the covenant with David, with its promise that his posterity shall last for all generations. Jesus was born of the family of David, and his birth fulfills the prophecy of this psalm beyond what Israel's great king could ever have imagined: Jesus Christ, to be born this night, will reign as king forever.

**For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.**
I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
   I have sworn to David my servant:
forever will I confirm your posterity
and establish your throne for all generations.
Blessed the people who know the joyful shout;
in the light of your countenance, O LORD, they walk.
At your name they rejoice all the day,
and through your justice they are exalted.
He shall say of me, “You are my father,
my God, the rock, my savior.”
Forever I will maintain my kindness toward him,
and my covenant with him stands firm.

* [Psalm 89] The community laments the defeat of the Davidic king, to whom God promised kingship as enduring as the heavens (Ps 89:2–5). The Psalm narrates how God became king of the divine beings (Ps 89:6–9) and how the Davidic king became king of earthly kings (Ps 89:20–38). Since the defeat of the king calls into question God’s promise, the community ardently prays God to be faithful to the original promise to David (Ps 89:39–52).

* [89:3–5] David’s dynasty is to be as long-lasting as the heavens, a statement reinforced by using the same verbs (establish, stand) both of the divine love and loyalty and of the Davidic dynasty and throne, cf. Ps 89:29–30.

We return again to other verses from this lament. The re-frain in particular is a most appropriate response to Third Isaiah’s insight. Mention of God’s "countenance" brings to mind not only the Temple where Israel went "to see" God but also Moses’ experience at Mount Sinai, and other instances which made God’s presence very palpable in the mighty deeds God worked for the chosen people. The final verse re-peats a familiar adoption-formula often sung at the corona-tion of new kings (see Psalm 2). Indeed, God will remain loyal to this son-king forever; the covenant with him will re-main unshaken.

SECOND READING

This excerpt from Paul’s sermon to the Jews in Antioch shows how Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s covenant with David. Relying on his audience’s knowledge of their own history, Paul demonstrates that the God who brought Israel out of Egypt has also now given them a Savior. This excerpt concludes with a summary of the message delivered by John the Baptist. This entire passage from Acts serves as a summary of Advent and a bridge toward Christmas Day.

When Paul reached Antioch in Pisidia and entered the synagogue,
he stood up, motioned with his hand, and said,
“Fellow Israelites and you others who are God-fearing, listen.
The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors
and exalted the people during their sojourn in the
land of Egypt.
With uplifted arm he led them out of it.
Then he removed Saul and raised up David as king;
of him he testified,
‘I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart;
he will carry out my every wish.’
From this man’s descendants God, according to his promise,
has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus.
John heralded his coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel; and as John was completing his course, he would say, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.'

* [13:4–14:27] The key event in Luke’s account of the first missionary journey is the experience of Paul and Barnabas at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14–52). The Christian kerygma proclaimed by Paul in the synagogue was favorably received. Some Jews and “God-fearers” (see note on Acts 8:26–40) became interested and invited the missionaries to speak again on the following sabbath (Acts 13:42). By that time, however, the appearance of a large number of Gentiles from the city had so disconcerted the Jews that they became hostile toward the apostles (Acts 13:44–50). This hostility of theirs appears in all three accounts of Paul’s missionary journeys in Acts, the Jews of Iconium (Acts 14:1–2) and Beroea (Acts 17:11) being notable exceptions.

Scholars agree that this "sermon" preached by Paul is in reality a Lukan composition following the pattern of earlier sermons (Acts 2:38-40; 3:19-26). Typically there are three parts: God’s promise in history (vv. 16-25), the Jesus kerygma as fulfillment of the promise (vv. 26-37), and an exhortation to faith and forgiveness (vv. 38-41). Today’s verses present a selective summary of history. God chose our ancestors, among them David, "a man after my own [God’s] heart! Jesus, heralded by John, was David’s descendant and savior of Israel.

What does it mean to be a person "after God’s own heart"? Everything human beings know and say about God is based on human experience. In theological jargon, "All theology is analogy:" Further, human experience is culturally shaped. Our non-introspective (actually, anti-introspective!) Mediterranean ancestors in the faith viewed human beings externally as composed of three interacting zones of the body: heart-eyes, mouth-ears, and hands-feet. Heart-eyes symbolized emotion-fused thought, mouth-ears self-expressive speech, and hands-feet purposeful action.

In the New Testament, God too functions in terms of these three zones. Relative to Jesus as son, the Father functions in terms of the heart-eyes zone: God "sees in secret" (Matt 6:18), knows our hearts (Luke 16:15), loves the world John 3:16), judges each according to his deeds (1 Pet 1:17), and so on. Relative to God, Jesus as Word (mouth-ears zone) reveals the Father (John 1:1ff.). The Father has spoken to us by a Son (Heb 1:12). In relation to the Father, Jesus is the son who reveals the Father. In other words, Jesus is the mouth-ears of God. The hands-feet zone applied to the Father in-variably refers to the Spirit who exhibits power, activity, doing, and effectiveness. The "hand of the Lord was upon" many of the prophets (1 Kgs 18:46; 2 Kgs 3:15; etc.). This typical Mediterranean way of viewing the human person may well be the source of the later Christian development of the notion of the Trinity.

Thus, a person "after God’s own heart" is one who relates harmoniously with the divine intellect, will, judgment, con-science, personality thrust, core personality—to borrow words from Western cultural perspectives. Such a person is totally pleasing to God. The speech that Luke crafts for Paul draws this phrase from 1 Sam 13:14 where Samuel tells Saul that God has rejected him as king in favor of David. Saul tended to overstep his authority. Too often he took matters into his own hands rather than obey God’s law strictly (1 Sam 13:1-5, esp. v. 14; 15:10-33). David was one who would "carry out my [God’s] every wish." The gospel for this vigil (Matt 1:18-25) describes the circumstances of the birth of Jesus, one who carried out "God's every wish" even more faithfully than David. In David and Jesus modern believers face a powerful challenge to become people after God’s own heart. How does that occur?

ALLELUIA
Tomorrow the wickedness of the earth will be destroyed: the Savior of the world will reign over us.

GOSPEL

Matthew’s account of the genealogy of Jesus shows how God brought about this birth as the fulfillment of the covenants established with Abraham and David. The genealogy breaks into three large groupings headed by Abraham, David, and the Babylonian exile. The long list of names in this genealogy sounds boring at first, but it is populated with spicy stories. The nontraditional inclusion of women throughout the list demonstrates unabashed honesty. Tamar conceived her two children by her father-in-law; Rahab was a harlot; Ruth was a Moabite, not an Israelite; and David married Bathsheba after lying with her and having her husband killed in battle. It is one thing to include women in a genealogy, but it is another thing to include these particular women, whose stories another family might prefer to cover up. Mary, the last in the list of women, experienced an unexpected conception of a singular nature. The power of the Holy Spirit came upon her. The genealogy concludes with Matthew’s brief description of the birth of Jesus, slight in comparison to Luke’s account, but it brings this Christmas Vigil Mass to its desired destination.

+ A reading from the beginning of the holy GOSPEL according to Matthew (1:1–25)

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ,

the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham became the father of Isaac,

Isaac the father of Jacob,

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah,

whose mother was Tamar.

Perez became the father of Hezron,

Hezron the father of Ram,

Ram the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab became the father of Nahshon,

Nahshon the father of Salmon,

Salmon the father of Boaz,

whose mother was Rahab.

Boaz became the father of Obed,

whose mother was Ruth.

Obed became the father of Jesse,

Jesse the father of David the king.

David became the father of Solomon,

whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.

Solomon became the father of Rehoboam,

Rehoboam the father of Abijah,

Abijah the father of Asaph.

Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat,

Jehoshaphat the father of Joram,

Joram the father of Uzziah.

Uzziah became the father of Jotham,

Jotham the father of Ahaz,

Ahaz the father of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh,
Manasseh the father of Amos,
Amos the father of Josiah.
Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers
at the time of the Babylonian exile.

After the Babylonian exile,
  Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel,
  Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,
  Zerubbabel the father of Abiud.
Abiud became the father of Eliakim,
  Eliakim the father of Azor,
  Azor the father of Zadok.
Zadok became the father of Achim,
  Achim the father of Eliud,
  Eliud the father of Eleazar.
Eleazar became the father of Matthan,
  Matthan the father of Jacob,
  Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary.
Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ.
Thus the total number of generations
  from Abraham to David
is fourteen generations;
  from David to the Babylonian exile,
  fourteen generations;
  from the Babylonian exile to the Christ,
  fourteen generations.
Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.
When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph,
  but before they lived together,
she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.
Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man,
  yet unwilling to expose her to shame,
decided to divorce her quietly.
Such was his intention when, behold,
  the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,
  "Joseph, son of David,
do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.
For it is through the Holy Spirit
  that this child has been conceived in her.
She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus,
  because he will save his people from their sins."
All this took place to fulfill
  what the Lord had said through the prophet:
  *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,*
  and they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means “God is with us.”
When Joseph awoke,
  he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him
and took his wife into his home.
He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

* [1:1–2:23] The infancy narrative forms the prologue of the gospel. Consisting of a genealogy and five stories, it presents the coming of Jesus as the climax of Israel’s history, and the events of his conception, birth, and early childhood as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The genealogy is probably traditional material that Matthew edited. In its first two sections (Mt 1:2–11) it was drawn from Ru 4:18–22; 1 Chr 1–3. Except for Jechoniah, Shealtiel, and Zerubbabel, none of the names in the third section (Mt 1:12–16) is found in any Old Testament genealogy. While the genealogy shows the continuity of God’s providential plan from Abraham on, discontinuity is also present. The women Tamar (Mt 1:3), Rahab and Ruth (Mt 1:5), and the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba (Mt 1:6), bore their sons through unions that were in varying degrees strange and unexpected. These “irregularities” culminate in the supreme “irregularity” of the Messiah’s birth of a virgin mother; the age of fulfillment is inaugurated by a creative act of God.

Drawing upon both biblical tradition and Jewish stories, Matthew portrays Jesus as reliving the Exodus experience of Israel and the persecutions of Moses. His rejection by his own people and his passion are foreshadowed by the troubled reaction of “all Jerusalem” to the question of the magi who are seeking the “newborn king of the Jews” (Mt 2:2–3), and by Herod’s attempt to have him killed. The magi who do him homage prefigure the Gentiles who will accept the preaching of the gospel. The infancy narrative proclaims who Jesus is, the savior of his people from their sins (Mt 1:21), Emmanuel in whom “God is with us” (Mt 1:23), and the Son of God (Mt 2:15).

* [1:1] The Son of David, the son of Abraham: two links of the genealogical chain are singled out. Although the later, David is placed first in order to emphasize that Jesus is the royal Messiah. The mention of Abraham may be due not only to his being the father of the nation Israel but to Matthew’s interest in the universal scope of Jesus’ mission; cf. Gn 22:18 “.... in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing.”

* [1:7] The successor of Abijah was not Asaph but Asa (see 1 Chr 3:10). Some textual witnesses read the latter name; however, Asaph is better attested. Matthew may have deliberately introduced the psalmist Asaph into the genealogy (and in Mt 1:10 the prophet Amos) in order to show that Jesus is the fulfillment not only of the promises made to David (see 2 Sm 7) but of all the Old Testament.

* [1:10] Amos: some textual witnesses read Amon, who was the actual successor of Manasseh (see 1 Chr 3:14).

* [1:17] Matthew is concerned with fourteen generations, probably because fourteen is the numerical value of the Hebrew letters forming the name of David. In the second section of the genealogy (Mt 1:6b–11), three kings of Judah, Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah, have been omitted (see 1 Chr 3:11–12), so that there are fourteen generations in that section. Yet the third (Mt 1:12–16) apparently has only thirteen. Since Matthew here emphasizes that each section has fourteen, it is unlikely that the thirteen of the last was due to his oversight. Some scholars suggest that Jesus who is called the Messiah (Mt 1:16b) doubles the final member of the chain: Jesus, born within the family of David, opens up the new age as Messiah, so that in fact there are fourteen generations in the third section. This is perhaps too subtle, and the hypothesis of a slip not on the part of Matthew but of a later scribe seems likely. On Messiah, see note on Lk 2:11.

* [1:18–25] This first story of the infancy narrative spells out what is summarily indicated in Mt 1:16. The virginal conception of Jesus is the work of the Spirit of God. Joseph’s decision to divorce Mary is overcome by the heavenly command that he take her into his home and accept the child as his own. The natural genealogical line is broken but the promises to David are fulfilled; through Joseph’s adoption the child belongs to the family of David. Matthew sees the virginal conception as the fulfillment of Is 7:14.
[1:18] Betrothed to Joseph: betrothal was the first part of the marriage, constituting a man and woman as husband and wife. Subsequent infidelity was considered adultery. The betrothal was followed some months later by the husband’s taking his wife into his home, at which time normal married life began.

[1:19] A righteous man: as a devout observer of the Mosaic law, Joseph wished to break his union with someone whom he suspected of gross violation of the law. It is commonly said that the law required him to do so, but the texts usually given in support of that view, e.g., Dt 22:20–21 do not clearly pertain to Joseph’s situation. Unwilling to expose her to shame: the penalty for proved adultery was death by stoning; cf. Dt 22:21–23.

[1:20] The angel of the Lord: in the Old Testament a common designation of God in communication with a human being. In a dream: see Mt 2:13, 19, 22. These dreams may be meant to recall the dreams of Joseph, son of Jacob the patriarch (Gn 37:5–11, 19). A closer parallel is the dream of Amram, father of Moses, related by Josephus (Antiquities 2, 9, 3; (par.) 212, 215–16).

[1:21] Jesus: in first-century Judaism the Hebrew name Joshua (Greek Iēsous) meaning “Yahweh helps” was interpreted as “Yahweh saves.”

[1:23] God is with us: God’s promise of deliverance to Judah in Isaiah’s time is seen by Matthew as fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, in whom God is with his people. The name Emmanuel is alluded to at the end of the gospel where the risen Jesus assures his disciples of his continued presence, “…I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

[1:25] Until she bore a son: the evangelist is concerned to emphasize that Joseph was not responsible for the conception of Jesus. The Greek word translated “until” does not imply normal marital conduct after Jesus’ birth, nor does it exclude it.

**Connections to Church Teaching and Tradition**

- “After the annual celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the Church has no more ancient custom than celebrating the memorial of the Nativity of the Lord and of [Christ’s] first manifestations, and this takes place in Christmas Time” (UNLY, 32).
- At Christmas Time, “Christians ponder the mystery of the incarnation and contemplate the Word of God who deigns to assume our humanity in order to give us a share in his divinity” (DD, 77).
- “God’s word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us: ‘As you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:40)” (EG, 179).
Mass at Midnight A B C
FIRST READING

The Roman Missal does not call this “Midnight Mass” but more literally the “Mass during the Night.” The Lectionary passages for this Mass are rich, and they may be used earlier in the evening if the people coming to the service are making this their primary celebration of the Eucharist for the family Christmas. Most people’s images of Christmas probably do not include a boot that tramped in battle or a cloak rolled in blood, but here they are in the First Reading for the principal Mass of Christmas. The passage from Isaiah comes shortly after his famous prophecy of Emmanuel, and further explains the benefits that will come with a great ruler to a people who have endured much suffering. A great light has dawned, we proclaim during the darkness of this night. The birth of Jesus radiates a brightness that overpowers everything that has shadowed humankind. The punishments the people have experienced have all been taken away; false rulers who persecuted them are being replaced. Those muddy boots and blood-stained cloaks? They will be burned because they are no longer useful. A child has been born. He will be the new ruler: Wonder-Counselor, God Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. This is the child they have been awaiting. For us Christians, he is the child we have been awaiting, the one whose justice will bring peace to our war-torn lives.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (9:1–6)
The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom
a light has shone.
You have brought them abundant joy
and great rejoicing,
as they rejoice before you as at the harvest,
as people make merry when dividing spoils.
For the yoke that burdened them,
the pole on their shoulder,
and the rod of their taskmaster
you have smashed, as on the day of Midian.
For every boot that tramped in battle,
every cloak rolled in blood,
will be burned as fuel for flames.
For a child is born to us, a son is given us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
His dominion is vast
and forever peaceful,
from David’s throne, and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains
by judgment and justice,
both now and forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!
* [9:3] Day of Midian: when God used the judge Gideon to deliver these northern territories from Midianite oppression (Jgs 6–7).
* [9:5] A child: perhaps to be identified with the Emmanuel of 7:14 and 8:8; cf. 11:1–2, 9. This verse may reflect a coronation rather than a birth. Upon his shoulder: the reference may be to a particular act in the ritual in which a symbol of the king’s authority was placed on his shoulder (cf. 2 Kgs 11:12; Is 22:22).

Earlier in the book of Isaiah, the prophet's oracle was looking for a successor to Ahaz in whom God's promise of a last-ing destiny would be realized (Isa 7:14-15). In this chapter, Isaiah describes that successor (possibly Hezekiah, ca. 716 B.C.E.) who ascended to the throne upon his father's death. The first four verses today express hope for deliverance of the northern kingdom. The words "yoke;' "pole;' and "rod" refer to Assyrian domination even before 721 B.C.E. and hopes that YHWH would deliver Israel from them. It is difficult for someone who has never lived under an occupying military power to appreciate how conquered people yearn for independence. Anyone who could deliver a nation from such a condition would be a welcome leader.

Verses 5-6 are a triumphant coronation hymn composed by Isaiah for Hezekiah, the son of God's promise in Isaiah 7:14. Wonder-counselor means this king will not need advisers such as those who led his father astray. God-Hero is a mighty warrior designation. Father-Forever describes the quality of his rule, and peace results because of the king's abilities, because God promised it, and because judgment and justice now sustain the dynasty. When Hezekiah did not meet the expectations expressed in these verses and in the previous oracle (7:10-17), Isaiah projected his hopes to a later time (11:1-9). This evening's gospel (Luke 2:1-14) identifies Jesus as the one who fulfills these hopes magnificently: he is Messiah and Lord.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 96:1–2, 2–3, 11–12, 13.)

This joyful psalm rings with outbursts of joy: God’s salvation is at hand. Even the nonbelieving nations should hear of God’s glory. Even nature should exult at the coming of the Lord. The final verses of this psalm are the ones that make it so special for Christmas. All these people and all nature rejoice because the Lord comes to rule the earth with justice. He comes. Yes, Christ comes. He fulfills the prophecy of this psalm. For that reason, our refrain comes from Luke’s account of the Gospel and quotes the Good News delivered by the angel. Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord!

Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.
Sing to the LORD a new song;
    sing to the LORD, all you lands.
Sing to the LORD; bless his name.
Announce his salvation, day after day.
    Tell his glory among the nations;
    among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.
Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice;
    let the sea and what fills it resound;
    let the plains be joyful and all that is in them!
Then shall all the trees of the forest exult.
They shall exult before the LORD, for he comes;
    for he comes to rule the earth.
He shall rule the world with justice
    and the peoples with his constancy.
This is an enthronement psalm that honors God as Israel's king. Today's verses are selected from the first call to praise (vv. 1-3) and the second set of reasons given for this praise (vv. 10-13). The author of this psalm has borrowed heavily from other composers (Psalms 33; 91; 98; and Isa 42:10). The word "announce" (his salvation) is a Hebrew word from which the English word "gospel" derives. This psalmist's inspiration prompts him to broaden the vision of Second Isaiah to a more universal sweep than Isaiah imagined: The Lord shall rule not just Israel, but all the earth.

SECOND READING

Paul's brief letter to Titus is the last of the three "pastoral epistles"—the other two having been addressed to Timothy. In general, these letters give practical advice for the church that is beginning to take on an organizational structure: how to live, who should lead, and what to expect. In this brief passage, Paul opens with the message that makes this passage the appropriate one for this Mass: “The grace of God has appeared” (v. 11). All the faithful have believed in God's good grace, and now that grace has taken flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. He comes “saving all” (v. 11). After all, the name Jesus means “Savior.” This appearance teaches us how we should live in this age as we await the blessed hope, the glorious appearance of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to Titus (2:11–14)

Beloved:
The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good.

This letter (along with 1 and 2 Timothy) has been dubbed by tradition as one of the Pastoral epistles. They have been called Pastoral epistles since the eighteenth century because they are addressed to "pastors" of early communities. For this reason, the anonymous person who wrote this letter under the name of Paul, who was already dead, is usually called "the Pastor." The architects of the lectionary have omitted the first and very important word in today's reading: "for." In Greek this particle always points backwards. The verses that follow this word provide the motive for what preceded (vv. 1-10 are guidelines for behavior based on age and gender: older men/older women; younger men/younger women). Thus have the architects made these verses somewhat "free floating" in the liturgy.
The key word now is "appeared" (v. 11), and its tense in Greek signals a once-and-for-always perspective. How has the grace of God appeared once-and-for-always? The noun "appearance" occurs just six times in the New Testament and always in reference to Jesus. So the process by which God relates to humans (= "grace") has been revealed once and forever in Jesus, in what he said and did and means for us (= salvation).

What is God doing for us? "Training us"; that is, forming us as authentic human beings in all respects: emotionally, intellectually, socially, religiously, politically, and any other way we might imagine. In modern terms, God is relating to us now holistically.

How does God train us? We must (a) reject godless ways and (b) worldly desires. Instead, on the positive side we must live (b') temperately, justly, and (a') devoutly. Notice the arrangement of ideas, so common in the Bible (a, b, b', a'). Godless ways would be equivalent to religious indifferentism or atheistic secularism. If science or some other idol usurps God's role to be in charge of life, the result is a godless way of life.

Worldly desires might be interpreted as accepting the dictates of one's culture without critical evaluation. Many people in Western culture derive a sense of self-worth from having a job or the right kind of job. Does human worth and identity depend on a job, or on something other than one's job? Instead, believers are called to lead sensible, self-controlled lives and to live justly or uprightly. This means one must live in good interpersonal relationships with other human beings. Finally, to live devoutly is to acknowledge God's reign in our personal lives. While this may sound like excessive reliance upon personal efforts, the Pastor says exactly the opposite: it is God's grace that makes good living possible.

This reflection on the consequences of Jesus' life and death for us is a fitting transition to the gospel (Luke 2: 1-14), which announces the birth of Jesus. Clearly the feast is about much more than the joy, lights, and gifts so characteristic of the season.

**ALLELUIA (Lk 2:10–11)**

I proclaim to you good news of great joy: Today a Savior is born for us, Christ the Lord.

**GOSPEL**

LUKE 2:1–14 This is the greatest account of the birth of Jesus, and arguably the greatest account of anyone's birth in all of history. The story is well known, and its slim details are alive with meaning and memory. Luke is highly regarded for his abilities as a writer. His gift at storytelling is evident in his accounts of the Annunciation, the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, and this indelible record of the birth of Jesus. Luke situates this account within time. He mentions specific leaders and places, painting a royal background for the humblest of births, as if to foreshadow how this birth will affect global events. The Good News is given to angels to announce. These messengers who behold the face of God appear on the scene. One of them, in shining splendor, makes the announcement to the lowliest shepherd, and the multitude announce the glory of God and the gift of peace. This record of this birth still fills the earth with comfort, even as it inspires people and nations to seek the peace that comes from God's favor.

+ **A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Luke (2:1–14)**

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.
So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town.

And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

While they were there,

the time came for her to have her child,

and she gave birth to her firstborn son.

She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock.

The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear.

The angel said to them,

“Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.

And this will be a sign for you:
you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

* [2:1] Caesar Augustus: the reign of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus is usually dated from 27 B.C. to his death in A.D. 14. According to Greek inscriptions, Augustus was regarded in the Roman Empire as “savior” and “god,” and he was credited with establishing a time of peace, the pax Augusta, throughout the Roman world during his long reign. It is not by chance that Luke relates the birth of Jesus to the time of Caesar Augustus: the real savior (Lk 2:11) and peace-bearer (Lk 2:14; see also Lk 19:38) is the child born in Bethlehem. The great emperor is simply God’s agent (like the Persian king Cyrus in Is 44:28–45:1) who provides the occasion for God’s purposes to be accomplished. The whole world: that is, the whole Roman world: Rome, Italy, and the Roman provinces.

* [2:7] Firstborn son: the description of Jesus as firstborn son does not necessarily mean that Mary had other sons. It is a legal description indicating that Jesus possessed the rights and privileges of the firstborn son (Gn 27; Ex 13:2; Nm 3:12–13; 18:15–16; Dt 21:15–17). See notes on Mt 1:25; Mk 6:3. Wrapped him in swaddling clothes: there may be an allusion here to the birth of another descendant of David, his son Solomon, who though a great king was wrapped in swaddling clothes like any other infant (Wis 7:4–6). Laid him in a manger: a feeding trough for animals. A possible allusion to Is 1:3 LXX.

* [2:8–20] The announcement of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds is in keeping with Luke’s theme that the lowly are singled out as the recipients of God’s favors and blessings (see also Lk 1:48, 52).

* [2:11] The basic message of the infancy narrative is contained in the angel’s announcement: this child is savior, Messiah, and Lord. Luke is the only synoptic gospel writer to use the title savior for Jesus (Lk
2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23; see also Lk 1:69; 19:9; Acts 4:12). As savior, Jesus is looked upon by Luke as the one who rescues humanity from sin and delivers humanity from the condition of alienation from God. The title christos, “Christ,” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew māšīaḥ, “Messiah,” “anointed one.” Among certain groups in first-century Palestinian Judaism, the title was applied to an expected royal leader from the line of David who would restore the kingdom to Israel (see Acts 1:6). The political overtones of the title are played down in Luke and instead the Messiah of the Lord (Lk 2:26) or the Lord’s anointed is the one who now brings salvation to all humanity, Jew and Gentile (Lk 2:29–32). Lord is the most frequently used title for Jesus in Luke and Acts. In the New Testament it is also applied to Yahweh, as it is in the Old Testament. When used of Jesus it points to his transcendence and dominion over humanity.

* [2:14] On earth peace to those on whom his favor rests: the peace that results from the Christ event is for those whom God has favored with his grace. This reading is found in the oldest representatives of the Western and Alexandrian text traditions and is the preferred one; the Byzantine text tradition, on the other hand, reads: “on earth peace, good will toward men.” The peace of which Luke’s gospel speaks (Lk 2:14; 7:50; 8:48; 10:5–6; 19:38, 42; 24:36) is more than the absence of war of the pax Augusta; it also includes the security and well-being characteristic of peace in the Old Testament.

**Connections to Church Teaching and Tradition**

- “The Word became flesh for us in order to save us by reconciling us with God” (CCC, 457).
- “The Word became flesh so that thus we might know God’s love” (CCC, 458).
- “The Word became flesh to be our model of holiness” (CCC, 459).
- “The Word became flesh to make us ‘partakers of the divine nature’” (CCC, 460).
Mass at Dawn A B C

FIRST READING

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (62:11–12)

See, the LORD proclaims

to the ends of the earth:
say to daughter Zion,
your savior comes!
Here is his reward with him,
his recompense before him.
They shall be called the holy people,
the redeemed of the LORD,
and you shall be called “Frequented,”
a city that is not forsaken.

* [62:1–12] As in chap. 60, the prophet addresses Zion, announcing the reversal of her fortune. Several motifs reappear: light and glory (60:1–3, 19–20), tribute of nations (60:11), and especially the marriage (61:10; cf. also 54:5–8).
* [62:8–9] Peace and prosperity are indicated by the absence of invaders who would live off the land.
* [62:10–11] The gates of Babylon are to be opened for the exiles to return, led by the Lord, as in 40:3–5, 10.

Third Isaiah seeks to prevent two unfortunate choices in post-exilic Jerusalem: that the people will lose hope and settle for less than God has promised, or that they will keep high hopes and become frustrated. These concluding verses of a section proclaiming salvation for a glorious new daughter Zion (Isa 60:1-62:12) string together three uplifting titles: holy people, redeemed of the LORD, and "frequented;” that is, a city that is not forgotten but rather visited by its Savior and recognized by all nations. In the accompanying gospel (Luke 2:15-20), after visiting Joseph, Mary, and the infant, the shep-herds announce all that had been told to them about Jesus. Third Isaiah’s vision for Zion is realized in the birth of Jesus.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 97:1, 6, 11–12.)

A light will shine on us this day: the Lord is born for us.
The LORD is king; let the earth rejoice; let the many isles be glad.
The heavens proclaim his justice, and all peoples see his glory.
Light dawns for the just; and gladness, for the upright of heart.
Be glad in the LORD, you just, and give thanks to his holy name.

* [Psalm 97] The hymn begins with God appearing in a storm, a traditional picture of some ancient Near Eastern gods (Ps 97:1–6); cf. Ps 18:8–16; Mi 1:3–4; Heb 3:3–15. Israel rejoices in the overthrowing of idol worshipers and their gods (Ps 97:7–9) and the rewarding of the faithful righteous (Ps 97:10–12).

Another post-exilic psalm which honors God as king draws also on other psalms (18; 50; 77) and Second Isaiah. The focus of this psalm and the verses selected for today is justice, which in the world of our ancestors in the faith was operative in the realm of patronage, a feature of fictive kinship. A pa-tron is
one with surplus who treats clients (needy people) as if they were family, hence, with favoritism. This is how the Lord treats his people (the just, the upright of heart), and all the people will witness this honorable behavior (his glory). The birth of a savior is a gift beyond expectation. Truly such a patron outshines all others, as the refrain reminds us.

SECOND READING:

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to Titus (3:4–7)

Beloved:

When the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of his mercy, he saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

* [3:1–8] The list of Christian duties continues from Ti 2:9–10, undergirded again as in Ti 2:11–13 by appeal to what God in Christ has done (Ti 2:4–7; cf. Ti 2:11–14). The spiritual renewal of the Cretans, signified in God’s merciful gift of baptism (Ti 3:4–7), should be reflected in their improved attitude toward civil authority and in their Christian relationship with all (Ti 3:1–3).

Scholars recognize these verses as a popular "creed" which the Pastor inserted at this point in his letter as a comment on good deeds (3:1, 5, 8) and bad deeds (3:9). (Examples of other such credal statements in the Pastorals would be 1 Tim 1:15; 2:4-6; 3:16; 6:12-16; 2 Tim 1:8-10; Titus 2:11-14.) Such credal statements may have originated in the context of liturgies. If so, the Pastor's ready reliance on creeds in his instructions about proper behavior (good and bad deeds) is an excellent example of moving from liturgy to life among our ancestors in the faith. The Pastor's creed-based observation is that good deeds by themselves don't merit anything from God (v. 5). Rather, everything is a free gift coming to us through baptism. But remember that in Mediterranean culture, there really are no free gifts. Every gift expects one in return, or at least some response. This response is "good deeds."

Once again, these verses seem well suited to the gospel (Luke 2:15-20) in which the shepherds who received word of the birth of Jesus don't just put it on their calendars or their lists of things "to do;" but rather immediately (so typical of the Mediterranean culture's intense focus on the present) go to Bethlehem, see for themselves, and return glorifying and praising God. Would you consider yourself a person who acts promptly on a resolution or one who procrastinates? Would it make a difference?

ALLELUIA (Lk 2:14)

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

GOSPEL

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Luke (2:15–20)

When the angels went away from them to heaven,

the shepherds said to one another,

“Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place,

which the Lord has made known to us.”
So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

Mass During the Day A B C

FIRST READING

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (52:7–10)

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, “Your God is King!”

Hark! Your sentinels raise a cry, together they shout for joy, for they see directly, before their eyes, the LORD restoring Zion.

Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the LORD comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God.

* [52:7–10] God leads the people back from Babylon to Zion, from whose ruined walls sentinels greet the returning exiles.

Exile is a painful experience. The Polish experience is expressed in the poignant phrase zyc na wygnaniu, "to live somewhere after one was chased out, driven out, banished, expatriated, without rights!" The notion involves a sense of belonging and security which is shattered by forced ejection from a sacred place. Without diminishing the historical and cultural uniqueness of each case, perhaps only a person who has experienced an exile can appreciate its reversal. Today Second Isaiah reports the joy of reversal of the Babylonian exile, but from a strange perspective. It is the watchmen, the ones who did not go into exile, who shout for joy. Scholars note that it was only the elite, the intelligentsia as it were, who were taken away. Ordinary folk remained. Yet both suffered. "How can we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land?" asked the deportees (Ps 137:4). Those who did...
not go into exile had no visionary leaders to lift their spirits or stir their hopes. The best news of all in the prophet's statement is that at last "all the ends of the earth" will see that God is worth believing in. God does care for and re-member the people of divine concern. As this reading tells that the people saw God's redemption in progress, the gospel reading for today (John 1:1-18) speaks of Jesus as Word and light giving people the ability to see a new moment in God's redemptive will.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 98:1, 2–3, 3–4, 5–6.)

All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done wondrous deeds; his right hand has won victory for him, his holy arm.
The LORD has made his salvation known: in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice.
He has remembered his kindness and his faithfulness toward the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God.
Sing joyfully to the LORD, all you lands; break into song; sing praise.
Sing praise to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and melodious song.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn sing joyfully before the King, the LORD.

* [Psalm 58] A lament expressing trust in God's power to dethrone all powers obstructing divine rule of the world. First condemned are "the gods," the powers that were popularly imagined to control human destinies (Ps 58:2–3), then "the wicked," the human instruments of these forces (Ps 58:4–6). The psalmist prays God to prevent them from harming the just (Ps 58:7–10). The manifestation of justice will gladden the just; they will see that their God is with them (Ps 58:11). The Psalm is less concerned with personal vengeance than with public vindication of God's justice now.
* [58:1] Do not destroy: probably the title of the melody to which the Psalm was to be sung.
* [58:2] Gods: the Bible sometimes understands pagan gods to be lesser divine beings who are assigned by Israel's God to rule the foreign nations. Here they are accused of injustice, permitting the human judges under their patronage to abuse the righteous, cf. Ps 82.
* [58:5–6] The image is that of a poisonous snake that is controlled by the voice or piping of its trainer.

Today's verses drawn from yet another psalm acclaiming God as king of the universe highlight a worldwide participation in the reign of God. Israel is saved, all the nations are witnesses, and the entire physical universe is transformed. Because the psalm borrows from the first reading ("all the ends of the earth:" Ps 98:3; Isa 52:10), it is perfectly suited as a bridge to the gospel and as a link between all the cosmic references in the readings.

SECOND READING

A reading from the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews (1:1–6)

Brothers and sisters:
In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways
to our ancestors through the prophets;
in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son, whom he made heir of all things
and through whom he created the universe,
who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being,
and who sustains all things by his mighty word.
When he had accomplished purification from sins,
he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high, as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say:  
You are my son; this day I have begotten you?

Or again:
I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me?

And again, when he leads the firstborn into the world, he says:
Let all the angels of God worship him.

* [1:1–4] The letter opens with an introduction consisting of a reflection on the climax of God’s revelation to the human race in his Son. The divine communication was initiated and maintained during Old Testament times in fragmentary and varied ways through the prophets (Heb 1:1), including Abraham, Moses, and all through whom God spoke. But now in these last days (Heb 1:2) the final age, God’s revelation of his saving purpose is achieved through a son, i.e., one who is Son, whose role is redeemer and mediator of creation. He was made heir of all things through his death and exaltation to glory, yet he existed before he appeared as man; through him God created the universe. Heb 1:3–4, which may be based upon a liturgical hymn, assimilate the Son to the personified Wisdom of the Old Testament as refulgence of God’s glory and imprint of his being (Heb 1:3; cf. Wis 7:26). These same terms are used of the Logos in Philo. The author now turns from the cosmological role of the preexistent Son to the redemptive work of Jesus: he brought about purification from sins and has been exalted to the right hand of God (see Ps 110:1). The once-humiliated and crucified Jesus has been declared God’s Son, and this name shows his superiority to the angels. The reason for the author’s insistence on that superiority is, among other things, that in some Jewish traditions angels were mediators of the old covenant (see Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19). Finally, Jesus’ superiority to the angels emphasizes the superiority of the new covenant to the old because of the heavenly priesthood of Jesus.

* [1:5–14] Jesus’ superiority to the angels is now demonstrated by a series of seven Old Testament texts. Some scholars see in the stages of Jesus’ exaltation an order corresponding to that of enthronement ceremonies in the ancient Near East, especially in Egypt, namely, elevation to divine status (Heb 1:5–6); presentation to the angels and proclamation of everlasting lordship (Heb 1:7–12); enthronement and conferral of royal power (Heb 1:13). The citations from the Psalms in Heb 1:5, 13 were traditionally used of Jesus’ messianic sonship (cf. Acts 13:33) through his resurrection and exaltation (cf. Acts 2:33–35); those in Heb 1:8, 10–12 are concerned with his divine kingship and his creative function. The central quotation in Heb 1:7 serves to contrast the angels with the Son. The author quotes it according to the Septuagint translation, which is quite different in meaning from that of the Hebrew (“You make the winds your messengers, and flaming fire your ministers”). The angels are only sent to serve...those who are to inherit salvation (Heb 1:14).

* [1:6] And again, when he leads: the Greek could also be translated “And when he again leads” in reference to the parousia.
provides no evidence for this hypothesis. What is more likely is that the community may have thought they were worshiping with angels (e.g., Isa 6:3). This is a familiar idea in first-century Judaism which later became an element of Christian liturgical practice. Variations on the phrase "And so, with all the choirs of angels in heaven we proclaim your glory" appear in prefaces throughout the Liturgical Year. If the author thought that associating Jesus with the angels in some way minimized Jesus’ role as mediator, it is surprising that he does not dwell upon it more explicitly.

The author’s purpose is clear. He seeks to reinforce the sublime dimension of Jesus' exalted status which guarantees salvation to believers. This strong statement prepares the way for his subsequent presentation of Jesus' humiliation which gained that salvation for his followers. This reading links well with the gospel John 1:1-18, which is the classic statement of Jesus' exalted status in the New Testament. It also looks back to the gospel for the Mass at Dawn, which highlighted a special function for angels at the birth of Jesus. Given the popularity of angels in the contemporary world, Hebrews invites modern believers to examine their faith and make certain that Jesus remains central and unsurpassed as our mediator with the Father.

ALLELUIA
A holy day has dawned upon us. Come, you nations, and adore the Lord.
   For today a great light has come upon the earth.

GOSPEL

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (1:1–18)

In the beginning was the Word,
   and the Word was with God,
   and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.
All things came to be through him,
   and without him nothing came to be.

What came to be through him was life,
   and this life was the light of the human race;
   the light shines in the darkness,
   and the darkness has not overcome it.

A man named John was sent from God.
He came for testimony, to testify to the light,
   so that all might believe through him.
He was not the light,
   but came to testify to the light.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
   He was in the world,
   and the world came to be through him,
   but the world did not know him.
He came to what was his own,
   but his own people did not accept him.

But to those who did accept him
   he gave power to become children of God,
   to those who believe in his name,
   who were born not by natural generation
   nor by human choice nor by a man’s decision
but of God.

And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father’s only Son,
full of grace and truth.

John testified to him and cried out, saying,
“This was he of whom I said,
‘The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me
because he existed before me.’”

From his fullness we have all received,
grace in place of grace,
because while the law was given through Moses,
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God.
The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side,
has revealed him.

* [1:1–18] The prologue states the main themes of the gospel: life, light, truth, the world, testimony, and the preexistence of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Logos, who reveals God the Father. In origin, it was probably an early Christian hymn. Its closest parallel is in other christological hymns, Col 1:15–20 and Phil 2:6–11. Its core (Jn 1:1–5, 10–11, 14) is poetic in structure, with short phrases linked by “staircase parallelism,” in which the last word of one phrase becomes the first word of the next. Prose inserts (at least Jn 1:6–8, 15) deal with John the Baptist.

* [1:1] In the beginning: also the first words of the Old Testament (Gn 1:1). Was: this verb is used three times with different meanings in this verse: existence, relationship, and predication. The Word (Greek logos): this term combines God’s dynamic, creative word (Genesis), personified preexistent Wisdom as the instrument of God’s creative activity (Proverbs), and the ultimate intelligibility of reality (Hellenistic philosophy). With God: the Greek preposition here connotes communication with another. Was God: lack of a definite article with “God” in Greek signifies predication rather than identification.

* [1:3] What came to be: while the oldest manuscripts have no punctuation here, the corrector of Bodmer Papyrus P75, some manuscripts, and the Ante-Nicene Fathers take this phrase with what follows, as staircase parallelism. Connection with Jn 1:3 reflects fourth-century anti-Arianism.


* [1:6] John was sent just as Jesus was “sent” (Jn 4:34) in divine mission. Other references to John the Baptist in this gospel emphasize the differences between them and John’s subordinate role.

* [1:7] Testimony: the testimony theme of John is introduced, which portrays Jesus as if on trial throughout his ministry. All testify to Jesus: John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, scripture, his works, the crowds, the Spirit, and his disciples.

* [1:11] What was his own...his own people: first a neuter, literally, “his own property/possession” (probably = Israel), then a masculine, “his own people” (the Israelites).

* [1:13] Believers in Jesus become children of God not through any of the three natural causes mentioned but through God who is the immediate cause of the new spiritual life. Were born: the Greek verb can mean “begotten” (by a male) or “born” (from a female or of parents). The variant “he who was begotten,” asserting Jesus’ virginal conception, is weakly attested in Old Latin and Syriac versions.
* [1:14] Flesh: the whole person, used probably against docetic tendencies (cf. 1 Jn 4:2; 2 Jn 7). Made his dwelling: literally, “pitched his tent/tabernacle.” Cf. the tabernacle or tent of meeting that was the place of God’s presence among his people (Ex 25:8–9). The incarnate Word is the new mode of God’s presence among his people. The Greek verb has the same consonants as the Aramaic word for God’s presence (Shekinah). Glory: God’s visible manifestation of majesty in power, which once filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:34) and the temple (1 Kgs 8:10–11, 27), is now centered in Jesus. Only Son: Greek, monogenēs, but see note on Jn 1:18. Grace and truth: these words may represent two Old Testament terms describing Yahweh in covenant relationship with Israel (cf. Ex 34:6), thus God’s “love” and “fidelity.” The Word shares Yahweh’s covenant qualities.

* [1:15] This verse, interrupting Jn 1:14, 16 seems drawn from Jn 1:30.

* [1:16] Grace in place of grace: replacement of the Old Covenant with the New (cf. Jn 1:17). Other possible translations are “grace upon grace” (accumulation) and “grace for grace” (correspondence).

* [1:18] The only Son, God: while the vast majority of later textual witnesses have another reading, “the Son, the only one” or “the only Son,” the translation above follows the best and earliest manuscripts, monogenēs theos, but takes the first term to mean not just “Only One” but to include a filial relationship with the Father, as at Lk 9:38 (“only child”) or Heb 11:17 (“only son”) and as translated at Jn 1:14. The Logos is thus “only Son” and God but not Father/God.
THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS MARY AND JOSEPH

FIRST READING

A reading from the Book of Sirach (3:2–6, 12–14)

God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother’s authority he confirms over her sons. Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and preserves himself from them. When he prays, he is heard; he stores up riches who reveres his mother. Whoever honors his father is gladdened by children, and, when he prays, is heard. Whoever reveres his father will live a long life; he who obeys his father brings comfort to his mother. My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life; kindness to a father will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt of your sins—a house raised in justice to you.

* [3:1–16] Besides the virtues that must characterize our conduct toward God, special duties are enjoined, such as honor and respect toward parents, with corresponding blessings (vv. 1–9). By showing such respect especially to old and infirm parents (vv. 10–13), the sins of children are pardoned (vv. 14–15). Failure to honor father and mother is blasphemy and merits a curse from God (v. 16). Cf. Ex 20:12; Eph 6:2–3.

While today’s gospel (Matt 2:13-15, 19-23) highlights Joseph as a responsible husband and father, this first reading focuses on the obligations of sons. Honoring one’s father means to submit to the father’s will and to remain fiercely loyal to the patriarch. Such a son pleases God who attends to the dutiful son’s prayers. Whoever reveres his father will live a long life because the father will not have to kill the disobedient son as God requires (see Deut 21:18-21 about the glutton and drunkard; compare the opinion of people about Jesus in Matt 11:18-19). If one mirror-reads the concluding verses (12-14), that is, imagines the situation that it might plausibly be ad-dressing, one might suspect that disrespect of fathers by sons did occur, perhaps often enough to warrant composition of these verses by the sage. Consider how Jacob at the instiga-tion of his mother Rebecca treated his aged father, Isaac (Genesis 27). The prevailing motivation given by the sage for his advice is that God hears the prayers of a dutiful and honorable son. Considering the concern God shows toward Joseph in today’s gospel, it is plausible to conclude that Joseph was an honorable son who revered his own father. When faced with challenges in his own married life, Joseph turned in prayer to God who responded favorably as the gospel indicates.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 128:1–2, 3, 4–5.)

Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.
Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways!
For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; blessed shall you be, and favored.
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home; your children like olive plants
around your table.
Behold, thus is the man blessed who fears the L ORD.
The L ORD bless you from Zion: may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

* [Psalm 128] A statement that the ever-reliable God will bless the reverent (Ps 128:1). God’s blessing is concrete: satisfaction and prosperity, a fertile spouse and abundant children (Ps 128:2–4). The perspective is that of the adult male, ordinarily the ruler and representative of the household to the community. The last verses extend the blessing to all the people for generations to come (Ps 128:5–6).

This psalm highlights the blessings that come to a person who fears the Lord. The word “fear” does not describe an emotion that causes trembling, the knees to weaken, and the like. It rather describes an awareness of who God is and how one relates to God. Acknowledging that the creature is not God will gain for the creature God’s blessings in labor, in the family circle, and in all of Israel. In this case, the blessings are a fertile wife and many, presumably obedient, children.

SECOND READING

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (11:8, 11–12, 17–19)

Brothers and sisters:
By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go.

By faith he received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age —and Sarah herself was sterile—for he thought that the one who had made the promise was trustworthy.

So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands on the seashore.

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name.”

He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead, and he received Isaac back as a symbol.

* [11:1–40] This chapter draws upon the people and events of the Old Testament to paint an inspiring portrait of religious faith, firm and unyielding in the face of any obstacles that confront it. These pages rank among the most eloquent and lofty to be found in the Bible. They expand the theme announced in Heb 6:12, to which the author now returns (Heb 10:39). The material of this chapter is developed chronologically. Heb 11:3–7 draw upon the first nine chapters of Genesis (Gn 1–9); Heb 11:8–22, upon the period of the patriarchs; Heb 11:23–31, upon the time of Moses; Heb 11:32–38, upon the history of the judges, the prophets, and the Maccabean martyrs. The author gives the most extensive description of faith provided in the New Testament, though his interest does not lie in a technical, theological definition. In view of the needs of his audience he describes what authentic faith does, not what it is in itself. Through faith God guarantees the blessings to be hoped for from him, providing evidence in the gift of faith that what he promises will eventually come to pass (Heb 11:1). Because they accepted in faith God’s guarantee of the future, the biblical personages discussed in Heb 11:3–38 were themselves commended by God (Heb 11:2). Christians have even greater reason to remain firm in faith since they, unlike the Old Testament men and women of faith, have perceived the beginning of God’s fulfillment of his messianic promises (Heb 11:39–40).

* [11:19] As a symbol: Isaac’s “return from death” is seen as a symbol of Christ’s resurrection. Others understand the words en parabolē to mean “in figure,” i.e., the word dead is used figuratively of Isaac, since he did not really die. But in the one other place that parabolē occurs in Hebrews, it means symbol (Heb 9:9).
The whole of Hebrews 11 is a carefully constructed unit reflecting on faith (see the inclusio or inclusion formed in vv. 1-2 and 39-40 by the notion of receiving witness through faith). It begins with a definition of faith (vv. 1-2) and then reviews biblical heroes who illustrate his notion of faith. Today's verses focus on Sarah the Matriarch and Abraham the Patriarch.

The sacred author understands faith to have two dimensions: it relates to the attainment of hoped-for goals and to the perception of invisible realities. It is the latter that supports a believer in trials and tribulations which test one's faith, or as the Mediterranean world would understand it, one's loyalty. What are some of the invisible realities (things not seen) that motivate a believer to remain faithful and loyal? Of course, it is God ("the one who is invisible" 11:2), God's existence and providence (11:6), trustworthiness (11:11), and power (11:19).

The story of Abraham as a model of faith is presented in three sections: his election, migration, and reception of the promised child (vv. 8-12); Abraham as a sojourner (vv. 13-16); and the binding of Isaac (vv. 17-22). In the first section (vv. 8-12), the sacred author of Hebrews stretches his sources, as is common in retelling biblical traditions. Verses 10 and 11 attribute motivations to the characters which do not appear in the original account and are implausible in that original context. But for the sacred author, this introduces his reflective comments in the next four verses (vv. 13-16). So faith, sticking with God no matter what, motivates Abraham to obey and to endure while patiently waiting to achieve the promised goal. One ought not press the biological comments in vv. 11 and 12. The real focus is the birth of Isaac, the child of promise. Life can come from death through faith.

The second segment praises the loyalty of the patriarchs who were seeking not an earthly but a heavenly homeland. It interrupts the reflection on Abraham. Clearly this reflection is for the benefit of the sacred author's audience, fellow believers in Jesus. Their faith has caused alienation from family and home and rendered them sojourners, subject to the suffering that accompanies alien status.

The final segment resumes the story of Abraham with his willingness to sacrifice his son who was the foundation of the fulfillment or God's promises. Again the sacred author restates the motif that God can bring life from death.

Today's gospel (Luke 2:22-40) presents Simeon and Anna as two models of loyalty to God who like Abraham attained the fulfillment or a long-awaited dream. Given the tendency in Western culture to form pragmatic friendships, what can modern Western believers do to strengthen their loyalties (= faith)?

GOSPEL

A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Luke 2:22-40)

When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord,” and to offer the sacrifice of “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,” in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:

“Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.”

The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a
sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

2:22–40 The presentation of Jesus in the temple depicts the parents of Jesus as devout Jews, faithful observers of the law of the Lord (Lk 2:23–24, 39), i.e., the law of Moses. In this respect, they are described in a fashion similar to the parents of John (Lk 1:6) and Simeon (Lk 2:25) and Anna (Lk 2:36–37). 2:22 Their purification: syntactically, their must refer to Mary and Joseph, even though the Mosaic law never mentions the purification of the husband. Recognizing the problem, some Western scribes have altered the text to read “his purification,” understanding the presentation of Jesus in the temple as a form of purification; the Vulgate version has a Latin form that could be either “his” or “her.” According to the Mosaic law (Lv 12:2–8), the woman who gives birth to a boy is unable for forty days to touch anything sacred or to enter the temple area by reason of her legal impurity. At the end of this period she is required to offer a year-old lamb as a burnt offering and a turtledove or young pigeon as an expiation of sin. The woman who could not afford a lamb offered instead two turtledoves or two young pigeons, as Mary does here. They took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord: as the firstborn son (Lk 2:7) Jesus was consecrated to the Lord as the law required (Ex 13:2, 12), but there was no requirement that this be done at the temple. The concept of a presentation at the temple is probably derived from 1 Sm 1:24–28, where Hannah offers the child Samuel for sanctuary services. The law further stipulated (Nm 3:47–48) that the firstborn son should be redeemed by the parents through their payment of five shekels to a member of a priestly family. About this legal requirement Luke is silent. 2:25 Awaiting the consolation of Israel: Simeon here and later Anna who speak about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem represent the hopes and expectations of faithful and devout Jews who at this time were looking forward to the restoration of God’s rule in Israel. The birth of Jesus brings these hopes to fulfillment. 2:35 (And you yourself a sword will pierce): Mary herself will not be untouched by the various reactions to the role of Jesus (Lk 2:34). Her blessedness as mother of the Lord will be challenged by her son who describes true blessedness as “hearing the word of God and observing it” (Lk 11:27–28 and Lk 8:20–21). 2:41–52 This story’s concern with an incident from Jesus’ youth is unique in the canonical gospel tradition. It presents Jesus in the role of the faithful Jewish boy, raised in the traditions of Israel, and fulfilling all that the law requires. With this episode, the infancy narrative ends just as it began, in the setting of the Jerusalem temple.

Defining the family is never easy. The challenge was no different in the ancient world than it is in modern cultures. Even more difficult is deciding what kind of family is good and decent, and what kind of family is not. As today's gospel indicates, the family into which Jesus was born and raised is unquestionably devout and pious. They observe the Torah meticulously. In accord with Leviticus 12:3, Jesus' parents have him circumcised and name him on the eighth day after he is born. In accord with the larger context of Leviticus 12:1-8, the family accompanies Mary to the Temple in Jerusalem for her purification forty days after the birth of Jesus.

CIRCUMCISION AND NAMING
In the ancient Middle East, circumcision was practiced in many societies. Its origins are obscure. Originally, scholars thought it had originated in Egypt and moved thence east and north into the Semitic world. Contemporary opinion rooted in recent archaeological discoveries holds that the practice of circumcision began in the northwest Semitic world and moved south where the Egyptians adopted it. The meaning of the procedure varied. For instance, in early Israelite history, males were circumcised at puberty (see Gen 17:25) or at the time of marriage (Gen 34). In this connection, the rite has a functional meaning: the man is now able to get married and to function as a married person. It was not until Abraham was circumcised that Sarah was able to bear a child, the proper child whom God would bless. Later in Israelite history (see Lev 12:3), circumcision was performed on the eighth day after birth, a custom that was retrojected into Abraham’s life (Gen 17:10-14). The Palestinian Targum, that is, the Aramaic paraphrase and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, reports an interesting, and very likely fictional, argument between Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac argues for his superiority over Ishmael because Isaac was circumcised, therefore pleasing to the Lord, at a very early age. Ishmael, acknowledging that he was circumcised at the age of thirteen, argues for his superiority over Isaac by noting that at puberty he could have resisted and rejected circumcision, but willingly accepted it. Who knows what Isaac would have done at puberty?

To appreciate the significance of circumcision and naming, it is important to recall the ancient understanding of conception. It was widely believed that the male deposited a fully formed miniature person in the woman who served merely as the "field" in which the "seed" would grow to maturity. But women in the ancient Mediterranean world were considered to be lascivious and untrustworthy (read Sirach and Proverbs for illustrations of this concern). A husband never knew for sure whether the child born was actually his. Such uncertainty would weaken the family by making potential heirs suspect, thereby rendering the family treasure vulnerable to theft. So by circumcising and naming a boy as early as eight days after birth, the father made a public proclamation formally accepting this child as his son, no matter what other charges might be made later.

In Luke’s Gospel, Joseph does not receive a "revelation" about Jesus and his divine origins, such as he does in Matthew’s Gospel. Nevertheless, Joseph demonstrates that he is truly an honorable and just man by seeing to the circumcision and naming of his son in accord with the prescriptions of the Torah. Joseph’s honorable behavior solidifies the bonds of his young family.

PURIFICATION OF MARY

Mary, too, shows herself to be a devout person who is eager to observe all the prescriptions of the Torah, including the obligation of her purification. (Notice Luke’s ignorance of Palestinian custom by referring to "their" purification.) By offering two doves at the purification rites instead of the preferred lamb, in obedience to Leviticus 12:6-8, Joseph and Mary reveal their social status. They very likely do not have the land on which to raise a lamb nor the ability to purchase one.

American believers tend to romanticize "the holy family": Too often it looks very much like a middle-class American family. Insights from Middle Eastern culture offer a healthy restraint to this tendency. Clearly, its deep faith and devout piety did not seem to spare this family its share of hardships and crises.
MARY, THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD
God's Many Blessings

God teaches Moses how to bless Aaron and his progeny. The prayer is for protection, happiness, and peace. In three parts, it became a model for the solemn blessing that may precede the dismissal at Mass.

In the present liturgical calendar, the Church reflects today on the motherhood of Mary. We also observe a world day of prayer for peace. Some people come to Mass with a more secular instinct: Prayer is a great way to start the new year. This passage from the Book of Numbers supports that motive. As we flip over the calendar and embrace a new beginning, we hear the blessing that God taught Moses. It has little to do with the motherhood of Mary, but it starts the year on the right foot, reminding us that all time and every season of our lives belong to God.

A reading from the Book of Numbers (6:22–27)
The LORD said to Moses:
"Speak to Aaron and his sons and tell them:
This is how you shall bless the Israelites.
Say to them:
The LORD bless you and keep you!
The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you!
The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!
So shall they invoke my name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them."

* [6:22] Just as God had commanded him: as in the creation of the world in chap. 1 and in the building of the tabernacle in Ex 25–31, 35–40 (all from the Priestly source), everything takes place by the command of God. In this passage and in Exodus, the commands of God are carried out to the letter by human agents, Noah and Moses. Divine speech is important. God speaks to Noah seven times in the flood story.

Many Christians recognize these verses as the Blessing of St. Francis written by him for Brother Leo who requested a special, personal benediction. Others may recall that these verses form the traditional conclusion to the Synagogue Sabbath service. In the context of the Hebrew Bible, these verses emphasize the "face" of God and hearken back to the experience of Moses himself: "The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another" (Exod 33:11). In this respect Moses was considered to be unique among all the prophets: "Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deut 34:10). But what of the persistent biblical tradition that no human being could survive such a face to face encounter with God; "But my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives" (Exod 33:20)? The text does not say that such a vision is impossible, only that it can be fatal. That is why people who survive can express only awe and wonder. "I have seen God face to face . . . yet my life has been spared:' marveled Jacob (Gen 32:31).

In Israel, the verses from Numbers had been used as a priestly blessing from very early times during the three feasts (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles) when Israelites went to present themselves to the Lord to "see his face." Thus the phrase meant going on pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. The priestly
verses, then, expressed the confident hope that those who came to experience God in the Temple would not be disappointed. The gospel (Luke 2:16-21) reports the responses of some who had met Jesus face to face: the shepherds went and told others; Mary pondered these things in her heart. How would you respond to a face to face meeting with God or the Risen Jesus?

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 67:2–3, 5, 6, 8.)

PSALM 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8 (2A) Another prayer of blessing serves as the Responsorial Psalm. Psalm 67 asks for God's mercy. To motivate God's favorable response, it suggests that all the nations will rejoice when they see what God has done. Blessing the people with peace will bring God the benefit of more praise. The psalm recognizes that God rules the nations, and does so in equity. The justice that God can bring will return praise from the earth.

Crossing the threshold of a new year, praying for the peace and justice of the world, today's psalm makes a fitting start to the Scripture readings that open a new year.

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**May God bless us in his mercy.**

May God have pity on us and bless us; may he let his face shine upon us.

So may your way be known upon earth; among all nations, your salvation.

May the nations be glad and exult because you rule the peoples in equity; the nations on the earth you guide.

May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you!

May God bless us, and may all the ends of the earth fear him!

* [Psalm 67] A petition for a bountiful harvest (Ps 67:7), made in the awareness that Israel's prosperity will persuade the nations to worship its God.

* [6:26] Peace: the Hebrew word Shalom includes the idea of happiness, good health, prosperity, friendship, and general well-being. To use this term as a greeting was to pray for all these things upon the one greeted.

* [67:2] May God be gracious to us: the people's petition echoes the blessing pronounced upon them by the priests, cf. Nm 6:22–27.

Originally this psalm may have been a non-Israelite thanks-giving after a bountiful harvest. Appending the priestly prayer in the opening verses would have accommodated it to the Israelite tradition. When God displays the divine "face" (= self), God manifests personal delight and gracious generosity. This is God's way of dealing with human beings (vv. 2-3). Nations should rejoice (vv. 5, 6), and so should all the earth (v. 8). God deals with human beings justly, as a father deals with family members. The final verse "all the ends of the earth" (which has yielded its increase) is a fitting reference to Mary, since Jesus, the fruit of her womb, is part of this earth's "yield" (see Gal 4:4 which is the second reading for today; relate also to today's gospel). These psalm verses make a fitting bridge between all three readings.

SECOND READING
The coming of Jesus as the only begotten Son of God has made it possible for us to become God's children by adoption, with the right to call God "Father." This reading appears in the Lectionary today because it says that Jesus was "born of a woman." In all the letters of St. Paul, he never mentions the name of Jesus' mother. (St. John doesn't, either.) Without the synoptic Gospel accounts, we would never know that her name is Mary. In fact, this is the only reference to Jesus' mother in the entire Pauline corpus. So, this passage from Galatians is used as the Second Reading many times throughout the year on Marian feasts, since there are not many other choices.

The thrust of the argument in Paul's letter is that we have become adopted into God's family because Jesus entered the world as the Son of God. The words "God sent his Son" and the repeated word born makes this reading especially appropriate for Christmas Time.

Some may feel that this translation is gender-exclusive when it repeats the word "sons" to comment on God's adoption of believers. There is another argument to be made, though. In Paul's day, sons received the inheritance of families. Daughters did not. To be adopted as a son was to be eligible for full inheritance. Paul's message reassured all of the Galatians that they would receive the full adoption that only sons could claim in his day. After all, this is the epistle where Paul says that there is neither male nor female in Christ (3:28).

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Galatians (4:4–7)

Brothers and sisters:
When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

As proof that you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"

So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then also an heir, through God.

* [4:1–7] What Paul has argued in Gal 3:26–29 is now elaborated in terms of the Christian as the heir (Gal 4:1, 7; cf. Gal 3:18, 29) freed from control by others. Again, as in Gal 3:2–5, the proof that Christians are children of God is the gift of the Spirit of Christ relating them intimately to God.
* [4:1, 3] Not of age: an infant or minor.
* [4:3] The elemental powers of the world: while the term can refer to the “elements” like earth, air, fire, and water or to elementary forms of religion, the sense here is more likely that of celestial beings that were thought in pagan circles to control the world; cf. Gal 4:8; Col 2:8, 20.
* [4:3–4] Though our gospel is veiled: the final application of the image. Paul has been reproached either for obscurity in his preaching or for his manner of presenting the gospel. But he confidently asserts that there is no veil over his gospel. If some fail to perceive its light, that is because of unbelief. The veil lies over their eyes (2 Cor 3:14), a blindness induced by Satan, and a sign that they are headed for destruction (cf. 2 Cor 2:15).
* [4:5] We do not preach ourselves: the light seen in his gospel is the glory of Christ (2 Cor 4:4). Far from preaching himself, the preacher should be a transparent medium through whom Jesus is perceived (cf. 2 Cor 4:10–11). Your slaves: Paul draws attention away from individuals as such and toward their role in relation to God, Christ, and the community; cf. 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 4:1.
Autobiographical allusion to the episode at Damascus clarifies the origin and nature of Paul’s service; cf. Acts 9:1–19; 22:3–16; 26:2–18. “Let light shine out of darkness”: Paul seems to be thinking of Gn 1:3 and presenting his apostolic ministry as a new creation. There may also be an allusion to Is 9:1 suggesting his prophetic calling as servant of the Lord and light to the nations; cf. Is 42:6, 16; 49:6; 60:1–2, and the use of light imagery in Acts 26:13–23. To bring to light the knowledge: Paul’s role in the process of revelation, expressed at the beginning under the image of the odor and aroma (2 Cor 2:14–15), is restated now, at the end of this first moment of the development, in the imagery of light and glory (2 Cor 4:3–6).

Children: see note on Gal 3:26; here in contrast to the infant or young person not of age (Gal 3:1

This treasure: the glory that he preaches and into which they are being transformed. In earthen vessels: the instruments God uses are human and fragile; some imagine small terracotta lamps in which light is carried.

Paul now confronts the difficulty that his present existence does not appear glorious at all; it is marked instead by suffering and death. He deals with this by developing the topic already announced in 2 Cor 3:3, 6, asserting his faith in the presence and ultimate triumph of life, in his own and every Christian existence, despite the experience of death.

For Paul, the advent of Jesus marked the beginning of a new “time?” Specifically, it was the redemptive death of Jesus that formed the dividing line signaling the end of one age and the beginning of another (then-now; once-but now). Jesus was born an Israelite and circumcised, hence he became subject to the law (then). But his death abrogated the covenant of law and established a new covenant of faith and grace (now; Gal 3:13-14). In his own life, Jesus manifests the precise pattern of the covenant of faith, its significance, and how it works in day-to-day life. Jesus is the unique “son” that God promised to Abraham (Gal 3:16), thus becoming a model for whoever would be son (or daughter) with God (Gal 4:5-7). This defines the status of any and every believer. Just as Jesus prayed to his Abba (Mark 14:36, the only place this word appears in the Gospels), so his followers are filled with the Spirit and pray as he did: “Abba, Father” (Gal 4:6).

It is probably unnecessary but still helpful to remind ourselves that the Aramaic word “Abba” never meant “Daddy;” but rather exactly as reported in the Greek of Mark meant and was understood as “Father?” Even in the English language, there is a difference between “Father” and “Daddy.” In 1988, James Barr reviewed the linguistic evidence and noted that in its cultural context, that is, the ancient Israelite social system, Abba was a term of formal address. It was not used as a familiar, intimate, warm, and loving term. The significance for these passages (Mark and Galatians) is that now after the death of Jesus, his followers have the same relationship to God that he had. That is indeed good news. The term, however, fits well into the Mediterranean cultural matrix where love for the father is always demonstrated in a respectful way. In this culture, the son is not the father’s equal or pal. As reflected in Sirach (3:6-7), the culture notes that “he who fears the LORD honors his father, and serves his parents as rulers!”

Luke (2: 16-21) depicts the way in which Jesus was indeed subject to his parents from the very beginning. He was cir-cumcised on the eighth day and given the name assigned by the angel. The pattern of his life lived faithfully under the law helps to appreciate the new relationship with God that Jesus made possible for all, Israelite and non-Israelites alike.

**ALLELUIA (Heb 1:1–2)**

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son.
GOSPEL

This passage appears in today’s Lectionary readings because it mentions the eighth day. Today is the Octave of Christmas. On the Octave of Easter, the Lectionary offers the account of Jesus appearing to the incredulous Thomas on the eighth day of the Resurrection, and this passage fits the Christmas Octave.

Happily, this passage also includes a depiction of Mary reflecting on the events in her heart. For this reason, the liturgical title of this day refers to her motherhood. This makes it a good day for the entire Church to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation and its implications. For ordinary Christians, who have just completed Christmas responsibilities, closed one year, and are greeting a new one, this becomes a beautiful day to do what Mary did: reflect.

Mary’s title as Mother of God caused quite a stir in the past. Many people rightly wondered, "How can God have a Mother?" The title says as much about Jesus as it does about Mary. It proclaims that Jesus is indivisibly God and human, and that Mary is his Mother. It makes no attempt to claim the divinity of Mary. She is human, one of us, but given a unique role in the history of salvation. The first Eucharistic Prayer refers to Mary as the "Mother of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ."

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Luke (2:16–21)

The shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger.

When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds.

And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.

Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

When eight days were completed for his circumcision,

he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

* [2:8–20] The announcement of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds is in keeping with Luke’s theme that the lowly are singled out as the recipients of God’s favors and blessings (see also Lk 1:48, 52).
* [2:21] Just as John before him had been incorporated into the people of Israel through his circumcision, so too this child (see note on Lk 1:57–66).

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- In 431, the Council of Ephesus proclaimed that Mary became the Mother of God by the human conception of the Son of God in her womb (see CCC, 466).
- “The human reality created through the word finds its most perfect image in Mary’s obedient faith” (VD, 27).
- “What was born of Mary was therefore human by nature, in accordance with the inspired Scriptures, and the body of the Lord was a true body: It was a true body because it was the same as ours. Mary, you see, is our sister, for we are all born from Adam” (Athanasius of Alexandria, Letter to Epictetus, Office of Readings for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, January 1)
Isaiah 60 has long been associated with the feast of Epiphany, and with good reason. It not only includes traditional Epiphany imagery, it also describes Isaiah’s vision of an actual epiphany of God. The first thing Isaiah saw was the appearance of God’s light rising to shine on the fallen people of Israel. Even though darkness might cover the rest of the earth, the glory of God was beginning to dawn in Zion. Then Isaiah saw a great throng of pilgrims approaching Jerusalem. Leading the procession were all the exiled children of Israel. Following them were representatives from all the nations of the world bearing gifts for Israel and Israel’s God. Attracted by God’s light, they, too, had come to worship. The most significant feature of this epiphany is its breadth. Given that Isaiah was writing at a time when Israel was obsessed with the pains of reconstructing its national life following the exile, Isaiah could have focused primarily on his own people. But he didn’t. In Isaiah’s vision, God’s light shone not only on Israel but on all the nations of the world. This epiphany, Isaiah says, is for everyone. It is a feast of reconciliation, bringing together all the cultures and races of the world.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (60:1–6)

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you the LORD shines, and over you appears his glory. Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses. Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow, for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you. Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the LORD.

* [60:1–9] The light the prophet proclaims to Zion symbolizes the blessing to come to her: the glory of the Lord, the return of her children, the wealth of nations who themselves will walk by her light. The passage is famous from its use in the Latin liturgy for the feast of Epiphany.
Third Isaiah speaks a word of encouragement to the residents of Jerusalem. To offset the discouragement deriving from the trickle of returnees from exile, the prophet uses the "prophetic perfect" tense (v. 1: light has come, glory shines [has shone]), which firmly declares that salvation is still to come. An action initiated in the past is yet to be completed. Paltry beginnings should not discourage anyone. God lights up the Holy City, which invites all to gather and come (vv. 1-3). The imagery stirs hope. First the scattered deportees of Israel return ("your sons ... and your daughters"). Then come the non-Israelites from far away. "Riches of the sea" would indicate the region north to Tyre and Phoenicia; "Midian and Ephah" point to the region south to the Arabian desert and east to the Gulf of Aqabah; "Sheba" refers to south Arabia. Some scholars think Matthew in today's gospel (2:1-12) drew inspiration from these verses of Isaiah when he mentions gold and frankincense. The passage has long been associated with the feast of the Epiphany in the liturgy.

This psalm epitomizes the royal theology that was popular in ancient Israel. The psalm itself may have been written for a coronation of one of Israel's kings or for one of the regular festivals celebrating the king's coronation. Today we might call Psalm 72 a prayer of invocation. Like many invocations written for official occasions, it sought God's blessings for both the king and the nation he led. The psalmist prayed that the king would rule justly, that he would see to the needs of the most vulnerable, that he would bring prosperity to the nation, and that his rule would increase even to the ends of the earth. Although it may not seem like it at first, this psalm also describes an epiphany of God. At least that is how the ancient Israelites might have seen it, for in the eyes of the royal theology the king was a very real manifestation of God. The king was God's anointed. He was God's adopted son. He was the bridge that connected the people to God. Christian theology, too, has seen this psalm as an epiphany of God's rule on earth, not in the person of the king but in the person of Jesus.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 72:1–2, 7–8, 10–11, 12–13.)

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.
O God, with your judgment endow the king,
and with your justice, the king's son;
He shall govern your people with justice
and your afflicted ones with judgment.
Justice shall flower in his days,
and profound peace, till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.
The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts;
the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute.
All kings shall pay him homage,
all nations shall serve him.
For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out,
and the afflicted when he has no one to help him.
He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor;
the lives of the poor he shall save.

* [Psalm 72] A royal Psalm in which the Israeliite king, as the representative of God, is the instrument of divine justice (Ps 72:1–4, 12–14) and blessing (Ps 72:5–7, 15–17) for the whole world. The king is human,
giving only what he has received from God. Hence intercession must be made for him. The extravagant language is typical of oriental royal courts.

* [72:2] The king’s, the king’s son: the crown prince is the king’s son; the prayer envisages the dynasty.
* [72:8] From sea to sea, the ends of the earth: the boundaries of the civilized world known at the time: from the Mediterranean Sea (the western sea) to the Persian Gulf (the eastern sea), and from the Euphrates (the river) to the islands and lands of southwestern Europe, “the ends of the earth.” The words may also have a mythic nuance—the earth surrounded by cosmic waters, hence everywhere.
* [72:10] Tarshish and the islands: the far west (Ps 48:6); Arabia and Seba: the far south (1 Kgs 10:1).

Traces of Isaiah 9:2-7 and 11:1-9 in this psalm support the opinion that it was composed in honor of King Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.E.), with verse 10 added still later (cf. Isa 60:6-10). Today's verses praise the ideal kin-person’s justice and judgment (1-2). He shall establish peace over the ideal expanse of Israel: from the Mediterranean, from the desert to the Euphrates ('sea to sea:' vv. 7-8). The psalmist pushes the boundaries even to Spain (Tarshish) and Ethiopia (Seba, vv. 10-11)! Why should this king’s empire extend so far? Because he will vindicate the lowly, poor, and afflicted (vv. 12-13). Yes, as the refrain indicates, every nation can admire such a ruler.

SECOND READING

What Isaiah had only dreamed of, the author of Ephesians now proclaims has already happened. Gentiles are coming to God. In fact, by the time Ephesians was written, most everyone knew that Paul’s mission to welcome Gentiles into the church had been successful. That was no mystery. What everyone didn’t know, however, was that God had intended the inclusion of Gentiles from the very beginning. What is more, God also intended that Gentiles would be included as full coheirs, not just as guests in the household of God. Since most of us in the church today are Gentiles, this revelation does not seem to be much of an epiphany for us. But in Paul’s day, God's secret plan for the Gentiles would have been shocking. If we are willing to apply it to our own day, the universality of God's plan can still shock us. It challenges our human tendency to put up barriers against those we perceive as different. It particularly challenges our long-standing practice of drawing theological lines between those who are acceptable and those who are not.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians (3:2–3a, 5–6)

Brothers and sisters:
You have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace
that was given to me for your benefit,
namely, that the mystery was made known to me by revelation.
It was not made known to people in other generations
as it has now been revealed
to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:
that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body,
and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the GOSPEL.

* [3:1–13] Paul reflects on his mission to the Gentiles. He alludes to his call and appointment to the apostolic office (Eph 3:2–3) and how his insight through revelation, as well as that of the other apostles and charismatic prophets in the church (Eph 3:4–5), has deepened understanding of God’s plan of salvation in Christ. Paul is the special herald (Eph 3:7) of a new promise to the Gentiles (Eph 3:6): that the divine plan includes them in the spiritual benefits promised to Israel. Not only is this unique
apostolic role his; Paul also has been given the task of explaining to all the divine plan of salvation (Eph 3:8–9), once hidden. Through the church, God’s plan to save through Christ is becoming manifest to angelic beings (Eph 3:10; cf. Eph 1:21), in accord with God’s purpose (Eph 3:11). The fulfillment of the plan in Christ gives the whole church more confidence through faith in God (Eph 3:12). The readers of this letter are also thereby encouraged to greater confidence despite Paul’s imprisonment (Eph 3:13).


* [3:2] Stewardship: the Greek is the same term employed at Eph 1:10 for the plan that God administers (Col 1:25) and in which Paul plays a key role.


[For brief background, see Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.] The author of Ephesians repeats Paul’s great insight here, that non-Israelites (Gentiles) have full and co-equal membership with Israelites in the Church through Christ Jesus. In the Greek texts three adjectives with the prefix syn- (to-gether) make this point emphatically (co-heirs, co-members, co-partners, v. 6). Actually, the insight results from a direct revelation from God (compare Gal 1:12, 16) which by this time in the tradition has become nonnative. Given the history of the chosen people, the covenant, and related concepts, only God could have revealed that the divine will now include non-Israelites in that people. This idea would be too preposterous for any human being to initiate on personal initiative.

Another interesting point is that this revelation/insight has been given to "holy apostles and prophets" (v. 5). Scholars remind us that Paul (e.g., in Galatians 1-2) insisted that he alone received the distinctive revelation concerning the place of non-Israelites in the Church. That the author of Ephesians now extends it to others (apostles and prophets) is a strong argument that this is an author writing in the name of Paul, and not Paul himself.

The common link between this reading and the gospel for today’s feast (Matt 2:1-12) is the Magi, non-Israelites who come to do homage to Jesus at his birth. In Romans, Paul makes the boldest statement of his understanding of the relationship of non-Israelites to Israelites by calling the graft-ing of non-Israelites to Israelites "unnatural" or "contrary to nature" (Rom 11:24). Only a revelation from God could convince humans that this is the divine will. Contemporary Church members who are overwhelmingly of non-Israelite lineage should be awed by God’s decision. Today’s feast provides an opportunity to formulate a convincing reply to a question frequently asked by outsiders: "Knowing the history of the Church and its warts, why do you remain a Christian?"

ALLELUIA (Mt 2:2)
We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.

GOSPEL

Of all the Gospel writers, Matthew is the most meticulous about tying Old Testament stories and prophecies to the life of Jesus. For Matthew, the visit from the Magi fulfills a number of prophecies. He quotes two of them, but the prophecy he has most in mind is the one we saw from Isaiah 60. As. if on cue, the Gentile Magi arrive in Bethlehem, bearing gifts and talking about the light of a great star. But after that, the plot thickens. Not everyone welcomes this new epiphany of God. Herod fears that a rival has come to claim his ill-gotten throne. The people of Jerusalem are 111troubled. 111 Even the Magi themselves end up sneaking away, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod. This is surely not what Isaiah had in mind. but Matthew is determined to speak the truth. Epiphanies of God are not all sweetness and light. They also announce a new order. and as such, they threaten people
like Herod, people who have a stake in maintaining the status quo. Jesus threatened the power structure from the very beginning. But to those who seek him, like those star-gazing Magi, he is the very light of God.

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Matthew (2:1–12)

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.”

When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, He inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:

And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler,
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.”

After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

* [3:1–13] Paul reflects on his mission to the Gentiles. He alludes to his call and appointment to the apostolic office (Eph 3:2–3) and how his insight through revelation, as well as that of the other apostles and charismatic prophets in the church (Eph 3:4–5), has deepened understanding of God’s plan of salvation in Christ. Paul is the special herald (Eph 3:7) of a new promise to the Gentiles (Eph 3:6): that the divine plan includes them in the spiritual benefits promised to Israel. Not only is this unique apostolic role his; Paul also has been given the task of explaining to all the divine plan of salvation (Eph 3:8–9), once hidden. Through the church, God’s plan to save through Christ is becoming manifest to angelic beings (Eph 3:10; cf. Eph 1:21), in accord with God’s purpose (Eph 3:11). The fulfillment of the
plan in Christ gives the whole church more confidence through faith in God (Eph 3:12). The readers of this letter are also thereby encouraged to greater confidence despite Paul's imprisonment (Eph 3:13).


* [3:2] Stewardship: the Greek is the same term employed at Eph 1:10 for the plan that God administers (Col 1:25) and in which Paul plays a key role.


Matthew alone reports this story about the Magi. No other ancient documents corroborate the account as actual, his-torical fact. Contemporary scholars believe that it was prob-ably a preexisting tradition based on the Balaam story (Num 22-24) intending to demonstrate that Gentiles were part of God's plan from the very beginning. Scholars are divided, though, in their estimation of the degree of creativity exer-cised by the evangelist in shaping this story for his Gospel.

Mediterranean people, however, maintain a very porous boundary line between reality and appearance, fact and im-pressions. The appearance or impression is always consid-ered much more significant than reality or the fact. This, of course, is all driven by that culture's overarching concern for honor, that is, public recognition and affirmation of pro-claimed worth.

Joseph knows he is not the father of the child Mary is car-rying (Matt 1:19). Matthew doesn't hide this fact. An angel of the Lord, a most honorable messenger from God, the source of all honor that counts, informs Joseph of the divinely willed circumstances of Jesus' conception and the function Jesus will play in God's plan: "He will save his people from their sins."

But so far as we know, Joseph doesn't make this mes-sage public. He apparently lived with the secret all his life and presented a different impression to the public.

How can the evangelist give an honorable public appear-ance to the potentially embarrassing circumstances of Jesus' conception? Matthew begins Jesus' story with a genealogy, which in the ancient world is a key strategy for documenting one's claim to honor. Matthew does it cleverly with a num-ber scheme based on David's name. Hebrew letters are also numbers, and the consonants DVD in Hebrew add up to fourteen. In this genealogy, Matthew clusters names in three groups of fourteen, more or less. The point: Jesus is none other than a descendent of David, Israel's greatest king!

Then Matthew reports the tradition about the Magi (not kings or astrologers) coming to pay homage to this descen-dant of royalty. A closer look at the story through the lenses of Mediterranean honor reveals how cleverly Matthew mag-nifies Jesus' honor rating.

**KING OF JUD EANS**

The Magi come seeking the newly born king of Judeans. Matthew and Matthew's Jesus during his ministry routinely identify God's people as "Israel" (see 2:6; also 8:10; 9:33; 10:6, 23; 15:24, 31; 19:28; 27:9). Three groups make up this people: "Judeans:• "Galileans,' and "Pereans:• Outsiders ignored these distinctions and called everyone "Judeans" (the Greek word is often incorrectly translated "Jews"). Pilate calls Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee "King of the Judeans" Oohn 19:19-22).

Word that these visitors from the East are seeking a newly born king of Judeans strikes fear into the heart of old Herod who is the current, living king of Judeans. He knows that he has no newly born heir. Then Matthew draws a contrast between these honorable visitors and the fearful ruler. Herod calls for the Magi "se-crety" (v. 7). In the Middle East and all societies in which honor is the core value, privacy is a threat to honor. If honor is a public claim to worth along with a public acknowledge-ment of that worth, then people's behavior must be ever on public display. Anyone who acts secretly has something to hide and is therefore automatically considered to be dishon-orable, shameful. Herod's secret inquiry immediately tags him as acting dishonorably.
The Magi listen to his request that they report to him what they find about this new king, but, astute Middle Easterners that they are, they refuse to enter into his shameful strategy. They return home by a different route (v. 12), thereby deceiving the shameful Herod (Matt 2:16).

When the Magi find Jesus, they pay homage. The high, honorable status of these visitors indicates the high degree of honor they pay to Jesus and his mother. They also offer three kinds of gifts (gold, myrrh, and frankincense), further enhancing the honor they bestow. Matthew has masterfully cast Jesus into an impressively honorable context that does not fail to catch the attention of his original Middle Eastern audience.

Americans are familiar with pregnancy out of wedlock and the crisis this poses in a wide variety of social contexts. This formerly shameful experience was often hidden as best as possible from family and neighborhood. Things are different today. How would Matthew the evangelist present the predicament of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus if all of them were Americans?

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

• “By the power of the risen Lord [the Church] is given strength that it might, in patience and in love, overcome its sorrows and its challenges, both within itself and from without, and that it might reveal to the world, faithfully though darkly, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it will be manifested in full light” (LG, 8).

• “The people of God, as represented by the local Church, should understand and show by their concern that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized” (RCIA, 9).

• “Lord God of heaven and earth,/ you revealed your only-begotten Son to every nation / by the guidance of a star. I Bless this house/ and all who inhabit ii./ Fill them (us) with the light of Christ,/ that their (our) concern for others may reflect your love” (BB, 1612A).
Overview of Lent

Lent is characterized by themes of Baptism and Penance. As a liturgical season, it has its roots in the second half of the fourth century in Rome. Imitating Christ's days in the desert, it begins on a weekday (Ash Wednesday), an arrangement made necessary by the desire to have forty days of penitence without including the Triduum or Sundays.

On the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, parishes may choose to use the readings from Year A or those from Year B. The Year A readings highlight baptismal themes, and are especially appropriate for the catechumens who will be initiated at the Easter Vigil. The information in this chapter applies to the Year B readings. Scripture backgrounds on the Year A readings are available in Scripture Backgrounds for the Sunday Lectionary, Year A: A Resource for Homilists (LTP, 2016).

In addition to the Scripture readings, Lent's liturgical prayers help us understand the grace the season offers. The first Preface for Lent gives thanks for this joyful season through which we prepare for Easter with renewed minds and hearts. It also recognizes that, as we recall the great events of salvation history, God's grace leads us to reverence and service of our neighbor.

FIRST READING

In addition to reflecting the themes of the GOSPEL READING of Year B, the FIRST READING highlight some of the great events of salvation history. On the First Sunday of Lent, we begin with God's promise to Noah, and on the Second Sunday, we see Abraham offer everything to God; both of these covenant stories are recorded in the Book of Genesis. On the Third Sunday of Lent, the Commandments, from Exodus, remind us of our covenant responsibility. Listening to the Second Book of Chronicles on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, we recall the cycle of infidelity, exile, and God's redeeming action. Then, on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Jeremiah promises a new covenant, engraved on the heart. Finally, on Palm Sunday, we hear Isaiah's song of the servant through whom the new covenant will be accomplished.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

While the psalms chosen for the Lectionary most directly respond to the First Readings, when taken together they form a prayer book particularly appropriate for Lent. Psalm 25, which we hear on the First Sunday of Lent, requests that God be our teacher and guide. On the next Sunday, we pray for trust, especially in difficult times, with Psalm 116. Psalm 19, which we hear on the Third Sunday, proclaims the joy God's law offers us. Psalm 137, which we hear on the Fourth Sunday, asks that we may never forget God's blessings, even when they may seem to be absent. On the Fifth Sunday, with Psalm 51, we ask for the grace of a clear heart. Finally on Palm Sunday, echoing Jesus' cry from the Cross, Psalm 22 admits near despair but ends with hope. These are prayers of faith put to the test.

SECOND READING

In the seasons of Lent, Easter Time, Advent, and Christmas Time, the SECOND READING often reflect on the other readings, unlike the readings in Ordinary Time. The SECOND READING represent the early strands of Christology, deepening our appreciation of Jesus' identity. From the first Letter of Peter and Romans, we hear that Christ suffered once for all as a sign of God's love. First Corinthians says that while the Cross may seem foolish, it demonstrates God's unfathomable wisdom. Ephesians teaches that believers are renewed in him, and the last two selections, from Hebrews and Philippians, teach how Christ practiced obedience and humble self-giving.
GOSPEL READING
As the SECOND READING could be understood to represent the primitive church's developing reflection on Christ, the GOSPEL READING of Year B are an ongoing revelation of Jesus' person and mission. The First Sunday's reading from Mark shows us the very human Jesus being tempted. That is followed by the Transfiguration, the revelation that this Son of Man was also uniquely the Son of God. On the middle three Sundays of Lent, we hear from John's account of the Gospel. With the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus is presented as the new Temple, the place where God and humanity come to meet. In the dialogue with Nicodemus, we are reminded that Jesus is the sign of God's unfathomable love for humanity. The reading from John 12 shows Jesus reflecting on the difficulty and necessity of his mission of suffering and glory. On Palm Sunday, the reading from the Passion according to Mark draws us again into the dramatic narrative about Jesus, the servant who emptied himself in the total self-giving that brought salvation.
Ash Wednesday

FIRST READING

The First Reading reminds us to seek renewal from the heart. In the Psalm, we beg the Lord to grant us mercy for our sins. The Second Reading inspires us to make the renewal fruitful by being ambassadors for Christ. And in the Gospel, Jesus tells us what are the things to do to attain renewal, have a fruitful Lent, and anticipate Easter ready for the joy and hope it brings.

(First Reading) We come before the Lord in full humility. We had sinned and fell so short of God’s expectation. This is not based on weighing the graces He gave versus the offences we have made. God had been gracious consistently. We had been unworthy. Lent leads us to Him in full nakedness. We dread the loss of heaven and our separation from God. We want to be back in His arms. We want to renew our friendship. We do this with all our heart, our mind, strength, and soul.

(Responsorial Psalm) And we dare seek renewal because we know God is merciful to those who repent. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, God waits for us everyday to come back to Him. When we do, He runs to us and brings back all our privileges as a child of God. We are renewed and is again on the way to eternal life.

(Second Reading) Renewed, we shine before others even before we speak. Our aura of holiness felt by those who we meet. But that is not enough, we seek to do good to others. Because we believe that we had been graced with mercy, we ought to share them to others. As St. Paul says in the reading, we are ambassadors for Christ. We represent Jesus to others.

The above brings us to the Gospel today. Renewal, mercy, and the resolve to go back to God entails three good acts namely; prayer, fasting (sacrifice), and good works. Prayer gives us direction and clarity of mission. When we kneel before the Lord, we allow ourselves to be open to God’s commands and wills. We report to Him ready to do everything He will ask us to do. At the same time, it is a moment of being graced with a strength of the divine kind. The task of a Christian is hard. It cannot be done through pure human efforts. It can only achieved with God.

Fasting or making sacrifices is more than paying for our sins. God does not need our sacrifices. He forgives without condition. Sacrifices are necessary to discipline ourselves. It is in defence against the temptations and lures of the devil. The devil knows our weaknesses. Thus, we also should be aware of our weaknesses. Therefore, in the Season of Lent, our sacrifices are focused on things we enjoy doing, having, thinking, etc. We deprive ourselves of them, thus disciplining our whole person. What we want to achieve is that we arrive at the realisation that we can live without them, at least temporarily. The devil will use them against us. When it comes, we will be ready and victorious. In the process, we assert our faith in God more than those which we sacrificed. It follows too that what we must sacrifice are those which will really challenge us. Jesus, Himself fasted for forty days and forty nights. Look at Him when He emerged from the desert. He was subject to a lot of temptations. But He remained faithful and was, later, victorious. We go through the Season of Lent having that attitude. We will be tempted. But we will not succumb. rather, we will turn the tables against satan!

Finally, we are encouraged to do acts of charity during this Season of Lent. Let us try to find a regular way of doing acts of charity. This maybe material, moral support, pleasant gestures, forgiveness, patience, understanding, etc. Anything that will make this world a better place because a certain goodness is done, is enough. Hopefully, if many participates, we will flood the world with our goodness and drown evil to oblivion.

Yes, we apply ashes on our foreheads as a sign of our internal spirit. The ashes may disappear later. Hopefully, our spirit does not. Remember that when the ashes are applied, we willingly enter to the season of lent and join the whole Christian community in renewal.
A reading from the Book of the Prophet Joel (2:12–18)
Even now, says the L ORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the L ORD, your God.
For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing, Offerings and libations for the L ORD, your God.
Blow the trumpet in Zion! proclaim a fast, call an assembly; Gather the people, notify the congregation; Assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast; Let the bridegroom quit his room and the bride her chamber. Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the L ORD, weep, And say, “Spare, O L ORD, your people, and make not your heritage a reproach, with the nations ruling over them! Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’ ” Then the L ORD was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on his people.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (51:3–4, 5–6ab, 12–13, 14 and 17)

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned. Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me. For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is before me always: “Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight.” A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not out from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me. Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
SECOND READING

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (5:20–6:2)
Brothers and sisters:
We are ambassadors for Christ,
as if God were appealing through us.
We implore you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God.
For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin,
so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.
Working together, then,
we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.
For he says:

In an acceptable time I heard you,
and on the day of salvation I helped you.

Behold, now is a very acceptable time;
behold, now is the day of salvation.

VERSE BEFORE THE GOSPEL (See Psalm 95:8)
If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

GOSPEL

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew (6:1–6, 16–18)
Jesus said to his disciples:

“Take care not to perform righteous deeds
in order that people may see them;
otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father.

When you give alms,
do not blow a trumpet before you,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets
to win the praise of others.

Amen, I say to you,
they have received their reward.

But when you give alms,
do not let your left hand know what your right is doing,
so that your almsgiving may be secret.

And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you pray,
do not be like the hypocrites,
who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners
so that others may see them.

Amen, I say to you,
they have received their reward.
But when you pray, go to your inner room,
   close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.
And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.
“When you fast,
   do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.
They neglect their appearance,
   so that they may appear to others to be fasting.
Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.
But when you fast,
   anoint your head and wash your face,
   so that you may not appear to be fasting,
   except to your Father who is hidden.
And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.”
SEASON OF LENT

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT B

FIRST READING

God's statement to Noah and his family in this reading is profound: "I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood" (v. 11). Never again will God destroy humanity. It is a wonderful promise on God's part, because, while Noah and his family may deserve to be rewarded for their faithfulness, human beings will certainly continue to sin. Yet, in spite of the infidelity of subsequent generations of humans, God has promised never to send destruction again. This is God's covenant: to remain in a loving, compassionate, and merciful relationship with all human beings, no matter what.

After the flood, God once again invited human beings to recognize the beauty of creation. The flood waters released humanity from sin and revealed the possibility of a new Eden, a new garden of life. This new earth, birthed from the flood waters, is where humans could be faithful partners in their loving relationship with God. God's creatures are welcomed, once again, to enter the waters of rebirth. In those waters, they can remember their part in keeping the covenant and relearn the ways of God. During Lent, we join with those who move toward the waters of Baptism at the Easter Vigil. With them, we are invited to seek a rebirth from sin and recognize our possibility of new life.

The bow suspended in the sky in Genesis is a sign of peace and God's faithfulness. It is a new dawn for humans who are, once again, invited to learn and live by God's ways. Like Noah, we see the sign of a new dawn as we begin this Lenten season.

A reading from the Book of Genesis (9:8–15)

God said to Noah and to his sons with him:

"See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you: all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals that were with you and came out of the ark. I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth."

God added:

"This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all mortal beings."
* [9:8–17] God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants and, remarkably, with all the animals who come out of the ark: never again shall the world be destroyed by flood. The sign of this solemn promise is the appearance of a rainbow.

During Lent, the Old Testament readings present highlights of the history of God's salvific activity on behalf of creation. In today's reading, God confirms the divine covenant with all creation: humankind and the animal kingdom. God makes three speeches (vv. 9-11, 12-16, 17) and places the rainbow in the clouds. The verses are arranged concentrically so that verses 13-16 ("my bow") are at the center. In the first speech (vv. 9-11) God introduces the topic of the covenant and highlights its central feature: the stability of the universe. Never again will God inflict such a punishment on creation. God promises that the stability and security of the universe will be permanent. Because the Hebrew word translated as "rainbow" primarily means "bow:' some scholars have suggested that God hung the war weapon on the clouds. (For the bow and arrow as God's weapon of war against Israel, see Deut 32:23, 42; Hab 3:9-11; Ps 18:14.) Contemporary scholars prefer to interpret it rather as a beautiful element of nature which God created to occur under certain circumstances (see Sir 43: 11; Ezek 1:28). In selecting it as a sign for Noah, God took it as a personal reminder of this covenant and a personal reminder never again to break this peace or truce with all creation. One possible link between this reading and the gospel (Mark 1:12-15) is nature in its original status as favorable to human beings.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 25:4–5, 6–7, 8–9.)

We pray this same psalm and verses on the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, but with a different antiphon. In today's antiphon, we pray for the courage and trust to learn the ways of the Lord: "Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant" (25:10). Learning the ways of God means being willing to be attentive to what God offers to teach us. In the psalm, we plead for God to make known, teach, guide, and remember. We ask God to be active in our lives. Despite our sinfulness, which we acknowledge as Lent begins, God does remember. God does make it known. God does teach and guide. The way to the Lord is set before us.

Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.
Your ways, O Lord, make known to me; teach me your paths,
Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.
Remember that your compassion, O Lord, and your love are from of old.
In your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O Lord.
Good and upright is the Lord, thus he shows sinners the way.
He guides the humble to justice, and he teaches the humble his way.

* [Psalm 25] A lament. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Such acrostic Psalms are often a series of statements only loosely connected. The psalmist mixes ardent pleas (Ps 25:1–2, 16–22) with expressions of confidence in God who forgives and guides.

This alphabetical psalm (each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet) expresses the psalmist's grateful response to God's covenant love (compassion, steadfast love, kindness, goodness, vv. 6-7) and asks God to show the "way" (throughout the psalm, and in the refrain). A fitting response to the reading from Genesis and a bridge to the gospel in which Jesus begins to proclaim the Good News of God (Mark 1:12-15).
SECOND READING

The passage from Peter’s epistle sounds like a creedal statement: Christ suffered, died, and rose, brought to life in the Spirit. His imagery reminded listeners of God's patience while Noah obeyed in building the ark. Peter linked the flood to the saving water of Baptism. His message is clear: Christ suffered that he might lead us to God.

Some Scripture commentators suggest that because this early community was living the true ways of the Gospel message, they were being derided and maligned. Peter encourages them to continue to live in ways that are faithful to Christ, no matter the cost. The author points to Jesus, who also suffered at the hands of those who abused him for his witness and message of God’s reign. Yet, death was not the end. Jesus’ Resurrection and new life in the spirit enabled his message and

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Peter (3:18–22)

Beloved:

Christ suffered for sins once,
the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous,
that he might lead you to God.

Put to death in the flesh,
he was brought to life in the Spirit.

In it he also went to preach to the spirits in prison,
who had once been disobedient
while God patiently waited in the days of Noah
during the building of the ark,
in which a few persons, eight in all,
were saved through water.

This prefigured baptism, which saves you now.

It is not a removal of dirt from the body
but an appeal to God for a clear conscience,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
who has gone into heaven
and is at the right hand of God,
with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

* [3:18] Suffered: very many ancient manuscripts and versions read “died.” Put to death in the flesh: affirms that Jesus truly died as a human being. Brought to life in the spirit: that is, in the new and transformed existence freed from the limitations and weaknesses of natural human life (cf. 1 Cor 15:45).

* [3:19] The spirits in prison: it is not clear just who these spirits are. They may be the spirits of the sinners who died in the flood, or angelic powers, hostile to God, who have been overcome by Christ (cf. 1 Pt 3:22; Gn 6:4; Enoch 6–36, especially 21:6; 2 Enoch 7:1–5).

* [3:21] Appeal to God: this could also be translated “pledge,” that is, a promise on the part of Christians to live with a good conscience before God, or a pledge from God of forgiveness and therefore a good conscience for us.

Commenting on this passage, Martin Luther said: "This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament. I still do not know what for sure the apostle means." (Luther’s Works, vol. 30, p. 113). Contemporary scholars can offer significant insight. The verses seem to be a conflation of two traditions: a hymn or creed (3:18, 22) and a catechetical section on baptism (3:19-21). To understand these high-context verses it is important to be familiar
with Gen 6:1-2 and its interpretation in Enoch. The sacred authors of 1 Peter continue their exhortation to believers to remain faithful. According to Israelite tradition (Gen 6:1-2), angelic sinners instigated the "original sin" of human beings (which was punished by the flood). These lustful beings impregnated human women who gave birth to giants. The beings were eternally imprisoned by God, but they continued to induce human beings to sin. Again according to tradition in 1 Enoch, God took this righteous man to himself (Gen 5:21-24) and Enoch had visions. In his altered states of consciousness experiences, Enoch ascended through a series of heavens where he announced to the 12-21) because of their wickedness (1 Enoch 6-11).

The sacred authors of 1 Peter (Silvanus, 5:12, and Mark, 5:13, but likely not Peter, 1:1, who was already dead) present the Risen Jesus as another Enoch who as he was raised to life (v. 18) ascended through the sky to be exalted at God's right hand (v. 22). On his way, he announced to these angels, authorities, and powers that they remained condemned and would be subordinated to him.

Likewise as God once saved Noah and his family (eight is a symbol of resurrection; see Justin, Dial. 138:1-2), so now in the present is God saving these strangers and resident aliens in Asia Minor through the deluge of their baptism. Thus baptism, which gives believers new life initiated by the resurrection of Jesus, now saves believers by fostering loyal obedience to God's will (see 2:19; 3:16).

Jesus' successful passing of the test of his loyalty as beloved Son in today's gospel (Mark 1: 12-15) is a fitting partner to the verses in 1 Peter which assure believers that they can be as successful as Jesus in remaining steadfast when their loyalty to God is tested.

VERSE BEFORE THE GOSPEL (Mt 4:4b)
One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.

GOSPEL

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+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (1:12–15)

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert,
and he remained in the desert for forty days,
tempted by Satan.

He was among wild beasts,
and the angels ministered to him.

After John had been arrested,
Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the GOSPEL of God:
"This is the time of fulfillment.
The kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent, and believe in the GOSPEL."
The same Spirit who descended on Jesus in his baptism now drives him into the desert for forty days. The result is radical confrontation and temptation by Satan who attempts to frustrate the work of God. The presence of wild beasts may indicate the horror and danger of the desert regarded as the abode of demons or may reflect the paradise motif of harmony among all creatures; cf. Is 11:6–9. The presence of ministering angels to sustain Jesus recalls the angel who guided the Israelites in the desert in the first Exodus (Ex 14:19; 23:20) and the angel who supplied nourishment to Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kgs 19:5–7). The combined forces of good and evil were present to Jesus in the desert. His sustained obedience brings forth the new Israel of God there where Israel's rebellion had brought death and alienation.

After John had been arrested: in the plan of God, Jesus was not to proclaim the good news of salvation prior to the termination of the Baptist's active mission. Galilee: in the Marcan account, scene of the major part of Jesus' public ministry before his arrest and condemnation. The gospel of God: not only the good news from God but about God at work in Jesus Christ. This is the time of fulfillment: i.e., of God's promises. The kingdom of God...Repent: see note on Mt 3:2.

Since scholars recognize Mark's as the earliest of the Gospels, his simple version of the Temptation of Jesus is also considered the primitive report which Matthew and Luke embellished by creating three specific temptations.

From the Mediterranean cultural perspective, the temptation of Jesus by Satan is inevitable after the honorable tribute by the voice from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Every claim to honor is sure to be tested. Someone will try to prove that the compliment was false.

Though Mark does not report Jesus' response to the testing, the reader can assume that Jesus successfully defends his honor as pleasing and beloved Son. Remember that the opening verse of this Gospel established Jesus' claim to honor: "The beginning of the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (1:1).

Then we note that Jesus left his kinship network in Nazareth of Galilee to meet with John in the wilderness (Mark 1:9) where Jesus subsequently finds himself apparently alone with Satan (v. 13). The Mediterranean reader realizes that without his kinship network, Jesus is particularly vulnerable to attack by anyone and everyone. The Mediterranean reader is quite frightened for Jesus until reminded that "the angels waited on him" (v. 13). Of course! The Son of God has a different kinship network which does not abandon him. With such help, Jesus certainly defended his honor successfully against Satan's tests.

Scholars believe that Mark has skipped over a bit of "history" between verses 13 and 14. After his baptism by John, Jesus very likely became John's disciple and baptized others into his baptism (see John 3:22 and contrast the "corrective" in John 4:2). The similarity of Jesus' proclamation ("repent and believe in the good news;" v. 15) to John's preaching of a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:3) strongly suggests that the initial relationship between Jesus and John was that of disciple and leader. Even so, the basic message is: the reign of God is imminent. Here is where the listeners must place their loyalty.

When John was arrested, Jesus and others who followed John were left without a leader. In the Mediterranean world where groups are a central feature of life, and rugged individualism is entirely foreign, the loss of a faction leader is a shocking experience.
In the meantime, as the references in John's Gospel make clear, Jesus attracted followers to himself. This puzzled the Baptist (see Luke 7:18-23) and some of his followers. Jesus' growing experience of success in healing and exorcism persuaded him to undertake a separate ministry, and John's arrest was the appropriate time to begin.

Mark summarizes and simplifies this development: Jesus was baptized by John and successfully defended his honor against Satan. When John was arrested, Jesus initiated his ministry, and only then went about recruiting followers for his faction. Such behavior is perfectly honorable, as one would expect from none other than the Son of God.

While Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the temptation provide an opportunity for Christians to ponder the three tests on the First Sunday of Lent in cycles A and C, Mark's account offers a different consideration. The preaching of John echoed by Jesus invites all believers to consider where they place their loyalty. The Greek word translated as "faith" ("believe in the good news") can be translated culturally by "loyalty," that is, the social glue that binds people together in Mediterranean society. Loyalty, commitment, solidarity—this is the cluster of values that Jesus invites his followers to embrace. Primarily, of course, these values should be directed to the God of Israel, whether in the midst of a storm (Mark 4:40), when seeking a healing from Jesus, God's prophet (Mark 5:34:10:52), or at any other time. Jesus himself is praised for his loyalty (Heb 3:1-3) and obedience to God (Heb 5:8). Mark would very likely second Matthew's challenge: "stay loyal to God and do not hesitate in your loyalty" (21:21).

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "God's love in Christ encounters us, attracts us, and delights us, enabling us to emerge from ourselves and drawing us towards our true vocation, which is love" (SacCar, 35).
- "Since this mission goes on and in the course of history unfolds the mission of Christ Himself, who was sent to preach the Gospel to the poor, the Church, prompted by the Holy Spirit, must walk in the same path on which Christ walked: a path of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice to the death, from which death He came forth a victor by His resurrection" (AG, 5).
- "In the Church's Liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive his presence and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives. He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love" (DCE, 17).
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

The sacrifice of Isaac focuses more on Abraham’s obedience to God’s desire than it does on the sacrifice itself. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. All hope of the promise’s fulfillment rested on Isaac, who embodied all that Abraham loved and all that would ensure his posterity. Isaac was not just any son. He was Abraham’s only son, the one “whom you love.” Without Isaac, Abraham’s own meaning and identity would cease. This makes God’s demand a true test of faith.

Abraham immediately demonstrates his readiness by responding, “Here I am!” As Abraham is about to sacrifice his only son, the Lord’s messenger intervenes. Abraham is praised for being willing to sacrifice “[his] own beloved son” simply because the Lord so desired. Because of his willingness and obedience to God’s word, Abraham is blessed abundantly with many descendants, and becomes the means by which “all the nations of the earth shall find blessing.” This Sunday we focus on God’s willingness to offer his only beloved Son for the salvation of all humanity. Just like Abraham’s love of God, God’s love for all creation was the motivating factor that enabled the ultimate sacrifice of his Son.

A reading from the Book of Genesis (22:1–2, 9a, 10–13, 15–18)

God put Abraham to the test.
He called to him, “Abraham!”
“Here I am!” he replied.
Then God said:

“Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love,
and go to the land of Moriah.
There you shall offer him up as a holocaust
on a height that I will point out to you.”

When they came to the place of which God had told him,
Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it.
Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.
But the LORD’s messenger called to him from heaven,
“Abraham, Abraham!”
“Here I am!” he answered.
“Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the messenger.
“Do not do the least thing to him.
I know now how devoted you are to God,
since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son.”

As Abraham looked about,
he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket.
So he went and took the ram
and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son.
Again the LORD’s messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said:
“I swear by myself, declares the LORD,
that because you acted as you did
in not withholding from me your beloved son,
I will bless you abundantly
and make your descendants as countless
as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore;
your descendants shall take possession
of the gates of their enemies,
and in your descendants all the nations of the earth
shall find blessing—
all this because you obeyed my command.”

* [22:1–19] The divine demand that Abraham sacrifice to God the son of promise is the greatest of his trials; after the successful completion of the test, he has only to buy a burial site for Sarah and find a wife for Isaac. The story is widely recognized as a literary masterpiece, depicting in a few lines God as the absolute Lord, inscrutable yet ultimately gracious, and Abraham, acting in moral grandeur as the great ancestor of Israel. Abraham speaks simply, with none of the wordy evasions of chaps. 13 and 21. The style is laconic; motivations and thoughts are not explained, and the reader cannot but wonder at the scene. In vv. 15–18, the angel repeats the seventh and climactic promise. Moriah: the mountain is not given a precise geographical location here, though 2 Chr 3:1 identifies Moriah as the mountain of Jerusalem where Solomon built the Temple; Abraham is thus the first to worship there. The word “Moriah” is a play on the verb “to see” (Heb. ra’ah); the wordplay is continued in v. 8, “God will provide (lit., “see”)” and in v. 14, Yahweh-yireh, meaning “the Lord will see/provide.”

* [22:9] Bound: the Hebrew verb is ‘aqad, from which is derived the noun Akedah, “the binding (of Isaac),” the traditional Jewish name for this incident.

* [22:13] While the Bible recognizes that firstborn males belong to God (Ex 13:11–16; 34:19–20), and provides an alternate sacrifice to redeem firstborn sons, the focus here is on Abraham’s being tested by God (v. 1). But the widely attested practice of child sacrifice underscores, for all its horror today, the realism of the test.

* [22:14] Yahweh-yireh: a Hebrew expression meaning “the Lord will see/provide.” See note on vv. 1–19.

* [22:15–19] The seventh and climactic statement of the blessings to Abraham. Unlike the other statements, which were purely promissory, this one is presented as a reward for Abraham’s extraordinary trust.

In the Mediterranean world, young boys are raised together with the girls almost exclusively by the women. They are pampered and spoiled so that when they finally enter the men’s world at the age of puberty, they have to begin to learn how to act and behave like men. To teach them this behavior, adult men apply physical discipline to the boys (see Prov 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17), who must learn how to bear pain and suffering without flinching or crying (see Isa 50:6; 53:7). Physical discipline is the strategy by which fathers impose their wills on their sons and teach their sons how to be loyal to the family and obedient to the patriarch. Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice, allowed his father to tie him up, and waited obediently and in silence for the potentially deadly blow his father was about to strike. Abraham surely raised an obedient and loyal son. At the same time, apparently without applying such physical discipline to Abraham, God found the patriarch to be obedient and loyal to the divine command. Because of Abraham’s loyalty and obedience, God stayed Abraham’s hand and promised Abraham numerous descendants and unfailing blessing.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 116:10, 15, 16–17, 18–19.)

Trust in the face of great suffering and pain is the central message of this psalm. The antiphon portrays God as a God of the living. Trust in God, no matter how difficult and challenging, always has life-giving consequences. Walking before the Lord brings assurance that we will always walk "in the land of the
I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.

I believed, even when I said, “I am greatly afflicted.”

Precious in the eyes of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones.

O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your handmaid; you have loosed my bonds.

To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the LORD.

My vows to the LORD I will pay in the presence of all his people,

In the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem.

* [Psalm 116] A thanksgiving in which the psalmist responds to divine rescue from mortal danger (Ps 116:3–4) and from near despair (Ps 116:10–11) with vows and Temple sacrifices (Ps 116:13–14, 17–19). The Greek and Latin versions divide the Psalm into two parts: Ps 116:1–9 and Ps 116:10–19, corresponding to its two major divisions.

* [116:10] I kept faith, even when I said: even in the days of despair, the psalmist did not lose all hope.

* [116:15] Dear in the eyes of the LORD: the meaning is that the death of God’s faithful is grievous to God, not that God is pleased with the death, cf. Ps 72:14. In Wis 3:5–6, God accepts the death of the righteous as a sacrificial burnt offering.

Though the entire psalm was composed in the context of serious illness and perhaps even sentence of execution ("my bonds"), the psalmist has experienced rescue. In today's select verses, we hear the psalmist's unshaken confidence ("I believed") and his gratitude (offer sacrifice in the Temple and call upon the name of the Lord). This echoes the sentiments of Abraham and links the Old Testament reading ("your son, . . . whom you love") with the gospel ("this is my beloved Son:" Mark 9:2-10).

SECOND READING

Paul's argument and rhetorical questions stress God's bountiful love for humanity. Rhetorically, Paul states that if "God is for us" (31 ), there is nothing we need fear. Whatever God does is ultimately for our benefit. The ultimate proof of God's love is Jesus, the offering of the "beloved Son" (Mark 9:7) "for us all" (Romans 8:32). If God was willing to gift us with the beloved, is there nothing that God would not give us? In arguments typical of his day, Paul highlights God's bountiful love for all.

Paul goes even further by emphasizing that neither God nor Jesus would ever bring a charge or condemn "God's chosen ones" (33). God acquits us through Jesus who died, was raised, and sits at the right hand of God interceding on our behalf. What further proof do we need of God's bountiful love, of our God being for us?

A reading from the Letter to the ROMANS 8:31 B-34

Brothers and sisters:

If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own Son

but handed him over for us all,
how will he not also give us everything else along with him?

Who will bring a charge against God’s chosen ones?
It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn?
Christ Jesus it is who died—or, rather, was raised—
who also is at the right hand of God,
who indeed intercedes for us.

* [8:31–39] The all-conquering power of God’s love has overcome every obstacle to Christians’ salvation and every threat to separate them from God. That power manifested itself fully when God’s own Son was delivered up to death for their salvation. Through him Christians can overcome all their afflictions and trials.

Paul wrote this letter from Corinth, or Cenchrae, its port, around 57-58 A.O. This text-segment brings to a conclusion Romans 5-8 in which Paul has described the Christian experience of new life at peace with God, thanks to God’s love. These hymn-like verses celebrate the reality of the good things God has determined for the elect. Realizing this, what else can one say except: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Reference to God not sparing his own Son alludes to Abraham not sparing Isaac (the first reading in today's liturgy) and echoes Jesus’ reminder of his destiny to his chosen disciples on the way down from the mountain after their altered state of consciousness experience of the true identity of Jesus. Notice Paul’s not too subtle reference to the death of the Son “for us ALL:’ indicating that non-Israelites were in-cluded also, fulfilling the inclusive promise to Abraham (Rom 4:16). Further, if God didn’t back down on this gift, how could God retract "everything else"?

The second question: "Who will bring a charge against God’s chosen ones?" derives from a forensic setting and draws inspiration from Isa 50:8-9a. The allusion is to an accusing angel, but given that God has already acquitted us, what lesser being could level a charge at the final judgment that would stick? Moreover, God's Messiah, who is at the right hand of God, continues to intercede for us "as brother" (Rom 8:29). Such privileged kinship makes us invincible against any final threat.

VERSE BEFORE THE GOSPEL (cf. Mt 17:5)
From the shining cloud the Father’s voice is heard: This is my beloved Son, listen to him.

Every Second Sunday of Lent the Church proclaims the Transfiguration of Jesus. This year’s account from Mark presents a select group of disciples witnessing the transfigured Jesus conversing with two towering Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah.

The symbolic elements that the evangelist Mark incorporates into the narrative convey truths about Jesus' identity and mission. In Jewish tradition, a person's transformation was connected with messianic end times. Moses and Elijah are Jewish precursors to messianic times. Having these two converse with Jesus is Mark's way of saying that both Moses and Elijah acknowledge Jesus as Messiah. The voice from the cloud, symbolic of God, proclaims Jesus as "my beloved Son," thus linking Jesus with Isaac in the First Reading. God directs all of us to "listen to him" (7). The disciples are fearful and confused about Jesus' identity and mission. Mark's Transfiguration account clearly identifies Jesus as God's beloved, the Messiah, who would die but would be raised up. Mark uses the Transfiguration as God's way of offering hope to Jesus' followers as they experienced opposition and Jesus' eventual Death. They still needed to learn how to discern God's direction and purpose in their lives, even in the face of death. They had to learn that life, and not death, is God's desire for all his beloved sons and daughters.
+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (9:2–10)

Jesus took Peter, James, and John
and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves.
And he was transfigured before them,
and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.
Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses,
and they were conversing with Jesus.
Then Peter said to Jesus in reply,
“Rabbi, it is good that we are here!
Let us make three tents:
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”
He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified.
Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them;
from the cloud came a voice,
“This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.”
Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone
but Jesus alone with them.
As they were coming down from the mountain,
he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone,
except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead.
So they kept the matter to themselves,
questioning what rising from the dead meant.

* [9:6] It is not clear whether But that you may know...to forgive sins is intended to be a continuation of the words of Jesus or a parenthetical comment of the evangelist to those who would hear or read this gospel. In any case, Matthew here follows the Marcan text.
* [9:8] Who had given such authority to human beings: a significant difference from Mk 2:12 (“They...glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this’”). Matthew’s extension to human beings of the authority to forgive sins points to the belief that such authority was being claimed by Matthew’s church.
* [9:9–17] In this section the order is the same as that of Mk 2:13–22.
* [9:9] A man named Matthew: Mark names this tax collector Levi (Mk 2:14). No such name appears in the four lists of the twelve who were the closest companions of Jesus (Mt 10:2–4; Mk 3:16–19; Lk 6:14–16; Acts 1:13 [eleven, because of the defection of Judas Iscariot]), whereas all four list a Matthew, designated in Mt 10:3 as “the tax collector.” The evangelist may have changed the “Levi” of his source to Matthew so that this man, whose call is given special notice, like that of the first four disciples (Mt 4:18–22), might be included among the twelve. Another reason for the change may be that the disciple Matthew was the source of traditions peculiar to the church for which the evangelist was writing.
* [9:10] His house: it is not clear whether his refers to Jesus or Matthew. Tax collectors: see note on Mt 5:46. Table association with such persons would cause ritual impurity.

The story of Jesus' "transfiguration" is more appropriately de-scribed by the technical term "theophany;" that is, an appear-ance of God to an individual person. The Bible reports a number of theophanies, the
most notable being those experienced by Moses (Exod 19-20; 34) and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:4-18). The appearance of God to Jesus reported by Mark includes elements that are common to all these accounts. (1) Mountain. The setting for the appearance is customarily a mountain (Mark 9:2b; Sinai for Moses; Horeb for Elijah). (2) Witnesses. Frequently there are "eyewitnesses" to the event (9:2a), though they may not see and hear exactly the same things experienced by the one to whom God is appearing. (3) Signs. The witnesses or the accounts report visible signs that the event is occurring. Jesus was "transfigured before them" (v. 2c); "his garments glistening, intensely white" (v. 3a); "a cloud over-shadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice" (v. 7). (4) Shared experience. The witnesses sometimes share in the experience. Peter, James, and John see Moses and Elijah conversing with Jesus (v. 4).

It is not clear whether the disciples heard intelligible conversation between Jesus and the prophets, or whether they heard the statement of the heavenly voice. At the end, Jesus forbids them to tell what they had seen (v. 9) but says nothing about what they had heard. Only Matthew (17:9) calls the event a "vision."

FUNCTION
Scholars in general agree on the function of this experience: God commissions the recipient of the theophany to some new role and status. The Baptism of Jesus was a theophany in which Jesus was authorized by God to preach and perform mighty deeds (Mark 1:15-8:30). At the midpoint in Mark's Gospel, the transfiguration is a theophany that authorizes Jesus to make his way to Jerusalem to meet his des-tiny, the cross, and his vindication (Mark 8:31-16:8). Clearly, theophanies involve revelation.

NATURE
There is less agreement on the nature of the experience. Some have interpreted the transfiguration as a resurrection appearance retrojected into Jesus' life, but this opinion is not well supported and is generally rejected.

Recent commentators interpret the transfiguration as a prophecy of Jesus' parousia, that is, something like a prelude or foreshadowing of Jesus' future coming in glory as judge. We might term this a "preview of coming attractions!" Still others call it "eschatological" without explaining in plain English exactly what that means.

ALTERNATE REALITY
There is a much simpler explanation for the nature of the event. The technical description is "an experience of alter-nate reality;" or an altered state of consciousness. Anthropologists note that such experiences are universal human phenomena, experienced in a wide variety of forms by all human beings. Ninety percent of 488 societies from all parts of the world studied by scientists routinely had this kind of experience. Anthropologist Erika Bourguignon concludes that "societies which do not utilize these states clearly are historical exceptions to be explained, rather than the vast majority of societies that do use these states!"

In a fifth-century document, The Sayings of the Fathers (PG 64:314c-d), an anecdote describes the visit of a pagan priest to a monastery at Scetis to observe the life of the monks. He asked whether as a result of their lifestyle "you see anything of your God?" The abbot Olympius said no. The pagan priest said when he and his fellow priests lived the same lifestyle, "[our God] hides nothing from us but re-veals his mysteries to us:" He wondered if the monks were putting an obstacle in God's way. The elders told the abbot they agreed with the priest's observation.

Physician and anthropologist Arthur Kleinman would agree. He observes that the modern, secular West has particularly effective in blocking access to these pan-human dimensions of the self. The human potential is still there and can be developed, though scientifically oriented Westerners seem fearful of anything over which they cannot exert com-plete control.

Viewing the story of Jesus' transfiguration as an experience of God commonly available in more than 90 percent of the world's cultures presents an exciting new challenge to Western Christians this Lenten
The Advent prayer, "Come Lord Jesus;" inspires a new Lenten prayer: "Lord God, help me to see you face to face as did Moses (Deut 34:10) and Jesus (Mark 9) and many other of your servants through the course of history even to this day:"

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- When God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Abraham does not cease to trust in God's goodness. Thus, Abraham prefigures God the Father, who will sacrifice his Son for all (see CCC, 2572).
- "Jesus wants evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God's presence" (EG, 259).
- "The substantial conversion of bread and wine into his body and blood introduces within creation the principle of a radical change, a sort of 'nuclear fission,' to use an image familiar to us today, which penetrates to the heart of all beings, a change meant to set off a process which transforms reality, a process leading ultimately to the transfiguration of the entire world, to the point where God will be all in all (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:28)" (SacCar, 11).
THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

FIRST READING

If you call a meeting and tell the group that you have a set of rules to give them, it is unlikely that the announcement will be received as good news. That, however, is not the case in this Exodus reading. God convenes the Hebrew people and gives them a set of rules, and in doing so, he draws them more deeply into relationship with himself. He addresses them with the familiar second person pronoun (“I am ... your God ...”), establishing an intimacy that did not exist before. He reminds them that he brought them safely out of Egypt and that he is passionate (ealou) in his commitment to them. In return he asks that they be his and his alone. This first commandment and the next two are new to the people. The remaining seven have been part of the communal wisdom that protects the common good. This time it is God, however, and not a tribal elder, who proclaims them, giving them a new authority. Though some might see the law as restrictive, God’s commandments tell the people who they are - a people set aside and chosen. They provide the security of an eternal promise of faithfulness that frees them to embrace the law as a means of knowing more deeply the God who loves them with a jealous passion.

A reading from the Book of Exodus (20:1–17)

In those days, God delivered all these commandments:

“I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me.

You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them.

For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers’ wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the LORD, your God, in vain.

“Remember to keep holy the sabbath day.

Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD, your God.

No work may be done then either by you, or your son or daughter, or your male or female slave, or your beast, or by the alien who lives with you.

In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested.

That is why the LORD has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

“Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you.

You shall not kill.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
The Exodus reading illustrates the power of the law to transform and define a relationship between God and his people. That said, Psalm 19 as we sing it today provides its own glorious affirmation of the gift of the law of the Lord. This psalm is a poem of praise, divided into three stanzas. The first stanza, which we
do not hear today, proclaims the silent majesty of God's creation. The third stanza requests freedom from sin and merciful cleansing from unknown faults. But it is the second stanza, which we sing at today's liturgy, that magnifies this hymn of praise. With its first words, "The law of the Lord is perfect, / refreshing the soul," the psalmist begins a love song that cherishes the law of the Lord. The law of the Lord is perfect, trustworthy, right, clear, pure, and true. It enlightens the people and is the source of wisdom. It is more precious than gold. It is the law that forms God's people and draws them near. It is the law that defines this newly established covenant. In short, it is the law that gives life to the people.

Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
The law of the L ORD is perfect,  
refreshing the soul;  
The decree of the L ORD is trustworthy,  
giving wisdom to the simple.  
The precepts of the L ORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the command of the L ORD is clear,  
enlightening the eye.  
The fear of the L ORD is pure,  
enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the L ORD are true,  
all of them just.  
They are more precious than gold,  
than a heap of purest gold;  
sweeter also than syrup  
or honey from the comb.

power and wisdom of their creator (Ps 19:2–7). The creator’s wisdom is available to human beings in the law (Ps 19:8–11), toward which the psalmist prays to be open (Ps 19:12–14). The themes of light and speech unify the poem.

The verses selected from this psalm as a response to the first reading sing praise for the Torah. The psalmist has in mind all of YHWH's directives and traditions for the chosen people. God’s name (YHWH) is repeated six times in our verses (LORD in small capital letters always represents YHWH in English translations), emphasizing the personal relationship that God desires to establish by means of the divine directives. This relationship "rejoices the heart" and is "sweeter . . . than syrup or honey from the comb." The refrain (from John 6:68c) transfers the reflection to Jesus' words, thus helping to establish a bridge between the Old Testament reading and today's gospel.

SECOND READING

In his life on earth, Jesus turned every expectation upside down and challenged the expectations and presumptions of nearly everyone. His death confounded some to such an extent that they were unable to see the power and hand of God in this cataclysmic event. Yet for as many Jews and Greeks who missed the point, there were others, "those who are called," who got the message. Paul makes it clear that those Jews and Greeks saw beyond the limits of human imagination and recognized that Jesus Christ is the power and wisdom of God. They didn't necessarily understand it, but they accepted that God's wisdom defied human reason. What seemed like weakness was really strength; what seemed like
abject loss was the story of victory. In the view of the faithful, Christ crucified was and is not the figure of shame, but the source of new life.

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (1:22–25)
Brothers and sisters:
Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,
but we proclaim Christ crucified,
a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,
but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike,
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom,
and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

* [1:21–25] True wisdom and power are to be found paradoxically where one would least expect them, in the place of their apparent negation. To human eyes the crucified Christ symbolizes impotence and absurdity.

The ancient world was intrigued by paradox and reversal. Imagine efforts to save life that end up losing it, but losing life ends up saving it (Mark 8:35). Reversal is at the center of Paul's argument in these verses. Basing themselves on Genesis 1 and their experience of a well ordered and predictable Temple system, Israelites concluded that God behaved in orderly and predictable ways. They could expect constancy and fairness in life. Non-Israelites (Gentiles) relied on logic, rational speculation, and drew a similar conclusion: life is predictable.

These verses center on the generally agreed upon map of honorable persons shared by all in the ancient Middle Eastern world. A person who died by crucifixion had no place on this map. Crucifixion is a shameful death reserved for criminals and not for honorable citizens. A crucified Messiah is indeed a stumbling block to Israelites. It was not what they expected. It is also a stumbling block to non-Israelites in this cultural world because crucifixion is patently dishonorable, outright shameful. Paul, however, insists that in this matter God engages in reversal, for in God's view, Christ crucified is truly "the power of God and the Wisdom of God" (v. 24). God is perfectly free to act in ways that totally contradict the patterns of order and honor commonly accepted in any culture, even the patterns to which observant Israelites have long been socialized. In other words, God is always free to draw new maps of value, of honor that deliberately reverse the expected pattern that would obtain divine favor.

In today's gospel (John 2:13-25), Jesus causes a disturbance in the Temple to call attention to what he believes is a perversion of its purpose and function. Another link between the epistle and gospel is the dubious value of "signs." Both Paul and John indicate that people who seek signs manifest a refusal to trust God. Perhaps this signals a satisfaction with the status quo. If we let God be God, we will surely be in for a surprise.

VERSE BEFORE THE GOSPEL (Jn 3:16)
God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.

John's is the only account of the Gospel that places the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning rather than at the end of the narrative. Each of the evangelists has a theological point to make and orders events accordingly. Thus, we presume that John wanted to depict the raising of Lazarus as the event that propelled Jesus from his public life toward his own suffering and death. Early on, John deems it important to describe the temple incident through a post-Resurrection lens (v. 22). Not only does he
make it clear that the temple is not a marketplace, but in addition, because the temple has been
destroyed by the time John writes, he wants his readers to know that Jesus is the new temple, the place
where humans meet the presence of God. Mindful of the invitation of Lent to grow more deeply in faith,
we pray with Jesus, who leads us to the presence of God and the gift of new life.

GOSPEL

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (2:13–25)
Since the Passover of the Jews was near,
    Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves,
    as well as the money changers seated there.
He made a whip out of cords
    and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen,
    and spilled the coins of the money changers
    and overturned their tables,
    and to those who sold doves he said,
“Take these out of here,
    and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”
His disciples recalled the words of Scripture,
    Zeal for your house will consume me.
At this the Jews answered and said to him,
    “What sign can you show us for doing this?”
Jesus answered and said to them,
    “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”
The Jews said,
    “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years,
    and you will raise it up in three days?”
But he was speaking about the temple of his body.
Therefore, when he was raised from the dead,
    his disciples remembered that he had said this,
    and they came to believe the Scripture
    and the word Jesus had spoken.
While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover,
    many began to believe in his name
when they saw the signs he was doing.
But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all,
    and did not need anyone to testify about human nature.
He himself understood it well.

* [2:13–22] This episode indicates the post-resurrectional replacement of the temple by the person of
    Jesus.
* [2:13] Passover: this is the first Passover mentioned in John; a second is mentioned in Jn 6:4; a third
    in Jn 13:1. Taken literally, they point to a ministry of at least two years.
* [2:14–22] The other gospels place the cleansing of the temple in the last days of Jesus’ life (Matthew,
    on the day Jesus entered Jerusalem; Mark, on the next day). The order of events in the gospel narratives
    is often determined by theological motives rather than by chronological data.
Oxen, sheep, and doves: intended for sacrifice. The doves were the offerings of the poor (Lv 5:7). Money-changers: for a temple tax paid by every male Jew more than nineteen years of age, with a half-shekel coin (Ex 30:11–16), in Syrian currency. See note on Mt 17:24.

Ps 69:10, changed to future tense to apply to Jesus.

This saying about the destruction of the temple occurs in various forms (Mt 24:2; 27:40; Mk 13:2; 15:29; Lk 21:6; cf. Acts 6:14). Mt 26:61 has: “I can destroy the temple of God...”; see note there.

In Mk 14:58, there is a metaphorical contrast with a new temple: “I will destroy this temple made with hands and within three days I will build another not made with hands.” Here it is symbolic of Jesus’ resurrection and the resulting community (see Jn 2:21 and Rev 21:2). In three days: an Old Testament expression for a short, indefinite period of time; cf. Hos 6:2.

Forty-six years: based on references in Josephus (Jewish Wars 1, 21, 1 #401; Antiquities 15, 11, 1 #380), possibly the spring of A.D. 28. Cf. note on Lk 3:1.

Those who follow the Church’s guidelines and apply historical-critical methods in interpreting the Bible expect to discover more than one layer of tradition in various texts. In today’s gospel, the word “remembered” or “recalled” (see w. 17 and 22) is a technical term used by John to describe the process by which the community of believers gradually came to view Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture after his resurrection. Thus, verses 17 and 22 do not describe on-the-spot responses of Jesus’ immediate followers but rather the evangelist’s interpretation of the event more than sixty years after the fact.

Jesus’ “cleansing of the Temple” is the obvious “historical” event that John describes. All the evangelists report it, but the Synoptics place it just prior to Jesus’ trial, making it the more proximate cause of Jesus’ death. John locates it much earlier in the ministry because he has made the raising of Lazarus the more proximate cause of Jesus’ death. Scholars think the Synoptic version is historically more likely. Granting that this is a historical event, how did Jesus’ contemporaries perceive and interpret what he was doing and saying? Roman denarii and Attic drachmas bore pagan or imperial portraits and were unacceptable in paying the Temple tax (see Matt 17:27). Moneychangers performed a necessary service by exchanging these coins for acceptable coins of Tyre. Animals, too, were necessary for sacrifice, but it seems the danger of an escaped animal entering the holy of holies was a risk originally avoided by keeping them outside the Temple precincts. It was likely Caiaphas who introduced them into the Temple precincts.

If Jesus’ contemporaries perceived abuses or potential abuses in these two activities, then Jesus the prophet is clearly viewed as performing a "prophetic symbolic action" after the fashion of Jeremiah (7:11) and Ezekiel. Such an action actually sets in motion the judgment spoken by the prophet. "Stop making the house of my Father a house of marketing!"

Jesus’ original audience would have interpreted Jesus’ claim symbolically, quite in line with his identity as a prophet who is cleansing the Temple. For them, Jesus refers to a spiritual or messianic renewal of the Temple and its function. Such a hope continued even after the destruction of the Herodian Temple and is echoed in the fourteenth of the Eighteen Benedictions recited in the synagogue. This benediction combines the expectation of a rebuilt Temple with the hope of a coming Messiah.
The evangelist's interpretation in verse 21, "he was speaking of the Temple of his body;' is baffling from a Mediterranean cultural perspective which cherishes group orientation and commitment. Emphasis on the individual (body) is practically nonexistent because it would weaken and destroy a group. The Qumran community viewed itself as the true temple of God's spirit. "Insofar as the laymen are concerned, [the community] will indeed be a temple (or sanctuary); and insofar as the priesthood is concerned, it will indeed constitute the basis for a true 'holy of holies'" (see IQS 8.7-10).

Paul, too, viewed the community as the temple in which the Spirit resides: "Or do you [Greek plural] not know that your [Greek plural, therefore collective] body is a temple [or sanctuary] of the Holy Spirit within you [Greek plural]?" (1 Cor 6:19).

That John identifies the risen body of Jesus (v. 21) rather than the community as the new Temple is culturally startling. From a purely Mediterranean cultural perspective, this individualistic interpretation could be the consequence of his group's distrust of all other groups (see Raymond Brown's The Community of the Beloved Disciple).

From a faith perspective, John says it all came clear after the resurrection (v. 22). How do culture and faith (understood as loyalty) relate to each other?

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- In the Ten Commandments, we see how we are called to respond to God with love (CCC, 2083).
- In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God the Father shows forth the power in his believers (CCC, 272).
- "God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth in which righteousness dwells ... 1 Then death will have been conquered, the daughters and sons of God will be raised in Christ and what was sown in weakness and dis-honor will become incorruptible" 2_ (GS, 39).
FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

FIRST READING

Second Chronicles, the last book in Jewish Scripture, concludes with these thoughts. God's Chosen People, along with their leaders and priests, are found guilty of infidelity to covenant promises, practicing abominations, and polluting the Jerusalem Temple. God continually had compassion on them and sent messengers to turn their hearts back to God. But the people refused to listen and change their hearts. God's anger flared, bringing destruction and ruin upon the land, the Temple, and the people, exiling the survivors to slavery in Babylon. Sabbath infidelity resulted in seventy years of punishment until all lost Sabbaths were retrieved.

Darkness covered the land and the people, yet the Lord did not forget the covenant promises. God's compassion empowers a foreign king, Cyrus the Persian, to defeat the Babylonians and to restore the people to their land. Seeing himself as God's instrument, Cyrus exhorts God's people to return home and build a house for the Lord in Jerusalem. In the midst of darkness, God's compassion shines bright. God's expansive love overcomes the rejection and the darkness, offering another opportunity for the people to turn back and renew fidelity to covenant promises. We are invited once more to respond to God's expansive love.

A reading from the second Book of Chronicles (36:14–16, 19–23)

In those days, all the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people added infidelity to infidelity,
practicing all the abominations of the nations
and polluting the LORD's temple
which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers,
send his messengers to them,
for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place.

But they mocked the messengers of God,
despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets,
until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy.

Their enemies burnt the house of God,
tore down the walls of Jerusalem,
set all its palaces afire,
and destroyed all its precious objects.

Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon,
where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons until the kingdom of the Persians came to power.

All this was to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah:
"Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths,
during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest
while seventy years are fulfilled."

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia,
in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah,
the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing:

“Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia:
All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him!”

The Chronicler is probably a Levite cantor who manifests related concerns throughout his books. He is concerned with the aesthetic, vocal, and conservative dimensions of Temple ritual. While it may sound boring and legalistic, his work is concerned with God’s word and how to please God in worship. In this final chapter, he continues to reflect upon and reinterpret the books of Kings, his source, as he explains the reason for the Babylonian Exile. In the Chronicler’s view, the prophets are primarily the guardians of theocracy. They bring God’s word to kings who are either blessed or judged by God according to their response. The prophetic message, so often cast in the "lawsuit pattern" (Hebrew: rib), made it clear that God frequently engaged in covenant lawsuit with the chosen people. In today’s verses, the Chronicler clearly says it was a cumulative process of ignoring the word that provoked God’s anger and brought about the Exile.

The Chronicler combines ideas from Jeremiah (25:11-12; 29:10) with notions from Leviticus (26:34-35, 43), but with a difference. While Leviticus looks to the punishment of disobedience, the Chronicler believes that an indefinitely long period (Jeremiah’s seventy years) of sabbatical rests will prepare the land for the return of the exiles (see Lev 26:40-45). In other words, God will remember and remain faithful to the covenant. The report of Cyrus’ decree is a fitting conclusion not only to these verses but to the entire work of the Chronicler. As John tells us in the gospel (3:14-21), God continues to rescue the chosen people, ultimately sending the Son so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 137:1–2, 3, 4–5, 6.)

The psalm reveals the anguish and pain of an exiled people separated from all that gave meaning and purpose to life. Their captors even tormented them by forcing them to sing joyously about the land and Temple that had been polluted and destroyed. In the midst of such anguish and sorrow, how does one maintain identity and balance? The psalmist’s response challenges all to remember who they are and to whom they belong. Jerusalem, the Temple and the land, must never be forgotten. That active recollection keeps hope alive, and enables the people to endure much. God must never be forgotten or ignored, because covenant love endures forever, no matter how difficult and challenging life becomes. In the midst of darkness, God never forgets us and we must never forget God. This is the eternal bond that covenant love creates and sustains.

Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

By the streams of Babylon
we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the aspens of that land
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked of us
the lyrics of our songs,
And our despoilers urged us to be joyous:
“How could we sing a song of the LORD
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand be forgotten!
May my tongue cleave to my palate
if I remember you not,
If I place not Jerusalem
ahead of my joy.

* [Psalm 137] A singer refuses to sing the people’s sacred songs in an alien land despite demands from Babylonian captors (Ps 137:1–4). The singer swears an oath by what is most dear to a musician—hands and tongue—to exalt Jerusalem always (Ps 137:5–6). The Psalm ends with a prayer that the old enemies of Jerusalem, Edom and Babylon, be destroyed (Ps 137:7–9).

The annals of Sennacherib report that male and female singers were taken in the sack of Jerusalem to provide entertainment for the Assyrian court (see 2 Kgs 18:13-16). Ezra (2:41) explicitly enumerates these singers among the returnees from the Babylonian exile. The key words here are “remember” (vv. 1 and 6) and “sing’ To sing the songs of Zion in unclean lands (see Amos 7:17; Hos 9:3) would be tragic. While some think this means that this psalm was sung only in Babylon, it is very probable that the returning singers would hymn it as they looked at the rubble of the destroyed Temple. A curse is laid on any Israelite who would betray or forget the Holy City. Since the left hand in the Middle East is used only for toilet functions and never for anything else, to wish that one’s right hand would wither is equivalent to wishing for death. The loss of one’s right hand is probably a double-death for a musician. The exhortation to “remember” is a fitting response to the first reading in which the kings obviously did not remember or heed the words of God’s prophets. Both readings lead appropriately to Nicodemus in the gospel who may not have “forgotten” anything but took a long while to understand Jesus completely.

SECOND READING

The depth and richness of God’s mercy in Christ suffuses these verses from Ephesians. The perennial biblical theme of God’s love and mercy, manifested most clearly in the darkness of sin and death, shines brightly here, offering all life-giving hope and joy. We are saved not by any merit of our own, but as a totally free and gracious gift from God. In Christ, not only did God save us from sin and death, but he raised us up, and even seats us at the honored place with Christ.

Ephesians emphasizes that we are God’s handiwork, created anew in Christ Jesus for the "good works that God has prepared in advance" (10). God calls us out of our sinful darkness and saves and creates us anew in Christ, the model of good works that God desires of all believers. We do good works not to gain salvation, but in faithful response to the marvelous saving deeds God has accomplished for us in Christ Jesus. In acknowledging God’s expansive love, we commit ourselves to taking on the mind and heart of Jesus, living as God desires.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians (2:4–10)
Brothers and sisters:
God, who is rich in mercy,
because of the great love he had for us,
even when we were dead in our transgressions,
brought us to life with Christ—by grace you have been saved—,
raised us up with him,
and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,
that in the ages to come
He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace
in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.
For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not from you; it is the gift of God;
it is not from works, so no one may boast.
For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works
that God has prepared in advance,
that we should live in them.

* [2:1–10] The recipients of Paul's letter have experienced, in their redemption from transgressions and
sins, the effect of Christ's supremacy over the power of the devil (Eph 2:1–2; cf. Eph 6:11–12), who rules
not from the netherworld but from the air between God in heaven and human beings on earth. Both
Jew and Gentile have experienced, through Christ, God's free gift of salvation that already marks them
for a future heavenly destiny (Eph 2:3–7). The language dead, raised us up, and seated us...in the
heavens closely parallels Jesus' own passion and Easter experience. The terms in Eph 2:8–9 describe
salvation in the way Paul elsewhere speaks of justification: by grace, through faith, the gift of God, not
from works; cf. Gal 2:16–21; Rom 3:24–28. Christians are a newly created people in Christ, fashioned by
God for a life of goodness (Eph 2:10).

* [2:1–7] These verses comprise one long sentence in Greek, the main verb coming in Eph 2:5,
God brought us to life, the object you/us dead in...transgressions being repeated in Eph 2:1, 5; cf. Col
2:13.

* [2:2] Age of this world: or “aeon,” a term found in gnostic thought, possibly synonymous with
the rulers of this world, but also reflecting the Jewish idea of “two ages,” this present evil age and “the
age to come”; cf. 1 Cor 3:19; 5:10; 7:31; Gal 1:4; Ti 2:12. The disobedient: literally, “the sons of
disobedience,” a Semitism as at Is 30:9.

* [2:5] Our relation through baptism with Christ, the risen Lord, is depicted in terms of realized
eschatology, as already exaltation, though Eph 2:7 brings in the future aspect too.

[For brief background, see Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.] Like others in his culture, Paul divides
time into "be-fore" and "after" periods with variations: then vs. now (Eph 2:11-22; 5:8); once but now
(Eph 2:1-10); mystery hidden vs. mystery now revealed (Eph 3:4-7, 8-11); and mystery prom-ised vs.
mystery now given (2 Tim 1:9-11). Here the one who writes this letter in the name of Paul describes the
Ephe-sians' conditions as once being dead (in their transgres-sions), but now alive with Christ. More
than being raised to new life, believers have been enthroned with Jesus in the sky. However, there is a
variation here. Whereas Paul ordinarily contrasts faith and good works (e.g., Rom 3:28), this letter writer
contrasts God's mercy, love, grace with good works. In today's gospel (John 3:14-21), John's Jesus spells
out God's love and gift of life eternal to those who believe in him.

VERSE BEFORE THE GOSPEL (Jn 3:16)
God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so everyone who believes in him might have eternal
life.
John's account of the Gospel consistently plays with the images of light and darkness as a means of getting at the core of what God is about in the person of Jesus. Darkness is associated with sinfulness and evil, while light is associated with the person of Jesus and with what God is doing in the world. Jesus is God's light come into a sinful, evil world, to manifest God's love, care, and concern for all. All that God desires is that we believe in Jesus, and love one another in the same expansive manner that God has loved us.

John 3:16, which we commonly see on signs at sporting events and on bumper stickers, is the core of John's message and portrait of Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." In Jesus, God has called us out of darkness. God asks that we respond to that expansive love by believing in Jesus. For John, believing is not only a head, lip, and heart event, it is also an action event, leading us to live and act like Jesus. This way of acting will demand much of Jesus and of us. Our coming into the light demands that we take up that challenge, knowing that God will always

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (3:14–21)

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed.

But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

* [3:14] Lifted up: in Nm 21:9 Moses simply “mounted” a serpent upon a pole. John here substitutes a verb implying glorification. Jesus, exalted to glory at his cross and resurrection, represents healing for all.

* [3:15] Eternal life: used here for the first time in John, this term stresses quality of life rather than duration.

* [3:16] Gave: as a gift in the incarnation, and also “over to death” in the crucifixion; cf. Rom 8:32.

* [3:17–19] Condemn: the Greek root means both judgment and condemnation. Jesus’ purpose is to save, but his coming provokes judgment; some condemn themselves by turning from the light.

* [3:19] Judgment is not only future but is partially realized here and now.

One familiar sign waved by spectators at sports events in hopes that television cameras will transmit their message is: 'John 3:16.' A favorite of many Christians, this verse states: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."
CONTEXT OF THE GOSPEL

Tom from its context (the entire Gospel of John and the Johan-nine community), this verse presents a
heartwarming thought. The fuller literary context, as reported in today's reading, dark-ens the picture:
"people loved darkness rather than light" (Gohn 3:19).
For John, the term "world" carries a negative meaning. It includes both Judeans and Gentiles without
distinction and describes those who refuse to accept or believe in Jesus. Oppo-sition to the "world" is a
dominant theme in John 14-17, yet the negative character of the "world" is evident throughout the
Gospel.
The world is at odds with Jesus (16:20; 17:14, 16; 18:36) and with his Spirit (14:17; 16:8-11). Worse, it
hates Jesus and those who believe in and follow after him (7:7; 15:18-19; 16:20). That the inhabitants of
the world preferred darkness to light earns them the name "children of darkness" (12:35-36). For this
reason, Jesus refuses to pray for the world; instead, he de-feats the world (16:33).
Contemporary Christians, like those who wave the "John 3:16" signs at sporting events, ought to heed
the caution of the eminent Johannine scholar, Raymond Brown, against the naivete that this passage
sometimes engenders. The world is not exclusively neutral, nor is it patiently awaiting good news. There
are many who are actively hostile to Jesus, to Chris-tianity and its message. Encountering the disbelief of
the "world" was a shocking experience for the Johannine Christians. This knowledge should help their
contemporary descendants to be forewarned and forearmed.

CONTEXT OF JOHN 3

Today's verses are selected from a more extensive discussion that Jesus had with Nicodemus, a Pharisee
and "ruler" or "re-li-gious authority" among the Judeans of the house of Israel.
He was attracted to Jesus, but approaching him at night suggests that Nicodemus was trying to hide his
interest (3:2). Anyone at all familiar with the nosey Mediterranean world where privacy is practically
nonexistent can sympathize with Nicodemus' strategy to protect his reputation, his honor. Once ruined
or lost, a reputation or honor cannot be re-gained.
But the discussion reported and interpreted by John runs in a circle because of Nicodemus' apparent
failure to under-stand Jesus' use of a Greek word with two meanings: "again" and "from above" (3:3-9).
Nicodemus typifies many who came to Jesus but had difficulty understanding him at first. Some never
understood him (see John 2:23-25).
To his credit, though, Nicodemus seems to have pondered and perhaps even pursued his interest in
Jesus further, no doubt in discussion with others in typically Mediterranean, group-centered fashion.
Later in the Gospel (7:37-44), Jesus' statements in the Temple prompt a divided response in his
au-dience. Some believe in him, and others want to arrest him.
The chief priests and Pharisees are disappointed and taunt and insult the Temple police for not arresting
Jesus. At this moment, Nicodemus exposes himself to shame by defending Jesus' right to a hearing (vv.
50-51). Shame is not long in coming: "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?" ask his fellow
Pharisees derisively. Nicodemus the night visitor has now gone one step further, to daytime defender of
Jesus, at least indirectly.
The final appearance of Nicodemus in John's Gospel makes his spiritual journey appear to be complete.
When Jesus dies, Nicodemus comes forward publicly with myrrh and aloes to anoint the body. He joins
Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus who feared the Judeans, and both of them see to the
burial of Jesus' corpse (19:38-42).
This final appearance of Nicodemus illustrates John 3:14: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the
wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life;•
and John 12:32: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.' Lent is an
opportunite time to redirect one's path to Jesus.
CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Although this world turned away from God through sin, God reached out again and again to draw the world to himself, finally sending his own Son in human flesh. This Son expressed the fullness of the Father's love by accepting death on the cross. The Father in turn glorified his Son by raising him from the dead and making him the source of eternal life for all who believe" (FYH, p. 6).

- "We have come to believe in God’s love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is ... the result of ... an encounter with an event, a person .... Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words: ’God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should have eternal life” (DCE, 1).

- "The Word of God, through whom all things were made, became man and dwelt among us ... He reveals to us that 'God is love'” (GS, 38).
FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

FIRST READING

In most of his preaching, Jeremiah was an uncompromising prophet of judgment. He called his people to repentance. They would not listen. The message people needed to hear after defeat by the Babylonians was different. Jeremiah began to preach wonderful words of hope. The opening phrase “the days are coming” (v. 31) looks forward to a new time. This phrase, used throughout the Book of Jeremiah, sometimes refers to the period after the exile and other times projects into the future messianic period. At this future time, which is near at hand, there will be a new covenant with the house of Judah and Israel (v. 31).

The first covenant, made with Moses and the people in the desert, had obviously been broken. Jeremiah says that God will offer a new beginning and a new covenant. Unlike the first, etched in stone and external, this new bond between God and Israel will be written on the heart of every Israelite. It will be an interior covenant accessible to each person without intermediaries. Finally, the new covenant will not be based upon judgment but upon God’s love and forgiveness (v. 34).

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah (31:31–34)

The days are coming, says the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel
and the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers
the day I took them by the hand
to lead them forth from the land of Egypt;
for they broke my covenant,
and I had to show myself their master, says the LORD.
But this is the covenant that I will make
with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD.
I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts;
I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives
how to know the LORD.
All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD,
for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.

* [31:31–34] The new covenant is an occasional prophetic theme, beginning with Hosea. According to Jeremiah, (a) it lasts forever; (b) its law (torah) is written in human hearts; (c) it gives everyone true knowledge of God, making additional instruction (torah) unnecessary. The Dead Sea Scroll community claimed they were partners in a “new covenant.” The New Testament presents the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as inaugurating a new covenant open to anyone who professes faith in Jesus the Christ. Cf. Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 8:8–12. Know the LORD: cf. note on 22:15–16.

Having reviewed the roles of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Cyrus in God’s redemptive plan in the readings on preceding Sundays of this Lent, we turn today to Jeremiah. The younger contemporary of Jeremiah, the prophet Ezekiel, had already mentioned that God would give his people a new heart and guide them...
in walking according to the covenant stipulations (Ezek 36:26-27). It is Jeremiah, however, who alone in
the Hebrew Bible dares to say that God will establish an entirely new covenant. Such a message is so
contrary to the long-standing tradition and belief, it is no wonder Jeremiah suf-fered for preaching it.
Such an incredible idea could only come from the source, from God. Jeremiah could not have imagined
it or calculated to say it for shock effect.
Not that God would entirely reject the chosen people. On the contrary, they had strayed so far from God
that God has to make a fresh start. This time around God would not rely on teachers, leaders, friends, or
relatives in community, but rather upon the intimate and personal experience of each person. The key
experience would be grasping God's forgive-ness and mercy in restoring the people to their land. Again
we notice how the individual in collectivistic cultures always manages to melt into the larger community,
the collectivity.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 51:3–4, 12–13, 14–15.)

Psalm 51 focuses on the heart, the same place Jeremiah focused. Conversion begins in the inner part of
a person and is possible only with the help of God. The psalmist readily acknowledges sin and prays that
God will restore all the things damaged by sin. In return, the psalmist promises to help others with the
conversion process by offering instruction in God's ways.

Create a clean heart in me, O God.
Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.
A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.
Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.
I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners shall return to you.

* [Psalm 51] A lament, the most famous of the seven Penitential Psalms, prays for the removal of the
personal and social disorders that sin has brought. The poem has two parts of approximately equal
length: Ps 51:3–10 and Ps 51:11–19, and a conclusion in Ps 51:20–21. The two parts interlock by
repetition of “blot out” in the first verse of each section (Ps 51:3, 11), of “wash (away)” just after the
first verse of each section (Ps 51:4) and just before the last verse (Ps 51:9) of the first section, and of
“heart,” “God,” and “spirit” in Ps 51:12, 19. The first part (Ps 51:3–10) asks deliverance from sin, not just
a past act but its emotional, physical, and social consequences. The second part (Ps 51:11–19) seeks
something more profound than wiping the slate clean: nearness to God, living by the spirit of God (Ps
51:12–13), like the relation between God and people described in Jer 31:33–34. Nearness to God brings
joy and the authority to teach sinners (Ps 51:15–16). Such proclamation is better than offering sacrifice
(Ps 51:17–19). The last two verses express the hope that God's good will toward those who are cleansed
and contrite will prompt him to look favorably on the acts of worship offered in the Jerusalem Temple
(Ps 51:19 [20–21]).
The verses of this well-known lamentation for sin echo the sentiments of Ezekiel and Jeremiah very well. The psalmist realizes that it will take nothing short of a fresh creation to renovate his inner spirit. He prays for this renewal with He-brew vocabulary drawn from the Priestly narrator of the creation story (Genesis 1). These psalm verses form a good bridge to the gospel John 12:20-33 in which Jesus speaks of such renewals as a grain dying to produce much fruit, or a person losing life in this world to preserve it for eternal life.

SECOND READING

Hebrews is a complex book. It was probably a sermon that circulated among the churches directed to Christians of Jewish origin who were weak in faith. In this pericope, the author wants to assure the hearers that Christ was truly human. The reference to prayers made with a loud voice and with tears may refer to the agony in the garden. This suffering is meant to console the hearers, who are undergoing their own persecution. Suffering is not foreign to Christ and therefore will not be foreign to his followers. Likewise, as Christ was resurrected (saved from death, v. 5), so too will be those who remain faithful to God.

Being Son of God in no way saved Jesus from the realities of human life. What was unique about his life is that he remained completely and perfectly obedient to God in the midst of his trials. Because he remained faithful, all have access to the salvation his faithfulness accomplished: eternal life. He is the model of the new covenant.

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (5:7–9)

In the days when Christ Jesus was in the flesh,
    he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears
    to the one who was able to save him from death,
    and he was heard because of his reverence.
Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered;
    and when he was made perfect,
    he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

* [5:7] He offered prayers...to the one who was able to save him from death: at Gethsemane (cf. Mk 14:35), though some see a broader reference (see note on Jn 12:27).
* [5:8] Son though he was: two different though not incompatible views of Jesus’ sonship coexist in Hebrews, one associating it with his exaltation, the other with his preexistence. The former view is the older one (cf. Rom 1:4).

[For the context of these verses see Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time.) Today's verses explain how Jesus in his earthly life demonstrated his full solidarity with human beings in his con-crete cultural setting. To appreciate the sacred author’s point, let us review the process by which young boys were raised from infancy to puberty. (Review Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time.) A wife was not fully integrated into her husband's family until she bore a son (cf. 1 Sam 1: 1-19). The birth of a son was great joy for all. Boys were raised by all the women with little to no male presence until the age of puberty. They were pampered, pleasured, and in modern terms quite "spoiled." Lacking male role-models during this time of life, they entered puberty with a sense of gender-ambiguity. At puberty, without the assistance of a rite of passage (bar mitzvah is Talmudic in origin), boys were pushed unceremoniously into the harsh and hierarchical world of men. They ran back to the comforts of the women's world, but the women would simply return them to the men's world.
Proverbs (e.g., 13:24; 23:13) and Sirach (30:1, 12) precribe frequent and severe physical discipline of boys as a means of instilling obedience and subordination. The patriarch was effective only if he could impose his will upon and secure the unswerving loyalty of his sons, something the father in Jesus' parable failed to accomplish (Luke 15:11-32). Eventually the adolescent son would become a man and spend his life continuing to learn how and trying to prove it (see the Servant Songs in Isaiah, the model of a cultural hero for males to imitate).

Thus, in today's verses the sacred author reflects that Jesus, a very human Mediterranean male, recognized the destiny his Father had designed for him. Jesus prayed for deliverance and was indeed heard (deliverance was his exaltation by the Father). The lectionary translation ignores Jesus' Mediterranean cultural experience described in the preceding para-graph when it says: "even though he was son, he learned obedience from what he suffered:" That same Greek particle spend his life continuing to learn how and trying to prove it (see the Servant Songs in Isaiah, the model of a cultural hero for males to imitate).

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The verses are appropriate for the lenten season and relate to today's gospel (John 12:20-33) in which Jesus reflects upon his death under the image of a grain of wheat which must die to bear much fruit. These reflections will probably raise more questions for modern believers than they will an-swer. How can we relate to such barbaric-to our way of understanding-relationships between fathers and sons? If one must die to gain eternal life, why must some suffer so long before death, especially when the condition can be nei-ther eliminated nor alleviated while others are spared this experience? As a cancer patient said to a sociologist in the hospice: "Three hours on the cross is easy. Try a lifetime of cancer:'

VERSE BEFORE THE GOSPEL (Jn 12:26)

Whoever serves me must follow me, says the Lord; and where I am, there also will my servant be.

GOSPEL

This Gospel passage comes just after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem when he was welcomed as a Messiah into the city. This discourse stands in contrast to that joyous welcome (12:12-13). The arrival of some Greek inquirers becomes an occasion for Jesus to announce that his hour has come (v. 23). In the Gospel of John, seeing is a metaphor for faith; their desire "to see Jesus" (v. 21) is an expression of their faith in Jesus. In re-sponse to their request, Jesus teaches the meaning of his messiahship. It is clear that Jesus' "hour" refers to his Passion: his glorification will take place through the cross. John then interrupts the glorification theme with a parable about wheat (v. 24). Death is necessary for new life. The rich harvest of a single death may refer to the fruit of Jesus' Death: the faith of the Gentiles. Then Jesus applies the parable to his followers. They must be willing to imi-tate his suffering and Death if they are to bear fruit. In verse 27, Jesus resumes the discussion of his own Death. While Jesus is troubled, he accepts his sacrificial Death as the purpose for his coming into the world. The Passion was a deliberate but difficult choice made by Jesus for the glory of the Father (v. 28). Jesus expresses grief and anguish when making this choice; he is truly human.

In the other Gospels, a voice from heaven speaks at Jesus' baptism and Transfiguration. Here, the voice from heaven confirms Jesus' choice.
to accept the hour of his passion. It is a foreshadowing of the future: Jesus will one day be glorified by God because of his willingness to suffer and die. Some will understand this sign, and others will misunderstand God's voice and misinterpret it.

The final verses express the meaning of Jesus' Death and Resurrection in cosmic terms. Jesus tells the people that through his Death, the ruler of this world (Satan) will be driven out (v. 31). This does not mean there will be no more evil but that the decisive victory will be won on the Cross; death is defeated for those who believe.

+A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (12:20–33)

Some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover Feast came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.”

Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.

Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.

Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be.

The Father will honor whoever serves me.

“I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it and will glorify it again.”

The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, “An angel has spoken to him.”

Jesus answered and said, “This voice did not come for my sake but for yours.

Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.”

He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.

* 12:20–36] This announcement of glorification by death is an illustration of “the whole world” (19) going after him.

* 12:20] Greeks: not used here in a nationalistic sense. These are probably Gentile proselytes to Judaism; cf. Jn 7:35.

* 12:21–22] Philip...Andrew: the approach is made through disciples who have distinctly Greek names, suggesting that access to Jesus was mediated to the Greek world through his disciples. Philip and
Andrew were from Bethsaida (Jn 1:44); Galileans were mostly bilingual. See: here seems to mean “have an interview with.”
* [12:23] Jesus’ response suggests that only after the crucifixion could the gospel encompass both Jew and Gentile.
* [12:24] This verse implies that through his death Jesus will be accessible to all. It remains just a grain of wheat: this saying is found in the synoptic triple and double traditions (Mk 8:35; Mt 16:25; Lk 9:24; Mt 10:39; Lk 17:33). John adds the phrases (Jn 12:25) in this world and for eternal life.
* [12:25] His life: the Greek word psychē refers to a person’s natural life. It does not mean “soul,” for Hebrew anthropology did not postulate body/soul dualism in the way that is familiar to us.
* [12:27] I am troubled: perhaps an allusion to the Gethsemane agony scene of the synoptics.
* [12:31] Ruler of this world: Satan.

HONOR, THE FATHER, AND SPIRITUAL PHENOMENA

Today’s gospel selection resounds with themes of honor, the Middle Eastern core value that lies at the heart of understanding Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. It helps bring chapter 12 and the Book of Signs to a conclusion.

Jesus declares that "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (v. 23). He then prays: "Father, glorify your name!" and the Father responds: "I have glorified it and will glorify it again" (v. 28). The word "glorify" belongs to the semantic field of honor. It means "to assert or declare the honor" of the Son and the Father.

Throughout the first twelve chapters of this Gospel, Jesus has won arguments with opponents, worked seven signs, shared impressive and significant teaching with "his own people" (1:11), but they received him not. They denied his claims to honor.

Now Gentiles come to see Jesus and this appears to be the reason for his statement that at last he will receive the honorable recognition he deserves. The Greek word "to see" may also mean "to visit with" or "to meet." In John’s heavily self-interpreted Gospel, however, the word probably has the meaning "to believe in"; there were still many who did not believe in Jesus despite the signs he worked.

Further, Jesus declares that the hour has come. Will he shirk it? Will he ask the Father to "save me from this hour?" (v. 27). No, for it is precisely through his obedience unto death that he honors the Father’s will, and the Father bestows honor by raising Jesus from the dead.

The parable of the seed (v. 24) indicates the means by which Jesus will be glorified. His death will be the source of life for many, actually for all (Israelites and non-Israelites). Moreover, those who follow Jesus will gain their entry to eternal life through death (vv. 25-26). For this reason, the one who is too attached to life in this world will not prove to be as honorable a follower of Jesus as the one who prefers life in the world to come. In eternity, the disciple will be with Jesus in the Father’s love, an honorable status that nothing on earth can match.

The "voice from the sky" (v. 28) is yet another indication of Jesus’ honorable reputation. In the Hebrew Scripture, this is the familiar bat qol or "daughter of the voice" of God which addressed the prophets. Some in the crowd think they have heard thunder (which was also considered the voice of God, see Ps 29); others think it the voice of an angel.

This event is yet another instance of Jesus momentarily experiencing alternate reality, that dimension of the real world inhabited by spiritual beings to which more than 90 percent of the world’s cultures have routine and normal access (see the discussion of this point relative to the transfiguration of Jesus on the Second Sunday of Lent). Like the prophets, holy patriarchs, and others among his Mediterranean ancestors, Jesus regularly interacts with this reality.

The fact that the audience was not shocked or disturbed, but offered instead some of the commonly accepted explanations for this phenomenon, indicates that they were fully aware of Jesus’ experience
even though on this occasion no one else seemed to be participating in it with him. The "voice from heaven" is a culturally specific element in the Mediterranean alternate state of consciousness. All alternate states must be interpreted according to the traditional beliefs of their respective culture. Newspaper and magazine reports that contemporary Westerners are hungering for more intimate contact with the spiritual world suggest an echo of the Gentile request of Andrew: "Sir, we would like to see (or believe in] Jesus."

Seeking a broker to establish contact with a patron is a common Mediterranean strategy. Yet notice that Philip takes the request to Andrew, then both seem to lead the Greeks to Jesus. The group-centered Mediterranean world gives pause to Western individualists who might want to "do it alone, on my own, thank you very much." Lenten communal observances in many churches, such as educational programs or devotional activities, provide a golden opportunity "to see, visit with, and come to a deeper faith in Jesus:"

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "By recalling in this way the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens up to the faithful the riches of the saving actions and the merits of her Lord, and makes them present to all times, allowing the faithful to enter into contact with them and to be filled with the grace of salvation" (SC, 102).
- "The greatest mysteries of the redemption are celebrated yearly by the Church beginning with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday until Vespers of Easter Sunday. This time is called 'the triduum of the crucified, buried and risen'; it is also called the 'Easter triduum' because during it is celebrated the paschal mystery, that is, the passing of the Lord from this world to his Father. The church, by the celebration of this mystery through liturgical signs and sacramentals, is united to Christ, her spouse, in intimate communion" (PS, 38).
HOLY WEEK

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD’S PASSION

Although we commonly speak of this day as Palm Sunday, its full title mentions the Passion of the Lord as well. Two Gospel passages are proclaimed on this day: one about the palms, the other about the Passion. The first is proclaimed after the blessing of branches and before the entrance procession. In Matthew’s account, the people recognize Jesus as the Son of David who comes in the name of the Lord. The word Hosanna means something like “save us.” It comes from the same Hebrew root as Jesus’ own name, Yeshua, which means “savior.”

The evangelist seems to have misunderstood Zechariah 9:9, where the prophet uses two different ways to express a humble king astride an animal. Matthew thought he meant two different animals, so he has Jesus straddling them both.

The Solemn Entrance

A reading from the Gospel of Mark 11:1-10

When they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately on entering it, you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone should say to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ reply, ‘The Master has need of it and will send it back here at once.’” So they went off and found a colt tethered at a gate outside on the street, and they untied it. Some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They answered them just as Jesus had told them to, and they permitted them to do it. So they brought the colt to Jesus and put their cloaks over it. And he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. Those preceding him as well as those following kept crying out: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! Hosanna in the highest!”

FIRST READING

This is the third of Isaiah’s four oracles of the servant of God. It poignantly foreshadows the suffering of Jesus as he approaches Calvary, giving his back to those who beat him. Not shielding his face from bullets and spitting, yet confident that the Lord God will be his help.
This passage was newly added to the Palm Sunday Mass after the Second Vatican Council. There were very few Old Testament readings on Sundays prior to the Council. This passage broadens the Christian's appreciation of the role of the Son of God in the eternal plan of salvation.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (50:4–7)
The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back. I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting. The Lord God is my help, Therefore, I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.

* [50:1] Responding to the people’s complaint of utter abandonment by God, the prophet asserts that their sins were responsible for their banishment. Since there was no bill of divorce, the bond between the Lord and his people still exists and he has the power to deliver them (v. 2).
* [50:2] Israel’s faith in God is weak; the people do not answer God’s call, nor believe promises of deliverance.
* [50:4–11] The third of the four “servant of the Lord” oracles (cf. note on 42:1–4); in vv. 4–9 the servant speaks; in vv. 10–11 God addresses the people directly.
* [50:5] The servant, like a well-trained disciple, does not refuse the divine vocation.

Just like the other Servant Songs, this third in the series of four from Second Isaiah describes the nation Israel in history and in Captivity. She will recognize herself in the persecuted, suffering, sick person, just as Isaiah (1:4, 6) described: “Ah, sinful nation, people laden with wickedness. . . . From the sole of the foot to the head there is no sound spot . . .” The very last verses of today's text segment are especially noteworthy. The Lord God is my help; I am not disgraced. The apparently shameful appearance and behavior of this servant is not really shameful if God is on his side. It is important for a male to defend his honor at all costs. But if a male finds himself in a losing situation such as being forced to go to court which is a definite no-win situation, then the male's honorable behavior is to endure the worst without flinching or crying. The honorable aspect of what seems to be shameful behavior, of course, is the notion that Mark's Passion story in its entirety (Palm Sunday and Easter Vigil gospel reading together) fleshes out for Jesus. While Jesus seemed to be irredeemably shamed in the betrayal, trial, crucifixion, death, and burial in a stranger’s tomb, God raised him from the dead. God must have been very pleased with Jesus to honor him in this way.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 22:8–9, 17–18, 19–20, 23–24.)
Perhaps the line in the Passion that most wrenches believers is Jesus' impassioned cry ”My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” He is quoting Psalm 22. which the Church sings for the responsorial today. The liturgy, however, does not rest on the quotation of that single agonizing line. It excerpts three stanzas of suffering: scoffing enemies, pierced hands and feet, and garments divided by a roll of tile dice. It concludes with a powerful fourth stanza presupposing a faith that stabilizes amid terror: all the descendants of Israel should revere God.
My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
All who see me scoff at me;
they mock me with parted lips, they wag their heads:
“He relied on the LORD; let him deliver him,
let him rescue him, if he loves him.”
Indeed, many dogs surround me,
a pack of evildoers closes in upon me;
they have pierced my hands and my feet;
I can count all my bones.
They divide my garments among them,
and for my vesture they cast lots.
But you, O LORD, be not far from me;
O my help, hasten to aid me.
I will proclaim your name to my brethren;
in the midst of the assembly I will praise you:
“You who fear the LORD, praise him;
all you descendants of Jacob, give glory to him;
revere him, all you descendants of Israel!”

* [Psalm 22] A lament unusual in structure and in intensity of feeling. The psalmist’s present distress is contrasted with God’s past mercy in Ps 22:2–12. In Ps 22:13–22 enemies surround the psalmist. The last third is an invitation to praise God (Ps 22:23–27), becoming a universal chorus of praise (Ps 22:28–31). The Psalm is important in the New Testament. Its opening words occur on the lips of the crucified Jesus (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46), and several other verses are quoted, or at least alluded to, in the accounts of Jesus’ passion (Mt 27:35, 43; Jn 19:24).
* [22:23] In the assembly I will praise you: the person who offered a thanksgiving sacrifice in the Temple recounted to the other worshipers the favor received from God and invited them to share in the sacrificial banquet. The final section (Ps 22:24–32) may be a summary or a citation of the psalmist’s poem of praise.

This lament of a person who suffers unjustly but patiently is quoted thirteen times in the New Testament and nine times alone in the Passion story. The psalmist is not complaining, shows no bitterness, makes no allusion to sin, does not declare personal innocence, and makes no defense against unjust charges. The suffering petitioner simply places himself entirely in the hands of God. In this he finds great peace. The first segment (vv. 8-9) reports the shameful taunts, the inhuman ridicule. The next segment literally claims that persecutors have mauled his hands and feet as would a lion (vv. 17-18). The petitioner beseeches God to hear his prayer (vv. 19-20). The final segment that announces a public expression of grateful indebtedness in the assembly testifies to the fact that God came to the rescue (vv. 23-24).

SECOND READING

For as long as there have been lectionaries, possibly at least since the fifth century, this passage has always been associated with Palm Sunday. It perfectly captures the mission of the Son of God, who takes on human form, humbling himself to death on a cross. and then is exalted as Lord above all creation. The Palm Sunday Gospel will tell of the Death of Christ, but this passage reveals already the mystery that will be proclaimed more grandly next week.
A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians (2:6–11)

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

[2:6–11] Perhaps an early Christian hymn quoted here by Paul. The short rhythmic lines fall into two parts, Phil 2:6–8 where the subject of every verb is Christ, and Phil 2:9–11 where the subject is God. The general pattern is thus of Christ’s humiliation and then exaltation. More precise analyses propose a division into six three-line stanzas (Phil 2:6; 7abc, 7d–8, 9, 10, 11) or into three stanzas (Phil 2:6–7ab, 7cd–8, 9–11). Phrases such as even death on a cross (Phil 2:8c) are considered by some to be additions (by Paul) to the hymn, as are Phil 2:10c, 11c.

[2:6] Either a reference to Christ’s preexistence and those aspects of divinity that he was willing to give up in order to serve in human form, or to what the man Jesus refused to grasp at to attain divinity. Many see an allusion to the Genesis story: unlike Adam, Jesus, though...in the form of God (Gn 1:26–27), did not reach out for equality with God, in contrast with the first Adam in Gn 3:5–6.

[2:7] Taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness: or “...taking the form of a slave. Coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance.” While it is common to take Phil 2:6, 7 as dealing with Christ’s preexistence and Phil 2:8 with his incarnate life, so that lines Phil 2:7b, 7c are parallel, it is also possible to interpret so as to exclude any reference to preexistence (see note on Phil 2:6) and to take Phil 2:6–8 as presenting two parallel stanzas about Jesus’ human state (Phil 2:6–7b; 7cd–8); in the latter alternative, coming in human likeness begins the second stanza and parallels 6a to some extent.


[2:9] The name: “Lord” (Phil 2:11), revealing the true nature of the one who is named.

[2:10–11] Every knee should bend...every tongue confess: into this language of Is 45:23 there has been inserted a reference to the three levels in the universe, according to ancient thought, heaven, earth, under the earth.

[2:11] Jesus Christ is Lord: a common early Christian acclamation; cf. 1 Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9. But doxology to God the Father is not overlooked here (Phil 2:11c) in the final version of the hymn.

[Contemporary scholarship identifies three distinct letters in Philippians: Letter A= 4:10-20 (in which Paul acknowledges receiving a gift; it is a receipt for aid); Letter B = 1:1-3:la; 4:4-7, 21-23 (in which Paul
having heard of problems in the community exhorts to unity and joy); and Letter C = 3:lb-4:3, 8-9 (in which Paul addresses problems caused by wandering Judaizing missionaries). Scholars who identify three letters, date A and B probably from 54-57 A.O.; Letter C some time later, perhaps 57-58 A.O. All came from Paul imprisoned in Ephesus. Those who identify two letters (combining B and C into one-B), date A to 58-60 A.O., and B to 62 A.O. when Paul was imprisoned in Rome. Intra-community squabbles about how to live the gospel threatened to divide the Philippians. Paul exhorts them to put aside differences, close ranks, and pursue the virtue of humility after the pattern of Jesus (vv. 1-5). Then, in this well-known hymn (vv. 6-11), Paul presents Jesus as a model for the Philippians to imitate. Scholars agree that this hymn was composed prior to and independently of this letter. It has two sections: vv. 6-8 describe Jesus’ humiliation (a shameful thing in this culture), while vv. 9-11 tell how God exalted him to unimaginable honor. Paul uses this hymn to exert moral pressure on the Philippians.

Many commentators see in v. 6 an implicit contrast between Adam who wanted to exploit likeness to God for selfish purposes and Jesus who did not. The verses contain many allusions to Genesis 1-3. In the Israelite tradition, being godlike means being immune from death (Wis 2:23). These verses compare the human Jesus with the human Adam (it is not a reference to pre-existent Jesus who became human). They contrast Jesus’ refusal as the final Adam to seek equality with God but highlight his humility and obedience to God in accepting mortality with the first Adam’s arrogance and disobedience. He sought to be equal to God as immortal, disobeyed God, and was cursed by God.

By his shameful death, Jesus was humiliated, a major tragedy in this honor driven culture. But God loved Jesus and exalted him. Thus, the basic meaning of Jesus who died and was raised is that he was humiliated and exalted, by God of course. The phrase "on the cross" disturbs the poetry of the hymn and was very likely added by Paul to underscore the degree of Jesus’ humiliation. In response (vv. 9-11), God exalted Jesus to rule over the entire universe. Jesus is Lord, the same word used in the Greek Bible to be spoken instead of YHWH. The one who in total obedience took on the low rank of slave now by God’s own commission is universal Lord.

To appreciate this hymn, one needs to remember some key elements of honor cultures. First, although one is rightly entitled to ascribed honor (usually by birth), it is also important not to give the impression that one seeks to augment that honor by impinging on others. Thus, all people learn to practice “cultural humility:’ that is, staying one step behind one’s rightful place. Others clearly see that such a person is no threat to their honor. More than this, others will summon this person to his or her rightful, honorable place.

Though this hymn may appear on a surface reading to reflect the reward of cultural humility, in actuality it does not. The hymn rather points to value reversal: shame leads to honor. In other words, Jesus didn't just politely state his humility, confident that someone would raise him to his proper place. He willingly accepted humiliation in the manner of his death. This is something Jesus' culture would not only not have expected but also would not have encouraged. Thus, any culture like that of our ancestors in the faith who live by honor and shame values would be "shocked" by this message of value-reversal: shame will lead to honor. This hymn presents that notion masterfully. It is likely that with this hymn Paul intended to propose an example for the Philippians to imitate given the situation in which they found themselves.

A second consideration is to keep in mind that Philippi was a Roman colony most of whose citizens were retired from the military. They had strong ties to Rome and would be quite willing to participate in the imperial cult, that is, acknowledging Caesar as divine. It is therefore plausible that Paul is vigorously arguing against such participation. His use of certain words (Lord), proposed gestures (bending the knee), mention of an empire (Phil 2:10), and the acclamation "Jesus is Lord" all echo the language of the imperial cult but speak instead of Jesus. Paul is deliberately commanding the Philippians to acknowledge Jesus as Lord rather than Caesar. This, however, is a treasonous act. What course of action would a retired military person who is devoted to Rome but believes in Jesus choose?
Finally, the downward-upward movement of Jesus' life (humiliation/exaltation; Phil 2:6-8, 9-11) is reflected in Paul's life. He voluntarily abandons all advantages (Phil 3: 4-8) in obedience to God. Then, as slave of God (Phil 1:1), Paul carries this obedience (Phil 1 :16) to the point that he might-like Jesus-die a shameful death (Phil 1 :20) confident that his glory is to come (Phil 3:10-11). The pattern resonates in the lives of Timothy and Epaphroditus as well. The three live in unselfish obedience and service and are a foil to the self-seeking and selfishness that have crept into the Philippian church. Of course, today's gospel (Matt 26:14-27:66), the Passion of Jesus, presents in significantly more detail the shameful end of Jesus' life which God reversed a short while later. It also reflects the choice Jesus made between acknowledging his identity and relationship to God and capitulating to his interrogators. Value reversal is a sobering meditation for people in any culture. So too is loyalty. Holy Week provides yet another opportunity to reflect on the death of Jesus and the challenge it poses to all believers.

VERSE BEFORE THE GOSPEL  (Phil 2:8–9)

Christ became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name.

GOSPEL

Where does one begin to unpack the rich-ness of Mark's account of the Passion? It is an account of the preparations for Jesus' Death, his instructions to friends at a final meal, a betrayal in Geth-semane, a trial that cannot find cause to condemn him, and finally, a cruci-fixion that ultimately leads to life. One could focus on those who betrayed Jesus: Peter, Judas, James, and John, those passing by, the bystanders at the Cross, and the revolutionaries crucified with him. Or one could reflect on those who stood with him: Simon the leper, the woman who anointed him with costly oil, Simon of Cyrene, Mary of Magdaia, Salome, Mary the mother of the younger James and Joses, and the women who watched from a distance. Finally, one could preach an entire homily on the two who seem to have had a conversion of heart: the centurion who announced at Jesus' Death, "Truly this man was the Son of God," and Joseph of Arimathea, a "distinguished member of the council" that had just condemned Jesus, who came forward to claim his broken body for burial. We wonder if we would have stood among the faithful women, spoken out bravely like the centurion, or condemned him out of fear like the bystanders. As this Holy Week begins, gratitude runs deep for those who remind us that hearts can be changed and action can be taken to make amends.

The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark (14:1–15:47)

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to take place in two days’ time. So the chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way to arrest him by treachery and put him to death. They said, “Not during the festival, for fear that there may be a riot among the people.”

When he was in Bethany reclining at table in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of perfumed oil, costly genuine spikenard. She broke the alabaster jar and poured it on his head.

There were some who were indignant. “Why has there been this waste of perfumed oil? It could have been sold for more than three hundred days’ wages and the money given to the poor.” They were infuriated with her. Jesus said, “Let her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me.
The poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but you will not always have me. She has done what she could. She has anticipated anointing my body for burial. Amen, I say to you, wherever the GOSPEL is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”  

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went off to the chief priests to hand him over to them. When they heard him they were pleased and promised to pay him money. Then he looked for an opportunity to hand him over. On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, “Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?” He sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. Follow him. Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says, ‘Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ’ Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there.” The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover. When it was evening, he came with the Twelve. And as they reclined at table and were eating, Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” They began to be distressed and to say to him, one by one, “Surely it is not I?” He said to them, “One of the Twelve, the one who dips with me into the dish.

For the Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had never been born.”  

While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many. Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, “All of you will have your faith shaken, for it is written: I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be dispersed. But after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee.”  

Peter said to him, “Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be.” Then Jesus said to him, “Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times.” But he vehemently replied, “Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all spoke similarly. Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be troubled and distressed.
Then he said to them, “My soul is sorrowful
even to death.
Remain here and keep watch.”
He advanced a little and fell to the ground and
prayed
that if it were possible the hour might pass
by him;
he said, “Abba, Father, all things are
possible to you.
Take this cup away from me,
but not what I will but what you will.”
When he returned he found them asleep.
He said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep?
Could you not keep watch for one hour?
Watch and pray that you may not undergo the
test.
The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”
Withdrawing again, he prayed, saying the same
thing.
Then he returned once more and found them
asleep,
for they could not keep their eyes open
and did not know what to answer him.
He returned a third time and said to them,
“Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?
It is enough. The hour has come.
Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to
sinners.
Get up, let us go.
See, my betrayer is at hand.”
Then, while he was still speaking,
Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived,
accompanied by a crowd with swords and
clubs
who had come from the chief priests,
the scribes, and the elders.
His betrayer had arranged a signal with them,
saying,
“The man I shall kiss is the one;
arrest him and lead him away securely.”
He came and immediately went over to him and
said,
“Rabbi.” And he kissed him.
At this they laid hands on him and arrested him.
One of the bystanders drew his sword,
struck the high priest’s servant, and cut off
his ear.
Jesus said to them in reply,

“Have you come out as against a robber,
with swords and clubs, to seize me?
Day after day I was with you teaching in the
temple area,
yet you did not arrest me;
but that the Scriptures may be fulfilled.”
And they all left him and fled.
Now a young man followed him
wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his
body.
They seized him,
but he left the cloth behind and ran off
naked.
They led Jesus away to the high priest,
and all the chief priests and the elders and
the scribes came together.
Peter followed him at a distance into the high
priest’s courtyard
and was seated with the guards, warming
himself at the fire.
The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin
kept trying to obtain testimony against
Jesus
in order to put him to death, but they found
none.
Many gave false witness against him,
but their testimony did not agree.
Some took the stand and testified falsely
against him,
alleging, “We heard him say,
‘I will destroy this temple made with hands
and within three days I will build another
not made with hands.’ ”
Even so their testimony did not agree.
The high priest rose before the assembly and
questioned Jesus,
saying, “Have you no answer?
What are these men testifying against you?”
But he was silent and answered nothing.
Again the high priest asked him and said to him,
“Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed
One?”
Then Jesus answered, “I am;
and ‘you will see the Son of Man
seated at the right hand of the
Power
and coming with the clouds of
heaven.’ ”
At that the high priest tore his garments and said,
   “What further need have we of witnesses?
You have heard the blasphemy.
What do you think?”
They all condemned him as deserving to die.
Some began to spit on him.
They blindfolded him and struck him and said to him, “Prophesy!”
And the guards greeted him with blows.
While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the high priest’s maids came along.
Seeing Peter warming himself, she looked intently at him and said, “You too were with the Nazarene, Jesus.”
But he denied it saying, “I neither know nor understand what you are talking about.”
So he went out into the outer court.
Then the cock crowed.
The maid saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.”
Once again he denied it.
A little later the bystanders said to Peter once more, “Surely you are one of them; for you too are a Galilean.”
He began to curse and to swear, “I do not know this man about whom you are talking.”
And immediately a cock crowed a second time.
Then Peter remembered the word that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times.”
He broke down and wept.
As soon as morning came, the chief priests with the elders and the scribes, that is, the whole Sanhedrin held a council.
They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.
Pilate questioned him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”
He said to him in reply, “You say so.”
The chief priests accused him of many things.
Again Pilate questioned him, “Have you no answer?
See how many things they accuse you of.”
Jesus gave him no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.
Now on the occasion of the feast he used to release to them one prisoner whom they requested.
A man called Barabbas was then in prison along with the rebels who had committed murder in a rebellion.
The crowd came forward and began to ask him to do for them as he was accustomed.
Pilate answered, “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?”
For he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over.
But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.
Pilate again said to them in reply, “Then what do you want me to do with the man you call the king of the Jews?”
They shouted again, “Crucify him.”
Pilate said to them, “Why? What evil has he done?”
They only shouted the louder, “Crucify him.”
So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified.
The soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the praetorium, and assembled the whole cohort.
They clothed him in purple and, weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him.
They began to salute him with, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him.
They knelt before him in homage.
And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him out to crucify him.
They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon,
a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country,  
the father of Alexander and Rufus,  
to carry his cross.  
They brought him to the place of Golgotha  
— which is translated Place of the Skull—  
They gave him wine drugged with myrrh,  
but he did not take it.  
Then they crucified him and divided his garments  
by casting lots for them to see what each should take.  
It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him.  
The inscription of the charge against him read,  
“The King of the Jews.”  
With him they crucified two revolutionaries,  
one on his right and one on his left.  
Those passing by reviled him,  
shaking their heads and saying,  
“Aha! You who would destroy the temple  
and rebuild it in three days,  
save yourself by coming down from the cross.”  
Likewise the chief priests, with the scribes,  
mocked him among themselves and said,  
“He saved others; he cannot save himself.  
Let the Christ, the King of Israel,  
come down now from the cross  
that we may see and believe.”  
Those who were crucified with him also kept abusing him.  
At noon darkness came over the whole land  
until three in the afternoon.  
And at three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice,  
“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”  
which is translated,  
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”  
Some of the bystanders who heard it said,  
“Look, he is calling Elijah.”  
One of them ran, soaked a sponge with wine,  
put it on a reed  
and gave it to him to drink saying,  
“Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down.”  
Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.  
Here all kneel and pause for a short time.  
The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom.  
When the centurion who stood facing him  
saw how he breathed his last he said,  
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”  
There were also women looking on from a distance.  
Among them were Mary Magdalene,  
Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome.  
These women had followed him when he was in Galilee  
and ministered to him.  
There were also many other women  
who had come up with him to Jerusalem.  
When it was already evening,  
since it was the day of preparation,  
the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea,  
a distinguished member of the council,  
who was himself awaiting the kingdom of God,  
came and courageously went to Pilate  
and asked for the body of Jesus.  
Pilate was amazed that he was already dead.  
He summoned the centurion  
and asked him if Jesus had already died.  
And when he learned of it from the centurion,  
he gave the body to Joseph.  
Having bought a linen cloth, he took him down,  
wrapped him in the linen cloth,  
and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock.  
Then he rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb.  
Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses watched where he was laid.
* [14:1–12] The murder of the Baptist by Herod Antipas prefigures the death of Jesus (see Mt 17:12). The Marcan source (Mk 6:14–29) is much reduced and in some points changed. In Mark Herod reveres John as a holy man and the desire to kill him is attributed to Herodias (Mk 6:19, 20), whereas here that desire is Herod’s from the beginning (Mt 14:5).
* [14:1] Herod the tetrarch: Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. When the latter died, his territory was divided among three of his surviving sons, Archelaus who received half of it (Mt 2:23), Herod Antipas who became ruler of Galilee and Perea, and Philip who became ruler of northern Transjordan. Since he received a quarter of his father’s domain, Antipas is accurately designated tetrarch (“ruler of a fourth [part]”), although in Mt 14:9 Matthew repeats the “king” of his Marcan source (Mk 6:26).
* [14:3] Herodias was not the wife of Herod’s half-brother Philip but of another half-brother, Herod Boethus. The union was prohibited by Lv 18:16; 20:21. According to Josephus (Antiquities 18:116–19), Herod imprisoned and then executed John because he feared that the Baptist’s influence over the people might enable him to lead a rebellion.
* [14:13–21] The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus that is recounted in all four gospels. The principal reason for that may be that it was seen as anticipating the Eucharist and the final banquet in the kingdom (Mt 8:11; 26:29), but it looks not only forward but backward, to the feeding of Israel with manna in the desert at the time of the Exodus (Ex 16), a miracle that in some contemporary Jewish expectation would be repeated in the messianic age (2 Bar 29:8). It may also be meant to recall Elisha’s feeding a hundred men with small provisions (2 Kgs 4:42–44).
* [14:19] The taking, saying the blessing, breaking, and giving to the disciples correspond to the actions of Jesus over the bread at the Last Supper (Mt 26:26). Since they were usual at any Jewish meal, that correspondence does not necessarily indicate a eucharistic reference here. Matthew’s silence about Jesus’ dividing the fish among the people (Mk 6:41) is perhaps more significant in that regard.
* [14:20] The fragments left over: as in Elisha’s miracle, food was left over after all had been fed. The word fragments (Greek klasmata) is used, in the singular, of the broken bread of the Eucharist in Didache 9:3–4.
* [14:22–33] The disciples, laboring against the turbulent sea, are saved by Jesus. For his power over the waters, see note on Mt 8:26. Here that power is expressed also by his walking on the sea (Mt 14:25; cf. Ps 77:20; Jb 9:8). Matthew has inserted into the Marcan story (Mk 6:45–52) material that belongs to his special traditions on Peter (Mt 14:28–31).
* [14:25] The fourth watch of the night: between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. The Romans divided the twelve hours between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. into four equal parts called “watches.”
* [14:27] It is I: see note on Mk 6:50.
* [14:31] You of little faith: see note on Mt 6:30. Why did you doubt?: the verb is peculiar to Matthew and occurs elsewhere only in Mt 28:17.
* [14:33] This confession is in striking contrast to the Marcan parallel (Mk 6:51) where the disciples are “completely astounded.”
* [15:1–20] This dispute begins with the question of the Pharisees and scribes why Jesus’ disciples are breaking the tradition of the elders about washing one’s hands before eating (Mt 15:2). Jesus’ counterquestion accuses his opponents of breaking the commandment of God for the sake of their tradition (Mt 15:3) and illustrates this by their interpretation of the commandment of the Decalogue concerning parents (Mt 15:4–6). Denouncing them as hypocrites, he applies to them a derogatory prophecy of Isaiah (Mt 15:7–8). Then with a wider audience (the crowd, Mt 15:10) he goes beyond the violation of tradition with which the dispute has started. The parable (Mt 15:11) is an attack on the Mosaic law concerning clean and unclean foods, similar to those antitheses that abrogate the law (Mt 5:31–32, 33–34, 38–39). After a warning to his disciples not to follow the moral guidance of the Pharisees (Mt 15:13–14), he explains the parable (Mt 15:15) to them, saying that defilement comes not
from what enters the mouth (Mt 15:17) but from the evil thoughts and deeds that rise from within, from
the heart (Mt 15:18–20). The last verse returns to the starting point of the dispute (eating with
unwashed hands). Because of Matthew’s omission of Mk 7:19b, some scholars think that Matthew has
weakened the Marcan repudiation of the Mosaic food laws. But that half verse is ambiguous in the
Greek, which may be the reason for its omission here.
* [15:2] The tradition of the elders: see note on Mk 7:5. The purpose of the handwashing was to remove
defilement caused by contact with what was ritually unclean.
* [15:3–4] For the commandment see Ex 20:12 (//Dt 5:16); 21:17. The honoring of one’s parents had to
do with supporting them in their needs.
* [15:5] See note on Mk 7:11.
* [15:8] The text of Is 29:13 is quoted approximately according to the Septuagint.
* [15:13–14] Jesus leads his disciples away from the teaching authority of the Pharisees.
* [15:15] Matthew specifies Peter as the questioner, unlike Mk 7:17. Given his tendency to present the
disciples as more understanding than in his Marcan source, it is noteworthy that here he retains the
Marcan rebuke, although in a slightly milder form. This may be due to his wish to correct the Jewish
Christians within his church who still held to the food laws and thus separated themselves from Gentile
Christians who did not observe them.
* [15:19] The Marcan list of thirteen things that defile (Mk 7:21–22) is here reduced to seven that
partially cover the content of the Decalogue.
* [15:28] As in the case of the cure of the centurion’s servant (Mt 8:10), Matthew ascribes Jesus’
granting the request to the woman’s great faith, a point not made equally explicit in the Marcan parallel
(Mk 7:24–30).
* [15:32–39] Most probably this story is a doublet of that of the feeding of the five thousand (Mt 14:13–
21). It differs from it notably only in that Jesus takes the initiative, not the disciples (Mt 15:32), and in
the numbers: the crowd has been with Jesus three days (Mt 15:32), seven loaves are multiplied (Mt
15:36), seven baskets of fragments remain after the feeding (Mt 15:37), and four thousand men are fed
(Mt 15:38).
* [15:36] Gave thanks: see Mt 14:19, “said the blessing.” There is no difference in meaning. The
thanksgiving was a blessing of God for his benefits.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Christ enjoyed in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had
come to reveal.1 What he admitted to not knowing in this area, he elsewhere declared himself not sent
to reveal”2. (CCC, 474).
- "The only Son of the Father ... became incarnate; without losing his divine nature he has assumed
human nature" (CCC, 479).
- "The Sixth Sunday [of Lent], on which Holy Week begins, is called 'Palm Sunday of the Passion of the
Lord.' Holy Week is ordered to the commemoration of Christ's Passion, beginning with his Messianic
entrance into Jerusalem" (UNLY, 30-31).
- In Christ, we see a "new Adam," who, rather than refusing to obey God, remains obedient to God
even to the point of his own death on the cross. Thus, Christ "makes amends superabundantly for the
disobedience of Adam" (CCC, 411).
- "[The Servant Songs of Isaiah] ... show how [Jesus] will pour out the Holy Spirit to give life to the
many: not as an outsider, but by embracing our 'form as slave'“1 (CCC, 713).
"In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear. For Adam ... was a type of him who was to come,§ Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling" (GS, 22).
Overview of the Sacred Paschal Triduum

The Triduum begins with the celebration of the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday. The Scriptures address the heart of our faith: that Jesus gave himself as bread and wine to his disciples and commanded them to eat and drink in remembrance of him, and that when we do this in the Eucharist he is truly present among us under the form of bread and wine. We are also called to engage in service to our neighbor, following Jesus's example of washing the disciples' feet.

On Good Friday, we journey with the Lord, the innocent servant of God, who has taken our sins upon himself as he walks the path to Calvary. At the end, Jesus says, "It is finished," meaning "it is accomplished," or "it is perfected." He has completed the task he was given. He hands over his spirit.

On that most sacred night after dark on Holy Saturday, we gather at the Easter Vigil to rejoice in the Good News of Christ's Resurrection. All of Lent has led to this pivotal night of the entire liturgical year; even Advent and Christmas prepared us for this night. Everything we celebrate for the next fifty days until Pentecost results from our belief that Jesus is risen from the dead. Easter Sunday resounds with the joy of this night until the day, and the Triduum, ends with Evening Prayer.

FIRST READING

On Holy Thursday, the First Reading from Exodus is the remembrance of the Passover meal preceding the Exodus, and on Good Friday, the First Reading is from another of the Servant Songs in Isaiah. At the Easter Vigil, there are seven Old Testament readings. Their proclamation makes the saving works of God throughout history present and real to us. On Easter Sunday, Peter summarizes the mission, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The psalms of Triduum are suitable to each of the three days. On Holy Thursday, the antiphon used with Psalm 110 comes from the New Testament's first letter of Paul to the Corinthians; it speaks of the blessing cup as participation in the Blood of Christ. Good Friday's RESPONSORIAL PSALM is Psalm 22; its antiphon contains the words spoken by Jesus as he hangs on the Cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," according to Luke 23:46. The seven RESPONSORIAL PSALMS of the Easter Vigil, which correspond with the seven Old Testament readings, abound with themes of the glorious nature of the earth and the Lord himself, the Lord's faithfulness to his people, the salvation the Lord offers, and the joyful nourishment that comes from following the Lord and his word. Easter Sunday we pray from Psalm 118 for the first of three times (also on the Second Sunday of Easter, Fourth Sunday of Easter), repeating its Paschal acclamation: "The stone which the builders rejected I has become the cornerstone" (118:22).

SECOND READING

On Holy Thursday, the Second Reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians gives the oldest written account of the Eucharist; it reminds us of what we celebrate each time we gather to pray the Eucharistic liturgy. On Good Friday, the Second Reading is from the Letter to the Hebrews. The letter speaks of the
high priesthood of Jesus Christ. In particular, Good Friday's passage emphasizes the sacrifice of the High Priest's own life as an offering for sin. At the Easter Vigil, the letter to the Romans points to the relationship of Christ's Death and Resurrection to our own, through Baptism. On Easter Sunday morning, the letter to the Colossians directs us to keep our minds on where Christ has gone and where we shall be; the first letter to the Corinthian's hearkens back to the Passover roots of our Easter celebration.

GOSPEL READING
The GOSPEL READING presents Jesus' example in his washing the feet of his disciples on Holy Thursday; John's account of the Passion, emphasizing Jesus as Isaiah's servant of the Lord who is the One High Priest, on Good Friday; and Mark's account of the women at the empty tomb and their encounter with the angel, on the Easter Vigil. On Easter Sunday morning, we journey once again with Mary and then Peter and the disciple to the inexplicably empty tomb, reminding us that even for those of us who know how the events progressed, Easter calls us to contemplate mystery.
While the community of Israel suffered bondage in Egypt, God sends the ten plagues through which the Pharaoh became convinced to free the people of Israel from their captivity. In the midst of these plagues God commands Moses and Aaron to prepare for the night of their freedom, and institutes the feast that would be known as Passover.

Passover came to mean the meal and the date fixed on the Jewish calendar. For the first observance, a family slaughtered a lamb or a goat, eating the meat but sprinkling the blood on the two door posts of each home. The blood became a sign for the angel responsible for the tenth plague to "pass over" the homes and spare the life of the firstborn.

**A reading from the Book of Exodus (12:1–8, 11–14)**

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt,

“This month shall stand at the head of your calendar; you shall reckon it the first month of the year. Tell the whole community of Israel: On the tenth of this month every one of your families must procure for itself a lamb, one apiece for each household.

If a family is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join the nearest household in procuring one and shall share in the lamb in proportion to the number of persons who partake of it.

The lamb must be a year-old male and without blemish. You may take it from either the sheep or the goats.

You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, and then, with the whole assembly of Israel present, it shall be slaughtered during the evening twilight.

They shall take some of its blood and apply it to the two doorposts and the lintel of every house in which they partake of the lamb.

That same night they shall eat its roasted flesh with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

“This is how you are to eat it: with your loins girt, sandals on your feet and your staff in hand, you shall eat like those who are in flight.

It is the Passover of the LORD. For on this same night I will go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn of the land, both man and beast, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt—I, the LORD!

But the blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thus, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you.

“This day shall be a memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the LORD, as a perpetual institution.”
As if to affirm victory over Pharaoh and sovereignty over the Israelites, the Lord proclaims a new calendar for Israel. This month: Abib, the month of “ripe grain.” Cf. 13:4; 23:15; 34:18; Dt 16:1. It occurred near the vernal equinox, March–April. Later it was known by the Babylonian name of Nisan. Cf. Neh 2:1; Est 3:7.

The lamb’s cost: some render the Hebrew, “reckon for the lamb the number of persons required to eat it.” Cf. v. 10.

As it stands in our current Lectionary, this reading from Exodus derives from the Priest-tradition (“P”) of the Torah which presents the "rubrics" or liturgical directives regarding the proper observance (vv. 1-8) and the "historicized" significance of the feast of Passover (vv. 11-14). The Priest-tradition is concerned with rekindling in the people of their day (sixth century B.C.E.) the very same openness and enthusiasm as displayed by their ancestors on the day of their deliverance. No-tice the urgency of personal involvement and participation reflected in verse 11.

Historically, two feasts were conflated into the feast of Passover: a nomadic, springtime rite involving blood to insure fecundity of the flock and to ward off evil by smearing the blood on tent poles and an agricultural harvest feast observed in the eating of unleavened bread. Notice that today's reading relates only the nomadic elements featuring lamb and blood.

This reading assigned for Holy Thursday is deliberately linked with the Johannine Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, whose blood gains salvation for all. In John, Jesus dies on the feast of Passover at the moment the lambs are being sacrificed for the festal meal. The Hebrew word for Passover, Pesah1, is also the name of the nomadic springtime feast which became histori-cized in the Exodus experience when God "passed over" (see v. 13-"I will pass over"-pesabti in Hebrew) the homes whose lintels had been covered with the blood of the lamb.

Viewed from a Mediterranean cultural perspective, some simple verses in today’s reading stand out more starkly and re-verberate in modern Western minds with some shock. In the Mediterranean world, men eat alone and separately, women and children including males younger than the age of puberty eat earlier and separately. According to Gen 18:9, Sarah was not present at the meal Abraham served to the strangers. Exod 12:3-4 directs that "every man" shall take a lamb for the household, and if the household is too small then include the neighboring household for this feast. And again in Exod 12:24 one reads that "you shall observe this rite as an ordinance for you and for your sons for ever." Recall also the gospel stories of multiplication of loaves (Mark 6:35-44 and par.; Mark 8: 1- 10 and par.) among which only Matthew adds to the number 4,000/5,000 the phrase: "besides women and children." The groups of fifty into which the crowd was divided were same-gender groups, segregated in public by gender just as they are in Mediterranean households of antiquity and certainly in the Bedouin present. (For a photograph of a Mediterranean-style "family picnic" see http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/pilchj, click on Mediterranean culture, "Gender-divided society.")

Preachers will, of course, be sensitive to history and tradition in constructing their homily for this occasion. One need not be an antiquarian purist, but one must also maintain a responsible sense of historical development and be keenly aware of the complex relationship between the many elements of our liturgical celebrations which derive from different centuries.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 116:12–13, 15–16bc, 17–18.)
Several verses from a psalm of thanksgiving supply the **RESPONSORIAL PSALM.** The overall purpose of this psalm is to give thanks to God, but the Lectionary designates these verses because they especially fit the themes of Holy Thursday. The psalmist gives thanks by taking up "the cup of salvation" (v. 13). The psalm proclaims, "Precious in the eyes of the Lord / is the death of his faithful ones" (v. 15). These verses foreshadow the Eucharistic cup that Jesus shared at the Last Supper, as well as his own death looming on Good Friday.

The antiphon is taken from the same epistle that gives us the Second Reading. As Christians experiencing anew the last days of Jesus, and familiar with the meal traditions of our ancestors in faith, we sing, "Our blessing-cup is a communion with the Blood of Christ." Normally, the **RESPONSORIAL PSALM** echoes a theme from the First Reading or the Gospel. This is a rare instance when it pertains to the Second Reading, which has not yet been proclaimed.

**Our blessing-cup is a communion with the Blood of Christ.**

How shall I make a return to the **LORD** for all the good he has done for me?
The cup of salvation I will take up, and I will call upon the name of the **LORD**.
Precious in the eyes of the **LORD** is the death of his faithful ones.
I am your servant, the son of your handmaid; you have loosed my bonds.
To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the **LORD**.
My vows to the **LORD** I will pay in the presence of all his people.

* [Psalm 116] A thanksgiving in which the psalmist responds to divine rescue from mortal danger (Ps 116:3–4) and from near despair (Ps 116:10–11) with vows and Temple sacrifices (Ps 116:13–14, 17–19). The Greek and Latin versions divide the Psalm into two parts: Ps 116:1–9 and Ps 116:10–19, corresponding to its two major divisions.

**SECOND READING**

St. Paul tells how Jesus instituted the Eucharist. With minor variations, this account also appears in Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but Paul wrote his epistles before the evangelists wrote their Gospel narratives. Therefore, this is the oldest account of what happened at the Last Supper, the version that lies closest to the years of Jesus’ life.
At this point in his letter, Paul is probably responding to some specific questions from the Corinthians. Apparently, they had asked about the proper way to celebrate the Eucharist. Paul hands on to them what others had told him. Paul says that the supper took place on the night before Jesus was betrayed, that Jesus took bread, gave thanks, and said, "This is my body that is for you"; then he commanded his followers to "do this in remembrance of me" (v. 24). Jesus repeated this command upon taking up the cup, which he called "the new covenant in my blood" (v. 25). Paul says we proclaim the Death of the Lord until he comes whenever we "eat this bread and drink the cup" (v. 26).
These words address the heart of Catholic faith. We believe that the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ, that Jesus told us this, and that he commanded us to eat and drink in remembrance of him. This passage is the key that unlocks the meaning of Holy Thursday.

**A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (11:23–26)**

Brothers and sisters:
I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,
that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over,
took bread, and, after he had given thanks,
broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

* [11:23–25] This is the earliest written account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament. The narrative emphasizes Jesus’ action of self-giving (expressed in the words over the bread and the cup) and his double command to repeat his own action.

The Corinthian Christian community is probably one of the better known of all the early communities. The verses elected for today’s feast are torn from their larger context (11: 17-34) in order to highlight Paul’s interpretation of the institution of the Eucharist (verses 23-27).

Drawing upon a favorite literary pattern among the ancients, A 8 A’, Paul notes division and lack of unity at the very celebration that is supposed to effect unity (A: vv. 17-22). Jesus’ Eucharist should serve a very different purpose (8: vv. 23-27). Disrespectful and shameful celebration of this sacrament carries its own penalty in its wake (A’: vv. 28-34).

By carving verses 23-26 away from their total context for today’s liturgy, the architects of the Lectionary intend that Paul should supply what is lacking in today’s gospel: an account of the institution of the Eucharist.

Paul’s account is the earliest of all accounts, even though it is similar to Luke 22: 19-20. Paul adds "do this in remembrance of me" over the cup as over the bread, and he adds "which is for you" to the words "This is my body."

For Paul the Eucharist is a concrete occasion of Christ’s presence in and unity with his people. It is also a memorial of his salvific death as described in John’s Gospel for today, and the celebration of Eucharist must continue until he returns. These verses from Paul and the selection from John’s Gospel for today’s feast present to modern-day believers an understanding of Jesus’ Last Supper as found in divergent(!) early traditions: the Pauline and the Johannine. Genuine respect for our ancestors in the faith will surely guide the preacher and liturgical planners to respect the uniqueness of each. The preacher will no doubt blend aspects of the traditions into a personal theological synthesis, a common feature in all preaching.

It is best to identify this as a personal synthesis.

VERSE BEFORE THE GOSPEL (Jn 13:34)

I give you a new commandment, says the Lord: love one another as I have loved you.

GOSPEL

Jesus gives his followers a model of discipleship when he washes their feet. In John’s account of the Last Supper, the institution of the Eucharist as it appears in the synoptic Gospels, and even in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, is not there. Instead, John gives a mystical interpretation of the Eucharist in the washing of the feet. Just as Paul’s letter unlocks the meaning of Holy Thursday, John’s narrative of the Gospel un-locks its implications. As Jesus stoops to wash his feet, Simon Peter resists until Jesus warns him, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me" (v. 8). His statement probably alludes to Baptism. Importantly, Jesus ad-vises the disciples, "If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet" (v. 14). Whenever we engage in selfless, humble service of our neighbor, we follow the model that Jesus gave.
Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end. The devil had already induced Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over.

So, during supper, fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God, he rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Master, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus answered and said to him, “What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later.” Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well.” Jesus said to him, “Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over; so you are clean, but not all.”

For he knew who would betray him; for this reason, he said, “Not all of you are clean.” So when he had washed their feet and put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, “Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me ‘teacher’ and ‘master,’ and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.”

* [13:1–19:42] The Book of Glory. There is a major break here; the word “sign” is used again only in Jn 20:30. In this phase of Jesus’ return to the Father, the discourses (Jn 13–17) precede the traditional narrative of the passion (Jn 18–20) to interpret them for the Christian reader. This is the only extended example of esoteric teaching of disciples in John.

* [13:1–20] Washing of the disciples’ feet. This episode occurs in John at the place of the narration of the institution of the Eucharist in the synoptics. It may be a dramatization of Lk 22:27—“I am your servant.” It is presented as a “model” (“pattern”) of the crucifixion. It symbolizes cleansing from sin by sacrificial death.

* [13:1] Before the feast of Passover: this would be Thursday evening, before the day of preparation; in the synoptics, the Last Supper is a Passover meal taking place, in John’s chronology, on Friday evening. To the end: or, “completely.”

* [13:2] Induced: literally, “The devil put into the heart that Judas should hand him over.”

* [13:5] The act of washing another’s feet was one that could not be required of the lowliest Jewish slave. It is an allusion to the humiliating death of the crucifixion.

* [13:10] Bathed: many have suggested that this passage is a symbolic reference to baptism. The Greek root involved is used in baptismal contexts in 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:26; Ti 3:5; Heb 10:22.

John’s account of the Last Supper does not report the instigation of the Eucharist but does include a foot-washing during the meal, an action which has no precedent in any Judaic meal-ritual of this time! What does it mean?

In the Mediterranean world people communicate both in word and in deed. In this culture, actions often speak louder than words. This particular washing of the feet is clearly understood in the culture as a “symbolic action,” that is, a deed that not only represents reality but effectively sets it in motion or a
deed that propels an already initiated event still further forward toward completion. Prophets like Jeremiah (e.g., 1: 3-11) and Ezekiel (e.g., 4) performed symbolic actions which to non-Mediterranean people look very much like bizarre behavior.

Notice that Jesus performs his symbolic action after the devil convinces Judas to betray Jesus (1: 3:2). The devil tests Judas' loyalty to Jesus, and sadly Judas yields and proves dis-loyal (13:27). Jesus' symbolic action thus further propels for-ward toward completing an event, Jesus' death, which has already been initiated by Judas' willingness to betray Jesus.

Jesus' symbolic action receives two interpretations in the text (vv. 1-11, 12-20). In the first interpretation the allusions to Jesus' approaching death in verses 1-3 indicate that Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, on one level, signifies his humili-ating death on their behalf (see 10: 11, 15; 18: 12-14 ). Verse 10 makes it even clearer, especially if the phrase "except for the feet" could be omitted in this Lectionary reading as it is in anc-ient manuscripts and in the New Jerusalem Bible translation. Then the "bathing" would implicitly refer to the foot-washing, and the reader or listener can understand why Jesus rejects Peter's request for additional washings (head and hands), or washing of the entire body.

On another level, the washing of the feet points to another symbolism. Streets in antiquity were filled with human and animal waste. A person walking the streets inevitably had soiled and smelly feet. Washing the feet of guests was usually a task for slaves or low-status servants. That Jesus would do a slave's task stuns his disciples. But they are missing his pri-mary intended symbolic meaning which is more than humility.

In biblical times people considered the hands and feet as a zone of the human body symbolizing human activity. To wash the feet (or hands) is to wash away the offensive deeds per-formed by these appendages. Foot-washing is therefore equiva-lent to forgiveness. When Jesus urges them to repeat this action, he is not urging them to wash feet but rather to forgive each other as he forgives them. The end result of such mutual for-giveness, of course, is greater group cohesion and solidarity. This, in fact, is what Jesus is building here.

Verses 12-20 explicitly state the second interpretation of the foot-washing that is already implied in the preceding verses (hands-feet zone). Jesus gives his disciples an example to imitate among one another. They are to forgive one another and create strong bonds of fellowship. (1 Tim 5:10 indicates how seriously this example was followed particularly by widows.) This interpretation receives fuller explanation in John 15:12-13 where loving one another includes willingness to lay down life for one another. Thus foot-washing, even in this second inter-pretation, retains a relationship with the death of Jesus and the community that he strengthened on the night before he died.

A Medite1Tanean cultural perspective on this text offers at least two insights. The first insight derives from the meals in this cultural world. In the Middle East, unrelated people rarely if ever eat together. Meals are shared only with relatives. A stranger taken into a Mediterranean family is also temporarily transformed into a friend in order to be able to share the family meal. But groups in the Middle East, such as the Twelve, are surrogate-kinship groups-that is, they are just like family. Thus Jesus' symbolic action of foot-washing and its obvious (to the e original viewers) reference to his death, to forgive-ness, and to group cohesion would not be lost on the disciples. Eating a meal with Jesus renders one a family member, and family members willingly sacrifice for other family members.

(Parenthetically, this cultural insight explains Paul's ire when Peter ceases to eat with uncircumcised Galatian converts who accepted Jesus as Messiah [Gal 2: 11-21 ]. Paul had to re-mind the Galatians that Peter's fickle behavior should not shake their confidence in being able to truly and meaningfully call God "Father." Having received the Spirit, they are truly part of God's family in spite of the false message Peter's non-verbal behavior communicates: that they are not family, or even surrogate-family members.)

The second insight to be gained by reading this passage from a Mediterranean cultural perspective concerns the uniquely Middle Eastern understanding of humility. In the Mediterranean world, a humble
person never presumes to overstep bounds but rather deliberately stays at least one step behind to avoid creating even an impression of pretending to be more than one truly is. Mediterranean people derive status from birth and never try to improve that status. The culture forbids it. For this reason, a Mediterranean person understates actual status to be certain not to step beyond it, or even to create that impression.

This is quite in contrast with the Western understanding of humility, which generally means absence of self-assertion. The "humble" Westerner does not proclaim personal worth but also does not deny compliments when they are given. Further the Westerner never takes a step below status so that others might point to the rightful status. This contrasts with Jesus the "humble" Mediterranean person who protested "Don't call me good!" when he was addressed in this way by a respectful admirer (Mark 10:18). Here are two culturally different ways of being humble illustrated by one's attitude toward personal status.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
- "At the last supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood" (SC, 47).
- "Moreover, the wondrous mystery of the real presence of the Lord under the Eucharistic species ... is proclaimed in the celebration of the Mass" (GIRM, 3).
- "In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life - political, economic, and cultural - must be given renewed value, becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity" (CSDC, 582).
GOOD FRIDAY OF THE LORD’S PASSION A B C
FIRST READING

The Lectionary subtitles this passage the "Fourth oracle of the Servant of the Lord," but it is often called the fourth song of the Suffering Servant. Near the end of the book of the prophet Isaiah, we meet a figure called God's servant, who represents God but suffers greatly for the sins of others. The figure may have been a historical person at the time of Isaiah or a representation of the people of Israel. Christians read these four passages with a very specific insight: they prophesy Jesus, the servant of the Father, who suffered for our salvation. The passage presents a startling description of this servant. He was "spurned and avoided by people,/ a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity" (53:3). In the most moving verses, we realize that the servant's suffering should have been ours: "Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, / our sufferings that he endured ... I We had all gone astray like sheep ... / but the Lord laid upon him / the guilt of us all" (Isaiah 53:4, 6). On Good Friday, these verses come to fulfillment in the crucified Jesus.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (52:13–53:12)

See, my servant shall prosper,
he shall be raised high and greatly exalted.
Even as many were amazed at him—
so marred was his look beyond human semblance
and his appearance beyond that of the sons of man—
so shall he startle many nations,
because of him kings shall stand speechless;
for those who have not been told shall see,
those who have not heard shall ponder it.
Who would believe what we have heard?
To whom has the arm of the L ORD been revealed?
He grew up like a sapling before him,
like a shoot from the parched earth;
there was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him,
nor appearance that would attract us to him.
He was spurned and avoided by people,
a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity,
one of those from whom people hide their faces,
spunred, and we held him in no esteem.
Yet it was our infirmities that he bore,
our sufferings that he endured,
while we thought of him as stricken,
as one smitten by God and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our offenses,
crushed for our sins;
upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole,
by his stripes we were healed.
We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way; but the LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all. Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth; like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearsers, he was silent and opened not his mouth. Oppressed and condemned, he was taken away, and who would have thought any more of his destiny? When he was cut off from the land of the living, and smitten for the sin of his people, a grave was assigned him among the wicked and a burial place with evildoers, though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood. But the LORD was pleased to crush him in infirmity. If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life, and the will of the LORD shall be accomplished through him. Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days; through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear. Therefore I will give him his portion among the great, and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty, because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; and he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.

* [52:13–53:12] The last of the “servant of the Lord” oracles (see note on 42:1–4). Taken together, these oracles depict a figure of one called by God for a vocation to Israel and the nations (42:4; 49:5–6); the servant’s exaltation both opens and closes the passage (52:13; 53:12). The servant responded in fidelity but has suffered opposition (50:4–6). In this fourth oracle the servant is characterized as “a man of suffering” (53:3) and appears to be unjustly put to death (53:8–9). Those who have witnessed his career somehow recognize that he is innocent, has undergone suffering for their sins (53:4–6), and his death is referred to as a reparation offering (see note on 53:10–11). The servant is described in ways that identify him with Israel (which is frequently referred to as “servant” in the context of Second Isaiah—e.g., 41:8, 9; 44:2, 21; 43:4) and is designated as “Israel” in 49:3; yet Israel outside the “servant of the Lord” oracles is not presented as sinless, but rather in exile because of sin (40:2; 42:21–25) and even as servant as deaf and blind (42:18–19). The servant is thus both identified with Israel and distinguished from it. As with the previous servant poems, this chapter helped the followers of Jesus to interpret his suffering, death, and resurrection; see especially the passion narratives.
Modern specialists in Isaiah have preferred to reintegrate these Servant hymns into the total book rather than separate them out as individual 'songs.' In addition, modern scholarship believes that the traditional identification of the speaker in these hymns, "Suffering Servant," should rather be called "the faithful servant who willingly suffers." Scholars further believe that in Isaiah, the servant is not an individual but rather Israel herself in history, captive Israel who will recognize herself in this persecuted sick person.

Israel the servant is described in Isaiah I:4-6 (NAB):

Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with wickedness
The whole head is sick,
and the whole heart faint
From the sole of the foot to the head
there is no sound spot;
Wound and welt and gaping gash.
not drained, or bandaged,
or eased with salve.

Isaiah’s message in today’s reading is that Israel, shattered, captive, and utterly humiliated will be restored. Israel has suffered for the same Israel who has sinned. The current state of humiliation is due to the fact that Isaiah’s Israel is one with the Israel of history. Isaiah proposes that God regarded Israel's suffering, which God brought about, as some sort of offering for sin.

Today's liturgy as well as a long-standing Christian tradition reflected already in the Gospels applies this and its related passages to Jesus. It makes good cultural sense that the followers of Jesus would search their tradition for cultural heroes with whom they would associate and compare Jesus. Again, the sensitive preacher and liturgy planners will be careful in identifying "promise and fulfillment" patterns and will resist using these patterns in a "supercessionistic" sense.

The Hebrew Scripture stands quite well on its own with continued significance for Jewish believers of contemporary times. Judaism did not collapse after Jesus. But it is also proper for Christians to draw upon the Hebrew Scriptures to interpret Jesus the Galilean. This, it seems, is the intent of today's liturgy especially in the light of the revised references to Judaic people in the bidding prayers.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 31:2, 6, 12–13, 15–16, 17, 25)

Psalm 31 appeals to God for rescue. The psalmist is desperate, "an object of reproach, / a laughing-stock to my neighbors, and a dread to my friends" (v. 6). But the psalm does not dwell in despair. It trusts that God will redeem the one in distress. This singer is so convinced of salvation that the psalm concludes with an exhortation to the hearer: "Take courage and be stouthearted, / all you who hope in the Lord" (v. 25). The antiphon "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (v. 6) was spoken by Jesus on the Cross as he breathes his last (Luke 23:46).

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.
In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
In your justice rescue me.
Into your hands I commend my spirit;
you will redeem me, O Lord, O faithful God.
For all my foes I am an object of reproach,
a laughing-stock to my neighbors, and a dread to my friends;
they who see me abroad flee from me.
I am forgotten like the unremembered dead;
I am like a dish that is broken.
But my trust is in you, O LORD;
I say, “You are my God.
In your hands is my destiny; rescue me
from the clutches of my enemies and my persecutors.”
Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your kindness.
Take courage and be stouthearted,
all you who hope in the LORD.

* [Psalm 31] A lament (Ps 31:2–19) with a strong emphasis on trust (Ps 31:4, 6, 15–16), ending with an anticipatory thanksgiving (Ps 31:20–24). As is usual in laments, the affliction is couched in general terms. The psalmist feels overwhelmed by evil people but trusts in the “God of truth” (Ps 31:6).
* [31:6] Into your hands I commend my spirit: in Lk 23:46 Jesus breathes his last with this Psalm verse. Stephen in Acts 7:59 alludes to these words as he is attacked by enemies. The verse is used as an antiphon in the Divine Office at Compline, the last prayer of the day.

SECOND READING

The sufferings of Jesus enabled him to sympathize with our weakness, making him a powerful mediator of mercy and grace. The Letter to the Hebrews explains the role of Jesus as the greatest of all high priests. This passage describes the events of Jesus' Passion: "In the days when Christ was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death" (5:7). These words resemble the Gospel accounts of Jesus suffering his agony in the garden of Gethsemane. But the passage does not linger on Jesus' suffering. "[H]e was heard" (5:7). The Father, who could save Jesus from death, did, by raising him from the dead.

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (4:14–16; 5:7–9)
Brothers and sisters:
Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens,
Jesus, the Son of God,
let us hold fast to our confession.
For we do not have a high priest
who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but one who has similarly been tested in every way,
yet without sin.
So let us confidently approach the throne of grace
to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.
In the days when Christ was in the flesh,
he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears
to the one who was able to save him from death,
and he was heard because of his reverence.
Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered;
and when he was made perfect,
he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

* [4:14–16] These verses, which return to the theme first sounded in Heb 2:16–3:1, serve as an introduction to the section that follows. The author here alone calls Jesus a great high priest (Heb 4:14), a designation used by Philo for the Logos; perhaps he does so in order to emphasize Jesus’ superiority over the Jewish high priest. He has been tested in every way, yet without sin (Heb 4:15); this indicates an acquaintance with the tradition of Jesus’ temptations, not only at the beginning (as in Mk 1:13) but throughout his public life (cf. Lk 22:28). Although the reign of the exalted Jesus is a theme that occurs elsewhere in Hebrews, and Jesus’ throne is mentioned in Heb 1:8, the throne of grace (Heb 4:16) refers to the throne of God. The similarity of Heb 4:16 to Heb 10:19–22 indicates that the author is thinking of our confident access to God, made possible by the priestly work of Jesus.

* [5:1–10] The true humanity of Jesus (see note on Heb 2:5–18) makes him a more rather than a less effective high priest to the Christian community. In Old Testament tradition, the high priest was identified with the people, guilty of personal sin just as they were (Heb 5:1–3). Even so, the office was of divine appointment (Heb 5:4), as was also the case with the sinless Christ (Heb 5:5). For Heb 5:6, see note on Ps 110:4. Although Jesus was Son of God, he was destined as a human being to learn obedience by accepting the suffering he had to endure (Heb 5:8). Because of his perfection through this experience of human suffering, he is the cause of salvation for all (Heb 5:9), a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:10; cf. Heb 5:6 and Heb 7:3).

* [5:6–8] The author of Hebrews is the only New Testament writer to cite Ps 110:4, here and in Heb 7:17, 21, to show that Jesus has been called by God to his role as priest. Heb 5:7–8 deal with his ability to sympathize with sinners, because of his own experience of the trials and weakness of human nature, especially fear of death. In his present exalted state, weakness is foreign to him, but he understands what we suffer because of his previous earthly experience.

* [5:7] He offered prayers...to the one who was able to save him from death: at Gethsemane (cf. Mk 14:35), though some see a broader reference (see note on Jn 12:27).

* [5:8] Son though he was: two different though not incompatible views of Jesus’ sonship coexist in Hebrews, one associating it with his exaltation, the other with his preexistence. The former view is the older one (cf. Rom 1:4).

In this meditation upon the significance of Jesus and his saving deed, the author of Hebrews notes that Christ the unique High Priest accomplished what the elaborate sacrificial Israelite ritual could not. He is an intercessor after the pattern of Abraham and Moses indeed, but very much more effective.

Pay special attention to the verses from Hebrews 5, for they were selected as especially suitable for Good Friday. These verses fit well with the sentiments of the Servant passage from Isaiah selected for today. They help a contemporary Western believer to shape an authentic image of a Mediterranean hero, someone Mediterranean boys would admire and emulate.

"Precisely because he was son, Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered. [Notice that I render this verse differently than it appear in traditional translations. See the explanation below.] I-le offered prayers and supplication with loud cries and tears to God, who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence." The Passion Narratives tell us Jesus prayed for his Father to remove his cup of suffering, but concluded: "Your will not mine be done."

Now relate these sentiments to the repeated and emphatic exhortations in Proverbs (13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29: 15, 17) and Ben Sira (30: 1-13) that fathers should physically punish their sons. The image resulting from these segments of the Old Testament is shocking to a Westerner. What American father physically punishes his sons? What American father would will a shameful and violent death for his son? What American son would hang around and submit to it?
A Westerner wonders why Jesus does not flee or strive to extricate himself from this predicament? The answer is simple. Stoic endurance of pain and even death among males is highly admired and highly regarded in Mediterranean culture. Jesus was very much a man of his culture. It is reasonable to expect that Joseph and Mary followed the advice of Proverbs and Sir-ach in rearing Jesus, and it is reasonable to believe he read or heard and cherished Isaiah's passages about the faithful servant who suffered as well as the Lamentations of Jeremiah and the Psalms of Lament by various Israelite ancestors. These sentiments very plausibly comforted him on the cross where he hung from the third hour to the ninth before shrieking. The pagan Centurion expressed deep admiration for the way he died-like a real Mediterranean man (Mark 15:39)!

Today's readings from Hebrews and Isaiah give us an opportunity to understand and appreciate our ancestors in the faith on their own terms. We ought not be shocked or ashamed. They are, after all, our ancestors. We are grateful for what they tell us for it gives us a better understanding of Jesus as well. While we welcome the salvation Jesus won for us and admire the way in which it was gained, our culture hold a different set of values relative to pain and suffering. We are able not only to assuage physical pain and suffering but also to eliminate it. This God-given ability poses new challenges to the notion of "redemptive suffering." The mystery we celebrate today gives us much to think about.

VERSE BEFORE THE GOSPEL (Phil 2:8–9)
Christ became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every other name.

GOSPEL

This passage in the Gospel according to John is one of the most sublime testimonies to the glory of God. The narrative moves through several scenes, but it constantly teaches the meaning of Jesus' life, Death, and Resurrection. Early on, John presents "Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him" (18:4). Jesus is no innocent bystander. He is the omniscient God in control of the events that follow. Three times in the opening confrontation he says, "I AM," boldly claiming the name that God revealed to Moses in the burning bush. His enemies end up proclaiming the truth about Jesus in spite of themselves. Caiaphas had told the Jews that, "it was better that one man should die rather than the people" (18:14), fulfilling Isaiah's fourth oracle. Pilate, unable to get a straight answer from Jesus about his identity, asks, "What is truth?" (18:38). But it is Pilate who has an inscription made for the Cross that calls Jesus, in three languages, the King of the Jews. The soldiers plait a crown from thorns and wrap Jesus' aching body in purple cloth, intending to mock, but handing over the signs of his kingship. While the enemies of Jesus unintentionally speak the truth, his friend Peter intentionally denies Jesus three times. From the Cross, Jesus takes matters into his own hands, entrusting his mother and the disciple whom he loved to each other. From these faithful disciples the Church will be born. Before he dies, Jesus says, "It is finished" (19:30). That doesn't mean "It's over." It means "It is accomplished" or "It is perfected." He has completed the task he was given. He hands himself over to God. John has Jesus dying on the Cross on preparation day, the day before Passover, so that we will see in the slaughtering of the Passover lambs a contemporaneous symbol of the One who gave his life that others might live.

The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John (18:1–19:42)
Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to where there was a garden, into which he and his disciples entered. Judas his betrayer also knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas got a band of soldiers and guards from the chief priests and the Pharisees
and went there with lanterns, torches, and
weapons.
Jesus, knowing everything that was going to
happen to him,
went out and said to them, “Whom are you
looking for?”
They answered him, “Jesus the Nazorean.”
He said to them, “I AM.”
Judas his betrayer was also with them.
When he said to them, “I AM,”
they turned away and fell to the ground.
So he again asked them,
“What are you looking for?”
They said, “Jesus the Nazorean.”
Jesus answered,
“I told you that I AM.
So if you are looking for me, let these men go.”
This was to fulfill what he had said,
“I have not lost any of those you gave me.”
Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it,
struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his
right ear.
The slave’s name was Malchus.
Jesus said to Peter,
“Put your sword into its scabbard.
Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave
me?”
So the band of soldiers, the tribune, and the
Jewish guards seized Jesus,
bound him, and brought him to Annas first.
He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas,
who was high priest that year.
It was Caiaphas who had counseled the Jews
that it was better that one man should die
rather than the people.
Simon Peter and another disciple followed
Jesus.
Now the other disciple was known to the high
priest,
and he entered the courtyard of the high
priest with Jesus.
But Peter stood at the gate outside.
So the other disciple, the acquaintance of the
high priest,
went out and spoke to the gatekeeper and
brought Peter in.
Then the maid who was the gatekeeper said to
Peter,
“You are not one of this man’s disciples, are
you?”
He said, “I am not.”
Now the slaves and the guards were standing
around a charcoal fire
that they had made, because it was cold,
and were warming themselves.
Peter was also standing there keeping warm.
The high priest questioned Jesus
about his disciples and about his doctrine.
Jesus answered him,
“I have spoken publicly to the world.
I have always taught in a synagogue
or in the temple area where all the Jews
gather,
and in secret I have said nothing. Why ask
me?
Ask those who heard me what I said to them.
They know what I said.”
When he had said this,
one of the temple guards standing there
struck Jesus and said,
“Is this the way you answer the high
priest?”
Jesus answered him,
“If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the
wrong;
but if I have spoken rightly, why do you
strike me?”
Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the
high priest.
Now Simon Peter was standing there keeping
warm.
And they said to him,
“You are not one of his disciples, are you?”
He denied it and said,
“I am not.”
One of the slaves of the high priest,
a relative of the one whose ear Peter had
cut off, said,
“Didn’t I see you in the garden with him?”
Again Peter denied it.
And immediately the cock crowed.
Then they brought Jesus from Caiaphas to the
praetorium.
It was morning.
And they themselves did not enter the
praetorium,
in order not to be defiled so that they could eat the Passover.
So Pilate came out to them and said,
“What charge do you bring against this man?”
They answered and said to him,
“If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.”
At this, Pilate said to them,
“Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law.”
The Jews answered him,
“We do not have the right to execute anyone,”
in order that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled
that he said indicating the kind of death he would die.
So Pilate went back into the praetorium and summoned Jesus and said to him,
“Are you the King of the Jews?”
Jesus answered,
“Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?”
Pilate answered,
“I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me.
What have you done?”
Jesus answered,
“My kingdom does not belong to this world.
If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.
But as it is, my kingdom is not here.”
So Pilate said to him,
“Then you are a king?”
Jesus answered,
“You say I am a king.
For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.
Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”
Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”
When he had said this,
he again went out to the Jews and said to them,
“I find no guilt in him.
But you have a custom that I release one prisoner to you at Passover.
Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?”
They cried out again,
“Not this one but Barabbas!”
Now Barabbas was a revolutionary.
Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged.
And the soldiers wove a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head, and clothed him in a purple cloak, and they came to him and said,
“Hail, King of the Jews!”
And they struck him repeatedly.
Once more Pilate went out and said to them,
“Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you may know that I find no guilt in him.”
So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple cloak.
And he said to them, “Behold, the man!”
When the chief priests and the guards saw him they cried out,
“Crucify him, crucify him!”
Pilate said to them,
“Take him yourselves and crucify him.
I find no guilt in him.”
The Jews answered,
“We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God.”
Now when Pilate heard this statement, he became even more afraid, and went back into the praetorium and said to Jesus,
“Where are you from?”
Jesus did not answer him.
So Pilate said to him,
“Do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?”
Jesus answered him,
“You would have no power over me
if it had not been given to you from above.
For this reason the one who handed me over to
you
has the greater sin.”
Consequently, Pilate tried to release him; but
the Jews cried out,
“If you release him, you are not a Friend of
Caesar.
Everyone who makes himself a king opposes
Caesar.”
When Pilate heard these words he brought
Jesus out
and seated him on the judge’s bench
in the place called Stone Pavement, in
Hebrew, Gabbatha.
It was preparation day for Passover, and it was
about noon.
And he said to the Jews,
“Behold, your king!”
They cried out,
“Take him away, take him away! Crucify
him!”
Pilate said to them,
“Shall I crucify your king?”
The chief priests answered,
“We have no king but Caesar.”
Then he handed him over to them to be
crucified.
So they took Jesus, and, carrying the cross
himself,
he went out to what is called the Place of
the Skull,
in Hebrew, Golgotha.
There they crucified him, and with him two
others,
one on either side, with Jesus in the middle.
Pilate also had an inscription written and put on
the cross.
It read,
“Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews.”
Now many of the Jews read this inscription,
because the place where Jesus was
crucified was near the city;
and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and
Greek.
So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate,
“Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’
but that he said, ‘I am the King of the
Jews!’”
Pilate answered,
“What I have written, I have written.”
When the soldiers had crucified Jesus,
they took his clothes and divided them into
four shares,
a share for each soldier.
They also took his tunic, but the tunic was
seamless, woven in one piece from the top
down.
So they said to one another,
“Let’s not tear it, but cast lots for it to see
whose it will be,”
in order that the passage of Scripture might
be fulfilled that says:
They divided my garments among them,
and for my vesture they cast lots.
This is what the soldiers did.
Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother
and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of
Clopas, and Mary of Magdala.
When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple
there whom he loved
he said to his mother, “Woman, behold,
your son.”
Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your
mother.”
And from that hour the disciple took her into his
home.
After this, aware that everything was now
finished, in order that the Scripture might
be fulfilled,
Jesus said, “I thirst.”
There was a vessel filled with common wine.
So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig
of hyssop and put it up to his mouth.
When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, “It is
finished.”
And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit.
Here all kneel and pause for a short
time.
Now since it was preparation day, in order that
the bodies might not remain on the cross
on the sabbath, for the sabbath day of that
week was a solemn one,
the Jews asked Pilate that their legs be
broken and that they be taken down.
So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first
and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus.

But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead,
they did not break his legs, but one soldier thrust his lance into his side,
and immediately blood and water flowed out.

An eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true; he knows that he is speaking the truth,
so that you also may come to believe.

For this happened so that the Scripture passage might be fulfilled: *Not a bone of it will be broken.*

And again another passage says: *They will look upon him whom they have pierced.*

After this, Joseph of Arimathea, secretly a disciple of Jesus for fear of the Jews,
asked Pilate if he could remove the body of Jesus.

And Pilate permitted it. So he came and took his body.

Nicodemus, the one who had first come to him at night,
also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes
weighing about one hundred pounds.

They took the body of Jesus and bound it with burial cloths along with the spices,
according to the Jewish burial custom.

Now in the place where he had been crucified there was a garden,
and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet been buried.

So they laid Jesus there because of the Jewish preparation day; for the tomb was close by.
We do not have the right to execute anyone: only John gives this reason for their bringing Jesus to Pilate. Jewish sources are not clear on the competence of the Sanhedrin at this period to sentence and to execute for political crimes.

The Jewish punishment for blasphemy was stoning (Lv 24:16). In coming to the Romans to ensure that Jesus would be crucified, the Jewish authorities fulfilled his prophecy that he would be exalted (Jn 3:14; 12:32–33). There is some historical evidence, however, for Jews crucifying Jews.

You say I am a king: see Mt 26:64 for a similar response to the high priest. It is at best a reluctant affirmative.

See note on Mt 27:15.

Barabbas: see note on Mt 27:16–17. Revolutionary: a guerrilla warrior fighting for nationalistic aims, though the term can also denote a robber. See note on Mt 27:38.

Luke places the mockery of Jesus at the midpoint in the trial when Jesus was sent to Herod. Mark and Matthew place the scourging and mockery at the end of the trial after the sentence of death. Scourging was an integral part of the crucifixion penalty.

Made himself the Son of God: this question was not raised in John’s account of the Jewish interrogations of Jesus as it was in the synoptic account. Nevertheless, see Jn 5:18; 8:53; 10:36.

Friend of Caesar: a Roman honorific title bestowed upon high-ranking officials for merit.

Seated him: others translate “(Pilate) sat down.” In John’s thought, Jesus is the real judge of the world, and John may here be portraying him seated on the judgment bench. Stone pavement: in Greek lithostrotos; under the fortress Antonia, one of the conjectured locations of the praetorium, a massive stone pavement has been excavated. Gabbatha (Aramaic rather than Hebrew) probably means “ridge, elevation.”

Noon: Mk 15:25 has Jesus crucified “at the third hour,” which means either 9 A.M. or the period from 9 to 12. Noon, the time when, according to John, Jesus was sentenced to death, was the hour at which the priests began to slaughter Passover lambs in the temple; see Jn 1:29.

He handed him over to them to be crucified: in context this would seem to mean “handed him over to the chief priests.” Lk 23:25 has a similar ambiguity. There is a polemic tendency in the gospels to place the guilt of the crucifixion on the Jewish authorities and to exonerate the Romans from blame. But John later mentions the Roman soldiers (Jn 19:23), and it was to these soldiers that Pilate handed Jesus over.

Carrying the cross himself: a different picture from that of the synoptics, especially Lk 23:26 where Simon of Cyrene is made to carry the cross, walking behind Jesus. In John’s theology, Jesus remained in complete control and master of his destiny (cf. Jn 10:18). Place of the Skull: the Latin word for skull is Calvaria; hence “Calvary.” Golgotha is actually an Aramaic rather than a Hebrew word.

The inscription differs with slightly different words in each of the four gospels. John’s form is fullest and gives the equivalent of the Latin INRI = Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum. Only John mentions its polyglot character (Jn 19:20) and Pilate’s role in keeping the title unchanged (Jn 19:21–22).

While all four gospels describe the soldiers casting lots to divide Jesus’ garments (see note on Mt 27:35), only John quotes the underlying passage from Ps 22:19, and only John sees each line of the poetic parallelism literally carried out in two separate actions (Jn 19:23–24).

It is not clear whether four women are meant, or three (i.e., Mary the wife of C[e]opas [cf. Lk 24:18] is in apposition with his mother’s sister) or two (his mother and his mother’s sister, i.e., Mary of C[e]opas and Mary of Magdala). Only John mentions the mother of Jesus here. The synoptics have a group of women looking on from a distance at the cross (Mk 15:40).

This scene has been interpreted literally, of Jesus’ concern for his mother; and symbolically, e.g., in the light of the Cana story in Jn 2 (the presence of the mother of Jesus, the address woman, and the mention of the hour) and of the upper room in Jn 13 (the presence of the beloved disciple; the hour). Now that the hour has come (Jn 19:28), Mary (a symbol of the church?) is given a role as the mother of
Christians (personified by the beloved disciple); or, as a representative of those seeking salvation, she is supported by the disciple who interprets Jesus’ revelation; or Jewish and Gentile Christianity (or Israel and the Christian community) are reconciled.


* [19:29] Wine: John does not mention the drugged wine, a narcotic that Jesus refused as the crucifixion began (Mk 15:23), but only this final gesture of kindness at the end (Mk 15:36). Hysopp, a small plant, is scarcely suitable for carrying a sponge (Mark mentions a reed) and may be a symbolic reference to the hysopp used to daub the blood of the paschal lamb on the doorpost of the Hebrews (Ex 12:22).

* [19:30] Handed over the spirit: there is a double nuance of dying (giving up the last breath or spirit) and that of passing on the holy Spirit; see Jn 7:39 which connects the giving of the Spirit with Jesus’ glorious return to the Father, and Jn 20:22 where the author portrays the conferral of the Spirit.

* [19:34–35] John probably emphasizes these verses to show the reality of Jesus’ death, against the docetic heretics. In the blood and water there may also be a symbolic reference to the Eucharist and baptism.

* [19:35] He knows: it is not certain from the Greek that this he is the eyewitness of the first part of the sentence. May [come to] believe: see note on Jn 20:31.

* [19:38–42] In the first three gospels there is no anointing on Friday. In Matthew and Luke the women come to the tomb on Sunday morning precisely to anoint Jesus.

The repeated and strong emphasis upon Jesus' divinity to-gether with the triumphalist tone in John's version of the Pas-sion read on Good Friday blunt the shock of the Synoptic versions which are read on Palm Sunday in each cycle.

My favorite literary analysis of John's Gospel and his Passion Narrative is a long-standing one recently refined by Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh in their Social Sci-ence Co1111111entary on the Gospel of John (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). I have modified their outline, though our analysis of the central scene is nearly identical. Such an analysis is rooted in the fact that artists (speakers, writers, composers) create their works by using patterns or structures that help an attentive reader or listener to follow and grasp the artist's in-tended meaning. In his Magnificat J. S. Bach used a form of concentric musical composition so that when the singers arrive at the words "As it was in the beginning .. . " that musical pat-tern repeats the pattern from the beginning of his composition. Musically at the end of his composition, Bach reminds the lis-tener how it was "musically" at the beginning.

In similar fashion, the author of John's Gospel favors clusters of seven. For instance, he reports just seven signs (which the Synoptics call mighty deeds) during the ministry of Jesus. In any literary composition where seven items stand out, it is possible to view them in "step progression" or in "concen-tric arrangement." Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman (John 4) is an example of "step progression." Jesus and the woman speak to each other seven times. In the woman's seven responses to Jesus, she gives evidence of a progressively im-proving understanding of who Jesus really is: Judean, Sir (Kyrie), Prophet, Messiah. In the end she becomes the first "evangelizer" in John's Gospel: "many Samaritans believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony." The story of the Samaritan woman is an example of an author using seven items to demonstrate "step progression." The highlight is at the end of the list of seven (John 4:29).

John's Passion Story illustrates the use of seven items in "concentric arrangement" similar to the musical device em-ployed by Bach. The technique of concentric composition was popular among ancient authors. In concentric composition, the main point of the narrative comes not at the end, but rather in the middle. When seven items are arranged concentrically, they appear thus:

A

B
John I 8: 1 to 19:41, the gospel reading for Good Friday, is like a play that can be divided into twenty-one scenes, or three acts each containing seven scenes. This means that the scenes of each act can be arranged according to the scheme of letters as presented just above. The "D" scene at the center is the highlight.

ACT I (18: 1-27): Arrest, Jesus before Annas, denial by Peter
A Scene I (18:1) In the garden
  B Scene 2 (18:2-3) Infidelity of Judas
  C Scene 3 (18:4-11) Jesus loses none given to him; double witness
D Scene 4 (18:12-14) transition from Judas to Peter: one must die
C' Scene 5 (18:15-18) Peter's first denial, outside
B' Scene 6 (18:19-24) Jesus and Annas: Teacher and Revealer; Jesus is struck, inside
A' Scene 7 (18:25-27) Peter's second and third denial, outside

To discern the scene changes here, pay attention to "in-side" and "outside."
A Scene 1 (18:28-32): OUTSIDE, authorities demand death
  B Scene 2 (18:33-38a): INSIDE, Pilate questions, Jesus answers
  C Scene 3 (18:38b-40): OUTSIDE, Jesus declared innocent
D Scene 4 (19:1-3): INSIDE, JESUS CROWNED AS KING
C' Scene 5 (19:4-8): OUTSIDE, Jesus is declared innocent
B' Scene 6 (19:9-12): INSIDE, Pilate questions, Jesus answers
A' Scene 7 (19:13-16): OUTSIDE, authorities demand death

Notice how section "D" is the heart of what John the Evangelist wants to say about Jesus in his Passion Story. Observe also how neatly the idea in section A matches the idea in section A', etc. Because of the literary device of "concentric arrangement," the reader (and sometimes a listener sensitive to this potential pattern) can easily grasp what the author or speaker is doing.

ACT 3 (19:17-42): Crucifixion; anointing; burial.
A Scene I (19:17-22) Crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate affirms twice
  B Scene 2 (19:23-24) Jesus stripped of clothing
C Scene 3 (19:25-27) Jesus' mother affirms
  B' Scene 6 (19:38-40) Anointing of Jesus; fidelity of disciples
A' Scene 7 (19:41-42) Burial in a garden.

If one were to take a longer view of John's Passion Story, Act I, scene I (in a garden), matches Act 3, scene 7 (in a garden), and so on, highlighting still further the centrality of Act 2 and its central scene: D. This kind of literary arrangement makes it clear that the crowning of Jesus as king, the mocking indignity of the thorns endured out of love for humankind, is the key to the suffering and death of Jesus in the mind of John. Death out of love for others is victory; the cross in this scheme is indeed coronation.

The soldiers mock Jesus as "king." This practice of mockery was common on stage and in the Roman circuses. A "mock king" game has also been found on the stone pavement identified in John's gospel as lithostrotos (Greek for stone pavement) and located under the present Sisters of Zion convent in Jerusalem. In his Gospel John betrays a fondness for irony wherein protagonists often speak the truth totally unbeknown to themselves. In this perspective, here is a sign that non-Judaic peoples will ultimately confess the kingship of Jesus.
What would a Mediterranean cultural perspective add to this? In the Mediterranean world where honor and shame are the core values, Jesus the honorable preacher had a very shameful end. His trial and execution were that of a criminal. The shame of this end obliterated the honor he amassed during his ministry. This, at least, is the synoptic story line in which Jesus 'being raised from the dead by God vindicates Jesus and heaps abundant honor upon him far surpassing anything human could have granted.

In John, Jesus is honorable from the cosmic beginning of the Gospel right through the triumphalist trial and death. From a Mediterranean honor and shame perspective, the resurrection was something like frosting on the cake in John's Gospel. It simply added more honor to honor which was never diminished. This is a comforting thought for a worshiper who, as this Good Friday liturgy progresses, will venerate the cross while singing or listening to the "reproaches," an Eastern hymn transferred to the West around the ninth century. The ceremony of venerating the cross was in existence in Rome from the seventh century. These "reproaches" represent the finest elements of folk piety calculated to prick the conscience and stir the hearts of sinners to conversion. St. Methodius, who brought Christianity to Poland in the ninth century A.D., also brought these "reproaches," which have held a treasured place in Polish piety through the ages even to the present time.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
- "The crucified Jesus has overcome divisions, re-establishing peace and reconciliation, precisely through the cross, 'thereby bringing the hostility to an end' and bringing the salvation of the Resurrection to mankind" (CSDC, 493).
- "The Church celebrates the redemptive death of Christ on Good Friday. The Church meditates on the Lord's Passion in the afternoon liturgical action, in which she prays for the salvation of the word, adores the Cross and commemorates her very origin in the sacred wound in Christ's side (cf. John 19:34)" (DPPL, 142).
- "On this day, when 'Christ, our passover was sacrificed,' the church meditates on the Passion of her Lord and Spouse, adores the cross, commemorates her origin from the side of Christ asleep on the cross and intercedes for the salvation of the whole world" (PS, 58).
Holy Saturday
*No Daily Mass Celebrated*

**EASTER SUNDAY A B C**

**THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD**
**AT THE EASTER VIGIL IN THE HOLY NIGHT OF EASTER**

**FIRST READING**

God created the heavens and the earth. The entire Bible opens with an account of how and why all things came to be. The heavens and the earth exist by the will of God. At the time these verses were written, science had not advanced beyond a rudimentary understanding of biology and zoology. The Catholic Church does not expect members to believe in the literal words of this story. Genesis, however, defends a vital belief that we recite at the beginning of our weekly profession of faith: God is the Creator of heaven and earth.

The Easter Vigil is the pivotal night of the entire liturgical year. Lent has led up to this night, and even Advent and Christmas have been preparing for this night. Everything we celebrate for the next fifty days results from our belief that Jesus is risen from the dead. Christ's Resurrection from the dead makes our own resurrection possible. As faithful followers, we believe that God created us, and that God will recreate us at the end of time.

Our destiny is prefigured in the Baptisms we celebrate in Catholic churches throughout the world on this night. To reaffirm the foundation of our belief in a new creation, the Easter Vigil offers us the story of the first creation. Since God created everything out of nothing, it is not so hard to believe that God can recreate everything out of something.

**A reading from the Book of Genesis (1:1–2:2)**

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,
the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss,
while a mighty wind swept over the waters.

Then God said,
“Let there be light,” and there was light.

God saw how good the light was.

God then separated the light from the darkness.

God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.”

Thus, evening came, and morning followed—the first day.

Then God said,
“Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters,
to separate one body of water from the other.”

And so it happened: God made the dome,
and it separated the water above the dome from the water below it.

God called the dome “the sky.”

Evening came, and morning followed—the second day.

Then God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered into a single basin,
so that the dry land may appear.”

And so it happened: the water under the sky was gathered into its basin,
and the dry land appeared.

God called the dry land “the earth,” and the basin of the water he called “the sea.”

God saw how good it was.

Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it.”

And so it happened: the earth brought forth every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it.

God saw how good it was.

Evening came, and morning followed—the third day.

Then God said: “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky, to separate day from night. Let them mark the fixed times, the days and the years, and serve as luminaries in the dome of the sky, to shed light upon the earth.”

And so it happened: God made the two great lights, the greater one to govern the day, and the lesser one to govern the night; and he made the stars.

God set them in the dome of the sky, to shed light upon the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness.

God saw how good it was.

Evening came, and morning followed—the fourth day.

Then God said, “Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures, and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky.”

And so it happened: God created the great sea monsters and all kinds of swimming creatures with which the water teems, and all kinds of winged birds.

God saw how good it was, and God blessed them, saying, “Be fertile, multiply, and fill the water of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the earth.”

Evening came, and morning followed—the fifth day.

Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth all kinds of living creatures: cattle, creeping things, and wild animals of all kinds.”

And so it happened: God made all kinds of wild animals, all kinds of cattle, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth.

God saw how good it was.

Then God said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.”

God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God blessed them, saying: “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth.”

God also said: “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the animals of the land, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the ground, I give all the green plants for food.”
And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.
Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.
Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed.
Since on the seventh day God was finished with the work he had been doing,
he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken.

* [1:1–2:3] This section, from the Priestly source, functions as an introduction, as ancient stories of the origin of
the world (cosmogonies) often did. It introduces the primordial story (2:4–11:26), the stories of the ancestors
(11:27–50:26), and indeed the whole Pentateuch. The chapter highlights the goodness of creation and the divine
desire that human beings share in that goodness. God brings an orderly universe out of primordial chaos merely by
uttering a word. In the literary structure of six days, the creation events in the first three days are related to those
in the second three.

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The seventh day, on which God rests, the climax of the account, falls outside the six-day structure.
Until modern times the first line was always translated, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”
Several comparable ancient cosmogonies, discovered in recent times, have a “when…then” construction,
confirming the translation “when…then” here as well. “When” introduces the pre-creation state and “then”
introduces the creative act affecting that state. The traditional translation, “In the beginning,” does not reflect the
Hebrew syntax of the clause.

* [1:2] This verse is parenthetical, describing in three phases the pre-creation state symbolized by the chaos out of
which God brings order: “earth,” hidden beneath the encompassing cosmic waters, could not be seen, and thus
had no “form”; there was only darkness; turbulent wind swept over the waters. Commencing with the last-named
elements (darkness and water), vv. 3–10 describe the rearrangement of this chaos: light is made (first day) and the
water is divided into water above and water below the earth so that the earth appears and is no longer “without
outline.” The abyss: the primordial ocean according to the ancient Semitic cosmogony. After God’s creative
activity, part of this vast body forms the salt-water seas (vv. 9–10); part of it is the fresh water under the earth (Ps
33:7; Ez 31:4), which wells forth on the earth as springs and fountains (Gn 7:11; 8:2; Prv 3:20). Part of it, “the upper
water” (Ps 148:4; Dn 3:60), is held up by the dome of the sky (vv. 6–7), from which rain descends on the earth (Gn

* [1:5] In ancient Israel a day was considered to begin at sunset.

* [1:7] The dome: the Hebrew word suggests a gigantic metal dome. It was inserted into the middle of the single
body of water to form dry space within which the earth could emerge. The Latin Vulgate
translation firmamentum, “means of support (for the upper waters); firmament,” provided the traditional English
rendering.

* [1:26] Let us make: in the ancient Near East, and sometimes in the Bible, God was imagined as presiding over an
assembly of heavenly beings who deliberated and decided about matters on earth (1 Kgs 22:19–22; Is 6:8; Ps 29:1–
2; 82; 89:6–7; Jb 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). This scene accounts for the plural form here and in Gn 11:7 (“Let us go down…”).
Israel’s God was always considered “Most High” over the heavenly beings. Human beings: Hebrew ‘ādām is here
the generic term for humankind; in the first five chapters of Genesis it is the proper name Adam only
at 4:25 and 5:1–5. In our image, after our likeness: “image” and “likeness” (virtually synonyms) express the worth
of human beings who have value in themselves (human blood may not be shed in 9:6 because of this image of
God) and in their task, dominion (1:28), which promotes the rule of God over the universe.

* [1:27] Male and female: as God provided the plants with seeds (vv. 11, 12) and commanded the animals to be
fertile and multiply (v. 22), so God gives sexuality to human beings as their means to continue in existence.

* [1:28] Fill the earth and subdue it: the object of the verb “subdue” may be not the earth as such but earth as the
territory each nation must take for itself (chaps. 10–11), just as Israel will later do (see Nm 32:22, 29; Jos 18:1). The
two divine commands define the basic tasks of the human race—to continue in existence through generation and
to take possession of one’s God-given territory. The dual command would have had special meaning when Israel
was in exile and deeply anxious about whether they would continue as a nation and return to their ancient territory. Have dominion: the whole human race is made in the “image” and “likeness” of God and has “dominion.” Comparable literature of the time used these words of kings rather than of human beings in general; human beings were invariably thought of as slaves of the gods created to provide menial service for the divine world. The royal language here does not, however, give human beings unlimited power, for kings in the Bible had limited dominion and were subject to prophetic critique.

* [1:29] According to the Priestly tradition, the human race was originally intended to live on plants and fruits as were the animals (see v. 30), an arrangement that God will later change (9:3) in view of the human inclination to violence.

In the Mediterranean world boys and girls are reared together up until the age of puberty by the women. Boys are routinely and regularly pampered, including the fact that they are breast-fed at least twice as long as girls are and often long after they have learned to speak (see 2 Mace 7:27). The male child soon learns that all he need do is say "milk" or "food," and he will be fed. Early in life Mediterranean people recognize the power of a word. Additionally from this childhood experience of pampering, adult Mediterranean males develop an aversion to manual, or specifically hand-soiling, labor. Thus, from personal experience, all Mediterranean people take it for granted that God could create the universe by simply saying "Let there be . . . ." Words are powerful and effective. Moreover, in this version of the creation story, God does not even soil his hands! Surely God can do what any Mediterranean man can do.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 104:1–2, 5–6, 10, 12, 13–14, 24, 35)

God created all things and wondrously renews what he has made. Psalm 104 is a psalm of praise to God for the wonders of creation. It imagines the earth fixed upon a foundation, covered with the waters of the oceans, surmounted by waters enclosed in the sky, high above the tops of the mountains. Water, birds, cattle, and grain all supply the needs of humanity, the crown of God's creation. It would be enough if this psalm praised God for the wonders of nature, but it does something more. It praises God for the way nature is renewed each year and from one generation to the next. The verse we use for the refrain calls upon God to send the Spirit to renew the face of the earth. This quality of creation, its inherent ability to renew, makes this psalm a perfect choice for the Easter Vigil. On this night, we praise God for the Resurrection of Christ, for the new life bestowed upon the newly baptized, and for the promise of eternal life revealed throughout God's Word.

Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!
O L ORD, my God, you are great indeed!
You are clothed with majesty and glory, robed in light as with a cloak.
You fixed the earth upon its foundation, not to be moved forever;
with the ocean, as with a garment, you covered it;
avove the mountains the waters stood.
You send forth springs into the watercourses that wind among the mountains.
Beside them the birds of heaven dwell;
from among the branches they send forth their song.
You water the mountains from your palace;
the earth is replete with the fruit of your works.
You raise grass for the cattle,
and vegetation for man’s use,
producing bread from the earth.
How manifold are your works, O LORD!
In wisdom you have wrought them all—
the earth is full of your creatures.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!

* [Psalm 104] A hymn praising God who easily and skillfully made rampaging waters and primordial night into a world vibrant with life. The psalmist describes God’s splendor in the heavens (Ps 104:1–4), how the chaotic waters were tamed to fertilize and feed the world (Ps 104:5–18), and how primordial night was made into a gentle time of refreshment (Ps 104:19–23). The picture is like Gn 1:1–2: a dark and watery chaos is made dry and lighted so that creatures might live. The psalmist reacts to the beauty of creation with awe (Ps 104:24–34). May sin not deface God’s work (Ps 104:35)!

* [104:5–9] God places the gigantic disk of the earth securely on its foundation and then, as a warrior, chases away the enveloping waters and confines them under, above, and around the earth.
* [104:26] Leviathan: a sea monster symbolizing primeval chaos, cf. Ps 74:14; Is 27:1; Jb 40:25. God does not destroy chaos but makes it part of the created order.
* [104:29–30] On one level, the spirit (or wind) of God is the fall and winter rains that provide food for all creatures. On another, it is the breath (or spirit) of God that makes beings live.
* [104:35] Hallelujah: a frequent word in the last third of the Psalter. The word combines the plural imperative of praise (hallelu) with an abbreviated form of the divine name Yah(weh).

This hymn (C) praises God, who with ease and skill has made primordial night and rampaging waters into a world everywhere vibrant with life. The conception of the psalm is the same as Gen 1, where a dark and watery chaos (Gen 1:1–2) receives light on the first day and dry land on the second day. The two forces, night and waters, that had made human community impossible are not annihilated; they are made into an integral part of creation.

In verses 1–4 the speaker acknowledges that the Lord’s palace, entourage, and very self by their splendor reflect God’s mastery over the heavenly world. In verses 5–18 the divine mastery extends to the waters; the waters that once completely covered the earth flee to their proper place at the divine rebuke (vv. 5–9). Water now is tamed for the service of people, nourishing life in rivers (vv. 10–12) and in rain (vv. 13–15), and even fertilizing the fabled mountain of Lebanon (vv. 16–17). Verses 19–23 show the mastery over darkness; it is now part of the sequence of night and day, necessary and helpful to humans and animals (vv. 19–23). In the face of such wisdom and power, the psalmist exclaims in awe (v. 24). Even the vast sea, the mysterious fringe of the known world, is under God. There, too, God has placed a living being, Leviathan, that it might enjoy life, (vv. 25–26). God’s world is not the clock of the Deist philosophers, wound and left to run mechanically; at every moment each creature looks to God for its being. God’s spirit, or breath, is necessary for life, as it is in Gen 2–3 and Ezek 37:1–14 (vv. 27–30). Control over the elemental forces on earth shows the glory of the Lord, the theme of religious song (vv. 31–34). The only thing that can obscure God’s glory is human sin. The psalmist prays that sinners no longer deface the handiwork of the Lord (v. 35)

SECOND READING

God puts Abraham to the test by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. This is one of the most difficult passages in the entire Bible, and it is hard to hear it without feeling uneasy about the God who would make this request, Abraham who would fulfill it, and Isaac who would be the innocent victim. There is a
happy ending, but not before the story wrenches our hearts. Adding to the grim nature of God’s request is that Abraham had no son until he was over one hundred years old. God had promised that Abraham’s progeny would be as numberless as the sands on the shore of the sea, but at that point the patriarch was not even the father of one. Now, at advanced ages, Abraham and Sarah had become first-time parents, and this was the son God wanted him to sacrifice. The story is retold at the Easter Vigil because it foreshadows the life of Jesus. He was an only child, as was Isaac. He was innocent, yet walked up a hill carrying on his shoulders the wood of his sacrifice. But there, the similarities end. Isaac was saved from death; Jesus saved through death.

A reading from the Book of Genesis (22:1–18)

God put Abraham to the test.
He called to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

Then God said:

“Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love,
and go to the land of Moriah.
There you shall offer him up as a holocaust
on a height that I will point out to you.”

Early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey,
took with him his son Isaac and two of his servants as well,
and with the wood that he had cut for the holocaust,
set out for the place of which God had told him.
On the third day Abraham got sight of the place from afar.

Then he said to his servants:

“Both of you stay here with the donkey,
while the boy and I go on over yonder.
We will worship and then come back to you.”

Thereupon Abraham took the wood for the holocaust
and laid it on his son Isaac’s shoulders,
while he himself carried the fire and the knife.
As the two walked on together, Isaac spoke to his father Abraham:

“Father!” Isaac said.

“Yes, son,” he replied.

Isaac continued, “Here are the fire and the wood,
but where is the sheep for the holocaust?”

“Son,” Abraham answered,

“God himself will provide the sheep for the holocaust.”

Then the two continued going forward.

When they came to the place of which God had told him,
Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it.
Next he tied up his son Isaac,
and put him on top of the wood on the altar.

Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.
But the LORD’s messenger called to him from heaven,

“Abraham, Abraham!”

“Here I am!” he answered.

“Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the messenger.

“Do not do the least thing to him.
I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son.”

As Abraham looked about, he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son.

Abraham named the site Yahweh-yireh; hence people now say, “On the mountain the LORD will see.”

Again the LORD’s messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said: “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing—all this because you obeyed my command.”

* [22:1–19] The divine demand that Abraham sacrifice to God the son of promise is the greatest of his trials; after the successful completion of the test, he has only to buy a burial site for Sarah and find a wife for Isaac. The story is widely recognized as a literary masterpiece, depicting in a few lines God as the absolute Lord, inscrutable yet ultimately gracious, and Abraham, acting in moral grandeur as the great ancestor of Israel. Abraham speaks simply, with none of the wordy evasions of chaps. 13 and 21. The style is laconic; motivations and thoughts are not explained, and the reader cannot but wonder at the scene. In vv. 15–18, the angel repeats the seventh and climactic promise. Moriah: the mountain is not given a precise geographical location here, though 2 Chr 3:1 identifies Moriah as the mountain of Jerusalem where Solomon built the Temple; Abraham is thus the first to worship there. The word “Moriah” is a play on the verb “to see” (Heb. ra’ah); the wordplay is continued in v. 8, “God will provide (lit., “see”)” and in v. 14, Yahweh-yireh, meaning “the Lord will see/provide.”

* [22:9] Bound: the Hebrew verb is ‘aqad, from which is derived the noun Akedah, “the binding (of Isaac),” the traditional Jewish name for this incident.

* [22:13] While the Bible recognizes that firstborn males belong to God (Ex 13:11–16; 34:19–20), and provides an alternate sacrifice to redeem firstborn sons, the focus here is on Abraham’s being tested by God (v. 1). But the widely attested practice of child sacrifice underscores, for all its horror today, the realism of the test.

* [22:14] Yahweh-yireh: a Hebrew expression meaning “the Lord will see/provide.” See note on vv. 1–19.

* [22:15–19] The seventh and climactic statement of the blessings to Abraham. Unlike the other statements, which were purely promissory, this one is presented as a reward for Abraham’s extraordinary trust.

22:1–19 The sacrifice of Isaac. The story of the sacrifice of Isaac, generally attributed to the Elohist, is one of the great masterpieces of narrative art in the Bible. We are drawn into the action of the story from the very start and are held in suspense until the climax. We know, as readers, that what is recounted is a test for Abraham; thus we focus on Abraham’s response and not on the horror of God’s command. We are left to imagine Abraham’s inner thoughts while the narrator tells us only what he does. We follow Abraham each step of the way as he complies with the divine command. We feel the silence as father and son walk together, coming closer with each step, to that moment of ultimate decision. We smile at Isaac’s innocent question and sympathize with Abraham in his tender but evasive answer. We watch as each detail of that final moment unfolds, from the building of the altar to
Abraham’s poised knife, ready to claim his son’s life. We wait expectantly until the angel intervenes, and finally we rejoice at the turn of events. Abraham has withstood the test, and Isaac still lives.

It is clear that the story is concerned with Abraham’s great faith, which is expressed in his willingness to sacrifice his son, the child of promise, in accord with God’s command. A connection between this story and human sacrifice is often made. Human sacrifice was commonly practiced among Israel’s neighbors, and on a few occasions even in Israel, though it was forbidden (see 1 Kgs 16:34; 2 Kgs 3:27; 23:10). It may be that the story originally centered on a repudiation of the practice of human sacrifice. However, any earlier significance is now superseded by the motif of the testing of Abraham’s faith.

The original conclusion of the story was verse 14, but a supplement was added (vv. 15–19) to link the story with the theme of promise, the dominant theme of the patriarchal narratives.

At the age of puberty, the Mediterranean boy is unceremoniously and forcefully pushed out of the women’s world to take his proper, hierarchical place in the male world. This shocking experience causes him to run back to the women, who must continue to expel him from their company. Having had little contact with men to this point, the boy experiences a gender-identity crisis. What does it mean to be a man? How ought a man behave?

In Mediterranean culture males distinguish themselves by an ability to bear physical pain without flinching. Fathers initiate their adolescent sons into bearing pain. Later, the grown sons initiate their son into bearing pain, and the cycle continues. Proverbs (13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17) and Ben Sira (30: 1-13) contain more than one exhortation to fathers to physically punish their son if they hope for an honorable adult.

These notions help a modern reader understand the story of a seemingly docile Isaac in the face of a terrifying ordeal about to be dealt to him by his father. One contemporary author of Mediterranean ancestry expresses this cultural ideal thus: "In a fight, I would never give up or say 'enough,' even though the other were killing me. I would try to go to my death, smiling. That is what we mean by being 'macho'" (Oscar Lewis, Children of Sanchez). Isaac may not have been smiling as he faced death, but an American believer wonders why he didn’t overpower his father or simply run away?

Child sacrifice in the Bible is noted in 2 Kgs 3:27; Jer 7:31; Ezek 16:20; and forbidden in Exod 1:15; Deut 12:29-31; and I Kgs 16:34. The Isaac story may represent an earlier stage of tradition that legitimized the substitution of an animal for child sacrifice. The present version of the story suggests (in v. 5) that Abraham recognized that this was only a test of his loyalty to God. He tells the servant: "I and the boy will return ..." Even though frightened, Abraham and the boy remained faith-fully obedient.

In the context of today’s celebration, God was satisfied with Abraham’s willingness. Isaac did not actually have to be sacrificed after all. Jesus too was willing to suffer, but his Father did not let the cup pass from him. For many believers, their experience is more like Jesus’ than Isaac’s experience.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (16:5, 8, 9–10, 11)

God will reveal the path of life. Those in the most difficult circumstances yearn for the confident trust of Psalm 16. When things go wrong, we turn to God for assistance. Sometimes we demand help; often we hope against hope for it. But Psalm 16 airs an aroma of confidence: “with [the Lord) at my right hand, I shall not be disturbed.” This psalm flows naturally from the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, too, possessed the charism of confidence. He believed that even in the most difficult circumstances God would be faithful to the covenant. Psalm 16 fits the Easter Vigil because of its references to death and life. This psalm appears each week in Thursday Night Prayer. Before going to bed, Christians pray these words, confident that wakefulness will follow sleep, and life will follow death.

You are my inheritance, O Lord.

O LORD, my allotted portion and my cup, you it is who hold fast my lot.
I set the LORD ever before me; with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed. Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices, my body, too, abides in confidence; because you will not abandon my soul to the netherworld, nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption. You will show me the path to life, fullness of joys in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever.

* [Psalm 16] In the first section, the psalmist rejects the futile worship of false gods (Ps 16:2–5), preferring Israel’s God (Ps 16:1), the giver of the land (Ps 16:6). The second section reflects on the wise and life-giving presence of God (Ps 16:7–11).

* [16:10] Nor let your devout one see the pit: Hebrew shahath means here the pit, a synonym for Sheol, the underworld. The Greek translation derives the word here and elsewhere from the verb shahath, “to be corrupt.” On the basis of the Greek, Acts 2:25–32; 13:35–37 apply the verse to Christ’s resurrection, “Nor will you suffer your holy one to see corruption.”

THIRD READING

God frees Israel from slavery through the waters of the Red Sea. This paradigmatic reading from the Old Testament must be proclaimed in every celebration of the Easter Vigil. The liturgy encourages the use of all the Old Testament readings at the Vigil, but permits a smaller number for exceptional circumstances. This reading is never omitted because it roots our understanding of Baptism and resurrection.

In the story, Egypt has enslaved the Israelites, and God has appointed Moses to lead them from the clutch of the Pharaoh into freedom. Their only route traverses the Red Sea, which parts for their passage, but flows back to swallow up Pharaoh’s pursuing forces. On the other side of the waters, Israel is poised to enter the Promised Land.

The Exsultet and the blessing of baptismal water, which are both proclaimed in the Vigil, point out the significance of this passage, and hence of this night. God freed Israel from its foes through water, and God will free the catechumens from the clutches of Satan and sin through the waters of Baptism. Set free from Pharaoh, Israel entered the Promised Land. Set free from sin, the neophytes enter the life of grace as members of the Body of Christ. At the center of all this imagery is Jesus Christ, who was set free from death to life through the mercy of the Father.

A reading from the Book of Exodus (14:15–15:1)

The LORD said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you, lift up your staff and, with hand outstretched over the sea, split the sea in two, that the Israelites may pass through it on dry land. But I will make the Egyptians so obstinate that they will go in after them. Then I will receive glory through Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots and charioteers. The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I receive glory through Pharaoh and his chariots and charioteers.”

The angel of God, who had been leading Israel’s camp, now moved and went around behind them. The column of cloud also, leaving the front,
took up its place behind them, 
so that it came between the camp of the Egyptians 
and that of Israel. 
But the cloud now became dark, and thus the night passed 
without the rival camps coming any closer together 
all night long. 
Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, 
and the LORD swept the sea 
with a strong east wind throughout the night 
and so turned it into dry land. 
When the water was thus divided, 
the Israelites marched into the midst of the sea on dry land, 
with the water like a wall to their right and to their left. 
The Egyptians followed in pursuit; 
al Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and charioteers went after them 
right into the midst of the sea. 
In the night watch just before dawn 
the LORD cast through the column of the fiery cloud 
upon the Egyptian force a glance that threw it into a panic; 
and he so clogged their chariot wheels 
that they could hardly drive. 
With that the Egyptians sounded the retreat before Israel, 
because the LORD was fighting for them against the Egyptians. 
Then the LORD told Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, 
that the water may flow back upon the Egyptians, 
upon their chariots and their charioteers.” 
So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, 
and at dawn the sea flowed back to its normal depth. 
The Egyptians were fleeing head on toward the sea, 
when the LORD hurled them into its midst. 
As the water flowed back, 
it covered the chariots and the charioteers of Pharaoh’s whole army 
which had followed the Israelites into the sea. 
Not a single one of them escaped. 
But the Israelites had marched on dry land through the midst of the sea, 
with the water like a wall to their right and to their left. 
Thus the LORD saved Israel on that day from the power of the Egyptians. 
When Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore 
and beheld the great power that the LORD had shown against the Egyptians, 
they feared the LORD and believed in him and in his servant Moses. 
Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: 
I will sing to the LORD, for he is gloriously triumphant; 
horse and chariot he has cast into the sea. 

* [14:19] Angel of God: Hebrew ma’ak ha’elohim (Septuagint ho angelos tou theou) here refers not to an independent spiritual being but to God’s power at work in the world; corresponding to the column of cloud/fire, the expression more clearly preserves a sense of distance between God and God’s creatures. The two halves of the verse are parallel and may come from different narrative sources.
* [14:20] The reading of the Hebrew text here is uncertain. The image is of a darkly glowing storm cloud, ominously bright, keeping the two camps apart.

* [15:1–21] This poem, regarded by many scholars as one of the oldest compositions in the Bible, was once an independent work. It has been inserted at this important juncture in the large narrative of Exodus to celebrate God’s saving power, having miraculously delivered the people from their enemies, and ultimately leading them to the promised land.

Although the victory it describes over the Egyptians at the sea bears a superficial resemblance in v. 8 to the preceding depiction of the water standing like a wall (14:22), the poem (as opposed to the following prose verse, v. 19) suggests a different version of the victory at sea than that found in chap. 14. There is no splitting of the sea in an act reminiscent of the Lord’s combat at creation with the sea monsters Rahab and Leviathan (Jb 9:13; 26:12; Ps 74:13–14; 89:11; Is 51:9–10); nor is there mention of an east wind driving the waters back so that the Israelites can cross. In this version it is by means of a storm at sea, caused by a ferocious blast from his nostrils, that the Lord achieves a decisive victory against Pharaoh and his army (vv. 1–12). The second half of the poem (vv. 13–18) describes God’s guidance into the promised land.

In verses 15–18 P responds to Israel’s cry of frustration. Yahweh’s action consists of giving directions that will ensure the safe passage of the Israelites through the sea. Thus Moses is to lift his staff, stretch out his hand, and divide the sea in favor of Israel. As predicted in verse 4, the obstinate Egyptians will pursue Israel into the sea. Their corpses will then become mute yet eloquent witnesses to Yahweh’s power. The Divine Warrior will thus be duly acknowledged.

14:19–31 Two traditions for the crossing of the sea. The biblical traditions are unable to present a blow-by-blow account of what actually transpired at the Reed Sea because the required sources are wanting. However, Israel has chosen to interpret that event by dwelling on Yahweh’s military prowess. Holy war theology enables the traditions in this section to unfold the picture of a God who thinks resolutely on behalf of the fleeing Israelites. Liberation means, not to be free from the ennui of Israel’s laments, but to be free for the bewildered and beleaguered people.

According to J Yahweh manifests himself in two ways: (a) the angel of God (v. 19a) and (b) the column of cloud (v. 19b). Yahweh in the form of a divine messenger and in the form of a cloud now takes up a position between the Israelites and the Egyptians (v. 20). This position implies protection for Israel. Moreover, during the night Yahweh drives back the sea with a strong easterly wind (v. 21b), thus making possible a passage on dry land. Just before dawn Yahweh, present in the column of cloud and fire, startles the Egyptians with a glance that results in the loss of military discipline (v. 24). Yahweh’s panic-creating glance is now followed by the clogging of the Egyptian chariot wheels, a gesture that leads to the sounding of retreat (v. 25). However, at dawn the sea resumes its normal depth. At this juncture Yahweh hurls the retreating Egyptians into its midst (v. 27b). The outcome is that Israel acknowledges Yahweh’s intervention to the point of believing in Yahweh and his servant Moses (vv. 30–31). According to P Moses stretches out his hand over the sea (v. 21a). The result is a very special miracle. Dry land appears for the safe passage of the Israelites with the water forming something resembling walls to their right and left (v. 22). At this point the Egyptian forces pursue the Israelites on the dry land (v. 23). At Yahweh’s command Moses once again stretches out his hand over the sea (vv. 26–27a). The returning waters then engulf the entire Egyptian army (v. 28). P finally notes much more dramatically than J the Israelite passage on the dry land with the contained waters to the right and left (v. 29). In P Moses’ gesture has replaced Yahweh’s strong easterly wind.

15:1–21 The Song of the Sea. The earliest tradition about the crossing is found in this section (vv. 1–18, 21) that, unlike the J and P traditions, is in poetry, not prose. It is generally regarded as an independent tradition that has been fitted into its present position by means of vv. 19–20. On the basis of several criteria the poem may be dated around 1100 B.C.E.

In the first-century Mediterranean world, more than 90 per-cent of the population were peasants. They regularly experienced scarcity and realized their inability to help themselves. Those few who could help
were known as "patrons," while the needy were known as "client." Sometimes an intermediary acted like a "broker" between a patron and clients. It is this cultural imagery that our ancestors in the faith utilized for understanding God.

God was the patron of the Israelites, and Moses was a broker between God and the Israelite clients. God the patron resolved to free his Israelite clients from Egyptian bondage with the aid of Moses his broker. But when the clients saw the Egyptians hot on their trail, they doubted the abilities of God and Moses, their patron and the appointed broker. Insisting on using Moses as the broker (vv. 16-17), God promises to bring destruction upon the Egyptians. From this God will "get glory or honor over Pharaoh." And when Israel saw that God the patron can deliver on the divine promises, they "feared (= respected) the Lord" and regained their trust in the patron (God) and the broker (Moses, vv. 30-31).

In successful patronage, everybody wins. The client (Israel) gets that which is needed and which cannot be obtained anywhere else or can't be obtained on such beneficial terms. The patron (God) gets honor, which is the main reason why anyone bothers to become a patron at all. And the patron's broker (Moses) either regains or gains an increase in credibility as one who can facilitate the deal with the patron. When the patron delivers, the Mediterranean client must pay for the gift received. The payment consists in singing the patron's praise, that is, broadcasting far and wide the honor of the patron. Hence the very logical canticle that Moses and the Israelite sang immediately, spontaneously, and quite publicly to the Lord. That is what honor is about.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ex 15:1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 17–18)

The people of Israel sing praise to God for granting them freedom. The response that follows this reading from Exodus also comes from Exodus. It is the very song that Israel sings upon reaching the dry shores beyond the Red Sea. It retells the events of this Passover night: the loss of Pharaoh's chariots in the Red Sea and the redemption of God's Chosen People when God "planted them on the mountain" (v. 17). Throughout the song, the people give praise to God. It is the Lord who has covered himself in glory. Yes, they have experienced freedom from slavery, but they do not rejoice in their own accomplishment. They praise God.

Let us sing to the Lord; he has covered himself in glory.

I will sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously triumphant; horse and chariot he has cast into the sea.
My strength and my courage is the Lord, and he has been my savior.
He is my God, I praise him; the God of my father, I extol him.
The Lord is a warrior, Lord is his name!
Pharaoh's chariots and army he hurled into the sea; the elite of his officers were submerged in the Red Sea.
The flood waters covered them, they sank into the depths like a stone.
Your right hand, O Lord, magnificent in power, your right hand, O Lord, has shattered the enemy.
You brought in the people you redeemed and planted them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place where you made your seat, O Lord, the sanctuary, Lord, which your hands established.
The Lord shall reign forever and ever.

Same as responsorial above

FOURTH READING
God reestablishes the covenant with Israel. The Maker of Israel becomes the Spouse of Israel. This passage from the prophecy of Isaiah meets Israel at a very different moment in history. Many years have passed since the dramatic rescue of the Chosen People from the hand of Pharaoh. The people have dwelled in the Promised Land and have enjoyed too much prosperity. They have been lured away by other beliefs. But God did not relinquish the covenant. Isaiah uses a startling image: "The Lord calls you back, / like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit" (v. 6). God says through Isaiah, "For a brief moment I abandoned you, I but with great tenderness I will take you back" (v. 7). God compares this event to the days of Noah, when God swore never again to cover the earth with the waters of wrath. God is not angry with the Chosen People. God takes them home. God still takes pity on us in our sin. Even those who have not yet been baptized are God's children. God is yearning to receive them with great tenderness as they enter the waters of Baptism. Catholics who have spent this Lenten season in repentance can hear these consoling words and take heart that their penance has been noticed, their prayers have been heard, and God is anxious to renew with them the everlasting covenant of mercy.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (54:5–14)
The One who has become your husband is your Maker; his name is the LORD of hosts; your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, called God of all the earth.
The LORD calls you back, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, a wife married in youth and then cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great tenderness I will take you back. In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you; but with enduring love I take pity on you, says the LORD, your redeemer. This is for me like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah should never again deluge the earth; so I have sworn not to be angry with you, or to rebuke you. Though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, my love shall never leave you nor my covenant of peace be shaken, says the LORD, who has mercy on you. O afflicted one, storm-battered and unconsolled, I lay your pavements in carnelians, and your foundations in sapphires; I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of carbuncles, and all your walls of precious stones. All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the peace of your children. In justice shall you be established, far from the fear of oppression, where destruction cannot come near you.

* [54:4–8] As with some other Old Testament themes, Second Isaiah uses that of Israel as the Lord's bride in a new manner. Whereas Hosea and Jeremiah had depicted Israel as the Lord's spouse to emphasize both Israel's infidelity and the Lord's continued love (Hos 1–3; Jer 2:2; 3:1–15) and Ezekiel to accuse Israel unsparingly (Ez 16; 23), Second Isaiah speaks only of the love with which the Lord restores the people, speaking tender words with no hint of reproach.

Covenant of peace: this whole section, vv. 9–17, is given to various assurances of God's love for Israel and of safety from various possible threats; the phrase sums up both the positive aspects of shalom, which implies a fullness of blessing, and protection from all that might harm. Cf. also 55:3; Nm 25:12; Ez 34:25; 37:26; Mal 2:5.

Afflicted one: Jerusalem.

A promise to Zion. The prophet resumes the joyful proclamation to Zion that was the theme of Isa 52:1–12. Two motifs are especially important here. First, Zion is the wife of God. The prophet Hosea used this metaphor to great effect and suggested that God was divorcing Israel. Second, Isaiah insists that Zion was only cast off for a moment (compare Isa 50:1 for the motif of divorce). Moreover, the abandoned wife will have more children than one who has a husband. (This is a favorite biblical theme. To illustrate how God can reverse any situation, compare the Song of Hannah in 1 Sam 2.) Underlying the metaphor of marriage is the idea of a covenant, a binding mutual commitment. The language of marriage, however, adds an emotional dimension to the covenant and deepens the commitment by arousing feelings of love.

The second theme is the analogy with the days of Noah. After the flood God guaranteed the future of life on earth: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man …. As long as the earth lasts, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Gen 8:21–22). That promise had been kept since the days of Noah. The promise to Zion is equally sure. Second Isaiah is reaffirming the traditional Zion theology found, for example, in Ps 46:3: “Therefore we fear not, though the earth be shaken ....”

Here we cannot fail to observe that Zion was destroyed again. On a literal level the promise would seem to be broken. Yet, both Judaism and Christianity continue to affirm that “my love shall never leave you nor my covenant of peace be shaken” (v. 10). The peace must be understood as an inner peace that can survive not only the shaking of the hills but the destruction of Zion itself. The restoration from the Exile had shown that God was with the people even in the darkness. The moment of clarity enjoyed by Second Isaiah would have to be remembered as a witness again in darker days ahead.

Honor and shame are the core or driving values behind Mediterranean culture. Men are associated with honor, and women are associated with shame mainly because they are most vulnerable to attacks on their man’s (father’s, brother’s, or husband’s) honor. When a man fails to chisel away at another man’s honor rating or honor claim directly, that man will attack the other man’s women. Sometimes the woman initiates waywardness and subjects her males (father, brother, or husband) to shame.

In either case, the shamed man responsible for guarding and protecting the now sullied women has two options: an honorable one—rid of the unfaithful spouse; or a shameful one—overlook the woman’s failing and take her back.

In the Mediterranean world the ideal marriage partner is a first cousin (one's father's brother's daughter). But if this marriage partner proves unfaithful, the honorable husband will first see if another proper partner, a cousin, is available. If no other suitable partner is available, the honorable husband may swallow his shame. What good will it do to destroy a faithless wife and end up a life-long widower?

Better to bear the shame of taking back a wayward wife and exercise greater vigilance in the future than to do the right thing, get rid of the wife, and remain single for the rest of life.

This makes excellent Mediterranean human sense. But God chose Israel from among many nations and can surely find another nation to love. First-cousin considerations don’t enter here. That God would take back a wayward partner is shocking news to Mediterranean folk. A God who would do this does not behave honorably, at least not as humans understand honor. Such a God is like a cuckold! (Adultery is a common image for Israel’s lack of loyalty to God.)

That such behavior could be considered compassionate or merciful would stretch this cultural imagination quite a bit. Yet that appears to be precisely Isaiah’s intention! Isn’t that the function prophets play on behalf of the Lord? Thus the prophet draws upon this culturally uncharacteristic
marriage behavior to assure Israel that God will indeed forget her "shame" and re-pair their mutual relationship that was disturbed by the Exile. Good news for faithless Israel! Astonishing behavior by God!
Salvation from the tragedy of Exodus and Exile. What a powerful patron God is!

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 30:2, 4, 5–6, 11–12, 13)

In thanksgiving, we sing praise to God. We thank God not for just any unexpected gift, but for release from a serious threat. The writer of Psalm 30 experienced death threats from enemies. Death seemed near, but somehow God rescued the singer "from among those going down into the pit" (v. 4). At the time, it seemed as though there were no way out, but in retrospect, it seems as though God's anger lasted "but a moment" and his good will lasts "a lifetime" (v. 6). This psalm takes up the main theme of the Easter Vigil: the triumphant Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. He could have sung this psalm himself: "O Lord, you brought me up from the netherworld ...! At nightfall, weeping enters in, / but with the dawn, rejoicing" (vv. 4, 6). All the participants in the Easter Vigil can sing this along with Christ. Those to be baptized are to be lifted from their former way of life to membership in the Body of Christ. Those who have already been baptized have expressed sorrow for their sins and experienced the joy of God's mercy. With Christ, we are all brought up from the netherworld on this night that shines more brightly than the dawn.

I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.
I will extol you, O Lord, for you drew me clear and did not let my enemies rejoice over me.
O Lord, you brought me up from the netherworld; you preserved me from among those going down into the pit.
Sing praise to the Lord, you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name.
For his anger lasts but a moment; a lifetime, his good will.
At nightfall, weeping enters in, but with the dawn, rejoicing.
Hear, O Lord, and have pity on me; O Lord, be my helper.
You changed my mourning into dancing; O Lord, my God, forever will I give you thanks.

* [Psalm 30] An individual thanksgiving in four parts: praise and thanks for deliverance and restoration (Ps 30:2–4); an invitation to others to join in (Ps 30:5–6); a flashback to the time before deliverance (Ps 30:7–11); a return to praise and thanks (Ps 30:12). Two sets of images recur: 1) going down, death, silence; 2) coming up, life, praising. God has delivered the psalmist from one state to the other.


In this thanksgiving praise is given to God for rescue from near fatal illness. Verses 2–4 describe the divine mercy, the snatching of the sick person from the annihilating power of death. As often in thanksgivings, the one rescued is so relieved and delighted that he teaches and exhorts the assembly to trust the saving Lord (vv. 5–6). The assembly learns about the psalmist’s inner journey, from his unthinking self-confidence (vv. 7–8a) to his panicky pleas and bargaining when illness struck (vv. 8b–11). Verses 12–13 express the delight of one who has experienced God’s favor and forgiveness.

FIFTH READING
God invites us to life-giving water, renews the covenant, and shows the power of his Word. Isaiah offers a second prophecy for our reflection. It extends again to a people who had drifted from the covenant, but who discover that God's mercies are without end. The prophecy opens with an invitation to drink water, a symbol that will occupy center stage at the Easter Vigil in the next part of the ceremony. We cannot live without water, and our relationship with God slakes our spiritual thirst. The Lord is near, and Isaiah urges us to call upon him, forsaking the ways of sin. The Risen Christ is very near to all who seek him. Catechumens have left the desert of life without Christ, and the faithful have abandoned their sins through the penance of Lent. The waters of the covenant will renew us. Strengthening the image of water, God speaks through Isaiah about the effectiveness of rain and snow. They come down from the heavens and do not return there "till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful" (Isaiah 55:10). God's Word does that in our lives. It comes to us like living water, and it produces the effect for which it was sent.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (55:1–11)

Thus says the Lord:
All you who are thirsty,
come to the water!
You who have no money,
come, receive grain and eat;
come, without paying and without cost,
drink wine and milk!
Why spend your money for what is not bread,
your wages for what fails to satisfy?
Heed me, and you shall eat well,
you shall delight in rich fare.
Come to me heedfully,
listen, that you may have life.
I will renew with you the everlasting covenant,
the benefits assured to David.
As I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander of nations,
so shall you summon a nation you knew not,
and nations that knew you not shall run to you,
because of the Lord, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, who has glorified you.
Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call him while he is near.
Let the scoundrel forsake his way,
and the wicked man his thoughts;
let him turn to the Lord for mercy;
to our God, who is generous in forgiving.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
As high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are my ways above your ways
and my thoughts above your thoughts.
For just as from the heavens
the rain and snow come down
and do not return there
till they have watered the earth,
making it fertile and fruitful,
giving seed to the one who sows
and bread to the one who eats,
so shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth;
my word shall not return to me void,
but shall do my will,
achieving the end for which I sent it.

* [55:1–3] The prophet invites all to return, under the figure of a banquet; cf. the covenant banquet in Ex 24:9–11 and wisdom’s banquet in Prv 9:1–6. The Lord’s covenant with David (2 Sm 7) is now to be extended beyond his dynasty.
* [55:5] The “nation” is Persia under Cyrus, but the perspective is worldwide.
* [55:6–9] The invitation to seek the Lord is motivated by the mercy of a God whose “ways” are completely mysterious.

Nothing in the Mediterranean world is free, even though money is rarely involved. An invitation received and accepted is an obligation that must be repaid. Reciprocity is what makes the economic world go round in the ancient world. Here, however, Second Isaiah concludes his consoling message (chs. 41–55) by inviting all to the banquet of God’s joy, but he also insists that God declines the reciprocal return. In the Middle East, if you accept an invitation to a meal you are obliged to re-turn the favor. People who lacked this capability would or-di-narily turn down the invitation. Isaiah says that even if you have no money, that is, if you do not have the wherewithal to reciprocate as expected, come to the banquet anyway. The only real requirement is to heed the Lord and/or seek the Lord. This is a small price to pay in order to eat well at a banquet featur-ing rich fare.
That the prophet was quite aware of presenting God in another culturally shocking posture is evident from the words attributed to the Lord in verse 8: Shocked are you? surprised? amazed? "My ideas and activities are significantly different from yours!"
A modern believer is forced to admire the prophet's ef-forts to meet the challenge of explaining to God's people in exile that God really wants to re-establish his "covenant of peace" (Isa 54:10) or the "everlasting covenant" assured to David (Isa 55:3). They are now in Babylon as a result of a bro-ken covenant. At first this seemed tragic, but within the fifty years of exile these displaced Judeans have prospered and fared well. With everything going so well in Babylon, why would these exiles want to return to the unwalled and demol-ished city of Jerusalem? The prophet has a hard sell on his hands.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Is 12:2–3, 4, 5–6)

With joy, we draw water at the fountain of salvation. We sing praise to God. Isaiah supplies not just the two previous readings, but also the responsorial for the second one. Like the passage from Exodus that follows the Third Reading, this canticle resembles the structure and content of a psalm, but it exists in another book of the Bible. The Lectionary offers us this passage to follow the previous reading because of the similarity in the way it applies the image of water, and because it comes from the same biblical book.
The canticle rings forth with praise of God. The singer proclaims, "I am confident and unafraid" (v. 2). God is the source of salvation, just as a fountain is the source of life-giving water. On this Easter night,
preparing for the celebration of Baptism, we are reminded of all that God promises, and how confidently we stand in faith.

You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.
God indeed is my savior; I am confident and unafraid.
My strength and my courage is the L ORD, and he has been my savior.
Give thanks to the L ORD, acclaim his name; among the nations make known his deeds, proclaim how exalted is his name.
Sing praise to the L ORD for his glorious achievement; let this be known throughout all the earth.

* [12:1] The import of this verse is brought out in vv. 4–5.
* [12:6] Verse 7 is a variant of verse 4 and is omitted.

12:1–6 A song of thanksgiving. This short hymn of thanksgiving probably concluded an independent booklet of Isaiah’s prophecies. The hymn is the work of an editor, despite the use of the characteristically Isaian phrase “the Holy One of Israel” (12:6). The psalmist looks back on hard times but can now praise God, since the crises are past. The judgment oracles of Isaiah are thus put in perspective, for the editor can view these events with hindsight. The reader, too, is encouraged to put the words of Isaiah, bound as they were to specific situations, in a broader, long-term context.

SIXTH READING

To know wisdom is to know God. Changing the tone of the evening, the prophet Baruch chides Israel for forsaking the fountain of wisdom. He ascribes the troubles of Israel to the people’s infidelity to the covenant. The solution? “Learn where prudence is, / where strength, where understanding” (v. 14). To know wisdom is to know God. Just as creation unveils the wisdom of God, so to know the wisdom of God is to draw near to our Maker. On this wondrous night, we grasp the wisdom of God’s plan. The plan existed from the beginning of creation, but it was revealed to human beings slowly, through history. At the time of Baruch’s prophecy, people still did not fully comprehend that Jesus would reveal the resurrection. Yet even without complete knowledge, people were able to perceive the wisdom of God in imperfect ways.

Hearing this reading, and standing on the other historical shore from the Passion of Christ, we praise God for the gift of revelation made plain to us. Those who are approaching the waters of Baptism have come to the same insight. They put their faith in the Resurrection of Christ, and they participate in his life because of the interior wisdom they have received.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Baruch (3:9–15, 32–4:4)
Hear, O Israel, the commandments of life:
listen, and know prudence!
How is it, Israel,
that you are in the land of your foes,
grown old in a foreign land,
defiled with the dead,
accounted with those destined for the netherworld?
You have forsaken the fountain of wisdom!
Had you walked in the way of God,
you would have dwelt in enduring peace.
Learn where prudence is,
where strength, where understanding;
that you may know also
where are length of days, and life,
where light of the eyes, and peace.
Who has found the place of wisdom,
who has entered into her treasuries?
The One who knows all things knows her;
he has probed her by his knowledge—
the One who established the earth for all time,
and filled it with four-footed beasts;
he who dismisses the light, and it departs,
calls it, and it obeys him trembling;
before whom the stars at their posts
shine and rejoice;
when he calls them, they answer, “Here we are!”
shining with joy for their Maker.
Such is our God;
no other is to be compared to him:
he has traced out the whole way of understanding,
and has given her to Jacob, his servant,
to Israel, his beloved son.
Since then she has appeared on earth,
and moved among people.
She is the book of the precepts of God,
the law that endures forever;
all who cling to her will live,
but those will die who forsake her.
Turn, O Jacob, and receive her:
walk by her light toward splendor.
Give not your glory to another,
your privileges to an alien race.
Blessed are we, O Israel;
for what pleases God is known to us!

* [3:9–4:4] This poem in praise of personified Wisdom utilizes the theme of Jb 28 (where is wisdom to be found?)
and it identifies wisdom and law, as in Sir 24:22–23.

Attributed to Jeremiah's secretary and companion, Baruch, this book is a pastiche of biblical passages
drawn from Daniel 9, Job 28, and Isaiah 40-66. Baruch is definitely not the author. In fact there may be
as many as four authors of this book, and internal evidence suggests dating it somewhere be-tween 200
to 60 B.c., the Maccabean period.
The particular poem selected for this liturgy reflects the largely secular wisdom tradition of the Bible
whose themes are the elusive nature of wisdom and an identification of wisdom with the Torah or Law.
Scant mention is made of the Exile, and there is no extended reflection on it. Nevertheless, the entire
book of Baruch and this, its central poem, offer a reflection on various aspects of Israel's exile in
Babylon.
According to Baruch, God, the fountain of Wisdom, has revealed life's true meaning and purpose to Jacob and Israel. If Israel would be faithful to God's commandments, she would experience peace and long life. True wisdom is found in God's gift of the Torah, the Law. The author's concluding verses sum up his enthusiasm quite well:

Give not your honor to another,
your privileges to an alien race,
Blessed are we, O Israel;
For we really know what pleases God! (NAB adapted)

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 19:8, 9, 10, 11)

Psalm 19 has two parts, and these verses come from the section that revels in the beauty of God's Word. It resembles the longest psalm in the Bible, 119, which meditates line by line on the Word of God through a variety of synonyms and attributes. These verses of Psalm 19 praise the "law," "decree," "precepts," "command," and "ordinances" of the Lord, which rejoice the heart and enlighten the eye. This psalm builds upon the theme of wisdom from the previous reading. We come to know God through meditation on his decrees. God revealed these to us in the covenant, so they detail the wisdom that exudes from the very being of God. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the perfect expression of God's wisdom. He is God's wisdom. He is the Word made flesh. For this reason, the Lectionary gives us a refrain taken from the Gospel according to John, not from the psalm itself. The verse is spoken by Peter after Jesus has given the discourse on the bread of life. The teaching revealed the very reason Jesus came, to offer us eternal life through the eating of his Body and drinking of his Blood. Many of those who heard him speak these words, however, turned away. Jesus looked fearfully at his closest followers and asked if they, too, were going to leave him now. Peter said no. "Lord, you have the words of everlasting life" (John 6:68c). That statement of faith becomes the refrain we sing to a psalm that praises the wisdom of God. It also foreshadows the initiation of those who will share Holy Communion for the first time at this Mass.

Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul;
the decree of the LORD is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple.
The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the command of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eye.
The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true, all of them just.
They are more precious than gold, than a heap of purest gold;
sweeter also than syrup or honey from the comb.

* [Psalm 19] The heavenly elements of the world, now beautifully arranged, bespeak the power and wisdom of their creator (Ps 19:2–7). The creator's wisdom is available to human beings in the law (Ps 19:8–11), toward which the psalmist prays to be open (Ps 19:12–14). The themes of light and speech unify the poem.

This unusual poem is a prayer that the law of the Lord, which contains such power to enlighten and enrich the person (vv. 8–11), not be denied to "your servant," the psalmist (vv. 12–15). The serene functioning of the universe expresses the wide scope and precision of the Lord's victory over what once was unbounded sea and primordial darkness, a chaos that had made human society impossible. The picture is the same as that in Psalm 104 and Gen 1.
The “glory of God” that the heavens declare in verse 1 is the power and wisdom that the Lord displays on earth in arranging them. In comparable religious literatures the sun is a judge and lawgiver; hence verses 5b–7 form a transition to the description of the law. The law is the will of the powerful Lord visible to the servants of that Lord; hence the prayer for openness to it (vv. 12–14).

SEVENTH READING

The prophet Ezekiel addresses a people who had experienced exile from their homeland because of their Infidelity, but who also had learned that God had not abandoned them. As a sign of renewing the eternal covenant, God offered the people cleansing and renewal through the gift of a new spirit. Israel's sin was not covered up, but it was forgiven, and the people grew stronger in faith. On a night when the waters of Baptism symbolize new life, this passage prophesies all that Christianity has to offer. Those who have failed to love God as they should are cleansed from all sin. Some are baptized and others will renew their baptismal covenant through promises and holy water. All will experience the gift of the new spirit that God places in the heart of believers. God never goes back on the covenant; it is eternal. Even though we sometimes fail to keep the covenant, God always gives us the opportunity to renew it.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel (36:16–17a, 18–28)

The word of the LORD came to me, saying:
Son of man, when the house of Israel lived in their land,
they defiled it by their conduct and deeds.
Therefore, I poured out my fury upon them
because of the blood that they poured out on the ground,
and because they defiled it with idols.
I scattered them among the nations,
dispersing them over foreign lands;
according to their conduct and deeds I judged them.
But when they came among the nations wherever they came,
they served to profane my holy name,
because it was said of them: “These are the people of the LORD,
yet they had to leave their land.”
So I have relented because of my holy name
which the house of Israel profaned
among the nations where they came.
Therefore, say to the house of Israel: Thus, says the Lord GOD:
Not for your sakes do I act, house of Israel,
but for the sake of my holy name,
which you profaned among the nations to which you came.
I will prove the holiness of my great name, profaned among the nations,
in whose midst you have profaned it.
Thus the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD,
when in their sight I prove my holiness through you.
For I will take you away from among the nations,
gather you from all the foreign lands,
and bring you back to your own land.
I will sprinkle clean water upon you
to cleanse you from all your impurities,
and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 
I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, 
taking from your bodies your stony hearts 
and giving you natural hearts. 
I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, 
careful to observe my decrees. 
You shall live in the land I gave your fathers; 
you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

* [36:20–24] These verses make clear that Israel’s restoration is God’s initiative, independent of the people’s shame and repentance (v. 31). By their wickedness, Israel provoked the exile; its presence among the nations gave the impression that God could not protect his people. God’s gracious return of Israel to its land will restore his honor among these same nations.

* [36:25–26] God’s initiative to cleanse Israel (cf. 24:13–14) is the first act in the creation of a new people, no longer disposed to repeating Israel’s wicked past (chap. 20). To make this restoration permanent, God replaces Israel’s rebellious and obdurate interiority (“heart of stone”) with an interiority (“heart of flesh”) susceptible to and animated by God’s intentions (“my spirit,” v. 27).

36:16–38 Regeneration of the people. The second half of chapter 36, which develops God’s reasons for the repopulation of the land, divides into five subsections defined by formulas and shifts in address. In verses 16–21 God speaks to Ezekiel about the cause of the Exile. In God’s sight the defilement of the land by the chosen people was “like the defilement of a menstruous woman” (v. 17; compare Lev 15:19). Personal responsibility, as Ezekiel had earlier said, explicitly required that a virtuous person “not defile his neighbor’s wife, nor have relations with a woman in her menstrual period” (18:6; see also 22:10). Because of their reprehensible defilement of the land and their idolatry, the people were scattered. Yet, even in other lands they continued to profane God’s holy name (v. 20). Now grief over the preservation of the holiness of the divine name motivates God to tell Ezekiel that the Exile will end (v. 21).

In verses 22–23, which are framed as a subunit by an introductory formula and a recognition formula, God speaks directly to the house of Israel. God rehearses their wicked history and emphasizes that it is not for their sakes that the Exile will end. Zeal for the holiness of the divine name motivates God to return the people to the land. Here, as in chapter 20, the dominant motivation for restoration is concern for the preservation of God’s holiness.

Verses 24–32 list a series of individual acts that God will initiate so that the people can live in the kind of obedience that will preserve the holiness of God’s name. God will gather the chosen people from their exile and lead them back to their own land (v. 24). Then, in a three-stage purification, God will create a new, radically reordered human harmony. First, God will ritually cleanse the people from their past impurities and idols (v. 25; on washing as a means of purification, see Num 19:9–21; Ps 51:3–4). Second, God will transplant new hearts and spirits into the people (v. 26; compare Jer 31:31–34). And third, God will animate their human hearts with the divine spirit, so that the people will have the inner power to live by God’s statutes and decrees (v. 27). Verses 28–32 describe the material prosperity God will give the people when they return to the land, and they close with a sober reminder that these benefits are given, not for the sake of the people, but to set forth God’s glory in the world.

The standard prophetic preaching invariably stresses the necessity of conversion and repentance as well as the resolve to remain righteous if Israelite exiles expect to return to the land (see Ezek 18; 33). In this oracle, however, God behaves according to the pattern of standard Mediterranean patronage, pure and simple.

At issue is honor, the honor of the God who is Israel’s patron. By turning to idolatry, these clients behaved shamefully toward God their patron. As any insulted patron would, God drops his clients like
hot potatoes. Worse, God the patron takes vengeance for his experience of dishonor by causing them to be scattered into exile!

But here in exile, non-Israelites comment: "These are the people of the Lord? yet they had to leave their land?" (Ezek 36:20) Non-Israelites laugh at a patron who was unable to look after the security of personal clients. God the patron is now subject to ridicule and shame rather than the scoundrel clients! No patron has to put up with this kind of ridicule and shame, and neither does God. So God acts NOT primarily in the interests of the clients but rather in genuine self interest out of concern for the honor that was tarnished: "It is not for your sake, Israel. that I act, but for my sake, for my honor which you have tarnished among the nations. And I will restore my honor. And the nations will know that I am a decent and effective patron, I am the Lord."

God does two things: God removes the wayward clients from exile, thereby regaining personal honor as an effective patron. Second, God recreates the clients by giving a new heart and a new spirit so that henceforth the behavior of God's clients will be a credit to their patron. God renews the patron-age contract: "You shall be my clients, and I will be your patron-you shall be my people, and I will be your God!" (Ezek 26:28) Please note we! I the one-sidedness of patronage: the patron takes the initiative, the patron seeks and selects the clients!

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 42:3, 5; 43:3, 4)

Our souls thirst for God like a deer that longs for running streams. The Lectionary offers three possible responses to the seventh reading. The first, from Psalm 42, is sung whenever Baptism will be celebrated at the Vigil.

The psalm asks God for the gift of God's light and fidelity, so that those who receive it may approach the dwelling place of God, and specifically the altar of God. These verses eloquently prophesy the journey of the catechumens, who thirst for the waters of Baptism, and attain it through the light and fidelity that God extends to new believers through the covenant. Having been refreshed by the waters of Baptism, the neophytes come to the altar of God, where they participate in Holy Communion, the intimate union that makes them fully the Body of Christ, a dwelling place for God most high.

The English-language Lectionary recommends it as one of the options if Baptism is not celebrated during the Vigil. This may seem puzzling because the image of water is so strong at the beginning of these verses. In fact, the liturgical books are not consistent on this point. The Ordo Lectionum Missae, actually recommends this psalm, not the previous one, when Baptism is to be celebrated.

God indeed is my salvation;
I am confident and unafraid.
For the LORD is my strength and my might,
and he has been my salvation.
With joy you will draw water
from the fountains of salvation,
And you will say on that day:
give thanks to the LORD, acclaim his name;
Among the nations make known his deeds,
proclaim how exalted is his name.
Sing praise to the LORD for he has done glorious things;
let this be known throughout all the earth.
Shout with exultation, City of Zion,
for great in your midst
is the Holy One of Israel!
Israel’s thanksgiving to the Lord, expressed in language like that of the Psalms.

The refrain “Why are you so downcast, O my soul,” repeated in 42:6, 12, and 43:5, shows that Psalms 42–43 are a single poem; the traditional separation into two psalms is wrong. It is a lament (A) of an individual who lives beyond Israel’s borders in the north and who longs to join the community of God worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem. In the Hebrew scriptures Yahweh is the God of all the world but is revealed only in Jerusalem. What distresses the psalmist is the absence of God, the feeling of deep hunger without the ability to satisfy it because of distance from Jerusalem and the hindrance of enemies. Their taunt, “Where is your God?” (vv. 4, 11), intensifies the pain.

Verses 7–8 show that the psalmist is in the north; Mount Mizar is generally thought to be a mountain in the region of Mount Hermon. In verse 9 the psalmist is caught like Jonah (Jonah 2:3–4) in the deep, a metaphor for the place where Yahweh will not be found. In the last of the three stanzas, Ps 43:1–5, the psalmist prays that Yahweh decide against the enemies who say that Yahweh cannot bring the psalmist to Jerusalem.

PSALM 51:12-13, 14-15, 18-19 (12A)

We ask God to create within us a clean heart. Tradition calls seven of the 150 psalms penitential. This one is perhaps the greatest of them. It expresses the remorse we feel after sinning, and our cries for forgiveness. These particular verses, coming at the end of the psalm, focus on renewal. Although we have sung this text often during Lent, we may complete its sentiments at the Vigil, when we put our sinful ways behind us and seek a clean heart. These verses work well after the passage from Ezekiel, which employs a similar image—a new heart. In reestablishing the covenant with us, God remakes us. We reenter the covenant not as the same people, but as those who have known sin, repented of it, received forgiveness, and resolved not to sin again. This psalm is recommended for an Easter Vigil that does not include Baptism. It more nearly suits the faithful Christians coming for renewal after observing a rigorous Lent.

Like a deer that longs for running streams, my soul longs for you, my God.

Athirst is my soul for God, the living God.
When shall I go and behold the face of God?
I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God,
amid loud cries of joy and thanksgiving, with the multitude keeping festival.
Send forth your light and your fidelity; they shall lead me on
and bring me to your holy mountain, to your dwelling-place.
Then will I go in to the altar of God, the God of my gladness and joy;
then will I give you thanks upon the harp, O God, my God!

* [Psalms 42–43] Ps 42–43 form a single lament of three sections, each section ending in an identical refrain (Ps 42:6, 12; 43:5). The psalmist is far from Jerusalem, and longs for the divine presence that Israel experienced in the Temple liturgy. Despite sadness, the psalmist hopes once again to join the worshiping crowds.
* [42:3] See the face of God: “face” designates a personal presence (Gn 33:10; Ex 10:28–29; 2 Sm 17:11). The expressions “see God/God’s face” occur elsewhere (Ps 11:7; 17:15; cf. Ex 24:10; 33:7–11; Jb 33:26) for the presence of God in the Temple.
* [42:5] The shrine of the Mighty One: this reading follows the tradition of the Septuagint and the Vulgate.

One of the great laments (A) in the Psalter, this Penitential Psalm (see p. 756) is primarily a plea for the removal of the personal and social distress that sins have caused. The poem is divided into two parts of
approximately equal length: verses 3–10 and 11–19, with a coda in vv. 20–21. The two parts are carefully interlocked by repetition of significant words: “blot (wipe) out” in the first verse of each section (vv. 3 and 11); “wash me” in the verse just after the first verse of the first section (v. 4) and just before the last verse (v. 9) of the first section; the repetition of “heart,” “God,” and “spirit” in verses 12 and 19. In the first section the psalmist, relying entirely on God’s gracious fidelity, prays to be delivered from sin. Verse 10 suggests that the psalmist is sick, and attributes the sickness to sin. Sin is depicted with intense realism, not just a past act against God but its emotional, physical, and social consequences. The psalmist experiences the destructive results of sin (v. 5) and knows that this suffering is self-inflicted and deserved. Before the all-holy God a human being can plead no self-righteousness (v. 7) but can only ask for God’s purifying favor (vv. 8–10).

Verse 11 begins the second part by repeating the prayer for forgiveness. Something more profound than the wiping clean of sin is the theme of verses 12–19, namely, a state of nearness to God, a living by the spirit or power of God (vv. 12–13). Such nearness brings joy (v. 14) and enables the forgiven sinner to speak from personal experience to all who are estranged from God (vv. 15–16). That proclamation is the response that God desires, even more than sacrifice in the temple (vv. 17–19). The last two verses make precise the situation: the experience of sin is the exilic absence of God from the temple and its ceremonies.

EPISTLE

Christ has been raised from the dead. Through Baptism, we enter the mystery of his Death and Resurrection. After hearing and singing up to fourteen passages from the Old Testament (seven readings and seven psalms or canticles sung responsorially), the New Testament makes its bright appearance. We hear Paul say, "We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him" (v. 9). This is the first scriptural proclamation from tonight that Jesus is risen. Paul compares the Resurrection of Christ and Baptism. This passage underscores our liturgical practice of celebrating Baptism at the Easter Vigil. It also affirms our preference for baptizing infants on any Sunday, our weekly observance of the Resurrection.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans (6:3–11)

Brothers and sisters:
Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.
For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection.
We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin.
For a dead person has been absolved from sin.
If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.
We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him.
As to his death, he died to sin once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God.
Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.
To defend the gospel against the charge that it promotes moral laxity (cf. Rom 3:5–8), Paul expresses himself in the typical style of spirited diatribe. God’s display of generosity or grace is not evoked by sin but, as stated in Rom 5:8 is the expression of God’s love, and this love pledges eternal life to all believers (Rom 5:21). Paul views the present conduct of the believers from the perspective of God’s completed salvation when the body is resurrected and directed totally by the holy Spirit. Through baptism believers share the death of Christ and thereby escape from the grip of sin. Through the resurrection of Christ the power to live anew becomes reality for them, but the fullness of participation in Christ’s resurrection still lies in the future. But life that is lived in dedication to God now is part and parcel of that future. Hence anyone who sincerely claims to be interested in that future will scarcely be able to say, “Let us sin so that grace may prosper” (cf. Rom 6:1).

In Romans 5-8 Paul highlights God’s love and exhorts the believers living in Rome to "consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11). Sin in the singular is noteworthy. Paul is not talking about some sort of human failing. Rather, his Greek word for sin is more correctly understood as a force or a power that drives a person toward an almost unavoidable proneness to failure or to committing an evil deed. Remember that Mediterranean culture views human beings as subject to nature rather than as controlling nature. Nature, in the Mediterranean world, includes an invisible world of powers and forces which mischievously, capriciously, or sometimes even with deliberate calculation intervene in human life and cause human beings to behave in ways that displease God. This world of power and forces is the context in which Paul understands sin.

The good news in Paul’s passage is that Jesus’ death and resurrection have destroyed the effectiveness of this force or power called sin. Furthermore, baptism snatches believers from the power of this force and incorporates them into new life with God. This is something very real and very welcome in the Mediterranean way of thinking. While some people in this world use amulets, gestures, or incantations to ward off evil, believers through baptism are intimately united with the very one who has defeated the source of all evil. But people still fail and still commit sins. It is to this situation that Paul speaks when he exhorts his letter-recipients thus: thanks to baptism our old self was crucified (v. 6) and we are now "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11); therefore, we should live accordingly.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 118:1–2, 16–17, 22–23)

This psalm gives many reasons for thanksgiving. It opens with the simple assertion that the Lord is good, and that "his mercy endures forever" (v. 1). It then announces the power and deeds of God's right hand. Two of the verses prophesy the meaning of this Easter night. You can imagine Jesus singing this psalm: "I shall not die, but live, / and declare the works of the Lord" (Psalm 118:17). Christians can affirm, "The stone which the builders rejected I has become the cornerstone" (v. 22). His enemies thought they had put Jesus to death, but he has become the cornerstone of life. The refrain for this psalm is a triple Alleluia. It doubles as the Gospel acclamation. No words can fully express the Joy of this night, so we resort to a Hebrew acclamation that needs no translation: Alleluia!

Throughout Lent, we have abstained from singing that word. We have introduced the Gospel with a different acclamation of praise. But now, the word returns. Our "fasting" from the Alleluia is over. We rejoice that Christ is risen.

ALLELUIA
Give thanks to the L ORD, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.
Let the house of Israel say, “His mercy endures forever.”
The right hand of the L ORD has struck with power; the right hand of the L ORD is exalted.
I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the L ORD.
The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.
By the LORD has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes.

* [Psalm 118] A thanksgiving liturgy accompanying a procession of the king and the people into the Temple precincts. After an invocation in the form of a litany (Ps 118:1–4), the psalmist (very likely speaking in the name of the community) describes how the people confidently implored God's help (Ps 118:5–9) when hostile peoples threatened its life (Ps 118:10–14); vividly God's rescue is recounted (Ps 118:15–18). Then follows a possible dialogue at the Temple gates between the priests and the psalmist as the latter enters to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice (Ps 118:19–25). Finally, the priests impart their blessing (Ps 118:26–27), and the psalmist sings in gratitude (Ps 118:28–29).

* [118:22] The stone the builders rejected: a proverb: what is insignificant to human beings has become great through divine election. The “stone” may originally have meant the foundation stone or capstone of the Temple. The New Testament interpreted the verse as referring to the death and resurrection of Christ (Mt 21:42; Acts 4:11; cf. Is 28:16 and Rom 9:33; 1 Pt 2:7).

A thanksgiving (B) after a victory, this psalm accompanies a procession into the temple precincts. Solemn entry into the temple by king and people and their partaking of a banquet were ways of celebrating the Exodus-Conquest, when Yahweh led the people from the domain of Pharaoh to Yahweh’s own domain. Verses 1–4 call upon the ranks of worshipers to praise the Lord, for the Lord is faithful. In verses 5–18 the speaker tells of the divine mercy shown by Yahweh’s rescue of the people from their enemies. The citation of the old poem about the Exodus-Conquest in Exod 15 (v. 14 = Exod 15:2; vv. 15–16 = Exod 15:6; v. 28 = Exod 15:2) suggests that today’s victory is an extension of the original victory that made Israel a people.

Verses 19–29 echo the cries of the procession as it enters the great court of the temple. Only the just, those whom God has chosen, may enter; victory today has shown the people that they are chosen and thus may enter. Verse 22 is a proverb; what is insignificant has become great through divine election. The reference may be to the foundation stone of the temple. The psalm orchestrates the people’s movement and shouts a hymn to the Lord of victory.

**GOSPEL**

Jesus has been raised from the dead. After many readings, we finally come to the account in the Gospel according to Matthew that announces the meaning of this night. At dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to the tomb, where they see an angel of the Lord who tells them not to be afraid. "I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said" (Matthew 28:5-6). That is truly the Gospel: the Good News of this night.

The encounter with the angel takes place just as the day after the Sabbath is dawning. For this reason, we celebrate the entire Easter Vigil at the same time. It begins after dark, and it finishes before light. The angel wears white clothing, the uniform of heavenly beings throughout the New Testament. The angel sends the women on. "Go quickly and tell his disciples," the angel says (Matthew 28:7). Easter is not just about hearing good news, it is about telling good news.

Throughout this glorious Vigil, the faithful encounter Christ in many ways: in the fire, in Baptism, and most importantly in the Eucharist. But they also meet Christ in the proclamation of the Word. He is present as we hear the Good News. Tonight, the response the people make to the Gospel reading has special power: "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." They do not address those words to the priest. They address those words to the Risen Christ, who is present as his Gospel is proclaimed.

* A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Matthew (28:1–10)

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.
And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow. The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men. Then the angel said to the women in reply, “Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ Behold, I have told you.” Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them on their way and greeted them. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

* [28:1] After the sabbath…dawning: since the sabbath ended at sunset, this could mean in the early evening, for dawning can refer to the appearance of the evening star; cf. Lk 23:54. However, it is probable that Matthew means the morning dawn of the day after the sabbath, as in the similar though slightly different text of Mark, “when the sun had risen” (Mk 16:2). Mary Magdalene and the other Mary: see notes on Mt 27:55–56; 57–61. To see the tomb: cf. Mk 16:1–2 where the purpose of the women’s visit is to anoint Jesus’ body.

* [28:2–4] Peculiar to Matthew. A great earthquake: see note on Mt 27:51–53. Descended from heaven: this trait is peculiar to Matthew, although his interpretation of the “young man” of his Marcan source (Mk 16:5) as an angel is probably true to Mark’s intention; cf. Lk 24:23 where the “two men” of Mt 24:4 are said to be “angels.” Rolled back the stone…upon it: not to allow the risen Jesus to leave the tomb but to make evident that the tomb is empty (see Mt 24:6). Unlike the apocryphal Gospel of Peter (9:35—11:44), the New Testament does not describe the resurrection of Jesus, nor is there anyone who sees it. His appearance was like lightning…snow: see note on Mt 17:2.

* [28:6–7] Cf. Mk 16:6–7. Just as he said: a Matthean addition referring to Jesus’ predictions of his resurrection, e.g., Mt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19. Tell his disciples: like the angel of the Lord of the infancy narrative, the angel interprets a fact and gives a commandment about what is to be done; cf. Mt 1:20–21. Matthew omits Mark’s “and Peter” (Mk 16:7); considering his interest in Peter, this omission is curious. Perhaps the reason is that the Marcan text may allude to a first appearance of Jesus to Peter alone (cf. 1 Cor 15:5; Lk 24:34) which Matthew has already incorporated into his account of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi; see note on Mt 16:16. He is going…Galilee: like Mk 16:7, a reference to Jesus’ prediction at the Last Supper (Mt 26:32; Mk 14:28). Matthew changes Mark’s “as he told you” to a declaration of the angel.

* [28:8] Contrast Mk 16:8 where the women in their fear “said nothing to anyone.”

* [28:9–10] Although these verses are peculiar to Matthew, there are similarities between them and John’s account of the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:17). In both there is a touching of Jesus’ body, and a command of Jesus to bear a message to his disciples, designated as his brothers. Matthew may have drawn upon a tradition that appears in a different form in John. Jesus’ words to the women are mainly a repetition of those of the angel (Mt 28:5a, 7b).

The empty tomb (see Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–10). No one witnessed the resurrection of Jesus, nor does Matthew suggest that anyone did. He and the other evangelists tell only about the
empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord. The explanation for the emptiness of the tomb is that Jesus had been raised from the dead (v. 6). The women, who had seen Jesus die and knew exactly where he had been buried on Friday afternoon, return to the tomb early on Easter Sunday morning (v. 1). They encounter an angel who had rolled back the large round, flat rock fitted into the groove at the entrance of the tomb and who had terrified the guards dispatched by the chief priests and Pharisees (vv. 2–4). The angel explains the emptiness of the tomb in verses 6–7 with reference to Jesus’ three passion predictions (see 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). The women, inspired by both joy and fear, hasten to tell the disciples (v. 8). On the way they encounter the risen Lord and do him homage (v. 9). He instructs them in verse 10 to tell the disciples to leave Jerusalem (the place where Jesus was rejected) and to go to Galilee (the place of revelation). After his resurrection, he too goes to Galilee (see 26:32).

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

■ "Creation is the foundation of 'all God's saving plans,' the 'beginning of the history of salvation that culminates in Christ" (CCC, 280).
■ "Thus the revelation of creation is inseparable from the revelation and forging of the covenant of the one God with his People .... The truth of creation is also expressed with growing vigor in the message of the prophets, the prayer of the psalms and the liturgy, and in the wisdom sayings of the Chosen People" (CCC, 288).
■ "A correct understanding of the environment prevents the utilitarian reduction of nature to a mere object to be manipulated and exploited" (CSDC, 463).
■ "Christian hope takes up and fulfills the hope of the chosen people which has its origin and model in the hope of Abraham, who was blessed abundantly by the promises of God fulfilled in Isaac, and who was purified by the test of the sacrifice " (CCC, 1819).
■ "But because of the union which the person of the Son retained with his body, his was not a mortal corpse like others .... [this statement] can be said of Christ: ... 'For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let your Holy One see corruption'4" (CCC, 627).
■ "As proclaimed in the prayers for the blessing of the water, baptism is a cleansing water of rebirth that makes us God's children born from on high" (Cl, 5).
■ "God's love is everlasting': 'For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you” (CCC, 220).
■ "When she delves into her own mystery, the Church, the People of God in the New Covenant, discovers her link with the Jewish People,7 'the first to hear the Word of God” (CCC, 839).
■ "Jesus, the Son of God, also himself suffered the death that is part of the human condition. Yet, despite his anguish as he faced death, he accepted it in an act of complete and free submission to his Father's will.8 The obedience of Jesus has transformed the curse of death into a blessing9" (CCC, 1009).
■ "By its very nature water cannot be treated as just another commodity among many, and it must be used rationally and in solidarity with others" (CSOC, 485).
■ "All evangelizing activity is understood as promoting communion with Jesus Christ. Starting with the 'initial' conversion of a person to the Lord, moved by the Holy Spirit through the primary proclamation of the Gospel, catechesis seeks to solidify and mature this first adherence" (GOG, 80).
■ "He who makes the profession of faith takes on responsibilities that not infrequently provoke persecution" (GOG, 83).
■ "Baptism is therefore, above all, the sacrament of that faith by which, enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we respond to the Gospel of Christ" (RCIA, Cl, General Introduction, 3).
■ "Baptism, the cleansing with water by the power of the living word, washes away every stain of sin, original and personal, makes us sharers in God's own life (see 2 Peter 1 :4) and his adopted children" (RCIA, Cl, General Introduction, 5).
“It is desirable that the liturgy of Lent and Paschal time should be restored in such a way that it will serve to prepare the hearts of the catechumens for the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, at whose solemn ceremonies they are reborn to Christ in baptism” (AG, 14).

“For this reason, the Church, especially during Advent and Lent and above all at the Easter Vigil, rereads and relives the great events of salvation history in the ‘today’ of her liturgy. But this also demands that catechesis help the faithful to open themselves to this spiritual understanding of the economy of salvation as the Church's liturgy reveals it and enables us to live it” (CCC, 1095).

“To accomplish so great a work Christ is always present in his church, especially in liturgical celebrations .... He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church” (SC, 7).

“The Resurrection of Jesus is the crowning truth of our faith in Christ, a faith believed and lived as the central truth by the first Christian community; handed on as fundamental by Tradition; established by the documents of the New Testament; and preached as an essential part of the Paschal mystery” (CCC, 638).
FIRST READING

Jesus’ earthly ministry was limited mostly to Jews (see Matthew 15:24). At Jesus’ Ascension, he commanded his followers to be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In obedience to Christ’s mandate, the Gospel moved beyond Israel’s borders. Peter’s offer of baptism to Cornelius, an uncircumcised Roman centurion, was a pivotal incident. Underlying the event were key questions: Did Christians have to obey Jewish dietary laws and practices? Could non-Jews become Christians without being circumcised? God prepared Peter to break through his narrow understanding of the Law by giving him a vision of “unclean” animals that the Jews were forbidden to eat. God tells Peter, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (1:15). For the first time in Acts, Peter proclaims the kerygma to a non-Jew. As at the first Pentecost, the Spirit pours forth on all those listening.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles (10:34a, 37–43)

Peter proceeded to speak and said:
“You know what has happened all over Judea,
beginning in Galilee after the baptism
that John preached,
how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth
with the Holy Spirit and power.
He went about doing good
and healing all those oppressed by the devil,
for God was with him.
We are witnesses of all that he did
both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem.
They put him to death by hanging him on a tree.
This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible,
not to all the people, but to us,
the witnesses chosen by God in advance,
who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.
He commissioned us to preach to the people
and testify that he is the one appointed by God
as judge of the living and the dead.
To him all the prophets bear witness,
that everyone who believes in him
will receive forgiveness of sins through his name.”

* [10:1–48] The narrative centers on the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile and a “God-fearer” (see note on Acts 8:26–40). Luke considers the event of great importance, as is evident from his long treatment of it. The incident is again related in Acts 11:1–18 where Peter is forced to justify his actions before the Jerusalem community and alluded to in Acts 15:7–11 where at the Jerusalem “Council” Peter supports Paul’s missionary activity among the...
To appreciate the readings of Easter time, it is helpful to understand a common human experience known as altered states of consciousness that are different from "normal" or "ordinary" consciousness. Brain and nervous system research indicates all human beings are capable of such experiences. Indeed, many are familiar with daydreaming, road trance (hypnosis while driving, yet obeying all laws and arriving at one's destination safely, etc.), and similar altered states. Cultures give distinctive interpretations to such experiences, but some cultures are reluctant to acknowledge them as healthy elements of human experience. Psychiatric research indicates that in some cultures, people can expect to see their deceased loves ones in an altered state of consciousness for as long as ten years after the death, and sometimes longer. Anthropological studies recount that altered states of consciousness experiences are common in the circum-Mediterranean world of the present and of the past.

Peter delivers his speech within the context of his experience with Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort (Acts 10:1-11:18). In ecstatic trance, Cornelius is instructed to seek out Peter and Peter, also in ecstatic trance, is instructed by God that all foods are clean. When Cornelius personally repeats his experience to Peter, Peter makes a speech, some verses of which have been selected for today's reading.

Of interest to our reflection is Peter's report about experiencing the risen Jesus. Peter notes that "God granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us?" Of course, God is the one who "hard-wired" human beings with the capacity for varieties of consciousness, and God can also select the subjects of specific experiences. Sometimes God can even communicate with "enemies" in an altered state of
consciousness (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2). While all human beings are indeed capable of the experience, the experiences will always be individual and culture specific.

Peter also observes that they ate and drank with the risen Jesus. This is not a literary device but rather the report of an actual experience. The Israelite tradition believed that holy men (saddiq; hasid) would eat at three-legged golden tables overflowing with delicacies in "the world to come." In the Israelite tradition, this phrase, "the world to come" points to that place where the righteous will go after they die and depart from "this world." Psychological anthropologists would call that world "alternate reality." In contrast to this world which is ordinary reality, or culturally "normal" reality. Thus, some experiences in altered states of consciousness are experiences of alternate reality, including "the world to come" which is parallel to ordinary reality, or as the Israelite tradition calls it, "this world."

Finally, Peter reports the consequences of seeing the risen Jesus in an altered state of consciousness. The apostles were commissioned to preach and testify to Jesus as appointed by God to judge the living and the dead. Anthropologists observed that two common results of alternate states of consciousness experiences are (1) the visionary finds a solution to a problem, or (2) is strengthened to embark on a new path in life. Clearly Peter and the apostles experienced the second effect. This reading from Acts relates well with the gospel John 20:1-9) in which Mary of Magdala, Simon Peter, and the other disciple find the empty tomb but do not yet experience the risen Jesus. It is the normal, first stage of experience after the death of a loved one.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 118:1–2, 16–17, 22–23.)

Psalm 118 is the Great Hallel! (Hebrew for "praise"), the last of the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118), which recount God's deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. Psalm 118 was sung at all major festivals. During the Feast of Tabernacles, it was a processional hymn on entering the Temple. The crowds that greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem sang, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD" (v. 26, see Matthew 21:9). Jesus quoted Psalm 118: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" (v. 22) to describe his own rejection but ultimate victory. The Hallel Psalms were also sung during the Passover meal.

Jesus and his disciples sang Psalm 118 before he went out to the garden of Gethsemane to face death.

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.
Let the house of Israel say,
"His mercy endures forever."
"The right hand of the LORD has struck with power;
the right hand of the LORD is exalted.
I shall not die, but live,
and declare the works of the LORD."
The stone which the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
By the LORD has this been done;
it is wonderful in our eyes.

* [Psalm 118] A thanksgiving liturgy accompanying a procession of the king and the people into the Temple precincts. After an invocation in the form of a litany (Ps 118:1–4), the psalmist (very likely speaking in the name of the community) describes how the people confidently implored God's help (Ps 118:5–9) when hostile peoples threatened its life (Ps 118:10–14); vividly God's rescue is recounted (Ps 118:15–18). Then follows a possible
dialogue at the Temple gates between the priests and the psalmist as the latter enters to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice (Ps 118:19–25). Finally, the priests impart their blessing (Ps 118:26–27), and the psalmist sings in gratitude (Ps 118:28–29).

* [118:22] The stone the builders rejected: a proverb: what is insignificant to human beings has become great through divine election. The “stone” may originally have meant the foundation stone or capstone of the Temple. The New Testament interpreted the verse as referring to the death and resurrection of Christ (Mt 21:42; Acts 4:11; cf. Is 28:16 and Rom 9:33; 1 Pt 2:7).

This is an entrance psalm from a Temple liturgy perhaps at a "Gate of Righteousness" which is offering solemn gratitude to God. The psalm also appears to have been associated with pilgrimages to Jerusalem on the feast of Tabernacles. It was an integral part of the Passover celebration recited in conjunction with filling the fourth cup of wine. The first two verses initiate the communal statement of grateful indebtedness. Verses 16-17 echo Moses’ song in Exodus 15, while the final verses (22-23) are quite likely an ancient proverb highlighting the difference that faith or loyalty can make. One person’s junk becomes another person’s treasure by faith. The late Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller suggested that the psalm refrain (v. 24) "this is the day the Lord has made" is better translated "on the day when the Lord takes action:' Indeed, on that day, Jesus was raised from the dead.

SECOND READING

The early Christians regarded Baptism as a dying and a rising again. As the person was immersed in the waters, it was as if he or she were buried in death. As they emerged from the waters, it was like being resurrected to a new life. Therefore, Christians must rise from Baptism as different persons. Their thoughts must be set on the things of God and no longer concerned with the passing things of earth. This was not another worldliness in which Christians withdraw from the activities of this world; ethical principles follow that make it clear what was expected of newborn Christians (vv. 5-25). They would now view everything in light of eternity and no longer live as if this world was all that mattered.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians (3:1–4)

Brothers and sisters:
If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above,
where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.
Think of what is above, not on earth.
For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.
When Christ your life appears,
then you too will appear with him in glory.

* [3:1–4] By retaining the message of the gospel that the risen, living Christ is the source of their salvation, the Colossians will be free from false religious evaluations of the things of the world (Col 3:1–2). They have died to these; but one day when Christ...appears, they will live with Christ in the presence of God (Col 3:3–4).

[Modern scholars locate this letter among the DeuteroPaulines written between 70 and 80 A.O. by someone who knew the Pauline tradition quite well. Perhaps it is a product of a Pauline school tradition located in Ephesus. Colossians 1:14 speaks of "forgiveness of sins:" one of thirty-eight such words or phrase which occur nowhere in the undisputed Pauline writings (see Eph 1:7; Heb 9:22; 10:18), supporting the argument against authenticity as a letter of Paul.]

Colossians 3:1-4. Written by a creative admirer of Paul perhaps between A.O. 63 and 90, this letter presents Jesus as the cosmic Messiah and explains what it means for believers to be exclusively devoted to his service. The letter is addressed to believers living in Colossae, a town in southwestern Turkey near
Laodicea not far from modem Pammukale. Today's verses begin the paraenetic, that is, hortatory section of the letters. The message is simple. Since believers through baptism have been raised with Jesus, they ought to focus on matters pertaining to alternate reality (what is above) rather than getting bogged down in material reality (the world in which we live). Today's gospel has some consequences for the ordinary life of the believer: this selection from Colossians puts those consequences in focus.

**ALLELUIA**  (cf. 1 Cor 5:7b–8a)
Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed; let us then feast with joy in the Lord.

**GOSPEL**

Two stories of the Resurrection were widely circulated in John's time. One story centered on the empty tomb; the other involved appearances of the Risen Lord. One of these stories involved Mary from Magdala, a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee. There Is no basis for identifying her with the repentant sinner of Luke's Gospel (Luke 7:36-50). Mary was a faithful follower of Jesus and, along with Jesus' mother and other women, was a witness to his crucifixion and burial (John 19:25). In John's Gospel, she was the first to discover the empty tomb. She believed Jesus' body had been stolen, and she ran to report the news to Peter and John. Jewish law held that two men were required as witnesses; therefore, Mary could not serve as a witness. The two apostles rushed to the tomb. John arrives first, but out of respect for the elder apostle, waits for Peter to enter the tomb. They observe the burial clothes lying folded neatly, which refuted any claim that Jesus' body was stolen. Peter is slow to understand the meaning of the empty tomb, but John "saw and believed" (20:8). Even though they did not yet understand the Scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead, John served as the example for all "those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (v. 29).

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (20:1–9)
On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him.” So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead.
The risen Jesus reveals his glory and confers the Spirit. This story fulfills the basic need for testimony to the resurrection. What we have here is not a record but a series of single stories.

The story of the empty tomb is found in both the Matthean and the Lucan traditions; John’s version seems to be a fusion of the two.

Still dark: according to Mark the sun had risen, Matthew describes it as “dawning,” and Luke refers to early dawn. Mary sees the stone removed, not the empty tomb.

Mary runs away, not directed by an angel/young man as in the synoptic accounts. The plural “we” in the second part of her statement might reflect a tradition of more women going to the tomb.

The basic narrative is told of Peter alone in Lk 24:12, a verse missing in important manuscripts and which may be borrowed from tradition similar to John. Cf. also Lk 24:24.

Some special feature about the state of the burial cloths caused the beloved disciple to believe. Perhaps the details emphasized that the grave had not been robbed.

Probably a general reference to the scriptures is intended, as in Lk 24:26 and 1 Cor 15:4. Some individual Old Testament passages suggested are Ps 16:10; Hos 6:2; Jon 2:1, 2, 10.

In this version of an "empty tomb" story that undergirds Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus, it is difficult to miss the special importance John assigns to Mary Magdalene.

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke report that a group of women went to the tomb on Sunday morning, only John reports that Mary Magdalene came alone, unaccompanied by other women. From a cultural perspective, this is very unusual behavior. A woman alone outdoors is an anomaly. Theologians believe that this is John's way of highlighting the Magdalene's special importance. She is, in his mind, a "typical" figure who represents a special character trait or reflects a certain theological position.

MARY'S KNOWLEDGE

Mary's initial response to the empty tomb is to suspect theft (see Matt 28:13-15; 27:62-66). This is implied in her report to the disciples: "They have taken the Lord ... we do not know where they have laid him (see John 20:2, 13, 15).

Twice Mary admits that she "does not know." a major theme in John's Gospel. In general, "not knowing" is not a problem in John's Gospel because Jesus can instruct these "ignorant" ones and bring them to light. This is clearly what he does with the Samaritan woman at the well (4:7-26) and with Thomas (14:5).

But it is a problem not to "be in the know." Jesus chides Nicodemus, a leader, for precisely this shortcoming: "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not know these things [about being born from above, of the spirit]?

Though she admits that she is not in the know, Mary is brought by Jesus to a very special knowledge. Jesus tells her "whither" he has gone: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (20:17).

This special knowledge, given by Jesus uniquely to Mary Magdalene, makes her a "typical" or representative character. Just as Nathanael is a typical character who is not misled by those who object to the message about Jesus but comes and sees for himself, so Mary is typical in becoming now an insider, someone definitely "in the know!"

She can even be called a beloved disciple because she receives a special revelation. Mary Magdalene stands out as an "enlightened" person in this Gospel. She does not depend upon the group or any other person for her special knowledge about Jesus, as Simon Peter depended upon his brother Andrew (1:35-40). In this, Mary is very different from the ordinary folk in this Gospel.

MARY'S EXPERIENCE

Mary Magdalene is typical from yet another perspective. In the Mediterranean world, status is ordinarily gained by ascription. This means that people gain their status by birth or inheritance. Human effort is of no avail in obtaining or improving status, but failed human effort can result in loss of status, or shame.
Genealogies are important not because they trace a family tree, but because they prove a Mediterranean person's claim to honor and status.

But Mary's special status in this Gospel does not derive from an appointment by the earthly Jesus but rather from her experience of the risen Jesus. In highlighting this aspect of Mary's experience, John is underscoring a motif that runs through his Gospel: whatever is earthly, material, of the flesh, is of no avail (6:63; 8:23). The "spiritual" is important, that which is out of the ordinary. Mary thus has spiritual status. As a typical figure, she becomes an extraordinary person.

Finally, in this Gospel the Samaritan woman at the well (4:49); Martha, a "beloved disciple" (11:5, 25); and now Mary Magdalene (20:17) all receive special revelations from Jesus. While the Samaritan woman and Martha went and called others to Jesus, they were not "officially commissioned" to do so in the same way that Jesus formally commanded Mary Magdalene: "Go to my brothers and say to them ... ?' Despite their different kinds of commissions from Jesus, the three women enjoy rather high status in John's community. This is all the more significant in Mary Magdalene's case because her role is unusual and rather controversial.

How did our allegedly patriarchal ancestors ever accept the help of women in making sense out of an empty tomb? How did these Middle Eastern women succeed without quotas and affirmative action laws? Believers will find stimulating help in Jerome H. Neyrey's insightful booklet, The Resurrection Stories (see Recommended Readings).

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- Jesus is revealed as Savior of the world in his life, Death, and Resurrection (NCO, 90) and fulfills both the promises of the Old Testament and his promises (CCC, 652).
- Easter is the feast of feasts, the focal point of the church year (CCC, 1169-1171).
- Christ is alive in a new way after the resurrection (CCC, 554-556, 645-647, 999-1000).
EASTER TIME

Introduction to Easter Time

Outside of Ordinary Time, Easter Time is the longest period of liturgical time in the liturgical year. The fifty days from Easter Sunday until Pentecost Sun-day are designated as weeks of, not after, Easter. Appropriately, all of the Lectionary readings come from the New Testament, with emphasis on the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel according to John. The First Letter of John provides the Second Reading for each of these Sundays.

The Prefaces to the Eucharistic Prayer offer special insight into the emphases of the season, just as they do in other seasons. During Easter Time, we are reminded that Christ's Resurrection is ours as well, that a new age has dawned, and that the joy of this season renews the whole world. On Pentecost Sunday, the Preface proclaims that in sending the Spirit, God has brought the Paschal Mystery to completion. No other season brims with such life and promise.

FIRST READING

The FIRST READING offers select scenes from the Acts of the Apostles for our Easter reflection. As noted in the previous chapter, we began on Easter Sun-day, with Peter summarizing the mission, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. On the Second Sunday of Easter, we hear about the unity of the community formed in Jesus' name. Peter preaches conversion on the Third Sunday, and on the Fourth Sunday he explains that a miracle he worked was performed in Jesus' name. On the Fifth Sunday we hear of Paul's entrance into the community, and then on the Sixth Sunday we learn of Peter's acceptance of the Gentiles. On the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, we hear the account of that great mystery. On the Seventh Sunday of Easter, where it is observed, we hear how the choosing of Matthias to fill the role of apostle after the betrayal and death of Judas. In sum, the readings outline the growth of the early church under the influence of the Spirit. Finally, we hear the account of the Pentecost event.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

An optional communal response to every psalm of this season is "Alleluia," which could also summarize the message and mood of these psalms. Three times, we pray from Psalm 118 (Easter Sunday, Second Sunday of Easter, Fourth Sunday of Easter), repeating its Paschal acclamation: "The stone which the builders rejected I has become the cornerstone" (118:22). Three additional themes dominate the Easter psalms: the plea for God's light and spirit, the proclamation that God's power has been shown to the nations, and joy in Christ's Ascension to the heavenly throne. They all offer variations on the theme expressed in the response to the Easter psalm: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,/ for his mercy endures forever" (118:1).

SECOND READING

The majority of the SECOND READINGS come from the First Letter of John. Taken all together, there are, as in the psalms, some extended themes. True to John, the most often repeated theme is love: the love of God for humanity, the love we should show to one another, and, most spectacular of all, the effect of God's love, as we become children of God who will be like Christ in glory. Paul takes up that latter theme, teaching that we who have the first-fruits of the Spirit can live by the Spirit and will appear with Christ in glory. Together, the readings promise unimaginable union with God.

GOSPEL READING

The readings for Easter Time draw heavily on the Gospel according to John. On Easter Sunday, we journeyed with Mary and then Peter and the disciple to the inexplicably empty tomb. The Gospel reading on the Second Sunday of Easter depicts the Risen Lord with his gift of peace and mission of reconciliation. On the Third Sunday of Easter, we hear another account of Christ's appearance to the disciples. This time, he eats with them and reminds them of the mission to preach forgiveness to all the world. The rest of the readings from the Gospel according to John portray Christ's love for his people. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for them, the True Vine that gives life to all who remain in him. He is the one who chose them and wants them to inhabit his love. These weeks celebrate not only Christ's Resurrection, but its historical consequences, especially the human vocation to become like him in union with God.
SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

FIRST READING

Luke presents various idealized descriptions of the early communities established by Christ’s followers, all centered on the Apostles’ role as witnesses to the resurrected Jesus. The risen Christ, present through his Spirit, empowers believers to live out Jesus’ mission and ministry. Witness to the Risen Christ is manifested in the communal lifestyle evidenced in his followers. They are of "one heart and mind" (v. 32), sharing their possessions with others in need, as the Apostles administer their distribution. Whether these communities were real or idealized by Luke, one thing is certain. Belief in the Risen Christ motivates his followers to manifest the same sacrificial love for others that Christ modeled for them. Empowered by the Spirit of the Christ, they carry on that lifestyle for all to see and experience. Others who have not seen or known Christ can now experience him in his followers. In their self-giving, they are living manifesta- tions of the Risen Lord.


The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.

Scholars recognize these verses as an ideal characterization of the community of believers. (Luke presents a glimpse of reality in 5:1-11 which may not have been a single and isolated occurrence.) Standing in contrast to Western individualism which lives by an isolating value system (each one has her or his own IRA, and his or her own plans for skilled nursing care in old age if necessary since no one wants to be a burden to his or her children, etc.), 80 percent of the world’s contemporary population is collectivistic or communal in character, living according to congregating value systems. The ideal described in these verses was familiar throughout the ancient world. Aristotle said: "Friends' goods are common property" and "Brothers have all things in common" (Nicomachean Ethics 8.9.1-2). The Israelite tradition practiced covenant loyalty to fellow-Israelites: "There should be no one of you in need" (Deut 15:4 NAB; RSV: "there will be no poor among you"). People were reminded of their obligation to look to the welfare of fellow-Israelites: "The needy will never be lacking in the land. That is why I command you to open your hand to your poor and needy kinsman in your country: Therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land." (Deut.) 15:11)

Of further note in this passage are the apostles' roles in managing community funds. In addition to proclamation and working mighty deeds (Acts 4:33), the apostles received donations (4:35, 37; 5:2) and redistributed them to the needy. This stood in contrast to the behavior of Temple authorities who were supposed to do the same thing but instead spent the funds on conspicuous consumption, something criticized by Jesus (see Luke 16:14; 20:45-21:4; Mark 12:38-44).
RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 118:2–4, 13–15, 22–24)

The psalm invites all to thank God, who is good and whose love is forever faithful and enduring. All are called to acclaim God's hesed, translated as "mercy," but literally meaning deep, faithful, enduring covenant love. God is attuned to the cry of the beloved with whom he has made this covenant, reaching out to save them and restore their courage and strength. Suffering and pain lead to experiences of loneliness, rejection, or abandonment by others. Such feelings of abandonment increase their suffering. God's covenant love restores and gives new life to the rejected ones, bringing back their sense of dignity and self-worth. This is the essence of covenant love. Such love "is wonderful in our eyes" (v. 23), as we joyfully acknowledge that "This is the day the Lord has made; / let us be glad and rejoice in it" (v. 24). Faithful love does ultimately conquer all.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.
Let the house of Israel say, “His mercy endures forever.”
Let the house of Aaron say, “His mercy endures forever.”
Let those who fear the LORD say, “His mercy endures forever.”

I was hard pressed and was falling, but the LORD helped me.
My strength and my courage is the LORD, and he has been my savior.
The joyful shout of victory in the tents of the just:
The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.
By the LORD has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes.
This is the day the LORD has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it.

In this ancient psalm, the refrain and first verses (2-3) emphasize the basic reliable quality of the covenant and the God who made it. Then a specific person praises God for a welcome rescue from a difficult situation, prompting everyone to rejoice ("tents of the just"). In Acts 4:10-11, verses 22-24 of this psalm are explicitly applied to "Jesus ... whom you crucified, whom God has raised from the dead." Once again the psalm makes a fitting bridge to the gospel John 20:19-31), which reports another encounter of the apostles with Jesus whom God raised from the dead.

SECOND READING

John makes the bold statement that all who believe Jesus to be the Christ, God's anointed, are begotten by God. This includes us, who believe without having seen. Believing in and loving Christ also means loving God. Love of God is clearly manifested in loving God's children and obeying the Commandments. God's Commandments are not burdensome. John's letter asserts that love of God manifests itself in love of others, while love of others clearly manifests love of God. No matter where one starts, the other necessarily follows.

Such love ultimately conquers the world, understood as the place where love of God and others is severely lacking. Faith in Jesus as God's Son empowers us, through God's Spirit, to overcome the world by loving God and neighbor. Jesus came to model total, self-giving love through water and blood, his total self-sacrifice. Belief in Jesus empowers us, through the testimony of his Spirit, to live in self-giving love toward God and others.

A reading from the first Letter of Saint John (5:1–6)

Beloved:
Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God,
and everyone who loves the Father
loves also the one begotten by him.
In this way we know that we love the children of God
when we love God and obey his commandments.
For the love of God is this,
    that we keep his commandments.
And his commandments are not burdensome,
    for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world.
And the victory that conquers the world is our faith.
Who indeed is the victor over the world
    but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?
This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ,
    not by water alone, but by water and blood.
The Spirit is the one that testifies,
    and the Spirit is truth.

The first four verses of today's reading focus on love, hence, continue the author's attack upon the Seces-sionists. These claim to love, but in the sacred author's view, they lie. His argument is that everyone who believes Jesus is the Messiah is a child of God. Of course, the Secessionists believed this, as did the Johannine community. The author continues: everyone who loves the parent loves the child (his argument is generic; there is no reason for translating father with an upper case letter). Conversely, loving the children is a way of loving the parent. So if the Secessionists do not love Johannine believers, they cannot really love God. And if they say that they love members of their group, they are not children of God because their faith is imperfect, hence they have no brothers to love. Further, the Secessionists claim to love God but do not emphasize keeping the commandments. But true love is obedient love, and obedient the Secessionists are not. Lest his own followers get discouraged and submit to pressures from the Secessionists, the author reminds them that commandments (proper behavior) are not burdensome for true children of God.

Johannine scholars acknowledge that vv. 5-9 are very obscure and difficult to interpret. This is a splendid example of high context writing. Surely the letter recipients could read between the lines and supply what the author was presupposing. The Secessionists apparently said that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, who became such when he "came by water:" as revealed by the Spirit. The author of 1 John broadens this by alluding to the crucifixion of Jesus and the now of blood and water (as the Secessionists would claim) but the water then flowed with the blood. The testimony of the beloved disciple to this event continues in the tradition of the Johannine community. The Spirit is still bearing witness.

The significance of witnesses derives from Deut 19:15, which requires two or three. Throughout the gospel of John, multiple witnesses are cited (John 8:18; 5:31-40). This was a technique used by the Johannine community in their arguments with fellow Israelites concerning the divinity of Jesus. Here the author summons it in his debate with the Secessionists over the humanity of Jesus. The Secessionists point to the witness of the Baptist testifying that the incarnation alone is sufficient. The author of 1 John summons three: Spirit, water, blood. How? On a symbolic level, the reference is to sacramental actions familiar to the Johannine Community: Spirit = anointing (see 2 John 2:20, 27); water = baptism (John 3:5); blood = Eucharist (John 6:51-58). Sacraments bear witness to the saving nature of Jesus' death: they constitute people as children of God, nourish them with heavenly food and drink, and they are actions by which true believers share in the action by which Jesus conquered the world (John 16:33).

The pairing of this reading from 1 John with today's gospel (John 20:19-31) is very appropriate. Johannine scholars point out that this section of 1 John seems to have borrowed themes and phrases from the gospel. Jesus gives the Spirit to his disciples. The author's concluding remarks remind his readers that these things were written "that you may come to believe Jesus is Messiah, the Son of God, and through this faith have life in his name!" Who doesn't want life in the name of Jesus?
GOSPEL

Two Johannine Resurrection appearances are proclaimed every Second Sunday of Easter. The first
one takes place on Easter Sunday evening, as the Risen Christ appears through locked doors and
imparts peace to his fearful followers. Having been shown his hands and feet, they rejoice in seeing
that it really is the Lord, as he breathes on them and gifts them with his Spirit. He commissions them
to practice forgiveness and rec- onciliation with all. Being Spirit-filled demands that disciples take up
Jesus' mission of reconciling the world to God and one another.
Thomas, who was not present for this first appearance, refuses to believe what he has been told
unless he sees and touches Jesus for himself. A week later, Jesus appears, imparts peace once again,
and invites Thomas to see and touch. We do not know whether Thomas follows through or not.
What he does do is make the boldest affirmation of belief in the risen Christ, "My Lord and my God!"
(v. 28). Jesus responds by saying "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are
those who have not seen and have believed" (v. 29).
John’s community, some three generations removed from the risen Christ, are like us. We all seek to
know where and how to experience the Risen Christ. The Gospel ending asserts that the Scriptures
are written that "you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ" and so believing, "you may have
life in his name" (v. 31). Faith in Jesus empowers us to live as disciples who have come to know and
experience the risen Christ through Scripture and through lives of self-giving, reconciling love.

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (20:19–31)
On the evening of that first day of the week,
    when the doors were locked, where the disciples were,
    for fear of the Jews,
    Jesus came and stood in their midst
    and said to them, “Peace be with you.”
When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.
The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.
Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you.
As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”
And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
    “Receive the Holy Spirit.
Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them,
    and whose sins you retain are retained.”
Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve,
    was not with them when Jesus came.
So the other disciples said to him, “We have seen the Lord.”
But he said to them,
    “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands
    and put my finger into the nailmarks
    and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”
Now a week later his disciples were again inside
    and Thomas was with them.
Jesus came, although the doors were locked,
    and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you.”
Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands,
and bring your hand and put it into my side, 
do not be unbelieving, but believe.”
Thomas answered and said to him, “My Lord and my God!”
Jesus said to him, “Have you come to believe because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”
Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples 
that are not written in this book.
But these are written that you may come to believe 
that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, 
and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

The various gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection appear-ances reflect a variety of traditions that are not easy to rec-oncile. Today's reading is set "on the evening of that first day of the week;' but the "disciples" (v. 19; are there more than Eleven?) gathered together seem unaware of Peter's, John's, and Mary Magdalene's experiences at the empty tomb "early" on that same day (as recounted in w. 1-10).
Scholars recognize that the evangelists received a diversity of traditions which they proceeded to interpret still further according to the "situation of the churches" for which they wrote and the particular purpose each author set for himself (Pontifical Biblical Commission Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels, 1964, no. 9). John the evangelist re-ported the tradition of frightened disciples gathered behind locked doors and added to it a story he created about "doubting Thomas" (w. 24-29; see the reflection on this pas-sage in cycle C for details). This new composition formed a larger scene to explain how the risen Jesus commissioned the disciples to bring new members into the community (vv. 19-21; see the reflection on this theme in cycle A).
Why do the resurrection appearances receive such diverse interpretations in the Gospels? To answer this question, we need to understand the pan-human experience known as al-tered states of consciousness and the distinctive function or role this experience plays in individual cultures.

APPEARANCES AND MEDITERRANEAN CULTURE
Ninety percent of the world's cultures normally and rou-tinely experience altered states of consciousness; that is, they get a glimpse of an alternate reality that is richer than the re-ality they experience most often. Eighty percent of the Mediterranean societies investigated by researchers, includ-ing the Hebrews, Greeks, and ancient Egyptians, have had these same experiences. Physician-anthropologists observe that Western societies in general, and the United States in particular, appear to have successfully blocked out this nor-mal human capability (see the comments on the transfigura-tion of Jesus, Second Sunday of Lent above).
Still, even in these societies, dreams are one familiar and common experience of alternate reality. Dreams are not bounded by time. From the dreamer's perspective, the dead consort with the living, and experiences separated by clock and calendar in waking consciousness flow together. Bible readers know that dreams are commonly reported in Scripture (e.g., Gen 37:5-11; Matt 1:20-24; 2:12; 2:13-14; etc.).
Visions are another experience of alternate reality re-ported frequently in the Bible (Num 12:6; 1 Sam 3:16; Ezek 8:3; 40:1-2; Matt 17:9; etc.). It is culturally plausible to in-clude appearances of the risen Jesus in the category of expe-riences of alternate reality, or states of altered conscious-ness.

FUNCTION OF RESURRECTION APPEARANCES
Church guidelines remind Bible readers of the necessity to distinguish various layers or stages of tradition in interpret-ing the Gospels. At rock bottom lies the tradition of the events of the life of Jesus, the apostles and all who interacted with them. The second stage of tradition is what the apostles preached about what they remembered of Jesus' words and deeds. And the third stage is that of the evangelist writing be-tween forty to sixty years after Jesus' lifetime on earth.
Since the experience of alternate reality is normal and com-mon in Mediterranean societies, it is possible that those who saw the risen Jesus experienced him in an altered state of consciousness.
They caught a glimpse of risen life, a reality that truly exists and includes much more than does ordinary human consciousness. The function of such experiences in the Mediterranean world is to guide people through otherwise insoluble difficulties and problems. When in doubt about a course of action, or the proper solution to a problem, Mediterranean people seek help and enlightenment in alternate reality. They know how to enter and exit this dimension of human experience as easily as Westerners know how to drive a car, program VCRs, and enjoy their CDs.

At the second and third levels of tradition reflected in the Scriptures, the preachers and evangelists sometimes reported the tradition they received (the appearances of the risen Jesus) and at other times created a tradition that would reflect common, Mediterranean cultural experience (the doubting Thomas story).

While modern science has blessed Western believers many times over, today’s gospel highlights one area of human experience it may have impoverished. Efforts to regain this gift of God could pay rich spiritual dividends.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- The Apostles had faith in the Resurrection because of their direct interactions with the resurrected Christ (see CCC, 644).
- By sharing a meal with his disciples and allowing them to touch him, Jesus invites them “to verify that the risen body ... is the same body that had been tortured and crucified, for it still bears the traces of his passion”1 (CCC, 645).
- “At the prompting of the Holy Spirit, 'Lord' expresses the recognition of the divine mystery of Jesus. In the encounter with the risen Jesus, this title becomes adoration: 'My Lord and my God!'” (CCC, 448).
Third Sunday of Easter

READING 1

It is fitting that we hear this sermon just after we have celebrated Christ’s Resurrection. Peter reviews with his listeners how the people freed Barabbas, a murderer, and had Jesus put to death. This injustice was done even though the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had glorified Jesus. The audience to whom he is preaching includes some people who participated in these events and some from the general population. Peter declares that the people "denied the Holy and Righteous One" (3:14) but God raised him from the dead. Peter’s accusations in this sermon are strong but true. Jesus suffered because of ungodly elements such as human ignorance, ruthlessness, selfishness, and sinfulness. Peter recognizes that they did this terrible deed out of ignorance, but his goal is to call everyone to repentance and conversion. Nothing is too great to be forgiven. God will forgive, he proclaims, if you reform your lives and turn to God.

A reading from ACTS 3:13-15, 17-19

Peter said to the people: "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and denied in Pilate’s presence when he had decided to release him. You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. The author of life you put to death, but God raised him from the dead; of this we are witnesses. Now I know, brothers, that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did; but God has thus brought to fulfillment what he had announced beforehand through the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer. Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away."

* [3:13] Has glorified: through the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, God reversed the judgment against him on the occasion of his trial. Servant: the Greek word can also be rendered as “son” or even “child” here and also in Acts 3:26; 4:25 (applied to David); Acts 4:27; and Acts 4:30. Scholars are of the opinion, however, that the original concept reflected in the words identified Jesus with the suffering Servant of the Lord of Is 52:13–53:12.
* [3:14] The Holy and Righteous One: so designating Jesus emphasizes his special relationship to the Father (see Lk 1:35; 4:34) and emphasizes his sinlessness and religious dignity that are placed in sharp contrast with the guilt of those who rejected him in favor of Barabbas.
* [3:15] The author of life: other possible translations of the Greek title are “leader of life” or “pioneer of life.” The title clearly points to Jesus as the source and originator of salvation.
* [3:17] Ignorance: a Lucan motif, explaining away the actions not only of the people but also of their leaders in crucifying Jesus. On this basis the presbyters in Acts could continue to appeal to the Jews in Jerusalem to believe in Jesus, even while affirming their involvement in his death because they were unaware of his messianic dignity. See also Acts 13:27 and Lk 23:34.
* [3:18] Through the mouth of all the prophets: Christian prophetic insight into the Old Testament saw the crucifixion and death of Jesus as the main import of messianic prophecy. The Jews themselves did not anticipate a suffering Messiah; they usually understood the Servant Song in Is 52:13–53:12 to signify their own suffering as a people. In his typical fashion (cf. Lk 18:31; 24:25, 27, 44), Luke does not specify the particular Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled by Jesus. See also note on Lk 24:26.

These verses are carved from Peter’s speech after restoring a lame man to wholeness (Acts 3:11-26). Peter shames his fellow Israelites by pointing out their key role in Jesus’ death. He is blunt: "The author of life you
put to death;' Nevertheless, Peter notes that it was out of ignorance rather than perversity that they acted (see Lk 23:34). This can be reversed and pardoned. While it might seem as if the Israelites had thwarted God's plan, Peter notes that in the larger scheme of things God was able even through their crime to bring to fulfillment God's saving purposes announced by the prophets. Peter's closing words here exhort the listeners to turn to God (be con-verted) that their sins might be wiped away. As the story progresses, it seems that many in his audience were not at all shamed (Acts 4:1-3) but rather annoyed. Still, many of them believed (Acts 4:4).

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 4:2, 4, 7-8, 9

Psalm 4 is linked closely to Psalm 3, as an individual lament with the theme of trust in the Lord. This psalm paints a picture of a wonderful God, one who listens to us, hears our cries, and relieves our distress. Ours is a God who smiles with love on us even though we continue to need to be called to repentance. How fitting and comforting it is to be re-minded of this gracious and protecting God just after the strong accusations we just heard from Peter. We can rejoice knowing that this is still how God relates to us today. The Lord will heal us and will answer us when we call.

Lord, let your face shine on us.
When I call, answer me, O my just God, you who relieve me when I am in distress;
have pity on me, and hear my prayer!
Know that the LORD does wonders for his faithful one; the LORD will hear me when I call upon him.
O LORD, let the light of your countenance shine upon us! You put gladness into my heart.
As soon as I lie down, I fall peacefully asleep, for you alone, O LORD, bring security to my dwelling.

* [Psalm 4] An individual lament emphasizing trust in God. The petition is based upon the psalmist's vivid experience of God as savior (Ps 4:2). That experience of God is the basis for the warning to the wicked: revere God who intervenes on the side of the faithful (Ps 4:3–6). The faithful psalmist exemplifies the blessings given to the just (Ps 4:7–8).
* [4:1] For the leader: many Psalm headings contain this rubric. Its exact meaning is unknown but may signify that such Psalms once stood together in a collection of “the choirmaster,” cf. 1 Chr 15:21.
* [4:3] Love what is worthless lies: these expressions probably refer to false gods worshiped by those the psalmist is addressing.
* [4:5] Tremble: be moved deeply with fear for failing to worship the true God. The Greek translation understood the emotion to be anger, and it is so cited in Eph 4:26. Weep bitterly wail: weeping within one’s heart and wailing upon one’s bed denote sincere repentance because these actions are not done in public or with the community but in the privacy of one’s heart and one’s home. The same idiom is found in Hos 7:14.
* [4:9] In peace I will fall asleep: the last verse repeats two themes in the Psalm. One is the security of one who trusts in the true God; the other is the interior peace of those who sincerely repent (“on [their] beds”), whose sleep is not disturbed by a guilty conscience.

The Hebrew language of this psalm echoes all the "official" language of Temple worship. An individual, perhaps a priest or other Temple functionary, has been caught in a web of in-trigue, lies, fraud, and perjury. Yet he trusts in the Lord and is not disappointed. The phrase "light of your countenance" echoes the priestly blessing (see Num 6:24-26; Ps 31:16; 80:3, 7, 9). This is an admirable and inspiring prayer of trust and confidence certainly befitting the boldness of Peter in his speech and the incredible joy of the apostles instructed by the risen Jesus in today's gospel (Luke 24:35-48).

SECOND READING

The same message found in today's psalm continues in this passage from 1 John. The original context of these particular verses seems to have been initiation into the Christian community. During the initiation
rites, each person was to make a public confession of his or her sinfulness. Following that, they were reminded that Christ, whose Death and Resurrection were expiation for all sins, is our advocate. In this context, as elsewhere, the community is reminded that "to know (God) is to keep his commandments" (2:3). It is a timeless message, true for us today as it was for the early Christians: one's behavior must reflect his or her knowledge of God. To know Christ is to be obedient to his commands. Knowledge of God cannot be separated from ethical conduct. This is the price of the privilege of being called a follower of Christ.

A reading from the First Letter 2:1-5A

My children, I am writing this to you so that you may not commit sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world. The way we may be sure that we know him is to keep his commandments. Those who say, "I know him," but do not keep his commandments are liars, and the truth is not in them. But whoever keeps his word, the love of God is truly perfected in him.

* [2:1] Children: like the term “beloved,” this is an expression of pastoral love (cf. Jn 13:33; 21:5; 1 Cor 4:14). Advocate: for the use of the term, see Jn 14:16. Forgiveness of sin is assured through Christ’s intercession and expiation or “offering”; the death of Christ effected the removal of sin.

* [2:3–6] The way we may be sure: to those who claim, “I have known Christ and therefore I know him,” our author insists on not mere intellectual knowledge but obedience to God’s commandments in a life conformed to the example of Christ; this confirms our knowledge of him and is the love of God...perfected. Disparity between moral life and the commandments proves improper belief.

This is not a letter so much as it is an exhortation to Johannine believers. We do not know the author’s identity; he is not the author of the gospel. The document was written after the gospel, perhaps around A.D. 100. His intent is to strengthen the community against those who have broken away (Secessionists) and who misunderstand and misrepresent the true identity and importance of Jesus (4:2-3). They do not show love for fellow believers (2:9-11; 3:10-24; 4:7-21).

The community for which this document was intended represents a third stage of development in the Johannine community. The first phase (pre-gospel, from mid-50s to late-80s) was marked by expulsion from the synagogue (John 9:22; 16:2) and growing animosity between those who accepted Jesus as Messiah and those who didn’t. Phase two is the period in which the gospel is being written (ca. A.D. 90). Scars from expulsion are slow to heal because of continuing persecution (John 16:2-3), and antipathy toward "the Judeans" on the part of believers in Jesus grows. In reaction to the rejection of Jesus, the Johannine group develops a "high Christology" (eclipsing the humanity of Jesus), which sets the group at odds with other groups that believe in Jesus. Phase three (ca. A.D. 100, the time when the three letters of John were probably written) involves in-group fighting between various Johannine groups who differ in their understanding and interpretation of Jesus. This is the setting for reading and appreciating 1 John. What position of the Secessionists is being challenged in today’s verses? They claimed to be in communion with God despite walking in darkness (1:6ab). They boasted that they were free from sin (1:8a). They denied having sinned (1:9a). Today’s verses counter these "boasts" and may represent a primitive stage of the Johannine tradition since they identify Jesus as the "paraclete" (advocate, intercessor, or counselor). In the gospel, the Spirit/Paraclete is "another Paraclete" (John 14:16), suggesting that this was one role or function Jesus fulfilled for the community. Here the exalted Jesus is a paraclete whose function is to intercede on behalf of those who have sinned. More than that, Jesus is expiation for our sins and those of the whole world. Further, Secessionists claimed to know God but didn’t worry about not keeping the commandments. They claimed an intimate knowledge of God while at the same time saw no relationship with or even necessity to live God’s way of life proposed in the commandments. Indeed, the one commandment they ignore is the command to love one another as Jesus has loved us! This they definitely are not doing. The sacred author calls these people "liars!"
In today's gospel (Luke 24:35-48), the risen Jesus opened his disciples' minds to understand the Scriptures. The author of 1 John attempted to do the same for his followers so that they might more vigorously resist the attractive appeals of the Secessionists.

Gospel

The first words out of Jesus' mouth when he appears to the disciples are "Peace be with you." This is the greeting, shalom, Jesus had taught the disciples to say whenever they entered a house. These are words that he had spoken over and over during his public life. Peace is at the heart of his message, the epitomes of how the followers of Christ are to live. Gathered as they were, listening to the report of the disciples on the way to Emmaus, the disciples were startled and, indeed, terrified when Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst. Once he showed them proof that it was he, the disciples' terror turned to incredulous joy.

In this appearance, Jesus does three things that are integral to his life: he greets them with peace, he shares a meal, and he teaches them. He asked for food and ate it in front of them, we are told. Eating together was significant throughout Jesus' life on earth, and he shared meals many times, including at the Last Supper. Here, again, he is showing us the importance of shared meals. Then he begins to teach. He uses the Law of Moses to emphasize that he is the Messiah. He points out specifically how what the prophets and psalms taught had now been fulfilled in him. The Apostles were able to understand because they opened their hearts and minds to his message. Everything about this Gospel makes his message so clear. Christ came to fulfill the law, and now that he has risen, those who follow him are to continue preaching his message, especially his message of peace.

A reading from the Gospel of LK 24:35-48

The two disciples recounted what had taken place on the way, and how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of bread. While they were still speaking about this, he stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." But they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Then he said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have." And as he said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed, he asked them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of baked fish; he took it and ate it in front of them.

He said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And he said to them, "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

* [24:36–43, 44–49] The Gospel of Luke, like each of the other gospels (Mt 28:16–20; Mk 16:14–15; Jn 20:19–23), focuses on an important appearance of Jesus to the Twelve in which they are commissioned for their future ministry. As in Lk 24:6, 12, so in Lk 24:36, 40 there are omissions in the Western text.

This appearance of the risen Jesus to the Christian community follows the story of his appearances to the two disciples at Emmaus. The complete unit (vv. 36-53) can be divided into three scenes: (1) the appearance (vv. 36-43); (2) instruction and a final commission (vv. 44-49); (3) the ascension (vv. 50-53).

THE APPEARANCE

If we explore this appearance story in terms of alternate reality, some of its elements make fresh sense. First, the disciples exhibit multiple reactions: they are terrified and startled (v. 37), alarmed and skeptical (v. 38), overjoyed yet wondering (v. 40), and they think they see a "ghost" (Greek: "spírít; v. 34), which suggests that they recognize a new kind of experience.

They know Jesus died and was buried, but now they see him quite alive. Instead of a "ghost" they see a flesh and bone person in alternate reality (v. 39). Jesus eats fish in their presence (v. 43) not only to prove his
"reality" but to reestablish table fellowship with his followers! Clearly this is a new kind of experience of alternate reality.

NEW UNDERSTANDING
As the disciples at Emmaus so too does this community gain a new understanding of the risen Jesus they are experiencing, rooted in the Scripture. Jesus personally "opened their minds" to the fuller meaning of the words he spoke in his lifetime and offered a deeper understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. No specific passages from the Old Testament are cited. Indeed, scholars are unable to find any passages that relate to Luke's global interpretation that "the Messiah shall suffer and rise from the dead on the third day!"

In the Torah, the word "Messiah" refers only to the anointed high priest (see Lev 4:3, 5, 16; 6:15) and never to an expected 'Davidic king who is to suffer. In the Prophets, the title "Messiah" refers to a historical king that would sit on David's throne (1 Sam 24:7; 2 Sam 2:10, 38; etc.). Second Isaiah (45:1) ascribed the title to Cyrus of Persia! Only in Daniel 9:25 does one meet for the first time in the Old Testament a reference to "an anointed one, a prince" as Messiah. In the Psalms it refers mainly to David (2:2; 132:10, 17). No matter. The Father's will has been fulfilled, and only in the light of the resurrection can Scripture be fully understood.

Experiences of alternate reality opened the minds of prophets and others in the Old Testament to understanding the will of God with greater clarity and precision; the experience of the risen Jesus accomplishes the same result for those who see him.

COMMISSION
What then is the function of this specific experience of alternate reality? In today's passage, the risen Jesus commissions "the Eleven and their companions" (Luke 24:33) to preach "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" to all nations and to be "witnesses" (vv. 47-48).

Preaching forgiveness of sins is a familiar theme in Luke, but the theme of testimony is a new one that will be high-lighted repeatedly throughout Acts. These eyewitness followers now bear witness and testimony to the end of the earth concerning the suffering Messiah who was raised (e.g., Acts 4:4, 29, 31, etc.).

EMPOWERMENT
Ordinarily, the experience of alternate reality itself suffices to convince, motivate, and empower the recipient to act upon the experience. But Jesus advises his followers to "remain here in the city until you are invested with power from on high" (v. 49). This is a crucial notion in Luke's Gospel, unfortunately omitted in the selection assigned for today's liturgy. It was with the "power of the Lord" that Jesus healed people (Luke 5:17). Indeed, the "power that went forth from him" (Luke 6:19) is the very same power with which God will invest these disciples (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:5).

The fact that it is impossible to harmonize the diverse resurrection stories into a continuous narrative should give the modern believer pause. One transforming experience of the risen Jesus and its narration in a single story sufficed for our ancestors in the faith. The experience and/or the story was enlightening and empowering.

Through centuries of Christian tradition, this experience has been stylized in ritual and relived in sacrament. The Western tendency toward rationalization has often robbed liturgy, ritual, and sacrament of their potential experiential impact. Can today's reflections help restore the power?

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
- "Peace is not merely the absence of war .... Peace is the work of justice and the effect of charity"1 (CCC, 2304).
- "Earthly peace is the image and fruit of the peace of Christ, the messianic 'Prince of Peace'"1 (CCC, 2305).
- "The church, in preaching the Gospel to everyone and dispensing the treas-ures of grace in accordance with its divine mission, makes a contribution to the consolidation of peace over the whole world and helps to strengthen the foundations of communion among people and nations" (GS, 89).
The Fourth Sunday of Easter is also called Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year, the Gospel on this day is taken from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, in which Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd. All the readings reflect this aspect of Jesus' identity. In Acts, Peter explains to the Jewish leaders that the crippled person he cured was healed in Jesus' name. They had rejected and crucified Jesus, he reminds them, but God raised him up. As a result, the Risen Christ is now the means of healing and salvation for all who believe. Peter connects Jesus with the stone rejected by the builders in Psalm 118. The Jewish leaders - the builders - rejected Jesus, but God raised him up, making him the cornerstone of the building.

The Risen Christ, the Good Shepherd, is now the ultimate and exclusive source of healing and salvation for all. God's love for humanity, incarnate in Jesus, is extended to all. God's concern for the rejected stone is the essence of that love, which Jesus clearly manifested in his ministry. His disciples follow through on their master's call to bring healing and salvation to all, especially the weak, the rejected, and the needy.

A reading from ACTS 4:8-12

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said: "Leaders of the people and elders: If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a cripple, namely, by what means he was saved, then all of you and all the people of Israel should know that it was in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead; in his name this man stands before you healed. He is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved."

* [4:1] The priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees: the priests performed the temple liturgy; the temple guard was composed of Levites, whose captain ranked next after the high priest. The Sadducees, a party within Judaism at this time, rejected those doctrines, including bodily resurrection, which they believed alien to the ancient Mosaic religion. The Sadducees were drawn from priestly families and from the lay aristocracy.

* [4:11] Early Christianity applied this citation from Ps 118:22 to Jesus; cf. Mk 12:10; 1 Pt 2:7.

* [4:12] In the Roman world of Luke's day, salvation was often attributed to the emperor who was hailed as "savior" and "god." Luke, in the words of Peter, denies that deliverance comes through anyone other than Jesus.

The preceding verse 7 provides important context for understanding this part of Peter's speech in the Temple after healing the man lame from birth (Acts 3:1-10). The authorities ask Peter and John: "by what power or by what name did you do this?" It is important to notice that no one in the Bible doubts the reality of the healing. The question is always about the source of power by which this happened (see Luke 20:2). In a hierarchical society such as this one, those in authority are seriously threatened by someone who has effective power to heal. And since they did not grant permission question: "by what name;" that is, by whose authority or power are you doing this? Then Peter's answer makes complete sense: Jesus the Messiah, the Nazarene, whom YOU crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. That has to cut these authorities to the quick. This is the second time in this encounter that Peter has to explain his actions (see Acts 3:12-16), so now he adds a fresh image from the tradition about "the stone that was rejected 'by you' [words added by Peter] ... has become
the cornerstone” (Acts 4:11; Ps 118:22). The image is most appropriate in the Temple, a massive stone structure. By rejecting Jesus, the true corner stone, Temple authorities set off the collapse of the Temple's stones around them. But there is hope in Peter’s final statement: "there is no salvation through anyone else:’ Convert while there is time!

RESPONSORIAL PSALM PS 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29

The refrain from Psalm 118 echoes the theme of the stone rejected by the builders. The readings connect Jesus with the rejected stone, whom God raised up and made the cornerstone. As disciples of Jesus, we also are caught up into God’s covenant love and saving actions. The psalm invites all to give thanks to God whose covenant love (mercy, kindness) endures forever. God alone can be trusted, and we are to take refuge in him. When we are in trouble or feel lonely and rejected, God is there to save and restore us. The Lord accomplishes such wonders before our eyes. The psalm blesses all who come in the name of the Lord, asking all to give thanks to God for being our Savior and restoring us. In the context of Good Shepherd Sunday, the psalm looks to the Risen Lord, raised from death by God, as the living presence of God

The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.
It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.
It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.
I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me and have been my savior.
The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.
By the LORD has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD; we bless you from the house of the LORD.
I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me and have been my savior.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his kindness endures forever.

* [Psalm 118] A thanksgiving liturgy accompanying a procession of the king and the people into the Temple precincts. After an invocation in the form of a litany (Ps 118:1–4), the psalmist (very likely speaking in the name of the community) describes how the people confidently implored God’s help (Ps 118:5–9) when hostile peoples threatened its life (Ps 118:10–14); vividly God’s rescue is recounted (Ps 118:15–18). Then follows a possible dialogue at the Temple gates between the priests and the psalmist as the latter enters to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice (Ps 118:19–25). Finally, the priests impart their blessing (Ps 118:26–27), and the psalmist sings in gratitude (Ps 118:28–29).
* [118:22] The stone the builders rejected: a proverb: what is insignificant to human beings has become great through divine election. The “stone” may originally have meant the foundation stone or capstone of the Temple. The New Testament interpreted the verse as referring to the death and resurrection of Christ (Mt 21:42; Acts 4:11; cf. Is 28:16 and Rom 9:33; 1 Pt 2:7).

As the reader may have noticed, Psalm 118 is used repeatedly in the Easter season throughout the three years of the Lectionary. It is a very complex psalm because of its frequent adaptation to ceremonies at the Jerusalem Temple and its reinterpretation in the rabbinic and New Testament traditions. Originally it was part of an entrance liturgy on an occasion when the congregation would offer solemn thanksgiving to God. The phrase about the rejected stone has the sound of an ancient proverb. Perhaps it predated the psalm. In this context, however, the community acknowledges that it is the Lord who has granted rescue and victory. The final verse is a short dialogue between an individual member of the community with the entire community.

Reading 2 1 JN 3:1-2
God's love in Christ has recreated us and made us children of God once more. As a new creation in the Risen Christ, we are called to know and live like him, to take on his values, his mind and heart, and make them our own. The world, understood as the place where God is not known or acknowledged, "does not know us" (v. 1) because it does not know Christ. The manner of Christian living is often in opposition to the manner of the world. As a result, those who live in Christ will be misunderstood, opposed, and rejected. No matter the world's reaction, we are challenged to remember that we are God's children now.

As for our final union with God, no one knows what it will be like. What we do know is that our final union with God will be complete and total. We will see and be like God for all eternity. What is demanded of us in the "now; ... not yet" (v. 2) state that we live is the continual carrying out of the mission of the Good Shepherd, always recognizing him in the poor and rejected.

A reading from the Letter of 1 John 3:1-2
Beloved: See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

* [3:1–3] The greatest sign of God's love is the gift of his Son (Jn 3:16) that has made Christians true children of God. This relationship is a present reality and also part of the life to come; true knowledge of God will ultimately be gained, and Christians prepare themselves now by virtuous lives in imitation of the Son.
* [3:2] When it is revealed: or "when he is revealed" (the subject of the verb could be Christ).

Key to understanding these verses is a proper interpretation of the word "world" (Greek: kosmos). In the Hellenistic period (300 B.C. to A.D. 300), "world" referred to God's created universe, the earth in contrast to the sky, the inhabited earth, the place of human society, and humanity. Modern understanding and usage of the word are similar. While the Johannine community sometimes used this word to refer to God's creation John 11:9; 17:5, 24; 21:25), most of the time it refers to humanity, human beings. Specifically, in the Johannine community "world" means Israelites. "Jesus answered him [the high priest]: 'I have spoken publicly to the world. I have always taught in a synagogue or in the temple area where all the Judeans gather, and in secret I have said nothing" (John 18:20). "God so loved the world [that is, the Israelites] that he gave his only Son .. .' (John 3:16). Thus, in today's verses, John's faithful community are rightfully called children of God because they accepted Jesus (John 1:10-12), while the Secessionists (the world, or the Israelites who did not accept Jesus) refuse to recognize their fellow Israelites as children of God because the Secessionists refuse to recognize Jesus as Son. (The Greek word teknon is a technical Johannine term for describing divine sonship or daughtership; son, huios, is reserved for Jesus' relationship to God.) In the end, the fullness of the believers' identity will be revealed. They will realize that they are like God, for everyone will see God clearly. Then their knowledge of God will be similar to what Jesus claims in today's gospel (John 10:11-18): "The Father knows me and I know the Father!' The Easter season, which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus and his appearances to his friends, is a tantalizing promise of the experiential knowledge of God all believers look forward to attaining.

Alleluia JN 10:14
I am the good shepherd, says the Lord; I know my sheep, and mine know me.

GOSPEL
Biblically, shepherds were the leaders, the kings, priests, and prophets who were supposed to facilitate justice and right relationship with God and others. Many were bad shepherds, more concerned with themselves than with God or others. Jesus asserts that he is the Good Shepherd, and that he knows his sheep and they know him.

The biblical meaning of the word know is related to the intimacy of the marriage covenant, in which one knows the other so intimately that one is willing to give all for the other, even one's life. Jesus' love is inclusive of all. There are other sheep that do not yet belong to his circle of love. His mission is to search them out and manifest his care and concern for them also, so that all may be one in him. Jesus' deep love is manifested in his desire to give his life for all. Such love does not end in death, but is raised up by God so that all people can experience the reconciling power and intimacy of love. We are called to be good shepherds modeled on Jesus, so that all can experience God's love, ultimately leading to total union with our Good Shepherd forever.

A reading from the Gospel of John 10:11-18

Jesus said: "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd. This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father."

* [10:8] [Before me]: these words are omitted in many good early manuscripts and versions.
* [10:16] Other sheep: the Gentiles, possibly a reference to “God's dispersed children” of Jn 11:52 destined to be gathered into one, or “apostolic Christians” at odds with the community of the beloved disciple.
* [10:18] Power to take it up again: contrast the role of the Father as the efficient cause of the resurrection in Acts 2:24; 4:10; etc.; Rom 1:4; 4:24. Yet even here is added: This command I have received from my Father.

Nothing in John's Gospel is as simple as it seems. Today's topic, the noble shepherd, began in cycle A (10:1-10) and will conclude in cycle C (10:27-30). Central to these passages is the Mediterranean understanding of sheep and shepherds.

In today's selection, the Johannine Jesus points to himself as the noble shepherd who contrasts starkly with the hireling. Five times Jesus the noble shepherd refers to "laying down his life" for the sheep while the hireling is frightened by the mere sight of the approaching wolf and flees, leaving the sheep to the predator.

Jerome Neyrey enlarges the picture for us. His Johannine research demonstrates how John the evangelist casts Jesus as the noble shepherd (e.g., he feeds his sheep, 13:26). The Beloved Disciple is also a noble shepherd, but Peter the braggart is portrayed as the hireling who abandons the sheep to the wolf. He has miles to go before he can be elevated to the rank of shepherd.

THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

From the very first moment that he appears in the Gospel, the Beloved Disciple is clearly special. He is "the one whom Jesus loved" (13:23), who is an intimate friend of Jesus (reclining at his side, 13:23), and who obtains for Peter inside information from Jesus (13:24-26). The modern reader is stunned to see Peter dependent upon this disciple for access to Jesus!

As the story progresses, the Beloved Disciple follows Jesus closely through his moments of crises to Caiaphas' house and even to the cross. This disciple risks his very life by being so closely associated with Jesus. Peter, it is true, cut off the ear of Malchus the high priest's servant while trying to defend
Jesus in the garden, but Jesus ordered him to put away his sword (John 19:10-11). Peter did the wrong thing.  
The noble shepherd enters by the door (10:2). The Beloved Disciple, known to the high priest, entered into his house but Peter stood outside (18: 15). The noble shepherd commands the gatekeeper to open the door (10:2-3); the Beloved Disciple, known to the high priest, requests the maid who kept the door to open it (10:16). The noble shepherd calls the sheep by name and leads them (10:3-4); at the request of the Beloved Disciple, the maid led Peter in (18:16). At this point in the story, the Beloved Disciple is clearly a shepherd, Peter is only a sheep.  

**PETER**  
At the Last Supper, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples including Peter (John 13:6-11). Neyrey identifies this as a ritual that is a nonrepeatable strategy for crossing a boundary, for transforming status. Baptism is ritual, a nonrepeatable strategy that transforms a nonbeliever into a believer and carries the candidates across the boundary into the community of believers.  
Peter has already proved his loyalty to Jesus (6:67-69) and is already a member of the general circle of disciples" (see 9:28). In John 13:8, Jesus offers Peter the insider a "part" or "inheritance" with him. This is a new "clean" status, a more, perfect role (in contrast to Judas who is "not clean" 13;2, 11). But Peter does not fully understand what Jesus is doing (13 :7, 9-10). Peter's misunderstanding is more fully played out a few verses later when he insists that he will lay down his life for Jesus (13:37; compare 10:11), and Jesus predicts that Peter will rather deny him three times (13:38). Peter will be a disloyal coward (18:17, 25-27), behaving like a hireling, before his final, post-resurrection transformation into noble shepherd (21:15, 16, 17). Only then does Peter repair his lapsed loyalty with a threefold declaration of love. Indeed, after the (13 :7, 9-10) Resurrection Jesus predicts Peter's death (21:18-19) acknowledging that Peter's earlier pledge (13:38) will ultimately find fulfillment.  
Nothing in John's Gospel is as simple as it seems. This small reflection on the noble shepherd binds together for contrast some key figures: Jesus, Peter, Judas, and the Beloved Disciple. In the Johannine community, where the Beloved Disciple was highly esteemed, it must have been difficult to demonstrate that Peter and not the Beloved Disciple was the shepherd of the group. Peter’s transformation from disloyal coward to noble shepherd offers much food for thought to Americans who seem driven to put their leaders – secular and religious – through intense moral scrutiny. Peter would be the last person to throw stones  

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**  
- "The Church is ... a flock of which God Himself foretold that He would be the shepherd,1 and whose sheep, although watched over by human shepherds, are nevertheless continuously led and nourished by Christ Himself, the Good Shepherd and Prince of shepherds.,2 who gave His life for the sheep"J (LG, 6).  
- "The church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need" (LG, 8).  
- "Pity for the needy and the sick and works of charity and mutual aid intended to relieve human needs of every kind are held in highest honor by the Church" (AA, 8).
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Reading 1

In this reading from Acts we have dramatic examples of change and growth in unity. Paul, formerly a persecutor and rabid member of the Pharisee sect, has undergone a remarkable change in his conversion to Christianity. The members of the mother Church in Jerusalem did not trust his conversion and were afraid of Paul when he returned to Jerusalem. It had been a few years since Paul had become a follower of Christ and, although he changed in his belief, his theological style was still forceful and argumentative. Barnabas intervened and brought about change in the community so that they came to accept Paul. Barnabas was trusted. He was kind and forgiving, and explained that Paul had undergone a dramatic conversion and was now preaching the Good News. In fact, Barnabas became something of a mentor to Paul and helped launch him on his extraordinary ministry (Acts 15:36-39). Unity was not easy for the early Church, which was often faced with controversy. Yet, it remained one body and, as the reading tells us, grew in numbers. Paul returned to Jerusalem six times and became equal to the other Apostles.

A reading from ACTS 9:26-31

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles, and he reported to them how he had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord. He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists, but they tried to kill him. And when the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him on his way to Tarsus. The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers.

* [9:26] This visit of Paul to Jerusalem is mentioned by Paul in Gal 1:18.
* [9:31–43] In the context of the period of peace enjoyed by the community through the cessation of Paul’s activities against it, Luke introduces two traditions concerning the miraculous power exercised by Peter as he was making a tour of places where the Christian message had already been preached. The towns of Lydda, Sharon, and Joppa were populated by both Jews and Gentiles and their Christian communities may well have been mixed.

It surely strained credulity among the early followers of Jesus to believe that Saul who earlier was known to be "breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1) now comes to Jerusalem to join the company of the disciples. Who would trust him? Why should they? Barnabas (whose name means "son of encouragement;" Acts 4:36) took Saul under his wing and explained to the apostles that Saul "had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him" (9:27). This experience empowered Saul to speak out boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus.

What is noteworthy in this account is the means by which Saul is made acceptable to and trusted by the apostles: he experienced the risen Jesus in a vision, an altered state of consciousness experience, and was obviously commissioned by the risen Jesus to preach the Good News. Even though Barnabas did not learn this in a vision as Ananias had (Acts 9:10-18), Paul's sharing of the experience with Barnabas was
sufficient and convincing for Barnabas, who in turn convinced the apostles. The vision is not put to any test, nor is the visionary subjected to interrogation. People accept the visionary at his word and respond accordingly. Some, of course, do not respond favorably. The Greek speaking members of the house of Israel, the Hellenists, sought to kill Saul, who spoke and argued with them (Acts 9:29) as Stephen did earlier (Acts 6:9). While the opponents of Stephen succeeded in killing him, Saul's opponents failed. Luke contrasts Saul with Jesus, who escaped from a hostile crowd in Nazareth and fled from his home town. Saul escaped the death threats in Jerusalem and fled to his home town of Tarsus (Luke 4:28-30).

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  PS 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32

The antiphon used today, "I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people," is in keeping with the other readings today. We are reminded that, on an individual level, we are expected to praise the Lord through our words and habitual actions. We are also to remain part of the assembly of God's people, praising and living the Gospel precepts as a community.

*R I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

I will fulfill my vows before those who fear the LORD. The lowly shall eat their fill; they who seek the LORD shall praise him: "May your hearts live forever!" All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; all the families of the nations shall bow down before him. To him alone shall bow down all who sleep in the earth; before him shall bend all who go down into the dust. And to him my soul shall live; my descendants shall serve him. Let the coming generation be told of the LORD that they may proclaim to a people yet to be born the justice he has shown.

* [Psalm 22] A lament unusual in structure and in intensity of feeling. The psalmist’s present distress is contrasted with God’s past mercy in Ps 22:2–12. In Ps 22:13–22 enemies surround the psalmist. The last third is an invitation to praise God (Ps 22:23–27), becoming a universal chorus of praise (Ps 22:28–31). The Psalm is important in the New Testament. Its opening words occur on the lips of the crucified Jesus (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46), and several other verses are quoted, or at least alluded to, in the accounts of Jesus’ passion (Mt 27:35, 43; Jn 19:24)

* [22:27] The poor: originally the poor, who were dependent on God; the term (‘anawim) came to include the religious sense of “humble, pious, devout.”

* [22:30] Hebrew unclear. The translation assumes that all on earth (Ps 22:27–28) and under the earth (Ps 22:29) will worship God.

These less-familiar thanksgiving verses from the well-known lament ("My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?") reflect a liturgical setting where such sentiments of peace and assurance could comfort all of God’s people suffering affliction. Eventually God comes to the rescue, and the afflicted person cannot refrain from telling everyone about his good fortune. Just as Paul announced his rescue to the community, so does everyone so favored by God. As Jesus notes in today's gospel (John 15:8): "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples;"

Reading 2

The opening sentence of this reading summarizes so well what is expected of each follower of Christ. We are not just to give lip service to what we believe, we are to live it out in deed. It is not enough to
say that we love one another. We must take it to the next level, so to speak, and show it in our actions. God knows what is in our hearts. God's commandment is that we believe in his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another. Not one without the other. It is in living out the love we profess that we stay connected to Christ. We know this through the Holy Spirit.

John exhorts us to have confidence in the Lord because God is the source of forgiveness. No matter what negative thoughts we may have about ourselves or our actions, God knows that we are striving to live out our faith. God does not condemn us and will always hear our prayers.

A reading from the First letter of John 3:18-24
Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. Now this is how we shall know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts before him in whatever our hearts condemn, for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us.

Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us.

* [3:11–18] Love, even to the point of self-sacrifice, is the point of the commandment. The story of Cain and Abel (1Jn 3:12–15; Gn 4:1–16) presents the rivalry of two brothers, in a contrast of evil and righteousness, where envy led to murder. For Christians, proof of deliverance is love toward others, after the example of Christ. This includes concrete acts of charity, out of our material abundance.

* [3:19–24] Living a life of faith in Jesus and of Christian love assures us of abiding in God no matter what our feelings may at times tell us. Our obedience gives us confidence in prayer and trust in God’s judgment. This obedience includes our belief in Christ and love for one another.

The polemics of the Secessionists have raised doubts in the community. Their argument is: since believers already possess eternal life through faith in Jesus, behavior has no bearing on salvation. In reply, the sacred author urges that believers must pay more than lip service to love: they must demonstrate its authenticity in deeds. A believer cannot claim to belong to the truth (which is a way of describing what has been revealed in Jesus and appropriated in faith by those who have become children of God) and not love other believers. Because of the Secessionists, believers were losing self-confidence. What about their sins? Were they really forgiven? Why do their hearts condemn them? The sacred author urges them to remove all doubts. If a believer does what is pleasing to God (keep the commandments, especially to love all believers), God will do what is pleasing to them (their petitions will be answered, requests fulfilled). The Johannine commandment is to believe in Jesus and to love one another (v. 23, in contrast to the synoptic tradition Mark 12:28-31 and parallels). To believe in Jesus is to have faith in God whose Son Jesus is and who has sent Jesus to us. The believers' response is to love all and the result is intimate union with God. This emphasis on Jesus incarnate is yet another counter-offensive to the Secessionists who denied Jesus in the flesh.

In today's gospel (John 15:1-8), Jesus described the intimate union between himself and his followers with the vine imagery. The author of 1 John spells out the behavior required to maintain this union. What else is needed?

Alleluia JN 15:4A, 5B
Remain in me as I remain in you, says the Lord. Whoever remains in me will bear much fruit.
This Gospel about the vine and branches is rich with meaning and levels of analogy. At the heart of it, John shows the cost of Church unity and the intimacy and interconnectedness of her members. Jesus is the vine - that is, the main stem, also called the vinestock - that provides life and sustenance to the whole plant. Apart from the vine we can do nothing. If we stay connected, however, we will produce abundant fruit. We will be part of the source of life because we share the same lifeblood that flows through the interconnected veins and arteries. Jesus is the heart and gives us life and strength. We are warned, however, that those who become separated will wither and die. Like rejected branches, they are thrown into the fire.

Just as vines need to be pruned in order to remain as fruitful as possible, so does the Church. For example, practices or organizations that do not serve the life of the whole Church may be ended or redirected. Pruning is important for the health of the vine, but it is not enough. A vine must be nurtured, fed, and watered. Jesus teaches that it is his word that nourishes all those connected to the vine. At the beginning of the reading he reassures the disciples that they are not in danger of pruning because they are already pruned due to hearing the word.

At the end of the reading Jesus makes the connection between following his teachings and glorifying the Father. If you do what he teaches, you can ask in confidence for what you need. If you follow him, you will bear much fruit. As members of the vine, we are called to pu

A reading from the Gospel of John 15:1-8

Jesus said to his disciples: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit. You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you. Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

* [15:1–16:4] Discourse on the union of Jesus with his disciples. His words become a monologue and go beyond the immediate crisis of the departure of Jesus.
* [15:1–17] Like Jn 10:1–5, this passage resembles a parable. Israel is spoken of as a vineyard at Is 5:1–7; Mt 21:33–46 and as a vine at Ps 80:9–17; Jer 2:21; Ez 15:2; 17:5–10; 19:10; Hos 10:1. The identification of the vine as the Son of Man in Ps 80:15 and Wisdom’s description of herself as a vine in Sir 24:17 are further background for portrayal of Jesus by this figure. There may be secondary eucharistic symbolism here; cf. Mk 14:25, “the fruit of the vine.”
* [15:2] Takes away, prunes: in Greek there is a play on two related verbs.

In the Mediterranean world, even God needs honor! "My Father has been honored [= glorified] in this;" says Jesus, "in your bearing much fruit and becoming my disciples" (John 15:8). The social reality that stands behind this statement is the Mediterranean institution of patronage.

PATRONAGE

In societies where central government is weak and ineffective, people have to look after their own needs. Most often they help each other by bartering or trading. When social equals are unable to help each other, they must seek someone with greater means who is expected to play the role of patron.
A patron freely chooses clients and serves them by giving them goods they are unable to obtain by their own efforts or on terms better than they could obtain. The people of Israel viewed and behaved toward their God as their patron. The people considered themselves clients, and key people like prophets were considered brokers. In the New Testament world, Jesus clearly presents himself as a broker of God the patron. who heals, sends rain, and bestows other favors upon his clients.

VINE IMAGERY

The imagery of "remaining in" Jesus the "true" vine (vv. 4-7) which has replaced the former vine, Israel (see Isa 5:1-7), reflects the normal and expected Middle Eastern "solidarity" between client and patron, even to the point of the client's self-effacement. The client's bond with the patron must be single-minded and single-hearted. Life itself depends upon it.

BEARING FRUIT

On a vine, every living branch is expected to bear fruit. If a branch does not bear fruit, it is considered to be dead despite other signs of life and is pruned away (v. 2). It is too simplistic to interpret "bearing fruit" as a reference to performing good works and leading an exemplary life. The responsible vine dresser will not allow a non-fruit-bearing branch to sap precious life from the vine.

God the patron is honored when clients draw their life from Jesus the vine who is also the patron's broker. Sustaining life is one of the patron's major gifts to the client. The client must accept and embrace the gift of life and "bear fruit!" The meaning of this phrase will become clear shortly.

BECOMING DISCIPLES

A client can never repay the munificence of a patron. Instead, a grateful client publicizes the patron's generosity far and wide. This is how the patron's honor is proclaimed, maintained, and even augmented. The broker shares in this honor, too, because the broker benefits every time the patron benefits and vice-versa. If God the patron's clients become disciples of Jesus his broker, God the patron benefits in double measure. The number of those who proclaim God's honor continues to grow.

Now we can begin to understand the meaning of "bearing fruit!" Jesus proposes that ultimately this tri-personal (patron-broker-client) symbiotic relationship should blossom into friendship (v. 15) characterized by love demonstrated in the willingness to lay down one's life for one's friends. Jesus himself is the model of such loving friendship.

But the evangelist is writing these words to Christians living in the last decade of the first century, under Roman domination, and threatened by political harassment and persecution. He wishes to encourage and strengthen fearful believers. He recalls Jesus' words "if they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (15:20) and his advice that "apart from me you can do nothing" (15:5). Readers will also remember Jesus' earlier comment: "if [ a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies], it produces much fruit" (John 12:24).

How does one honor God by bearing much fruit? Pilate consented to Jesus' execution when Jesus' enemies warned that any other decision would indicate that "you are not Caesar's friend" (John 19:12). In the vine passage, John reminds his readers that it is more important to remain Jesus' friend, and through that God's friend, than to preserve one's life.

What can American believers learn from the Mediterranean style of solidarity (vine and branches) lived by their ancestors in the faith?

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Today, there is an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbor of every individual, without exception, and to take positive steps to help a neighbor whom we encounter" (GS, 27).
- "In his preaching he clearly described an obligation on the part of the daughters and sons of God to treat each other as sisters and brothers. In his prayer he asked that all his followers should be one" (GS, 32).
- "Your word is a lamp to my feet, / a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105).
"Christ the Lord ... commanded the apostles to preach (the Gospel) to everyone as the source of all saving truth and moral law, communicating God's gift to them"1 (DV, 7).
Sixth Sunday of Easter

FIRST READING

In an amazing sequence of events, the doors of the Chosen People are opened to Gentiles as well as to Jews. Two messengers came to Peter as he was preaching and invited him to go with them to the house of Cornelius. This was very significant, since Cornelius was a Roman soldier, not a Jew. Cornelius was a good man, however, and his whole household was God-fearing. When Peter entered the house, Cornelius knelt before him in reverence. Peter, however, insisted that Cornelius stand, saying that he himself was also human, not a god.

In what transpired, Peter saw that God accepts not only Jews but all nations who act uprightly or lead God-fearing lives. Not only did Peter sense this but the Holy Spirit made it perfectly clear. While Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit came upon everyone there, uncircumcised Gentiles included. It must have been quite a joyous sight as the whole household praised God and spoke in tongues. Peter immediately ordered that these Gentiles could be baptized, since God clearly showed that all were welcome in the name of Jesus Christ.


When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, paid him homage. Peter, however, raised him up, saying, “Get up. I myself am also a human being.” Then Peter proceeded to speak and said, “In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.” While Peter was still speaking these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word. The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit even as we have?” He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

* [10:24–27] So impressed is Cornelius with the apparition that he invites close personal friends to join him in his meeting with Peter. But his understanding of the person he is about to meet is not devoid of superstition, suggested by his falling down before him. For a similar experience of Paul and Barnabas, see Acts 14:11–18.
* [10:34–35] The revelation of God’s choice of Israel to be the people of God did not mean he withheld the divine favor from other people.
* [10:44] Just as the Jewish Christians received the gift of the Spirit, so too do the Gentiles.

Once again, as happens repeatedly in Acts of the Apostles, ecstatic trance experiences help the young community of believers in Jesus to arrive at radically new understandings. Our ancestors in the faith understood God in general under the image of a patron, who in the Mediterranean world is a person with surplus who is obligated to distribute to those in need. The patron, however, is free to select his clients and need not attend to degree of need, etc. Thus, the patron is known to treat clients "as if" they were blood relatives, that is, with favoritism and partiality. This is what Paul writes when speaking of God's "new" behavior toward non-Israelites compared with the chosen people: "As it is written, / I loved Jacob I but hated Esau" (Rom 9: 13 citing Mal 1 :2-3; the meaning of the sentence is not positive hate, but preference: I preferred Jacob to Esau).

Only a direct message from God in an altered state of consciousness experience could work such a dramatic change in the understanding of God for Peter or anyone else in this cultural tradition (see Acts 10:9-16, 34).

In this entire Cornelius episode (Acts 10: 1-11: 18), a variety of people experience altered states of consciousness in which they receive communication or new understanding from God or messengers from God. In the biblical tradition, this was God's customary way of communicating with the chosen people (see 1 Sam 3:1). As Peter was speaking the Spirit fell upon the non-Israelites, who began speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Glossolalia is patterned speech and not the ability to speak foreign languages. While human beings perform glossolalia, everyone knows it is the spirit world that inspires and causes it. Thus, Peter's associates (members of the house of Israel who believe in Jesus) know that these non-Israelites are not circumcised. From this point of view, therefore, they cannot be pleasing to God. But if the Spirit chose to fall on them and gift them, how could anyone refuse them full membership into the community of those who believed in Jesus? They were baptized immediately.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 98:1, 2–3, 3–4)

This psalm continues the theme of God's love for all peoples. God's saving power is revealed to all nations. A new song can be sung, for the Lord has revealed his salvation. He has come to the house of Israel; however, "all the ends of the earth have seen / the salvation by our God" (98:3). Surely, this universal gift is worthy of the song of praise we offer. Surely this is a wonderful thing for us to sing about.

**The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.**

Sing to the **LORD** a new song,
for he has done wondrous deeds;
His right hand has won victory for him,
his holy arm.

The **LORD** has made his salvation known:
in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice.
He has remembered his kindness and his faithfulness
toward the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation by our God.
Sing joyfully to the LORD, all you lands;
break into song; sing praise.

* [Psalm 98] A hymn, similar to Ps 96, extolling God for Israel’s victory (Ps 98:1–3). All nations (Ps 98:4–6) and even inanimate nature (Ps 98:7–8) are summoned to welcome God’s coming to rule over the world (Ps 98:9).

This psalm acclaims YHWH as king over the universe. YHWH has acted graciously toward Israel, so it should respond with praise (in Temple liturgy, of course) in order that all the ends of the earth might witness God’s rescue of the chosen people. The key gifts of God are salvation and justice or righteousness, and kindness and loyalty or faithfulness.

SECOND READING

The message from John in this brief pericope couldn’t be clearer or more direct. God is love. Everything flows from him. The focus is on the second part of the double commandment. We are to love God and we are to love our neighbor. We are to love one another because of God’s love. If we do not love one another, John tells us, we do not know God. In fact, love is what distinguishes those who know God from those who don’t. We are reminded of just how great God’s love for us is, as he sent his only Son. Love is clearly God’s initiative, and while God’s love is revealed to Christians in Jesus, the Christian community, which now has life through that love, also reveals God’s love (John 5:26; 6:57).

A reading from the first Letter of Saint John (4:7–10)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God;
everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.
Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love.
In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world
so that we might have life through him.
In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us
and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.

* [4:7–12] Love as we share in it testifies to the nature of God and to his presence in our lives. One who loves shows that one is a child of God and knows God, for God’s very being is love; one without love is without God. The revelation of the nature of God’s love is found in the free gift of his Son to us, so that we may share life with God and be delivered from our sins. The love we have for one another must be of the same sort: authentic, merciful; this unique Christian love is our proof that we know God and can “see” the invisible God.

Once again it is important to keep the Secessionists in mind in order to properly interpret these verses. The Secessionists, who were once Johannine Christians and whose vocabulary also included "love:' had a
different understanding of what God did in Jesus. It is probably fair to say that they believed God's love for human beings (which existed from eternity) became manifest in the incarnation. The Johannine Christians would insist that the incarnation also includes the life and death of Jesus, something the Secessionists denied. Likely, the Secessionists considered salvation a fait accompli, there was nothing more that human beings need do. The Johannine group of believers insisted that behavior was important, notably loving one another. Recall that in the Mediterranean world, love does not involve affection and sentiment as much as it involves group-glue, the determination to keep the community together, whole, and integral.

The familiar and oft-repeated phrase "God is love" in its context here communicates three things: that God has an only beloved Son; that God freely willed to share this Son - even to the point of death; that God did this for the forgiveness of our sins that we might have life through Jesus' salvific deed. The gospel for this Sunday (John 15:9-17) resonates very well with this second reading. Love that is willing to die for one's friends has always been admired. To accept that opportunity when it presents itself is a challenge all believers hope they can recognize and accept.

**ALLELUIA (Jn 14:23)**

Whoever loves me will keep my word, says the Lord, and my Father will love him and we will come to him.

**GOSPEL**

Having just taught his disciples that they are connected to him and to each other as branches on the vine, Jesus now deepens the relationship. He preaches the importance of love, the centrality of love, and the interconnectedness that comes about as a result of love. He has proved his love by his death, and his love provides not just the example but also the very foundation for love among his followers. In verse 9, he reminds them of the Father's love for his Son, which is the model of his love for his disciples: "As the Father loves me, so I also love you." We remain in his love by keeping his commandments, just as Jesus keeps his Father's commands.

The doctrine in this reading is, of course, the same as in the second. Christian love is traced to the Father as its source. It is expressed in the redemption of Jesus and then in the mission of all his followers who are to love one another as God loves us. This passage also points to the upward direction of obedience. Jesus' response to the love of the Father is lived out in his obedience to the Father's commands. Likewise, Jesus' followers are to respond to his love through obedience to his commands. To make the point dramatically clear, to teach unmistakably what it means to love, Jesus reminds them of the ultimate sign of love: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13). Thus, love is more than a feeling. Love is action. Jesus' standard of perfection makes that perfectly clear. In John 8:31-33, Jesus has taught the disciples about the transition from being a slave to being free. Slaves do not belong to the family permanently; they will be set free by the truth that he brings. Thus, he will no longer call his disciples slaves. He has taught them what the father taught him. Unlike slaves, they know what the master is doing. They are now friends, rather than slaves. This reading ends with the same straightforward imperative that the previous reading begins, "Love one another" (15:17).

**+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John (15:9–17)**

Jesus said to his disciples: “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.”
No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing.

I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.

It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.

This I command you: love one another.”

John’s Gospel is permeated with the word “love.” On today’s eight verses the word occurs eight times! Of particular interest is Jesus’ advice that his followers “love one another” (vv. 12-17) “as I love you” (v. 12). How did our Mediterranean ancestors in the faith understand this word?

**LOVE = ATTACHMENT**

In the Mediterranean world, affection is not central to the concept of love. It may be present, but more often than not it isn’t. The key element in the Mediterranean understanding of love is attachment and bonding, particularly to the group. Joshua exhorts the people “to love the Lord your God . . . and to hold fast to him” (Josh 22:5). "Solomon clung to these [his foreign wives] in love" (1 Kgs 11:2).

The familiar quotation “therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:23) is particularly enlightening in understanding group attachment. According to Middle Eastern custom, a married son continues to live with his father and mother in his father’s house. “Leaving” father and mother therefore means dis-attaching himself from them in order to attach himself to his wife. While he “cleaves” to his wife, however, his primary group attachment is still to his father and broth-ers and the household.

John develops the theme of attachment (= love) throughout his Gospel. For instance, God was so attached to humanity that he sent his only Son (3:16) to whom also God is very attached (17:24-26). In the series of challenges and ripostes exchanged between Jesus and the Pharisees Jesus questions their claim that God is their Father: “If God were your Father, you would love me for I came from God.”

Rephrased, Jesus; objection is that if his opponents were attached to him who came from God it would be clear that they are indeed attached to the Father. But since they are not attached to Jesus they cannot be attached to the Father. Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus repeatedly invites and exhorts his disciples to be attached to him. (14:15, 21, 23, 24, 21…15-17ª.

**LOVE INVOLVES DOING**

Generally speaking, “being” is the primary preference in the Middle Eastern value system. This means that Middle Easterners generally opt for spontaneous response to the stimulus of the moment, like children in the market place who should respond immediately to cues to dance or mourn (Matt. 11:16-
17) People who don’t respond to appropriately are considered uncooperative, which definitely does not promote and solidify group attachment.

In this same value system, “doing,” that is calculated and planned activity, is a secondary option. In today’s passage, Jesus urges the disciples to “keep [= do] my commandments” (v. 10) and “do what I command you” (v. 14). A survey of any of the Gospels reveals that he repeats this exhortation rather frequently. Why is this necessary?

In most cultures, the primary value orientation represents male choices. For females in the culture, the options are reversed. For males in the Mediterranean world, the values that regulate activity are “being” and then “doing.” For females, the order is “doing,” then “being.”

In his ministry, Jesus sought to invert the order of these values according to the needs of the moment. Martha who was quite appropriately “doing” (primary orientation for Mediterranean women) was directed to imitate Mary’s “being” (spontaneous response to Jesus at the moment, Luke 10:38-42). Here in John 15 addressing his (presumably) male disciples, Jesus says “being” (love attachment to him and the Father) is not enough. They must strive to “do” (keep the commandments; do what I command you).

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the prophets had to prod Israel to similar behavior. The nation believed that simply “being chosen” by God sufficed. This conferred honorable status. What else was needed? Each prophet challenged the people to “keep” the covenant, to “obey” the commandments, to “perform deeds of justice and charity,” because this was not the normal cultural script.

The preference for goal-setting and planned activity in Western culture and the corresponding difficulty in “hanging loose” therefore sounds like it is just what the prophets and Jesus were after. If they had to preach to Americans today, what would the message be?

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

■ “This love is not something reserved for important matters, but must be exercised above all in the ordinary circumstances of daily life” (GS, 38).

■ “Charity is love received and given .... Its source is the wellspring of the Father's love for the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Love comes down from the Son. It is creative love, through which we have our being; it is redemptive love, through which we are recreated. Love is revealed and made present by Christ and 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.' Z. As the objects of God's love, men and women become subjects of charity, they are called to make themselves instruments of grace, so as to pour forth God's charity and to weave networks of charity” (CIV, 5).

■ “God, who has a parent's care for all of us, desired that all men and women should form one family and deal with each other as brothers and sisters” (GS, 24).
The Ascension of the Lord

Reading 1

Jesus' Ascension frames Luke's two-volume work. Luke ends his Gospel account and begins Acts with the Ascension narrative. The Ascension functions differently in each work. In the Gospel, it gives closure to Jesus' ministry. In Acts, it signals the beginning of the disciples' ministry. The passage begins with the prologue to Theophilus, giving the Ascension a forty-day time frame; in the Gospel it takes place late on Easter Sunday. Luke uses the biblical time frame of forty days to indicate a period of transition as the disciples are prepared to receive the Spirit, and begin their ministry. The disciples' focus on restoring "the kingdom to Israel" is readily dismissed by Jesus as he instructs them to await the Spirit's power. This will signal the beginning of their ministry as witnesses to the Risen Lord in Jerusalem and, from there, to the entire world. As Jesus is lifted up from them, they fix their gaze to the heavens, longing for Jesus. Reprimanded for gazing at the heavens, they are assured that he will return just as he left. Their focus should now be on preparing to welcome the Spirit and begin their ministry. From now on, the Spirit will guide and support them in their ministry as they go about loving others the way Jesus loved them.

A reading from ACTS 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for "the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." When they had gathered together they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He answered them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven."
the ascension marks the end of the appearances of Jesus except for the extraordinary appearance to Paul. With regard to Luke’s understanding of salvation history, the ascension also marks the end of the time of Jesus (Lk 24:50–53) and signals the beginning of the time of the church.

* [1:4] The promise of the Father: the holy Spirit, as is clear from the next verse. This gift of the Spirit was first promised in Jesus’ final instructions to his chosen witnesses in Luke’s gospel (Lk 24:49) and formed part of the continuing instructions of the risen Jesus on the kingdom of God, of which Luke speaks in Acts 1:3.

* [1:6] The question of the disciples implies that in believing Jesus to be the Christ (see note on Lk 2:11) they had expected him to be a political leader who would restore self-rule to Israel during his historical ministry. When this had not taken place, they ask if it is to take place at this time, the period of the church.

* [1:7] This verse echoes the tradition that the precise time of the parousia is not revealed to human beings; cf. Mk 13:32; 1 Thes 5:1–3.

* [1:8] Just as Jerusalem was the city of destiny in the Gospel of Luke (the place where salvation was accomplished), so here at the beginning of Acts, Jerusalem occupies a central position. It is the starting point for the mission of the Christian disciples to “the ends of the earth,” the place where the apostles were situated and the doctrinal focal point in the early days of the community (Acts 15:2, 6). The ends of the earth: for Luke, this means Rome.

* [1:18] Luke records a popular tradition about the death of Judas that differs from the one in Mt 27:5, according to which Judas hanged himself. Here, although the text is not certain, Judas is depicted as purchasing a piece of property with the betrayal money and being killed on it in a fall.

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Luke alone among the New Testament authors (here and in his gospel for this day, 24:46-53) reports Jesus’ ascension as an actual visible event that took place near Bethany (Gospel) on the Mount of Olives (Acts) and was observed by "witnesses:' that is, the apostles. The event takes place in an altered state of consciousness; it is a trance experience. The Greek word in verse 10 (gazing intently at the sky) is the word Luke uses in Acts to identify a trance experience (see e.g. Acts 7:55, etc).

There are two kinds of trance experiences: individual and group. This is a group type of experience (recall 1 Cor 15:6 where Jesus appeared to more than five hundred at one time). According to anthropological and psychiatric studies it is not uncommon for those who have lost loved ones in death to have vivid experiences of them for up to five years after the event, and sometimes longer. While such experiences are especially common at the burial place, they can occur elsewhere, too.

Where do the deceased go at death? To use nontheological language, they go to alternate reality. All of reality consists of two parts: the one in which human beings presently live (called the world, ordinary reality, or culturally "normal" reality) and the one to which human beings go after they die to join God and the spirit world (called alternate reality or in theological terms "heaven;' "with God;' "the world to come;' and the like). Cultures who hold this understanding of reality know that there is an entryway between the two parts of reality: ordinary and alternate. It is a hole or an opening or a crack or a door between the earth and sky which a person must find in order to go from one realm to the other.

According to the sacred traditions of many cultures, that hole or crack or door is located over the city in which is located the earthly abode of the deity. In Greek tradition, the hole was over Delphi. In the Israelite tradition, the hole is over Jerusalem. Thus, Jesus could not likely have ascended in Galilee (Matt 28:16), for the hole is not located there. Nor does Matthew say that. He says only that Jesus met the disciples there. Luke places the ascension at the most plausible place, where the passageway between this world and the sky is located in Israelite tradition, namely in the environs of Jerusalem. The two men in white robes are typical of Luke and are typical representative beings from alternate reality.

As one can expect in a trance experience, the apostles receive instruction from the risen Jesus just before he departs their company (stay in Jerusalem, wait for the Spirit, bear witness to the ends of the earth). The two messengers from alternate reality conclude the trance experience by promising them that Jesus will return.
RESPONSORIAL PSALM  PS 47:2-3,  6-7,  8-9

The psalm highlights God's enthronement as king over all the nations, a most fitting psalm to celebrate Jesus' Ascension as he is lifted up and made king over all creation. Shouts of joy and blasts of the trumpet rise from the people as they acknowledge and celebrate God, "the great king over all the earth" (v. 3). The psalm's setting envisions the ark, symbol of God's presence, being processed into the Temple and taking its place in the Temple throne room. The Ascension celebrates the lifting up of the Risen Christ to the heavenly throne as king of all creation. For the psalmist, the only fitting response to such a glorious event is to "sing praise ... sing hymns of praise" (vv. 7-8).

God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord. All you peoples, clap your hands, shout to God with cries of gladness, For the LORD, the Most High, the awesome, is the great king over all the earth. God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy; the LORD, amid trumpet blasts. Sing praise to God, sing praise; sing praise to our king, sing praise. For king of all the earth is God; sing hymns of praise. God reigns over the nations, God sits upon his holy throne.

This enthronement psalm was sung in the Temple annually at the New Year feast when the Ark of the Lord was installed anew in its place. This symbolized the Lord's definitive enthronement and was met with shouts of joy and blasts on the shofar. Non-Israelites who witnessed this event recognized the superiority of Israel's God over others. Though originating in a limited nationalistic perspective, the psalm's conclusion finds its fulfillment in the first reading and the gospel (Mark 16:15-20) for today's liturgy.

Second Reading

Both readings from Ephesians speak of God lifting up Jesus, both from death and in the Ascension, where the Risen Christ is now seated at the right hand of God. Being so exalted, God "put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things" (1:22). Both readings affirm that Jesus, now exalted, "fills all things" (1:23; 4:10).

As disciples, we have been filled with Christ's Spirit, who has showered upon all a diversity of gifts that we may more effectively witness to Jesus, and carry on the ministry that he initiated. The Spirit empowers us to live according to Jesus' standards. Both readings offer guidance on how we are to act and live. We witness to the Risen Lord both in our actions and with our words, continuing Jesus' ministry of loving others as he loved us. As we work to build up the Body of Christ, we strive for unity among all, waiting in hope for the day when we will be fully united with Christ.

A reading from the Letter to the EPHESIANS 4:1-13 OR 4:1-7, 11-13

Brothers and sisters, I, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore, it says: He ascended on high and took prisoners captive; he gave gifts to men. What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended into the lower regions of the earth? The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the
unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature to manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ.

* [4:1–16] A general plea for unity in the church. Christians have been fashioned through the Spirit into a single harmonious religious community (one body, Eph 4:4, 12; cf. Eph 4:16), belonging to a single Lord (in contrast to the many gods of the pagan world), and by one way of salvation through faith, brought about especially by the significance of baptism (Eph 4:1–6; cf. Rom 6:1–11). But Christian unity is more than adherence to a common belief. It is manifested in the exalted Christ's gifts to individuals to serve so as to make the community more Christlike (Eph 4:11–16). This teaching on Christ as the source of the gifts is introduced in Eph 4:8 by a citation of Ps 68:18, which depicts Yahweh triumphantly leading Israel to salvation in Jerusalem. It is here understood of Christ, ascending above all the heavens, the head of the church; through his redemptive death, resurrection, and ascension he has become the source of the church's spiritual gifts. The "descent" of Christ (Eph 4:9–10) refers more probably to the incarnation (cf. Phil 2:6–8) than to Christ's presence after his death in the world of the dead (cf. 1 Pt 3:19).

* [4:4–6] The "seven unities" (church, Spirit, hope; Lord, faith in Christ [Eph 1:13], baptism; one God) reflect the triune structure of later creeds in reverse.

* [4:8–10] While the emphasis is on an ascension and gift-giving by Christ, there is also a reference in taking prisoners captive to the aeons and powers mentioned at Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12.


* [4:12] The ministerial leaders in Eph 4:11 are to equip the whole people of God for their work of ministry.

* [4:13] Mature manhood: literally, "a perfect man" (cf. Col 1:28), possibly the "one new person" of Eph 2:15, though there anthrōpos suggests humanity, while here anēris the term for male. This personage becomes visible in the church's growing to its fullness in the unity of those who believe in Christ.

After reflecting upon the unity of the Church in vv. 3-6, the sacred author considers the diversity of Church offices within this body in vv. 7-13. He cites Ps 68:19 in a form that does not reflect either the Hebrew or the Greek version. The biblical text says, 'you [Lord God] received men as gifts;' while the citation in Eph 4:8 says "he [Jesus] gave gifts to men". Scholars believe that the sacred author is quoting from a collection of testimonies (testimonia) which were gathered together to help preachers as they presented the community's ongoing and developing understanding of Jesus raised and ascended. Certain passages of the Old Testament quite in contrast to their original meaning were interpreted as "testimonies" to gospel facts, or as somehow reflecting the intention of God which was fulfilled in those facts. Psalm 68 is considered a testimony to the ascension of Jesus. Clearly biblical texts are rearranged and recast in such a way as to present new information and thereby serve to construct theology for the Messianist community. The idea in Ephesians is that Jesus risen and now ascended is the one who bestows gifts upon the Church.

The "gifts" of Ps 68:19 are interpreted here as offices within the Church. Apostles and prophets belong to the period of foundation of the Church (see Eph 2:20), that is, they belong to a period now past. These were succeeded by evangelists, shepherds, and teachers which are ministries prominent in the Church of the letter-writer (after Paul's death). Their task is to guide the holy ones toward stronger unity of belief, deeper knowledge of Jesus, and maturity measuring up to "the full stature of Christ."

Today's gospel (Mark 16:15-20) is drawn from the "longer ending" of Mark which is likely based on Luke 24:50-51 and Acts 1:9-11. It reports the event of the ascension of Jesus, while the import of this event for the believing community is spelled out in Ephesians. All the readings offer an opportunity for modern believers to learn and appreciate how our ancestors in the faith used their scriptural traditions to resolve questions about their beliefs. While modern approaches to interpreting the Bible do not follow this path any longer, they would benefit from learning how the ancients used in-sights thus gained to strengthen their faith.
Alleluia MT 28:19A, 20B
Go and teach all nations, says the Lord; I am with you always, until the end of the world.

Gospel

This longer ending added to the Gospel according to Mark references similar events from accounts of the Gospel, or even earlier traditions. The Ascension links to the Gospel according to Luke, while Jesus' great commission to his disciples references the ending of the Gospel according to Matthew. The Gospel according to Mark surfaces in the assertion that "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned" (v. 16). This longer ending was probably added after Mark's original text was completed. Even though Mark's original text ended with chapter 16:8, this later addition is still considered to be the inspired Word of God.

While the Ascension is the key focus of the First Reading from Acts, Mark's account of the Gospel clearly mentions Jesus taking "his seat at the right hand of God" (v. 19). Jesus is honored by God and given authority over all things. Mark speaks of the many signs that accompany the disciples, seeing them as a confirmation of the word they are proclaiming. They are to "go into the whole world and ... to every creature" (v. 15) proclaiming the Good News. Clear signs will witness to the validity of their testimony. These signs highlight the Spirit’s power to unite, heal, and establish harmony. Having received from the Spirit the ability to confront all sorts of dangers, the disciples are assured that they are not alone, that the "Lord worked with them" (v. 20).

A reading from the Gospel of Mark 16:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

* [16:9–20] This passage, termed the Longer Ending to the Marcan gospel by comparison with a much briefer conclusion found in some less important manuscripts, has traditionally been accepted as a canonical part of the gospel and was defined as such by the Council of Trent. Early citations of it by the Fathers indicate that it was composed by the second century, although vocabulary and style indicate that it was written by someone other than Mark. It is a general resume of the material concerning the appearances of the risen Jesus, reflecting, in particular, traditions found in Lk 24 and Jn 20.

• Mark 16:14: The signs which accompany the announcement of the Good News. Jesus appears to the eleven disciples and reproaches them for not believing the persons who had seen Him resurrected. They did not believe Mary Magdalene (Mk 16:11), nor the two disciples on the road out in the country (Mk 16:13). Several times, Mark refers to the resistance of the disciples to believing the witness of those who experienced the resurrection of Jesus. Why does Mark insist so much on the lack of faith of the disciples? Probably to teach two things: First, that faith in Jesus goes through faith in persons who give witness. Second, that no one should be discouraged when there is doubt in the heart. Even the eleven disciples doubted!

• Mark 16:15-18: The mission to announce the Good News to the whole world. After having criticized the lack of faith of the disciples, Jesus confers their mission to them: “Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned”. To those who had the courage to believe in the Good News and who are baptized, Jesus promises the following signs: they will cast out devils, they will speak new languages, they will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed if they
drink deadly poison, and they will lay their hands on the sick who will recover. This happens even today. To cast
devils is to fight against the force of evil which destroys life. The life of many people improves because they
entered into the community and have begun to live the Good News of the presence of God in their life, to speak
new languages: it means to begin to communicate with others in a new way. Sometimes we meet a person whom
we have never seen before, and we care deeply for them and their situation, even though we don't know them
well. This happens because we speak the same language, the language of love.
- deadly poison will not harm them: there are many things that poison life together in community. There is gossip
which destroys the relationship between persons. The one who lives in the presence of God does not participate in
these things and is able to not be disturbed by this terrible poison.
- they cure the sick. Wherever there is a clear and lively knowledge of God's presence, there is also a special care
given to the excluded and marginalized, especially the sick. What can help cure is that the person feels accepted
and loved.
• Mark 16:19-20: Through the community, Jesus continues His mission. Jesus Himself, who lives in Palestine and
accepts the poor of His time, revealing the love of the Father to them, continues to be alive in our midst in our
community. Through us, He wants to continue His mission to reveal the Good News of God's love to the poor. Even
up to this time the resurrection takes place, and it impels us to sing: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ,
who will separate us?" No power of this world is capable of neutralizing the force that comes from faith in the
Resurrection (Rm 8:35-39). A community which wants to be a witness of the Resurrection should be a sign of life
and should struggle against the forces of death in such a way that the world may be a favorable place for life.
Above all, in parts of the world such as Latin America and the Middle East, where the life of people is in danger
because of the system of death which has become common there, the communities should be a living proof of the
hope which overcomes the world without fear of being happy!

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
■ "Following the Lord's ascension to the glory of the Father, and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the
perfect glorification of God and the salvation of man comes about primarily through the celebration of
the liturgy"1 (DPPL, 55).
■ "To look upon the face of Christ, to recognize its mystery amid the daily events and the sufferings of
his human life, and then to grasp the divine splendor definitively revealed in the Risen Lord, seated in
glory at the right hand of the Father: this is the task of every follower of Christ and therefore the task of
each one of us" (RVM, 9).
■ "The church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has
its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit"2 (AG, 2).
Pentecost Sunday

Reading 1

In Luke’s account of the event of Pentecost, the only account we have in our Scriptures, we hear more about the response of the people who witnessed the event than about the event itself. Earlier, the disciples had chosen Matthias to fill out the symbolic number of twelve patriarchs who represented people of Israel. On the day of Pentecost, we hear that there were Jews from "every nation under heaven," in other words, people representing the ends of the earth. Although the account of the coming of the Spirit is spare, it is laden with symbolism. Luke indicates that the 120 people mentioned earlier (1:15) were gathered as a community. The imagery of the wind and the fire remind us of Exodus 19:18, when God came in fire; Ezekiel 37:9, where the spirit came from the four winds; and 2 Samuel 22:8-16, when God appears with all the forces of nature. In recording the detail that "tongues as of fire" rested on the gathered disciples, Luke is emphasizing the fact that the Spirit came to each individual in the community.

In the Old Testament, being filled with the Spirit of God indicated that an individual was called to prophecy. In this experience it was an entire community who received the Spirit and began to speak the prophetic word so that all could understand it.

A reading from ACTS 2:1-11

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astonished, and in amazement they asked, "Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his native language? We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God."

* [2:1–41] Luke’s pentecostal narrative consists of an introduction (Acts 2:1–13), a speech ascribed to Peter declaring the resurrection of Jesus and its messianic significance (Acts 2:14–36), and a favorable response from the audience (Acts 2:37–41). It is likely that the narrative telescopes events that took place over a period of time and on a less dramatic scale. The Twelve were not originally in a position to proclaim publicly the messianic office of Jesus without incurring immediate reprisal from those religious authorities in Jerusalem who had brought about Jesus’ death precisely to stem the rising tide in his favor.

* [2:2] There came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind: wind and spirit are associated in Jn 3:8. The sound of a great rush of wind would herald a new action of God in the history of salvation.
Luke reports yet another group type trance experience in which each member of the group becomes aware of being filled by a holy spirit. Belief in spirits was common in the ancient world, and a variety was recognized: good, malevolent, and capricious. The members here recognize that they are encountering a good or holy spirit. Luke mentions two elements of the trance: what is seen (visual) and what is heard (sound). The sound, a "noise like a strong driving wind:' comes from the sky. This means it has an other-than-human source. The Israelite tradition considered thunder to be the sound of God's voice (Psalm 29; Mark 1:11), though people could differ in their interpretation of the sounds they heard (John 12:29). Since the word for wind can also mean spirit, the sound indeed is of a strong wind or spirit filling the entire home. The visual element, what everyone saw in this group trance, was "tongues as of fire!' This would plausibly be a red color perhaps tinged with yellow. In trance, colors identify the level of the trance, from light to deep. These colors indicate a deeper trance. The tongue shape of the fire quite likely relates to the result to which the vision plausibly contributes, namely, speaking in tongues (glossolalia). But the shape of a tongue also reminds one of a slit or opening between ordinary reality and alternate reality. If this is true, then the gathered community is at stage one of the trance (seeing geometric patterns) and Luke's report may already be anticipating what the community learned in stage two (searching for meaning in what is seen) or stage three (often arriving at totally unexpected insight). Contemporary scholars familiar with the extensive research on glossolalia note that either Luke or his source misunderstood and therefore misinterpreted the phenomenon. In glossolalia, speech becomes musical sound. It is lexically noncommunicative, that is, this is not the informative or communicative side of discourse. Messages or insights are very rare. The musicality of glossolalia is a regular series of pulses of accented and unaccented syllables, and it is learned. One can imitate what one hears even at the first instance (see 2 Sam 10:5-12), though sometimes it occurs without a model to imitate. It is also possible that Luke deliberately speaks of foreign languages in his report (Acts 2:4, 8-11) in order to present this event as a reversal of the Babel experience of the confusion of languages (Genesis 11). Notice that the devout Judeans were divided in their assessment of the event. Some thought the speakers were drunk (see v. 13), while others believed that it was of God because they were speaking of "the mighty acts of God." As with all trance experiences, interpretation is key. In this report, the audience interprets what they hear, the speakers do not interpret what they are saying. Even in the speech he makes, Peter does not interpret what was said. He identifies the experience as an authentic trance, induced by the Spirit, and then he takes the occasion to preach about Jesus.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM PS 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34

Today we sing part of the same psalm that we prayed in yesterday's vigil Mass. Again, we praise God for the diversity of creation and recognize the dependence of every creature on God. On this day of Pentecost, we conclude the singing of the psalm with the stanza that praises God's glory and asks that the Lord be glad with all of creation, especially with our song of praise. Most of all, we repeatedly cry out, "Lord, send out your Spirit!"
Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

Some different verses are selected from the same psalm used on the Vigil of Pentecost. Again the refrain highlights the key idea: God’s spirit is an agent of renewal. It is worth-while to ask God to send forth the Spirit to renew all creation.

Reading 2

A reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians of 12:3B-7, 12-13

Brothers and sisters: No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

* [12:1–14:40] Ecstatic and charismatic activity were common in early Christian experience, as they were in other ancient religions. But the Corinthians seem to have developed a disproportionate esteem for certain phenomena, especially tongues, to the detriment of order in the liturgy. Paul’s response to this development provides us with the fullest exposition we have of his theology of the charisms.

* [12:2–3] There is an experience of the Spirit and an understanding of ecstatic phenomena that are specifically Christian and that differ, despite apparent similarities, from those of the pagans. It is necessary to discern which spirit is leading one; ecstatic phenomena must be judged by their effect (1 Cor 12:2). 1 Cor 12:3 illustrates this by an example: power to confess Jesus as Lord can come only from the Spirit, and it is inconceivable that the Spirit would move anyone to curse the Lord.

* [12:4–6] There are some features common to all charisms, despite their diversity: all are gifts (charismata), grace from outside ourselves; all are forms of service(diakoniai), an expression of their purpose and effect; and all are workings (energēmata), in which God is at work. Paul associates each of these aspects with what later theology will call one of the persons of the Trinity, an early example of “appropriation.”

Even a cursory reading of these verses indicates that Paul is insisting on unity. The Corinthian community was so torn by competing party loyalties and dissension that Paul repeatedly exhorts to unity at every opportunity in this letter. The “spirit-people” in Corinth were viewed as the cause of disunity, in part because they were vaunting the Spirit, themselves, and their gifts from the Spirit above others who did not possess such gifts.

It is very difficult for Western individualists to appreciate the harm done by competition in a culture whose core value is honor. By birth, all people in such a culture have ascribed honor. It is shameful and wrong to attempt to improve that status. The cultural obligation is to maintain and preserve it. Cooperation, harmony, and unity are the preferred and honorable values in a collectivistic society.

The combination of select verses for today’s reading high-light two powerful arguments that Paul mounts against such divisive competition. One argument is based on how three heavenly figures relate to each other. After admitting that the Spirit does indeed grant various gifts, forms of service, and workings, Paul notes-in an apparent hierarchic ordering - that the Spirit, the Lord, and God live in harmony and not in rivalry or competition. God, of course, is sovereign and holds the highest place on the honor map (see 1 Cor 11:3; 15:27-28). And the authentic spirit acknowledges that Jesus has a special position: "Jesus is Lord!" Thus, after God, Jesus enjoys the next maximum status, and the Spirit holds...
third place as servant of the Lord Jesus. The three are not equal in role or status, yet they live harmoniously in heaven. The Spirit and the Spirit's gifts, therefore, should not disrupt the order God has willed for the world. The second argument is based on the human body which consists of different parts, all of which must work together harmoniously lest damage occur to the body. This exaggerated sense of self-esteem and exalted status among the "spirit people" amounts to a denial of authority. Their understanding of the freedom bestowed upon them by the Spirit calls into question God's will for specific patterns of roles, statuses, and orderly relationships on earth and in heaven. Paul argues that the pattern existing in heaven ought to be mirrored on earth. In the concluding verses (12-13), Paul declares that not only is the diversity of gifts among human beings unified in the same Spirit, but the diversity of ethnic groups (Israelites and non-Israelites) and roles (slaves or free persons) is similarly unified in the "one" Spirit.

Galatians 5:16-25. Finally, Paul draws practical conclusions from the preceding four chapters of his letter. He urges those who have slipped in their resolve or who have backslid in their status to dig in, to stand firm, to yield not another inch to anyone. At issue is a return to circumcision which Paul opposed and rejected as a requirement for non-Israelites to become followers of Jesus. Once again tugging at the letter recipients' emotions ("brothers and sisters;" v. 13), Paul presents another understanding of "freedom!" He discourages using freedom for unfettered self-indulgence. "Serve one another through love" (v. 13). Literally, the Greek verb translated here as "serve one another" should be rendered "render slave service" to one another. The Israelite understanding which Paul reflects is that no human person is ever absolutely free, subject to no one. The Exodus freed the Israelites from Egyptian bondage so that they might serve (render slave service to) God more faithfully. By raising Jesus from the dead, God gave an opportunity for those who believe in Jesus to attain a new freedom, a freedom for a new kind of slave service. For those united in Jesus, secondary differences are not important (gender, social status, ethnicity). What really counts is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6).

To make his instruction concrete, Paul draws on two favorite images: flesh and spirit. Flesh refers to the human person as entirely self-reliant, weak, earthbound, unredeemed. Spirit refers to the knowing and willing core of the individual, that part of a human person most suitable for receiving and responding to God's Spirit. Paul's advice: Live by the Spirit! Walk according to the prompting of the Spirit! What does this mean in the concrete? With regard to how believers should behave toward one another, Paul lists actions to be avoided (5:19-21) and actions to be performed (5:22-23). The deeds to be avoided reflect a way of life rooted in the flesh. They can be clustered into four groups: sexual aberrations (the first three items), heathen worship (the next two), social evils (seven items, many in the plural suggesting numerous and repeated occurrences), and intemperance (the last three). All of them are failures against justice and love, hardly a fitting lifestyle for those who accept the rule of God in their lives. The main deed to be performed is love, along with nine other representative desirable qualities that should characterize a believer's relationships with other believers (5:22-23). The final verses sum up Paul's feelings. Those who have accepted Jesus have definitively, once and for always put aside the way of the flesh and should live, walk, and be led by the spirit.

The gospel John 20:19-23 or John 15:26-27; 16:12-15) describes yet other gifts of the Spirit (power to forgive and retain sins; guidance to all truth) intended to maintain unity in the community.

Sequence

Veni, Sancte Spiritus

This Sunday, the Church sings one of four sequences - ancient, poetic songs that precede the singing of the Gospel acclamation. In the Pentecost Sequence, Veni, Sancte Spiritus, the Church prays for the Holy Spirit to come. Using beautifully poetic titles, the sequence calls on the Father of the Poor, the Comforter, Divine Light, Sweet Rest, and Healer, emphasizing that if the Holy Spirit is absent, we have
nothing. When the Holy Spirit is present, we have the salvation of the Lord.

Come, Holy Spirit, come!
And from your celestial home
Shed a ray of light divine!
Come, Father of the poor!
Come, source of all our store!
Come, within our bosoms shine.
You, of comforters the best;
You, the soul's most welcome guest;
Sweet refreshment here below;
In our labor, rest most sweet;
Grateful coolness in the heat;
Solace in the midst of woe.
O most blessed Light divine,
Shine within these hearts of yours,
And our inmost being fill!

Where you are not, we have naught,
Nothing good in deed or thought,
Nothing free from taint of ill.
Heal our wounds, our strength renew;
On our dryness pour your dew;
Wash the stains of guilt away:
Bend the stubborn heart and will;
Melt the frozen, warm the chill;
Guide the steps that go astray.
On the faithful, who adore
And confess you, evermore
In your sevenfold gift descend;
Give them virtue's sure reward;
Give them your salvation, Lord;
Give them joys that never end. Amen.

Alleluia
Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.

Gospel

A reading from the Gospel of John 20:19-23

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

* [20:19] The disciples: by implication from Jn 20:24 this means ten of the Twelve, presumably in Jerusalem. Peace be with you: although this could be an ordinary greeting, John intends here to echo Jn 14:27. The theme of rejoicing in Jn 20:20 echoes Jn 16:22.
* [20:21] By means of this sending, the Eleven were made apostles, that is, “those sent” (cf. Jn 17:18), though John does not use the noun in reference to them (see note on Jn 13:16). A solemn mission or “sending” is also the subject of the post-resurrection appearances to the Eleven in Mt 28:19; Lk 24:47; Mk 16:15.
* [20:22] This action recalls Gn 2:7, where God breathed on the first man and gave him life; just as Adam’s life came from God, so now the disciples’ new spiritual life comes from Jesus. Cf. also the revivification of the dry bones in Ez 37. This is the author’s version of Pentecost. Cf. also the note on Jn 19:30.

Each year this same Scripture passage is read on Pentecost. In the volume on cycle A, we reflect on the Spirit, and in the volume on cycle C we reflect on the commissioning of the disciples. Here we reflect upon the themes of fear and joy.

FEAR
Contemporary psychiatric research notes that anxiety and fear are related emotions, and both relate to action. Fear stimulates avoidance and escape, but when these or any actions are blocked or thwarted, fear turns into anxiety. At the core, all emotions presuppose certain kinds of knowledge. In fear, this knowledge is an awareness of danger.

Johannine scholar Raymond Brown points out that in the Synoptic Gospels, the guards and women are frightened by the sight of the angel at the tomb (Mark 16:8; Matt 28:4, 5, 8; Luke 24:5), and the women and disciples are frightened by the sight of Jesus (Matt 28:10; Luke 24:37). Though Middle Easterners readily interact with the world of the spirits, these contacts always stir fear because of their potential danger.

One is never certain of the nature of the spirit (good, bad, mischievous) or of the possible outcome of the encounter.

In John's Gospel, it is not encounters with spirits but rather "the Judeans" who cause fear (see also John 7:13). At the time of Jesus, there could be any number of reasons why the disciples would fear the Judeans. They had belonged to Jesus' faction and hence could expect to experience the same persecution as he did from Judean authorities. After Jesus' resurrection, they might be sought by these same authorities for alleged complicity in stealing the corpse (Matt 28:13) and spreading a lie. A third source of fear is reported in the Gospel of Peter (26): a widespread search for the disciples was instituted on the grounds that they were malefactors and had attempted to burn the Temple.

Fear on these or any similar grounds would certainly account for the highly irregular action of "locking the doors:" Middle Eastern culture does not recognize or respect privacy. While the interior of a house is sacred to the family, the place where the women are protected and kept secure, children have the culturally recognized right of wandering in and out of every home to spy on what other families are doing and report this back to their own families.

In group-oriented societies like that of our ancestors in the faith, every group suspects that all other groups are plotting evil against it. The only way to protect one's group is to keep informed about what other groups are up to. Young children serve this purpose, which is why Jesus forbade his disciples to keep the youngsters away from him. Jesus wanted everyone to know that he had nothing to hide.

The reason why the disciples locked the door is chiefly because they wanted to hide themselves! Not that others did not know where they were and could not easily find them. Their action (locking doors=avoidance) was prompted by fear.

PEACE

Typically in the Bible, when a supernatural being encounters a human being, the supernatural being assures the human of its good will. Words like "do not be afraid" (Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10; Matt 28:5, 10; etc.) set the human being at ease and dispel the fear.

The Hebrew word for "peace" is very rich and has at least eight different meanings. David asks his general, Joab, literally about "the peace of Joab, the peace of the people, and the peace of the war" (2 Sam 11:7). When Jesus says to his frightened disciples, "Peace to you," he declares a factual reality. His resurrection has gained unshakable peace for them; hence it is inappropriate to translate his statement as a wish: [May] peace be to [or with] you; Jesus is not wishing them peace; he declares with firm assurance that they possess it, hence they should discard all fear.

And indeed they do. Their new knowledge replaces the old perceptions that stirred fear and anxiety. As the Risen Lord commissions them to receive new members into the community, they recognize a new beginning and not an end for those who believe in him.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

1. "In all her members, the Church is sent to ... make present, and spread the mystery of the communion of the Holy Trinity" (CCC, 738).
"The human community that we build by ourselves can never, purely by its own strength, be a fully fraternal community, nor can it overcome every division and become a truly universal community. The unity of the human race, a fraternal communion transcending every barrier, is called into being by the word of God-who-is-Love" (CIV, 34).

"All Christians by the example of their lives and the witness of the word ... have an obligation ... to reveal the power of the holy Spirit by whom they were strengthened at confirmation, so that others, seeing their good works, might glorify the Father1 and more perfectly perceive the true meaning of human life and the universal solidarity of humankind" (AG, 11).
ISAIAH 55:1-11 OR ISAIAH 42:1-4, 6-7 This reflection focuses on the reading from Isaiah 55. The first reading begins with the image of a banquet to describe the richness of God's blessings. In this section of Isaiah, the long exile is ending; the people are returning to their homeland and to the freedom to worship and live out the covenant God made with them. Abundance awaits all who come to the Lord. God, the Holy One, is eager to receive all who come, regardless of wealth or status, with the offer of mercy and forgiveness. God is ready to renew the covenant with the chosen people. The faithfulness and mercy of God, like all God's ways and thoughts, are beyond our comprehension. All we can do is trust in them.

This reading is especially appropriate for today's feast, paired with the narrative of Jesus' baptism. It is also among the readings for the Easter Vigil, providing a fitting reflection for those who will enter the waters of Baptism that night.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (42:1–4, 6–7)

Thus says the LORD:

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
    my chosen one with whom I am pleased,
upon whom I have put my spirit;
    he shall bring forth justice to the nations,
not crying out, not shouting,
    not making his voice heard in the street.
A bruised reed he shall not break,
    and a smoldering wick he shall not quench,
until he establishes justice on the earth;
    the coastlands will wait for his teaching.
I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice,
    I have grasped you by the hand;
I formed you, and set you
    as a covenant of the people,
    a light for the nations,
to open the eyes of the blind,
    to bring out prisoners from confinement,
    and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.

* [42:1–4] Servant: three other passages have been popularly called “servant of the Lord” poems: 49:1–7; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12. Whether the servant is an individual or a collectivity is not clear (e.g., contrast 49:3 with 49:5). More important is the description of the mission of the servant. In the early Church and throughout Christian tradition, these poems have been applied to Christ; cf. Mt 12:18–21.
These verses are commonly identified as one of the four "Servant" Songs in Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9a; 52:13-53:12). Current scholarship suggests that they were an integral part of Second Isaiah (40-55) from the beginning and were not later additions. The Servant is Israel presented as a collectivistic individual. At the present time, approximately 80 percent of the world's population are collectivistic individuals. Such people stand in sharp contrast to individuals as they are known in Western cultures (representing just 20 percent of the world's population). Collectivistic personalities draw their identity from the group (nation, family) and do not want to stand out from the crowd. While earlier biblical scholarship talked about corporate personality, it is more appropriate today to speak of collectivistic personalities. Thus, while these Servant Songs in Isaiah sound as if they are describing a specific individual, they really describe the nation. Any individual member of this nation would readily identify with the description.

These particular verses deal with the destiny of the Servant. Above all, the Servant will reveal and establish justice or God's law to all the nations. The Servant will teach everything that is needed for leading a well-ordered life pleasing to God. Israel will not assume the posture of an arrogant and rushing victor but will rather offer a living example of obedience to God's will. In this way will she be a light to the nations. One 26 The Cultural World of the Prophets basic link between this reading and the gospel (Matt 3:13-17) is the notion of someone with whom God is pleased: the Servant and Jesus. What kind of job description would you write for such a person?

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 29:1–2, 3–4, 8, 9–10.)

The Lord will bless his people with peace.
Give to the L ORD, you sons of God, give to the L ORD glory and praise,
give to the L ORD the glory due his name;
adore the L ORD in holy attire.
The voice of the L ORD is over the waters, the L ORD, over vast waters.
The voice of the L ORD is mighty; the voice of the L ORD is majestic.
The God of glory thunders, and in his temple all say, “Glory!”
The L ORD is enthroned above the flood; the L ORD is enthroned as king forever.

* [Psalm 29] The hymn invites the members of the heavenly court to acknowledge God's supremacy by ascribing glory and might to God alone (Ps 29:1–2a, 9b). Divine glory and might are dramatically visible in the storm (Ps 29:3–9a). The storm apparently comes from the Mediterranean onto the coast of Syria-Palestine and then moves inland. In Ps 29:10 the divine beings acclaim God's eternal kingship. The Psalm concludes with a prayer that God will impart the power just displayed to the Israelite king and through the king to Israel.
* [29:1] Sons of God: members of the heavenly court who served Israel's God in a variety of capacities.
* [29:3] The voice of the LORD: the sevenfold repetition of the phrase imitates the sound of crashing thunder and may allude to God's primordial slaying of Leviathan, the seven-headed sea monster of Canaanite mythology.
* [29:9b–10] Having witnessed God's supreme power (Ps 29:3–9a), the gods acknowledge the glory that befits the king of the divine and human world.

This hymn was borrowed from Canaanite culture where it was sung in honor of Baal, god of thunder and conqueror of the mighty waters. The Israelites substituted "voice of the L ORD" for "voice of Baal" and
repeated it seven times while singing this hymn in the liturgical assembly. Of course, thunder is the voice of the Lord, and these psalm verses point to today's gospel reading in which the sky is torn open and the voice from the sky says of Jesus: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased!"

SECOND READING

This reflection focuses on the reading from 1 John. The first letter of John is a theological reflection on the divine and human nature of Jesus. All who believe that Jesus is the Son of God are themselves loved by the Father. This relationship calls the believer into right relationship with God. Belief is carried out in action as a faith response to the love one has for God.

It is not necessary to rely solely on the testimony of humans in recognizing Jesus' divine and human nature. The Spirit, as well as the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist, are testimony to the truth of Christ's identity. Spirit, water, and blood are God's testimony. To put faith in Christ is to accept the testimony of God that Jesus is the Son of God.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles (10:34–38)

Peter proceeded to speak to those gathered in the house of Cornelius, saying:

"In truth, I see that God shows no partiality.

Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.

You know the word that he sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all, what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power.

He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."

10:34–35 The revelation of God’s choice of Israel to be the people of God did not mean he withheld the divine favor from other people.

10:36–43 These words are more directed to Luke’s Christian readers than to the household of Cornelius, as indicated by the opening words, “You know.” They trace the continuity between the preaching and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and the proclamation of Jesus by the early community. The emphasis on this divinely ordained continuity (Acts 10:41) is meant to assure Luke’s readers of the fidelity of Christian tradition to the words and deeds of Jesus.

10:36 To the Israelites: Luke, in the words of Peter, speaks of the prominent position occupied by Israel in the history of salvation.

10:38 Jesus of Nazareth: God’s revelation of his plan for the destiny of humanity through Israel culminated in Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, the ministry of Jesus is an integral part of God’s revelation. This viewpoint explains why the early Christian communities were interested in conserving the historical substance of the ministry of Jesus, a tradition leading to the production of the four gospels.
**ALLELUIA (cf. Mk 9:7)**
The heavens were opened and the voice of the Father thundered: This is my beloved Son, listen to him.

[For background to 1 John see Second Sunday of Easter.] The first four verses of today's reading focus on love, hence continue the author's attack upon the Secessionists. These claim to love, but in the sacred author's view, they lie. His argument is: everyone who believes Jesus is the Messiah is a child of God. Of course, the Secessionists believed this, as did the Johannine community. The author continues: every one who loves the parent loves the child (his argument is generic; there is no reason for translating father with an upper case letter). Conversely, loving the children is a way of loving the parent. So if the Secessionists do not love Johannine believers, they cannot really love God. And if they say they love members of their group, well they are not children of God because their faith is imperfect, hence they have no brothers to love. Further, the Secessionists claim to love God but do not emphasize keeping the commandments. But true love is obedient love, and obedient the Secessionists are not. Lest his own followers get discouraged and submit to pressures from the Secessionists, the author reminds them that commandments (proper behavior) are not burdensome for true children of God. Johannine scholars acknowledge that vv. 5-9 are very obscure and difficult to interpret. This is a splendid example of high context writing. Surely the letter recipients could read between the lines and supply what the author was presupposing. The Secessionists apparently said that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, who became such when he "came by water," as revealed by the Spirit. The author of 1 John broadens this by alluding to the crucifixion of Jesus and the flow of blood and water from his side (John 19:34). The flowing blood was proper according to the Torah so that it could be sprinkled, and the water is not water of baptism (as the Secessionists would claim) but the water that flowed with the blood. The testimony of the Beloved Disciple to this event continues in the tradition of the Johannine community. The Spirit is still bearing witness.

The significance of witnesses derives from Deut 19:15 which requires two or three. Throughout the gospel of John, multiple witnesses are cited (John 8:18; 5:31-40). This was a technique used by the Johannine community in their arguments with fellow Israelites concerning the divinity of Jesus. Here the author summons it in his debate with the Secessionists over the humanity of Jesus. The Secessionists point to the witness of the Baptist testifying that the incarnation alone is sufficient. The author of 1 John summons three: Spirit, water, blood. How? On a symbolic level, the reference is to sacramental actions familiar to the Johannine Community: Spirit = anointing (see 2 John 2:20, 27); water = baptism (John 3:5); blood = Eucharist (John 6:51-58). Sacraments bear witness to the saving nature of Jesus’ death: they constitute people as children of God, nourish them with heavenly food and drink, and they are actions by which true believers share in the act by which Jesus conquered the world (John 16:33).

By pairing this reading with the Baptism of Jesus reported today by Mark (1:7-11), one can see event and interpretation. Believers too focused on getting at the facts (e.g., in Jesus’ life) may miss the point of what the facts mean, and how that meaning made sense out of the lives of subsequent believers. The readings for today’s feast offer an opportunity to reflect on events and their interpretation.

**GOSPEL B**

Live your faith. Practice what you believe. All of these can be just empty words if they are not backed up with meaningful acts. In today's Gospel, John pointed to the one who was to come as the fulfillment of all he had been doing as he called people to repent and prepare for the Lord. When John baptized Jesus, he witnessed the coming of God's beloved Son, the one who was to be a servant. John's continued witness led to his eventual arrest. John did not proclaim empty words; he acted in ways that he was aware would lead to conflict with the authorities, as Jesus' actions also would. John had fulfilled his call
as a witness so that the message of Jesus could be heard: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).
Do we live lives of empty words or true witness? We hear what the prophet Isaiah tells us about the actions of a faithful servant. The psalmist invites us to give glory and praise for the blessing that God has bestowed on all people, but glory and praise are just empty words unless they are backed up with actions and deeds, even when it they are difficult. Like Peter, we are able to break out of our biases because Jesus first showed us the way of justice for all by the witness of his own life.

**A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (1:7–11)**
This is what John the Baptist proclaimed:

“One mightier than I is coming after me.
I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.
I have baptized you with water;
he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee
and was baptized in the Jordan by John.
On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open
and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him.
And a voice came from the heavens,
“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

* [1:1–13] The prologue of the Gospel according to Mark begins with the title (Mk 1:1) followed by three events preparatory to Jesus’ preaching: (1) the appearance in the Judean wilderness of John, baptizer, preacher of repentance, and precursor of Jesus (Mk 1:2–8); (2) the baptism of Jesus, at which a voice from heaven acknowledges Jesus to be God’s Son, and the holy Spirit descends on him (Mk 1:9–11); (3) the temptation of Jesus by Satan (Mk 1:12–13).
* [1:8–9] Through the life-giving baptism with the holy Spirit (Mk 1:8), Jesus will create a new people of God. But first he identifies himself with the people of Israel in submitting to John’s baptism of repentance and in bearing on their behalf the burden of God’s decisive judgment (Mk 1:9; cf. Mk 1:4). As in the desert of Sinai, so here in the wilderness of Judea, Israel’s sonship with God is to be renewed.
* [1:10–11] He saw the heavens…and the Spirit…upon him: indicating divine intervention in fulfillment of promise. Here the descent of the Spirit on Jesus is meant, anointing him for his ministry; cf. Is 11:2; 42:1; 61:1; 63:9. A voice…with you I am well pleased: God’s acknowledgment of Jesus as his unique Son, the object of his love. His approval of Jesus is the assurance that Jesus will fulfill his messianic mission of salvation.

**Mark’s brief account of Jesus’ baptism is an excellent example of Scripture as "high context" literature which omits many important details because the author expects the listeners or readers to know them and fill in the gaps. In "low context" literature, no details are left out; examples are legal documents such as contracts, loan and credit card agreements, and mortgages. Mark expected his audience to supply their distinctive cultural understanding of kinship, including paternity.**

**KINSHIP**
Jesus presumably leaves his family and village to come to John for baptism. This movement is very symbolic. In the ancient Mediterranean world, family is one of the central social institutions. Individuals have no identity or meaningful existence apart from the family. Middle Eastern audiences would not miss the significance of Jesus’ symbolic break with family ties. What will he do now? A person not
embedded in a family is as good as dead. Jesus has taken what seems to be a very shameful step away from his family.

**BAPTISM**
The circumstances of the baptism of Jesus provide an immediate answer to this startling predicament. A voice emanating from the torn-open heavens declares Jesus to be son of God, beloved of and highly pleasing to the Father.

In the ancient world with its very primitive understanding of reproduction, it was impossible to prove who was the actual father of a child. For this reason, only when a father acknowledged a baby as his own did that boy or girl become a son or daughter.

We know that Joseph, by agreeing to marry Mary who was not pregnant by him, performed precisely this task on behalf of Jesus. Joseph accepted Jesus as his son and embedded him into the family to give him honorable standing and a secure setting in which to live.

Now that Jesus has symbolically left family and village behind, none other than God personally acknowledges him as a beloved and obedient son.

Still, one difficulty remains. Honor is a public proclamation of worth accompanied by a public acknowledgement of that worth. The torn heavens indicate that this is a public event. If not for that fact, Jesus' experience would be quite personal and, in this society, meaningless.

Yet the text does not mention crowds or other witnesses. Who else hears this statement? Who will acknowledge and confirm this public claim to honorable status for Jesus? Clearly, Mark expects those who hear and read the Gospel to recognize the eminent source of Jesus' honor and provide the confirmation required. You and I are expected to recognize Jesus as pleasing son of God.

Western readers generally find this story and discussion to be unengaging. Such communication between earthlings and supernatural, invisible beings is considered esoteric.

Yet the ancient Mediterranean world and many contemporary peasant societies maintain a strong belief in the reality of a spirit world which continually interacts with human beings. In Mark's Gospel, it is chiefly this spirit world that knows and acknowledges Jesus' identity as son of God. Here at the baptism, the divine voice is directed toward Jesus himself. When Jesus successfully challenges unclean spirits, they regularly acknowledge his honorable status and identity. They cry out: "holy one of God" (Mark 1:24); "son of God" (Mark 3:11); "son of the Most high God" (Mark 5:27). In Mark 9:7, God reveals to Jesus' core disciples (Peter, James, and John) his identity as "my son, my beloved:" That this identity eventually became known but not accepted or believed is clear from the central charge against Jesus at his trial, that he claimed to be the Christ, "the son of the Blessed One" (Mark 14:61).

In the ancient Mediterranean world, Jesus' true identity was a critically important matter. A son of an artisan from a backwater village has no legitimacy as a public figure ("Where did this man get all this? ... and they took offense at him" [Mark 6:2-3]). But the legitimacy of the son of God as a public figure is incontestable.

How do American believers "fill in the blanks" of high context passages in the Bible, such as Jesus' baptism?

- "By the power of the risen Lord [the Church] is given strength that it might, in patience and in love, overcome its sorrows and its challenges, both within itself and from without, and that it might reveal to the world, faithfully though darkly, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it will be manifested in full light" (LG, 8).
- "The people of God, as represented by the local Church, should understand and show by their concern that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized" (RCIA, 9).
- "Lord God of heaven and earth, / you revealed your only-begotten Son to every nation / by the guidance of a star. / Bless this house / and all who inhabit it. / Fill them (us) with the light of Christ, / that their (our) concern for others may reflect your love" (BB, 1612A).
SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

Before kings ruled the tribes of Israel, judges governed the people who "did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Samuel, who serves as priest and prophet, is a bridge between the two ages. Samuel's birth was an answer to the prayers of his mother, who was barren, like many other women in Scriptures. In gratitude, Samuel was dedicated to God and taken to be of service to Eli, an elderly priest in the Temple at Shiloh (1 Samuel 2:11). Like Jesus, "Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people" (v. 26). Unlike Eli's sons, who disobeyed the voice of their father and the commands of the Lord, Samuel is found worthy to receive God's revelation. At night while Eli sleeps, Samuel is awake and listening. Three times he hears God's voice, and each time he goes to Eli, saying, "Here I am, for you called me" (vv. 5, 6, 8), thinking it was Eli's voice he heard. The third time, Eli tells the boy to answer, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (vv. 9-10). Samuel's submission to God's Word prepares him for the role he would later play in Israel's history.

A reading from the first Book of Samuel (3:3b–10, 19)

Samuel was sleeping in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was. The Lord called to Samuel, who answered, "Here I am." Samuel ran to Eli and said, "Here I am. You called me." "I did not call you," Eli said. "Go back to sleep." So he went back to sleep.

Again the Lord called Samuel, who rose and went to Eli. "Here I am," he said. "You called me." But Eli answered, "I did not call you, my son. Go back to sleep." At that time Samuel was not familiar with the Lord, because the Lord had not revealed anything to him as yet.

The Lord called Samuel again, for the third time.

Getting up and going to Eli, he said, "Here I am. You called me." Then Eli understood that the Lord was calling the youth.

So he said to Samuel, "Go to sleep, and if you are called, reply, Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

When Samuel went to sleep in his place, the Lord came and revealed his presence, calling out as before, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel answered, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Samuel grew up, and the Lord was with him, not permitting any word of his to be without effect.

* [3:2–18] The call of Samuel: This section may be divided as follows: 1. the triple summons (vv. 2–9); 2. God's revelation (vv. 10–14); 3. Samuel informs Eli (vv. 15–18).
The event described in these verses is identified in verse 1 (omitted from today's reading): "the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision." Modern psychological anthropologists identify vision as an altered state of consciousness, one of twenty different states which human beings are capable of experiencing. It is interesting that in this "vision" Samuel doesn't seem to "see" anything. Instead, he hears the Lord and receives a message from the Lord. Today's verses also do not tell us that the message was not good news for Eli and his sons. Very likely the architects of the lectionary have carved these verses from their context to emphasize the need for openness to hearing God's word: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening:•

Contemporary studies of altered states of consciousness add further insight. Notice that Samuel did not recognize the one speaking to him because he "was not familiar with the LORD, because the LORD had not revealed anything to him as yet." This was either Samuel's first experience of a vision, an altered state of consciousness, or it was the first time he en-countered the LoRD in a vision or altered state of consciousness. Very often the visionary is confused at first or doesn't recognize the one speaking until that person identifies or "re-veals" self. "Fear not, it is I" is typical. Once Eli realizes what is happening to Samuel, he tells Samuel who it might be: the Lord.

It is also important not to distinguish too rigidly between what is seen and what is heard. The total experience is a unit, both elements are present. Typically, however, the visionary provides the "sound track" from the visionary's knowledge. Even if visuals are lacking, as they seem to be in Samuel's "vision;" he is aware of being in an altered state of consciousness. He is also aware of being in the presence of the Lord, and the Lord communicates with him. The Lord speaks, and Samuel listens.

Such experiences are common among more than 90 per-cent of the world's population. Those who do not have such experiences are the ones who need to explain why. Perhaps very wisely have the architects of the lectionary selected these verses so that modern believers might pray: "Speak LORD, for your servant is listening. Help me to hear, 0 Lord!"

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 40:2, 4, 7–8, 8–9, 10)

This psalm is a prayer of trust; it may have been two separate psalms and later combined into one. The psalmist's life was in danger, perhaps from an enemy or sickness. He found himself in a "desolate pit," a "miry bog" (v. 2). But God heard his cry and drew him out, setting his feet on solid rock. A new song of praise is given to him, and he publicly declares his confidence in God. Israel's worship depended on the many sacrifices offered by the people. The psalmist's sacrifice is not one of burnt offerings, but one of a listening heart and contrite spirit obedient to do God's will.

Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will.
I have waited, waited for the LORD, and he stooped toward me and heard my cry. And he put a new song into my mouth, a hymn to our God. Sacrifice or offering you wished not, but ears open to obedience you gave me. Holocausts or sin-offerings you sought not; then said I, "Behold I come."
"In the written scroll it is prescribed for me, to do your will, O my God, is my delight, and your law is within my heart!"
I announced your justice in the vast assembly; I did not restrain my lips, as you, O LORD, know.

* [Psalm 40] A thanksgiving (Ps 40:2–13) has been combined with a lament (Ps 40:14–17) that appears also in Ps 70. The psalmist describes the rescue in spatial terms—being raised up from the swampy underworld to firm earth where one can praise God (Ps 40:2–4). All who trust God will experience like protection (Ps 40:5–6)! The Psalm stipulates the precise mode of thanksgiving: not animal sacrifice but open and enthusiastic proclamation of the salvation just experienced (Ps 40:7–11). A prayer for protection concludes (Ps 40:12–17).
A new song: a song in response to the new action of God (cf. Ps 33:3; 96:1; 144:9; 149:1; Is 42:10). Giving thanks is not purely a human response but is itself a divine gift.

Obedience is better than sacrifice (cf. 1 Sm 15:22; Is 1:10–20; Hos 6:6; Am 5:22–25; Mi 6:6–8; Acts 7:42–43 [quoting Am 5:25–26]). Heb 10:5–9 quotes the somewhat different Greek version and interprets it as Christ's self-oblation.

The phrase "I have waited" most often implies that a sad time period is almost ended (this psalm is dated between the destruction of the Temple in 587 B.C.E. and its reconstruction in 520 B.C.E.). The verses selected for today's response to the first reading underscore the importance of faith (= loyalty) and obedience. "Open ears" (literally "ears that you have dug for me") reflects a practice described in Exodus 21:5-6. A slave who was set free but elected to stay with his master had his earlobe pierced at the temple. The psalmist modifies the idea to represent an obedient listening to God's will (see also Isa 50:4-5). These sentiments form a suitable bridge between the story of the young Samuel in the first reading and the call of the first disciples in the gospel John 1:35-42).

SECOND READING

Rivalries developed in the Christian community at Corinth. Each faction claimed to belong to an important figure: Paul, Apollos, or Cephas (Peter's Aramaic name). Paul reminds them that they should not boast about any human leader, because in Baptism, they all "belong to Christ" (3:23). Paul then takes up the matters of sexual immorality (chapter 5) and lawsuits among Christians (6:1-11), which bring shame to the community. Some believed that the Law of Moses no longer bound them, and misquoted Paul to back their claim: "All things are lawful for me" (v. 12). Paul strongly disagreed: While all things might be lawful, not everything is beneficial. Because the body belongs to the Lord, it must be treated as the sacred "temple of the Holy Spirit" (v. 19). The word Paul uses is naos, the innermost sanctuary of the Temple.

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (6:13c–15a, 17–20)

Brothers and sisters:
The body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body; God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.
Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?
But whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one Spirit with him. Avoid immorality.
Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the immoral person sins against his own body.
Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?
For you have been purchased at a price.
Therefore glorify God in your body.

Paul now turns to the opinion of some Corinthians that sexuality is a morally indifferent area (1 Cor 6:12–13). This leads him to explain the mutual relation between the Lord Jesus and our bodies (1 Cor 6:13b) in a densely packed paragraph that contains elements of a profound theology of sexuality (1 Cor 6:15–20).
[6:12–13] Everything is lawful for me: the Corinthians may have derived this slogan from Paul’s preaching about Christian freedom, but they mean something different by it: they consider sexual satisfaction a matter as indifferent as food, and they attribute no lasting significance to bodily functions (1 Cor 6:13a). Paul begins to deal with the slogan by two qualifications, which suggest principles for judging sexual activity. Not everything is beneficial: cf. 1 Cor 10:23, and the whole argument of 1 Cor 8–10 on the finality of freedom and moral activity. Not let myself be dominated: certain apparently free actions may involve in fact a secret servitude in conflict with the lordship of Jesus.

* [6:15b–16] A prostitute: the reference may be specifically to religious prostitution, an accepted part of pagan culture at Corinth and elsewhere; but the prostitute also serves as a symbol for any sexual relationship that conflicts with Christ’s claim over us individually. The two...will become one flesh: the text of Gn 2:24 is applied positively to human marriage in Matthew and Mark, and in Eph 5:29–32: love of husband and wife reflect the love of Christ for his church. The application of the text to union with a prostitute is jarring, for such a union is a parody, an antitype of marriage, which does conflict with Christ’s claim over us. This explains the horror expressed in 15b.

* [6:18] Against his own body: expresses the intimacy and depth of sexual disorder, which violates the very orientation of our bodies.

* [6:19–20] Paul’s vision becomes trinitarian. A temple: sacred by reason of God’s gift, his indwelling Spirit. Not your own: but “for the Lord,” who acquires ownership by the act of redemption. Glorify God in your body: the argument concludes with a positive imperative to supplement the negative “avoid immorality” of 1 Cor 6:18. Far from being a terrain that is morally indifferent, the area of sexuality is one in which our relationship with God (and his Christ and his Spirit) is very intimately expressed: he is either highly glorified or deeply offended.

This letter was probably written from Ephesus about the year 54 A.D. The broader context of these verses clarify Paul’s intentions. Paul and the Corinthians held contrasting views of the human body. For Paul, believers were to safe-guard the integrity and holiness of the physical body. They were to control the body and its orifices (mouth, genitals) through which it could be polluted. For his opponents, the physical body was an organism that needed no control. For them, freedom that comes with redemption by Jesus encourages spontaneity and rejects controlling rules and laws. This explains their contrasting ideas about fornication considered in today’s verses.

Second, the Corinthians summarized their views in slo-gans: “all things are lawful for me” (1 Cor 6:12); “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food” (it makes no differ-ence what one eats-6:13). The New American Bible trans-lation puts these in quotation marks since Paul is quoting his opponents. A third slogan, “Every sin a person commits is outside the body” (only intentions count-6:18), is not in quotation marks because Paul reinterprets it in his critical response. “Every other sin ... is outside the body; but sex-ual sins which involve crossing body boundaries and pene-trating bodily orifices takes place within the physical body:’ Paul’s opponents have moved in the direction of individ-ualism similar to that familiar to members of modern Western cultures. Paul and his thinking remain anchored in the Mediterranean cultural concept of dyadic individualism and collectivistic personality. In this view, the individual must al-ways be subordinate to and responsible for the well-being of the group, the community. Thus, in Paul’s thinking individ-ual believers with their physical bodies constitute the com-munity which is Christ ("your bodies are members of Christ"). This community is where the Holy Spirit resides; the com-munity ("your body") is a Temple of the Holy Spirit. The community therefore must be holy. Individual members are obliged to see to that.

But if individual believers join their physical bodies in il-licit sexual liaisons, they pollute the community which is Christ. Paul's adamant conclusion: you are not your own (to do as you please, like an individualist). You must honor God in your physical body to ensure that the social body will re-main holy. This thinking fits perfectly well with the Mediterranean cultural concept of collectivistic personality.
In the gospel John 1:35-42, Jesus calls his first disciples. The first two come from among the Baptist's disciples. If these disciples are like their master, they are worthy persons. Then one of these, Andrew, calls his brother Simon. If Andrew was worthy, Simon his blood-kin is also worthy. Perhaps this explains why the invitations give no requirements for discipleship other than responding to the invitation. In contrast, Paul reminds believers that they "have been purchased at a price" in order to become members of the community. From this perspective of collectivistic personalities, Paul lays out some strict regulations for believers about the integrity of the physical body which has an impact on the social body, the community. How does the behavior of modern, individualist believers with relationship to their physical bodies bless or taint the community? Or does it matter to individualists at all?

ALLELUIA (Jn 1:41, 17b)
We have found the Messiah: Jesus Christ, who brings us truth and grace.

GOSPEL

The day after Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist is no longer the focus of attention. John points to Jesus as the "Lamb of God" (v. 36). Just as the blood of the Passover lamb saved the Israelites from death (Exodus 12), Jesus, the new paschal lamb, sheds his blood for the sins of the world. Two of the Baptist's disciples follow Jesus out of curiosity. On seeing them, Jesus asks what they are looking for, and they ask him, "Where are you staying?" (John 1:38). The Greek word also means "abiding," which is not a geographical place but a state of being in relationship with someone. Jesus invites them to "come and see" (v. 39). The two came, saw, and stayed with Jesus from that day. The new disciples address Jesus as their "rabbi" (teacher), but they soon discover that Jesus is the "Messiah" which is translated "Anointed" (v. 41; Christos in Greek). Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, is one of these new disciples. Andrew brings his brother to Jesus, who changes Simon's name to Peter, meaning "rock" (Petros in Greek). Changing a person's name signifies a new relationship and function. Peter will be the foundation on which Jesus will build his church.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John (1:35–42)
John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi"—which translated means Teacher—, "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they went and saw where Jesus was staying, and they stayed with him that day.
It was about four in the afternoon.
Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus.
He first found his own brother Simon and told him, "We have found the Messiah"—which is translated Christ—. Then he brought him to Jesus.
Jesus looked at him and said,
“You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas”—which is translated Peter.

* [1:36] John the Baptist’s testimony makes his disciples’ following of Jesus plausible.
* [1:37] The two disciples: Andrew (Jn 1:40) and, traditionally, John, son of Zebedee (see note on Jn 13:23).
* [1:39] Four in the afternoon: literally, the tenth hour, from sunrise, in the Roman calculation of time. Some suggest that the next day, beginning at sunset, was the sabbath; they would have stayed with Jesus to avoid travel on it.
* [1:41] Messiah: the Hebrew word māšiāh, “anointed one” (see note on Lk 2:11), appears in Greek as the transliterated messias only here and in Jn 4:25. Elsewhere the Greek translation christos is used.
* [1:42] Simon, the son of John: in Mt 16:17, Simon is called Bariona, “son of Jonah,” a different tradition for the name of Simon’s father. Cephas: in Aramaic = the Rock; cf. Mt 16:18. Neither the Greek equivalent Petros nor, with one isolated exception, Cephas is attested as a personal name before Christian times.


**THE PATTERN**

(1) A believer in Jesus evangelizes another person (2) by using a special title of Jesus. (3) The evangelizer leads the convert to Jesus (4) who sees the newcomer and confirms his decision. (5) The conversion is sealed.

**Example 1: John 1:35-39**

(1) The Baptist evangelizes two of his own disciples (v. 35) (2) using the title "Lamb of God" (v. 36). (3) As a result, the two disciples followed Jesus (v. 37). (4) Jesus sees and invites them to "Come and see" (v. 38-39). (5) They came, saw, and remained with him that day (v. 39), which was a Friday, or Sabbath eve (4 P.M.). This means the new converts stayed with Jesus until the Sabbath ended.

The Baptizer is a true herald of Jesus: "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God. . . . Look, here is the Lamb of God!" Oohn 1:34-35). He evangelizes two of his disciples who switch their allegiance from the Baptist to Jesus.

**Example 2: John 1:40-43**

One of these new converts is Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. (1) Andrew goes to evangelize his brother, Simon Peter (v. 40) (2) using the title "Messiah" (v. 41). (3) Andrew the evangelizer leads Simon Peter to Jesus (v. 42) (4) who looks at the newcomer and confirms him: "You are Cephas" (v. 42). (5) The sealing of Peter’s conversion is not mentioned but known from the tradition.

Believers familiar with the Christian tradition are surprised to see Jesus change Peter’s name here at the beginning of his ministry when in the Synoptic tradition that does not occur until later in the ministry (see Matt 16:18). Moreover, Andrew tells Peter now that Jesus is Messiah, and in the Synoptic tradition Peter doesn’t seem to arrive at this conclusion until midway into the ministry (see Mark 8:29).

John the evangelist has compacted the development of discipleship into several striking scenes. In actuality, the process is longer, just as the Synoptic record indicates.

**Example 3: John 1:43**

In the case of Philip, the pattern seems truncated. The Greek text is not clear about exactly who found him: Peter or Andrew. Still, Jesus confirmed that conversion by inviting Philip to "follow me:"

**Example 4: John 1:45-50**

(1) Philip evangelizes Nathanael about Jesus (v. 45) (2) describing him as "the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" (v. 45). (3) In reply to Nathanael’s skepticism ("Can anything
good come out of Nazareth?” v. 46), Philip invites Nathanael to meet Jesus: "Come and see:' Nathanael stands out in this series as a difficult convert, not easily persuaded. (4) Jesus nevertheless confirms the conversion with the judgment: "Here is truly an Israelite in which there is no deceit!” (v. 47). (5) The conversion is sealed with Jesus' promise: "You will see greater things than these” (v. 50).

The missionary pattern is present in the story of the Samaritan woman as well. After being evangelized by Jesus, she in turn evangelizes the people of Sychar: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Gohn 4:29). They came, and saw, listened to Jesus, and ultimately became confirmed disciples Gohn 4:39-42).

The evangelist sets out a challenging pattern of evangelization. The first people to be evangelized preached Jesus in their turn to relatives, friends, and even to strangers. The content of their preaching was essentially the "signs" of Jesus, and their aim was to get people to accept Jesus as a prophet or leader who bore the mark of God's approval. Sometimes the preachers based their activity on scriptural argument, as in the case of Philip and Nathanael. Modern Christians are regularly exhorted to evangelize, but Americans find the task unpleasant and embarrassing. It conjures up images of pairs of evangelizers Jehovah’s witnesses, local Baptists, etc.), dressed in dark clothing, ringing doorbells throughout neighborhoods in search of converts. These stereotyped figures seem to share one thing in common with the evangelizers in John: enthusiasm about Jesus. Where and how might contemporary believers discover and develop such enthusiasm?

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- All people are called to seek, to know, and to love God (CCC, 1).
- Jesus calls all people to follow him (CCC, 1694) and to hand on the Gospel (CCC, 542-543).
- Through baptism, the entire church is called to sanctity (CCC, 825) and to unity (CCC, 836).
- Although considered particular to the religious life, the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, and obedience) illustrate every Christian's response to God's call (CCC, 914-916).
THIRD SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

The Book of Jonah was written in the postexilic period and later placed among the prophets in the Bible. Actually, it is a lengthy parable on the history of prophets told with wisdom and humor. Like Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, Jonah expresses misgivings when God calls him to be a prophet. When God commands him to go preach against Israel's ancient adversary, the Assyrians of Nineveh, Jonah sets sail to Tarshish in the far west of the Mediterranean Sea. But this reluctant prophet will not thwart God. When a violent storm threatens to break up the ship, the crew discovers that Jonah is fleeing from God. They blame Jonah for their plight and throw him overboard. A giant fish swallows him, and after three days and three nights ("the sign of the prophet Jonah," used by Jesus concerning his death and resurrection, Matthew 12:39), God commands the fish to spew Jonah up on the very shore he attempted to avoid. When Jonah announces God's plan to destroy Nineveh in forty days, much to the prophet's dismay, the people turn away from their sins in repentance. The story ends with Jonah sulking under a bush because God had mercy on a people who "did not know their right hand from their left" (Jonah 4:11).

The Book of Jonah is an indictment against Israel's narrow-minded attitude and their unwillingness to share God's message with other nations. Jonah's name means "mourning dove," an allusion to the prophet, who takes flight from God and then mourns his enemy's conversion. Unlike Jonah and Israel, God has compassion toward people they regard as their enemies.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Jonah (3:1–5, 10)

The word of the LORD came to Jonah, saying:

“Set out for the great city of Nineveh,
and announce to it the message that I will tell you.”

So Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh,
according to the LORD'S bidding.

Now Nineveh was an enormously large city;
it took three days to go through it.

Jonah began his journey through the city,
and had gone but a single day's walk announcing,
“Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed,”
“when the people of Nineveh believed God;
they proclaimed a fast
and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way,
he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them;
he did not carry it out.
Great and small: the contrast can refer to distinctions of social class (prominent citizens and the poor).

Scripture frequently presents the Lord as repenting (or, changing his mind) of the evil that he threatens; e.g., Gn 6:6–7; Jer 18:8.

After a brief sermon by the prophet, all the people have a change of heart and turn from their evil ways within a single day! The concluding verse (10) is very likely inspired by Jeremiah 18:7-8, which points out that the deity can indeed change plans if God's creatures have a change of heart and turn away from evil. Today's verses do not mention Jonah's disappointment with his success. He felt certain that his audience would not listen and would merit punishment from God. Jonah would prefer a predictable God to a God of surprises. The Hebrew name yonah means dove or homing-pigeon. It may have symbolized Israel's intent to limit God's mercy to herself. The experience of the prophet and the message of his book is a clear challenge to such an outlook so pointedly manifest in the prophet's response to his successful evangelization.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 25:4–5, 6–7, 8–9)

This psalm is arranged alphabetically, allowing for easy memorization. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is also a Wisdom psalm, a meditation on the way (ha/lakah in Hebrew) to God. The psalmist realizes his own sinfulness and knows he cannot find the path to God on his own. He invokes God seven times (a number that stands for completeness), asking God to reveal the correct path that leads to God's compassion and goodness.

Teach me your ways, O Lord.
Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths,
Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.
Remember that your compassion, O LORD, and your love are from of old.
In your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O LORD.
Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way.
He guides the humble to justice and teaches the humble his way.

SECOND READING

Paul continues to answer questions people ask as they try to follow God's call. One question regards the choice between the married or celibate state of life. If the world they know is passing away, does marriage serve any purpose? Paul, like many in his day, believes the return of Christ is imminent. Some
in the community devalued marriage, believing it only concerned the flesh and had no place in the coming Kingdom. While Paul clearly favors the celibate state because it left him free to minister, he insists this is a personal choice and not a command of the Lord. Whether married or unmarried, each person should continue to live a life of fidelity until the coming of the Lord.

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (7:29–31)
I tell you, brothers and sisters, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.

* [7:29–31] The world...is passing away: Paul advises Christians to go about the ordinary activities of life in a manner different from those who are totally immersed in them and unaware of their transitoriness.

In general, Mediterranean culture's primary temporal orientation is to the present moment rather broadly understood; it includes tomorrow as well. In antiquity, the concept of a distant future was practically non-existent. The closest they came to the notion of a future is better expressed as forthcoming. A harvest is forthcoming from seeds already planted. A baby is certainly forthcoming from a woman already pregnant. Since Jesus died and has already been raised, his return is already forthcoming. Paul and his contemporaries believed it was imminent (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Cor 15:51-52). Paul was firmly convinced he would still be alive when Jesus returned. It was only close encounters with death (e.g., 2 Cor 1:8) that brought Paul and his contemporaries (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:13) to the realization that the Second Coming of Jesus might be delayed for a very long time. Still, the prevailing orientation of this culture to the present moment explains the urgency of Paul's exhortations: “The time is running out.” In that context, the general meaning of his practical advice is: “don't get wrapped up in anything that would prevent you from being fully prepared:' If you are married, this is hardly the time to start a family. If you have purchased land, don't bother preparing it either for a building or for farming. Time is running out.

In the Gospel (Mark 1:14-20), Jesus preaches with similar urgency: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (1:15). When Simon, Andrew, James, and John hear Jesus' call, they follow immediately. The American proverb: "Don't put off for to-morrow things you can do today" suggests that we have a tendency precisely to delay resolute action to another time, to tomorrow. What ought believers do today in order to be fully prepared for the eventualities the Scriptures describe for us?

ALLELUIA (Mk 1:15)
The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.

GOSPEL

After the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus leaves the Judean countryside where John baptized him in the Jordan River. He travels north to a small fishing village along the Sea of Galilee. This area is the center of his ministry for the first half of Mark's account of the Gospel. Jesus begins preaching with a continuation of John's call to repent and believe in the Good News. While John merely announced the Kingdom, Jesus
declares that the time of fulfillment for God's reign is at hand. Jesus calls his first disciples, two pairs of brothers who are fishermen. With the invitation, "Follow me" (v. 17), Jesus makes a radical demand of his disciples to turn away from their former way of life and turn toward the Kingdom of God. Simon Peter and his brother Andrew immediately forsake their boats and nets to become fishers of souls. James and his brother John also leave their family and fishing business to follow Jesus. Jesus promises the new disciples they will be instruments to spread the Gospel throughout the world. During their journey together, they will discover that there are no half measures to serving the Lord. Jesus' disciples must leave everything behind and accompany him on the road to his Death and Rising.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark (1:14–20)

After John had been arrested,

    Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God:
    “This is the time of fulfillment.
The kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent, and believe in the gospel.”
As he passed by the Sea of Galilee,
    he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea;
    they were fishermen.
Jesus said to them,
    “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”
Then they abandoned their nets and followed him.
He walked along a little farther
    and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John.
They too were in a boat mending their nets.
Then he called them.
So they left their father Zebedee in the boat
    along with the hired men and followed him.

* [1:14–15] After John had been arrested: in the plan of God, Jesus was not to proclaim the good news of salvation prior to the termination of the Baptist's active mission. Galilee: in the Marcan account, scene of the major part of Jesus' public ministry before his arrest and condemnation. The gospel of God: not only the good news from God but about God at work in Jesus Christ. This is the time of fulfillment: i.e., of God’s promises. The kingdom of God...Repent: see note on Mt 3:2.

Today's reading from Mark presents a version of how Jesus recruited his first followers that differs from the version re¬ported by John (see last Sunday's reflection).

JESUS AND THE BAPTIST
Scholars believe that after his baptism, Jesus became a dis¬ciple of John, preaching his message of repentance and bap¬tizing others (see John 3:22). Over the course of time, Jesus began to discover a new ministry for himself. According to Mark, Jesus embarked upon it after John was arrested (v. 14). The theme of Jesus' preaching is quite similar to that of the Baptist's: "the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (v. 15). Jesus in¬vites his listeners to give undivided loyalty to God whose de¬finite reign is about to begin.

JESUS RECRUITS HIS FACTION
Modern believers are amazed that the people Jesus invites to join him seem to drop everything and follow him imme¬diately. It is all the more amazing if this is the first time they have met each other.
Cultural background and information shed light on the story. It is highly likely that Jesus and the four followers he summons here are not strangers. If they have not personally met each other before this time, they were aware of each other’s aspirations and objectives. News travelled quickly in the ancient world thanks to gossip networks.

Jesus the artisan moves from Nazareth, an insignificant village, to Capernaum, a hub of activity on the Sea of Galilee at the crossroads of major highways. His presence and activity stir curiosity and become the topic of gossip. He does not seem to have gone there to seek work. Instead, he appears to be seeking people to join him in a common venture.

Gathering a following is a common occurrence in the Mediterranean world. Technically, a group that gathers for a specific purpose for a limited time is called a "coalition." The coalition that Jesus gathers is technically called a "faction" because it focuses on a central person who holds and controls the loyalty of the group. Invariably, the faction leader has a grievance and gathers around him others who share the grievance.

What were the grievance and the aspirations, objectives, and hopes of the fishermen who joined Jesus' faction? These are never spelled out. The facts, however, that Jesus was known as the son of an artisan and that these first four members of his group were fishermen make it probable that they found common cause in the oppressive difficulties of their daily lives. Such experiences would be the underpinning for Jesus' broader project of proclaiming the reign of God, the authentic patron or father of Israel.

In societies where central government is weak, people develop more reliable ways of meeting their needs. Patronage is such a system in the Mediterranean world. People with means (patrons) are expected to help those with less or no means (clients). Many refused to play the role of patron (Luke 12:15-21) prompting Jesus to point to God as the only reliable patron for Israel.

Fishing was a major industry in the first century, much too demanding to be the pastime of a single family. The brothers Simon and Andrew worked with their father Jonah, while the brothers James and John worked with their father Zebedee. These two families very likely formed a corporation that also employed "hired hands" (v. 20), that is, day laborers.

Such corporations were contracted to provide fish in return for payment in cash or in processed fish. First-century records indicate the payment was frequently irregular and inadequate. Moreover, fishing was part of the tax network. Toll collectors, like Matthew, leased fishing rights to corporations in return for a percentage of the catch, sometimes as high as 40 percent. Jonah and Zebedee had to hire more day laborers to replace their sons who followed Jesus. They calculated that this short-term gamble might improve their lot if Jesus could deliver what he promised.

Western believers like to romanticize Jesus' call of his first followers. Cultural insights demonstrate that issues of livelihood were at stake. What real-life issues in America prompt people to follow Jesus with undivided loyalty?

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- God meets us in many ways (CCC, 31-35) in the world (CCC, 32) and in the human person (CCC, 33).
- Beyond the ordinary means available, God meets us through grace (CCC, 35, 1996-2005) and through revelation (CCC, 36-38).
- Grace is God's favor, free and undeserved help that God gives us in our ordinary lives (CCC, 1996). It is our participation in the life of God (CCC, 1997). Reflection on God's blessings is a guarantee that grace is at work in us.
FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

We do not know much about the author of Deuteronomy except that he lived in about the seventh century BC and was very concerned about the negative influence of the monarchy on Israel's faith. This concern led him to reinterpret some of Israel's earlier traditions in order to make them more relevant for his own time. In the First Reading, the author incorporates two specific strands of Israel's past. The most obvious is the Exodus-Moses tradition. Indeed, most of Deuteronomy, including this passage, was written as if it were a farewell speech by Moses. The second strand of tradition, that of Elijah, is less obvious. The phrase "I will raise up for them a prophet like you" (v. 18) is a reference to the prophet Elijah’s resemblance to Moses.

The literary context for these words is a warning against using divination or other means of fortune telling to predict and control the future. For the author of Deuteronomy, such things were wrong on two counts. First, they were pagan practices borrowed from Israel's neighbors; second, they were veiled attempts to manipulate the power of the one true God. Although divination is not as enticing today as it might have been in the days of Deuteronomy, most of us are still not entirely free from the desire to play God on occasion. However, the author of Deuteronomy shows us that the Lord our God already knows our need to communicate with the divine. Indeed, that is why he often spoke through prophets like Moses and Elijah to communicate his word, drawing his people close to him. Christians believe that God sent his only Son, Jesus, a great prophet, but also true God and true man, to draw us into communion with him.

A reading from the Book of Deuteronomy (18:15–20)

Moses spoke to all the people, saying:

“A prophet like me will the LORD, your God, raise up for you from among your own kin; to him you shall listen.

This is exactly what you requested of the LORD, your God, at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let us not again hear the voice of the LORD, our God, nor see this great fire any more, lest we die.’

And the LORD said to me, ‘This was well said.

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kin,

and will put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him.

Whoever will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name,

I myself will make him answer for it.

But if a prophet presume to speak in my name an oracle that I have not commanded him to speak,

or speaks in the name of other gods, he shall die.’

* [18:15] A prophet like me: from the context (opposition to the practices described in vv. 10–11) it seems that Moses is referring in general to all the true prophets who were to succeed him. This passage came to be understood in a quasi-Messianic sense in the New Testament (Mt 17:5; Jn 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:22; 7:37).
A prophet is a spokesperson for God who declares God's will for the here-and-now. These verses (very likely exilic) describe the authentic prophet. A true prophet is called by YHWH, is a native Israelite, and stands in continuity with the distinctive prophetic role of Moses (see Exod 33:11; Num 12:1-8). The Israelites requested a mediator/prophet (see Deut 5:23-28) because direct interaction with God was a frightening experience for them. God promises to raise up such a mediator/prophet as the occasion requires. Only such a one, however, is authorized to speak in God's name. For this reason, listeners will be held accountable for the prophetic message. On the other hand, non-Yahwistic prophets or anyone not commissioned by YHWH (see Jer 23:9-32) will be subject to death. This reading is intended to illuminate the gospel in which Jesus is described as one who teaches with authority (Mark 1:27).

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 95:1–2, 6–7, 7–9)

The words of this psalm might have originally been a processional song sung to remind the people of whom they were coming to worship as they made their way to the Temple. The psalmist says that the Lord is a "great God," a "great King above all gods" (v. 3). All of creation belongs to him, and he has the authority and power to do whatever he wants. He is the "rock of our salvation" and because of this his people can make a "joyful noise" (v. 1). As the exuberant procession approaches the Temple, another voice is heard, perhaps that of a priest. It is not enough to acknowledge God with our words, he warns; we must also acknowledge his authority and power by the way we live. Thus, the psalmist exhorts the people to hear the Lord's voice and not harden their hearts as the Israelites had at Meribah and Massah in the desert.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
Come, let us sing joyfully to the L ORD; let us acclaim the rock of our salvation.
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us joyfully sing psalms to him.
Come, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the L ORD who made us.
For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.
Oh, that today you would hear his voice: "Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as in the day of Massah in the desert, Where your fathers tempted me;
they tested me though they had seen my works."

* [Psalm 95] Twice the Psalm calls the people to praise and worship God (Ps 95:1–2, 6), the king of all creatures (Ps 95:3–5) and shepherd of the flock (Ps 95:7a, 7b). The last strophe warns the people to be more faithful than were their ancestors in the journey to the promised land (Ps 95:7c–11). This invitation to praise God regularly opens the Church's official prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours.

This psalm originated as a processional or entrance hymn as pilgrims moved toward and entered the Temple area. They would see the "rock" upon which the altar of sacrifice was located. It was not difficult to apply this image to YHWH who, in the psalms, is often acclaimed as "rock" (Pss 18:2; 78:35; 89:26). The repetition of "today" reflects a concern that is common in Deuteronomy (4:30; 5:3; 6:1; 7:11, etc.). The pilgrims making the procession would be encouraged to praise the Lord (w. 1-2). Once within the sanctuary at the Holy of Holies, they would be exhorted to adore and praise God (vv. 6-7). Then, a reading and homily would be offered (see Neh 8:4, 6, 8, 9-12 for a sample of what they might have heard). Finally, the service would end with a warning to take to heart what had been heard. Though the pilgrims are in the presence of the Lord, they are advised to remain obedient and not harden their hearts.

SECOND READING
This Sunday, Paul continues his reflection on the question of marriage and in the process reveals a decided preference for the single life. It is not that marriage is wrong, he says, it is that singleness promotes more focused attention to the work of God. Married persons, he argues, have to concern themselves with the needs of their spouse and family. Single people are free to devote themselves to God. For Paul, singleness is a charism, a gift that enables a person to be more fully available to God and to other people. Ultimately, though, whether single or married, Paul's desire is that a Christian be as totally devoted to God as Jesus was.

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (7:32–35)

Brothers and sisters:
I should like you to be free of anxieties.
An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord.
But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided.
An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit.
A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.
I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction.

Key to understanding Paul's thoughts on marriage as expressed in these verses is an appreciation for a cardinal Mediterranean value: limited good. This value consists in the firm belief that all goods in life are finite in quantity and already distributed: honor, semen, beauty, health, wealth, land, reputation, etc. Loyalty is one of these limited goods. There is no more where this came from. There is only so much to go around. The one who can give all her or his loyalty to a single person gives more loyalty than the one who has to divide her or his loyalty between two or more persons. Hence, the married person has divided loyalties; the unmarried person can give all her or his loyalty to God.

Murphy-O'Connor observes that while Paul has no qualms imposing administrative decisions, he shows restraint in imposing moral judgments. In v. 35 Paul concludes his comments by saying: "I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you:" In other words, take it or leave it, but strive to adhere to the Lord without distraction.

Western culture, in contrast, believes in unlimited or limit-less goods: there is always more where this came from. Western citizens can be loyal to their family, their occupation, their hobbies, etc. For the Western citizen, time rather than loyalty appears to be the more dominant concern. Hence Westerners have invented quality time which can be of brief duration but very intense and filled with meaning. The gospel for today (Mark 1:21-28) illustrates the consequences of Jesus' loyalty to God. He teaches with authority and has mastery over unclean spirits. Both readings present an opportunity for modern believers, whether married or not, to review their loyalties. No matter what one's station in life, divided loyalties in our culture are possible, acceptable, and often necessary. How do we maintain and balance them?

ALLELUIA (Mt 4:16)
The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light; on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death, light has arisen.
According to Mark, the appearance of Jesus on earth set off a spiritual battle between the powers of good and the powers of evil. Today’s Gospel records the first of four specific conflicts. Jesus enters the synagogue and is immediately challenged by the man with an unclean spirit. The unclean spirit even knows Jesus' name, which in that day was a sign that this unclean spirit had power over Jesus. But Jesus is in control. He rebukes the unclean spirit, and the man it has tormented is healed. Astonished, the people in the synagogue marvel, “What is this? A new teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him” (v. 27). Although Mark often depicts Jesus as a teacher, he records very little of what Jesus actually said. Instead, Mark prefers to concentrate on the authority of Jesus as evidenced in his works, such as the healing in today’s Gospel. For Mark, however, both Jesus' teaching and his power to heal confirm that he is indeed the Son of God. Even in the unexpected words of the unclean spirit, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God," is a confession of Jesus' true identity (v. 24).

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark (1:21–28)

Then they came to Capernaum, and on the sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.

In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit;

he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

Jesus rebuked him and said, “Quiet! Come out of him!”

The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him.

All were amazed and asked one another, “What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.”

His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.

* [1:21–45] The account of a single day’s ministry of Jesus on a sabbath in and outside the synagogue of Capernaum (Mk 1:21–31) combines teaching and miracles of exorcism and healing. Mention is not made of the content of the teaching but of the effect of astonishment and alarm on the people. Jesus’ teaching with authority, making an absolute claim on the hearer, was in the best tradition of the ancient prophets, not of the scribes. The narrative continues with events that evening (Mk 1:32–34; see notes on Mt 8:14–17) and the next day (Mk 1:35–39). The cleansing in Mk 1:40–45 stands as an isolated story.


* [1:24–25] The Holy One of God: not a confession but an attempt to ward off Jesus’ power, reflecting the notion that use of the precise name of an opposing spirit would guarantee mastery over him. Jesus silenced the cry of the unclean spirit and drove him out of the man.

* [1:24] What have you to do with us?: see note on Jn 2:4.

Middle Eastern cultures and indeed a large part of the ancient and modern world believe in spirits, good and bad. The West has allowed science and particularly the medical sciences to explain instances of "human beings possessed by spirits" in a different way. This makes the present story difficult for Westerners to accept and appreciate. From a Middle Eastern perspective, the meaning of the story is very plain.

**JESUS THE ARTISAN WHO TEACHES**
It is not the unclean spirit and the possessed man that trouble Jesus' audience. These were common in their world. They are disturbed because Jesus is acting totally out of line with his inherited status. This artisan from Nazareth dares to teach "as one having authority" in the Capernaum synagogue. Who gave him authority to teach?

**JESUS THE TEACHER WITH POWER OVER SPIRITS**

As the listeners puzzle over Jesus' behavior, his teaching, and his manner of teaching, a man possessed by an unclean spirit interrupts the setting by shrieking.

Our ancestors in the faith believed that spirits were more powerful than human beings but less powerful than God. Spirits readily interfered (or intervened) in human life, some-times benevolently, sometimes capriciously, and sometimes malevolently. They had power to control human behavior.

The spirit who possessed the man in the synagogue is cen-tral in this story because he knows Jesus' identity far better than Jesus' compatriots do. He knows Jesus is "the Holy one of God!"

According to ancient magical practice, one means of pro-tection against the power of malicious or malevolent spirits is to call out the name (and true identity) of that spirit. The apocryphal Testament of Solomon is like a modern-day physi-cian's desk reference listing the names of various spirits, what they do, and how human beings might thwart or counteract their power. For instance, "The nineteenth [spirit] said, 'I am called Mardero. I inflict incurable fevers; write my name in some such way in the house, and I retreat immediately'" (Testament of Solomon 18.23). By shouting out Jesus' true identity, the unclean spirit seeks to thwart Jesus' power.

But much to the amazement of the people, Jesus is not controlled or cowed by this unclean spirit. Instead, Jesus shows that his power is stronger than that of the spirit. Jesus commands the spirit to come out of the man, and it does!

The people now have an answer to why Jesus teaches "with authority, and not as the scribes." Clearly, Jesus possesses powers stronger than those of ordinary human beings. Some Greek manuscripts have variant readings of the people's re-sponse to Jesus in Mark 1:27: "What is this? A new teach-ing? With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!"

Authority is a major problem for Jesus' contemporaries. No one denies the mighty deeds of power that Jesus performs. What troubles them is the source of his authority. Is it God? (Mark, of course, has already told this to his listeners and readers a number of times.) Or is it the world of the other, lesser gods and spirits?

The people in the synagogue at Capernaum have not yet decided. The fact, however, is very clear. Jesus the artisan from Nazareth has authority and effective power to do what he does. He behaves not shamefully, out of alignment with his status, but rather quite honorably. And this is why Mark concludes by noting: "At once his reputation [honor] began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee!"

This final note affects the honor of both Jesus and the healed man. The gossip network proclaims a new honor sta-tus for Jesus (teaches with authority; has power over unclean spirits) that contrasts with his status "of Nazareth." It also re-stores honor to the man now released from the power of un-clean spirits. He can reclaim his rightful place in the community.

The Western tendency to rationalize the ancient under-standing of spirits is rooted in the fact that Westerners have much more power over their lives and circumstances than the ancients believed they had. Today's reflection invites Westerners to consider how wisely or imprudently they use their power.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- The first commandment tells us we are to worship and serve only the Lord our God. It forbids the worship of other gods (CCC, 2084-2141).
- The Christian is obliged in conscience not to follow authorities that are contrary to the Gospel, the moral order, or the fundamental rights of per-sons (CCC, 2242).
The fourth commandment has us honor our father and mother and all who receive authority from God for the good of society. Those in authority also have certain duties (CCC, 2197-2257).
FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

Many people find it easy to think of all the blessings God offers until they go through a difficult time. When troubling times hit, people's faith can waver. We realize that good things don't just happen to good people, and that bad things don't just happen to bad people. Life is much more mysterious and complicated than that. In Job's time, people took a more simplistic view of things. If you were being punished, it must be as a result of sin. Job's suffering is mysterious. What does God want him to learn? How is this supposed to help him to grow? In spite of his troubles, Job's faith is constant. Job complains to God about his treatment, he never curses God, even though his friends advise him to do so. Job's friends insist that he must have sinned, but Job remains...

A reading from the Book of Job (7:1–4, 6–7)

Job spoke, saying: Is not man's life on earth a drudgery? Are not his days those of hirelings? He is a slave who longs for the shade, a hireling who waits for his wages.

So I have been assigned months of misery, and troubled nights have been allotted to me. If in bed I say, "When shall I arise?" then the night drags on; I am filled with restlessness until the dawn. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle; they come to an end without hope. Remember that my life is like the wind; I shall not see happiness again.

* [7:1] Drudgery: taken by some to refer to military service; cf. also 14:14.

Today's gospel (Mark 1:29-39) describes Jesus' successful healing efforts on behalf of all who suffer a wide variety of human ills. The selection from Job does not describe an illness but rather offers Job's complaints about his predicament, a situation in which he receives little useful help or advice from his so-called friends! No one helps Job like Jesus helped those in need. Today's verses are Job's reply to Eliphaz's statement in Job 4:7, a prelude to his address to God which becomes explicit in verse 12 but begins in verse 7, when Job asks God to remember the human condition. Here Job protests that his life is a complete misery, without any meaning now since experiencing the losses God has caused him (Job 1-2). He compares his life with three common frustrating experiences in the ancient world: forced military service, the work of a day laborer, and simple slavery. In Roman times and perhaps earlier, it was customary for soldiers to force nonsoldiers to carry their equipment. To paraphrase Jesus, "if a soldier makes you carry his equipment for one mile, go two" (Matt 5:41). Day-
laborers were usually people who lost family property and therefore had to rely on the graces of someone to hire them, day after day. In the Mediterranean world, it is inappropriate to ask for a job. One has to be invited to work, and one can only hope the employer will choose you from among all those who are waiting for the invitation (see Matt 20:1-16). Finally, while slavery in antiquity had nothing in common with slavery known in the New World, for some it did involve heavy labor often during the hottest time of day in the Mediterranean. Job's conclusion? I shall not see happiness again.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 147:1–2, 3–4, 5–6)

Those who have lost something or someone they loved, perhaps a friend, a family member, a job, or a home or homeland, know what it is to feel brokenhearted. The first stanza of Psalm 147 speaks of a God who understands life at the level of loss and pain. God gathers, rebuilds, heals, binds up wounds, and gives sustenance. God is present to the brokenhearted, lost, wounded, and lowly. God has a personal relationship with human beings, yet he also numbers each star and knows them by name. This God, with his immense power and tender love, is unlike all of the other gods that the Israelites and their pagan neighbors had ever worshipped. Those who are lost and scattered are gathered together, and that which has been torn down is rebuilt - such is the attentiveness of this God.

Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.
Praise the LORD, for he is good;  
sing praise to our God, for he is gracious;  
it is fitting to praise him.
The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem;  
the dispersed of Israel he gathers.
He heals the brokenhearted  
and binds up their wounds.
He tells the number of the stars;  
he calls each by name.
Great is our Lord and mighty in power;  
to his wisdom there is no limit.
The LORD sustains the lowly;  
the wicked he casts to the ground.

* [Psalm 147] The hymn is divided into three sections by the calls to praise in Ps 147:1, 7, 12. The first section praises the powerful creator who restores exiled Judah (Ps 147:1–6); the second section, the creator who provides food to animals and human beings; the third and climactic section exhorts the holy city to recognize it has been re-created and made the place of disclosure for God’s word, a word as life-giving as water.

YHWH is the healer of Israel in this period of rebuilding Jerusalem after its destruction (587 B.C.E.). That God numbers the stars and calls each by name means that God controls the seasons of the year, notably the rainy season that is so important in this part of the world which knows only two seasons: dry (summer, the end of April to beginning of October) and wet (winter, October through April). The theme of healing, or restoring meaning to broken and disrupted lives, in this psalm makes it a fitting bridge between the first reading and the gospel.

SECOND READING
Listening to today's Second Reading, we might imagine Paul to be a second John the Baptist. Paul does not mince words. He speaks with passion. He feels compelled to preach. He clearly calls others to follow by professing belief in Jesus Christ and acting on that faith. He knows that everything he does is for the sake of the Gospel.

Paul had met the Risen Christ on the way to Damascus and, from then on, preached a message of faith in Jesus Christ, who had lived, suffered, and died for human sin. Paul was one of the very ones Christ had redeemed, and Paul wanted others to know of his conversion.

Paul faced criticism from others, who said that he had no right to preach the Gospel and act as an Apostle because he was not a true follower. But Paul knew the call to act for the sake of the Gospel. He had experienced the call in the person of Jesus Christ. Nothing could dissuade him from that mission.

Paul's sense of his own vocation speaks to us of ours. Our Baptism initiates us into the community of Christian believers. We are to respond individually to our vocational call to follow Jesus Christ. This means finding ways to live out our baptismal promise by proclaiming the Good News, not just in our words but also in our actions. Like Job and Paul, we are invited to a faithful response in the circumstances of our lives. We, too, seek to find the brokenhearted, lost, wounded, and lowly. We help people by gathering them, rebuilding them, healing them, may not always have Job's patience or the psalmist's eloquence of poetic prayer. We may not always have Paul's zeal or Jesus' strength. But, we always have God's steadfast love and grace, and that is enough.

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (9:16–19, 22–23)

Brothers and sisters:

If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast,
  for an obligation has been imposed on me,
  and woe to me if I do not preach it!
If I do so willingly, I have a recompense,
  but if unwillingly, then I have been entrusted with a stewardship.
What then is my recompense?
That, when I preach,
  I offer the gospel free of charge
  so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.
Although I am free in regard to all,
  I have made myself a slave to all
  so as to win over as many as possible.
To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak.
I have become all things to all, to save at least some.
All this I do for the sake of the gospel,
  so that I too may have a share in it.

* [9:1–27] This chapter is an emotionally charged expansion of Paul's appeal to his own example in 1 Cor 8:13; its purpose is to reinforce the exhortation of 1 Cor 8:9. The two opening questions introduce the themes of Paul's freedom and his apostleship (1 Cor 9:1), themes that the chapter will develop in reverse order, 1 Cor 9:1–18 treating the question of his apostleship and the rights that flow from it, and 1 Cor 9:19–27 exploring dialectically the nature of Paul's freedom. The language is highly rhetorical, abounding in questions, wordplays, paradoxes, images, and appeals to authority and experience. The argument is unified by repetitions; its articulations are highlighted by inclusions and transitional verses.
* [9:15–18] Paul now assigns a more personal motive to his nonuse of his right to support. His preaching is not a service spontaneously undertaken on his part but a stewardship imposed by a sort of divine compulsion. Yet to merit any reward he must bring some spontaneous quality to his service, and this he
does by freely renouncing his right to support. The material here is quite similar to that contained in Paul’s “defense” at 2 Cor 11:5–12; 12:11–18.

* [9:19–23] In a rhetorically balanced series of statements Paul expands and generalizes the picture of his behavior and explores the paradox of apostolic freedom. It is not essentially freedom from restraint but freedom for service—a possibility of constructive activity.

There are no free gifts in the Mediterranean world. Every gift carries the expectation of a gift in return. The principle of limited goods (my gift to you depletes my goods) joins with the cultural practice of dyadic contract (your gift requires that I reciprocate so that your supply of goods may be complete again). It was on this basis that Jesus sent his disciples to preach the gospel (Mark 6:8-12). Preachers can expect support from the community. If it is not offered, preachers must move on. In these verses, however, Paul insists that he is preaching to the Corinthians “free of charge” (v. 18). Actually, the Macedonians are supporting Paul at this time (2 Cor 11:7-9), so the preaching isn’t exactly free. Paul's main point, however, is that he tempers his freedom with self-discipline: "I have made myself a slave to all" (v. 22). Thus, though he has a right based on the words of Jesus to expect support for his preaching, he forgoes the right for the sake of the common good. He restrains his legitimate freedom in order to keep the community whole and holy. Here is yet another glowing example of the Mediterranean collectivistic personality subordinating individual preferences to the good of the social body. According to Paul, Christian freedom is not license but rather an obligation to serve each other through love (Gal 5:13-15). He consistently gives personal witness to this in his pastoral practice.

In the gospel for today (Mark 1:29-39) we see another example of dyadic contract. Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law, who responds by waiting on him and his entourage. "You do me a favor; I owe you a favor and do one in return." But going beyond that, Jesus went to the nearby villages to preach and drive out demons. His movement made it impossible for the beneficiaries to repay him personally. The hope was that through love they would serve one another in their needs. The readings invite modern believers to reflect upon freedom, that value so highly cherished in the West. Is it readily sacrificed for the common good, or is freedom proclaimed even to the detriment of others?

ALLELUIA (Mt 8:17)
Christ took away our infirmities and bore our diseases.

GOSPEL

Jesus clearly states his mission in the Gospel according to Mark. He comes to bring a message about God's reign and invites a decision from followers to change their lives and believe the Good News. In today's passage, he reiterates his mission: "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come" (Mark 1:38). Even after his preaching in the synagogue, he did not choose to rest at Simon's house, but healed Simon's mother-in-law instead. After days of curing the sick and Jesus knows the need is great and his message and ministry is urgent, and he calls his followers to act with the same passion for the sake of the Gospel.

From the holy Gospel according to Mark (1:29–39)
On leaving the synagogue
Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John.
Simon’s mother-in-law lay sick with a fever.
They immediately told him about her.
He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up.
Then the fever left her and she waited on them.
When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. The whole town was gathered at the door. He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him. Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. Simon and those who were with him pursued him and on finding him said, “Everyone is looking for you.” He told them, “Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come.” So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.

* [1:21–45] The account of a single day’s ministry of Jesus on a sabbath in and outside the synagogue of Capernaum (Mk 1:21–31) combines teaching and miracles of exorcism and healing. Mention is not made of the content of the teaching but of the effect of astonishment and alarm on the people. Jesus’ teaching with authority, making an absolute claim on the hearer, was in the best tradition of the ancient prophets, not of the scribes. The narrative continues with events that evening (Mk 1:32–34; see notes on Mt 8:14–17) and the next day (Mk 1:35–39). The cleansing in Mk 1:40–45 stands as an isolated story.

Modern Western readers of the Bible are ever curious about the health problems Jesus appears to have addressed effectively. The fever experienced by Peter’s mother-in-law, the people afflicted with demons, the "various diseases" (v. 35) presented to Jesus all raise a host of questions. The basic questions are, what really happened? did Jesus really do it? Contemporary medical anthropologists offer some helpful insights. They distinguish between disease as a biomedical malfunction that afflicts an organism, and illness as a disvalued human condition in which social networks are ruptured and life’s meaning is lost. Curing is aimed at disease; it is a rare occurrence. Healing is aimed at illness; it occurs infallibly all the time for all people. Everyone works out a new meaning in life no matter what the predicament. It is nearly impossible for us to know what diseases afflicted the people who came to Jesus for help. But the texts do reveal the social consequences of their affliction and how Jesus remedied those consequences as well as the affliction, whatever it was. Consider Peter’s mother-in-law.

**PETER’S HOUSE**
The ideal marriage partner in the ancient Mediterranean world is a first cousin, specifically, the young man’s father’s brother’s daughter. Moreover, the wife always moves into the husband’s household, for the sons continue to live with their father even after marriage. But they have a place of their own in an often large housing complex. Peter’s mother-in-law, the wife of his father’s brother, should be living in her husband’s house. If he has died, she should be living with one of the sons, or if they have died she would return to her family. That she is in Peter’s house suggests that she may have no living family members to take care of her. In the Middle Eastern world, this is a fate worse than any sickness, indeed, worse than death. As often happens in Jesus’ ministry, the challenge is more than the woman’s fever.

**JESUS THE FOLK HEALER**
In the ancient world, professional physicians did not attempt to heal people. If they failed, they could be put to death. They preferred to talk about illnesses, after the fashion of philosopher-physicians. These
are the physicians to whom the New Testament refers when it (infrequently) uses that word (Mark 2:17; 5:26; Luke 4:23; 8:43; Col 4:14).
Folk healers were more abundant and were much more willing to use their hands and risk a failed treatment. Peasants had easy access to such healers and resorted to them frequently. In the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as a folk healer: a spirit-filled prophet and teacher who has power over unclean spirits and a wide variety of illness.
One very consistent element in Jesus' healing activity is that he restores sick persons to their proper status, role, and place in the community. Lepers declared cleansed rejoin the holy community of God. The dead restored to life return to membership in their family.
In today's gospel reading, Jesus takes Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and helps her up. Anyone familiar with Mediterranean culture knows that they are more willing to touch each other than germ-obsessed Americans. They stand closer to each other when they speak, and they frequently touch. It is not Jesus' simple touch that is important; his touch mediates his power. On another occasion, a woman who touched only his cloak drew upon his power without his knowing it, and she was healed (Mark 5:30).
That Peter's mother-in-law immediately began to serve Jesus and his disciples demonstrates that Jesus has really healed her. She is strong enough to resume her status, role, and normal function in the home. Jesus has restored meaning to her life. In typical Mediterranean fashion, she reciprocates the favor by serving him and those with him.
The teaching and healing ministry of Jesus challenge America's continuing efforts to reform its health care delivery system. Above all, people need meaning in life. That's what healing is about.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
- "True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others" (EG, 88).
- "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (DCE, 1).
- "The Gospel dictates ... that we should dedicate ourselves to the liberation of people even in their present existence in this world. For unless the Christian message of love and justice shows its effectiveness through action in the cause of justice in the world, it will only with difficulty gain credibility with the people of our times" (JM, 35).
SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

As the Israelites began to understand their role as the people of God, they worked to understand what it meant to be holy, faithful, and free of sin in the eyes of the Lord. They created rituals to cleanse themselves and to show signs of repentance. They established laws and practices to keep themselves holy and pure. They saw these practices as ways to uphold their part of the covenant to be faithful to the Lord. One such prescription in Leviticus allowed that a priest, such as Aaron, could declare a person clean from sin and so able to return to the community. But, in their legislation, they began to practice extremes and see external diseases such as leprosy, or physical irregularities such as blindness or deafness, as a sign that a person was unclean. They thought that the outward appearance must mirror the internal, so they interpreted illness and deformity as signs of sin. People avoided the sick and handicapped and relegated them to staying outside the community that was so important to the Israelites. In the First Reading, we hear of the leper: “He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp” (v. 46). It was a terrible fate for people to be cast out from the community. This story sets the scene for us to hear of Jesus’ cure of the leper in the Gospel.

A reading from the Book of Leviticus (13:1–2, 44–46)

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron,

“If someone has on his skin a scab or pustule or blotch which appears to be the sore of leprosy, he shall be brought to Aaron, the priest, or to one of the priests among his descendants.

If the man is leprous and unclean, the priest shall declare him unclean by reason of the sore on his head.

“The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’

As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean, since he is in fact unclean. He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.”

* [13:45–46] The symbolic association with death is found in the mourning activities in which those diagnosed with these afflictions engage: rending clothes, disheveling the hair, and covering the mouth. They are also excluded from the camp. Cf. examples of exclusion in Nm 5:1–4; 12:14–15; 2 Kgs 7:3–10; 15:5; 2 Chr 26:21. Persons with scaly infections must have been able to pollute others in the priestly system, though this is not stated. Hence, they must cry out “Unclean, unclean!” to warn others of their presence.

At first glance, leprosy is the topic that links the gospel (Jlark 1:40-45) and first reading today. These verses from Leviticus state that the priest may “certify” authentic leprosy. Once this is done, the afflicted
person is declared unclean. Such a person must dwell outside the camp. Straightforward as the reading appears, there is a major difficulty. Leprosy as we know and understand it (Hansen's disease) first came to the Middle East with Alexander's armies in the fourth century BCE. Leviticus reflects a much earlier period of history.

What is Leviticus 13-14 talking about? Very likely it is not Hansen's disease. Rather, it is some kind of repulsive scaly condition that affected people, clothes, and walls. Why the concern? Why would God care? The "holiness and purity codes" of Leviticus can be dated to the exilic and post-exilic era. When the Babylonian captivity had ended, Ezra the priest discerned that the reason for Israel's exile was its failure to keep itself pure and holy, mainly by marrying people who were not members of the House of Israel. To assure success to Israel's fresh start after the Exile, Ezra determined that all mixed marriages should be broken up and the purity of the nation restored (Ezra 9-10).

The legislation contained in Leviticus 11-16 also dates from this period. The disparate subjects of these chapters (food, childbirth, leprosy, involuntary genital discharges) all pertain to "body openings" and "the boundary of the body." The concern centers upon what can properly enter or exit the body and upon body openings both normal, like the mouth, and irregular, like scabs on the skin.

Social scientists note that rules about social boundaries and rules about body boundaries replicate one another. Thus, a concern for purity of the social body (avoid contamination with foreigners through marriage) is reflected in a concern for purity of the physical body (foods, leprosy, discharges). Both rules reinforce the major concern: keeping the community pure. "Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy" (Lev 19:2).

The message of today's first reading is that purity of the community must be preserved at all costs. Anyone afflicted with the repulsive skin condition that causes irregular "body openings" is a risk and must be "excommunicated:" especially in relation to the worshipping community. If a person had the visible condition described here, such a person was not "holy as the Lord your God is holy." The condition was not considered contagious (in fact, even real leprosy is minimally contagious), but rather polluting. Experience indicated that those who touched these afflicted people often did not contract their physical condition. They did, however, become unclean, impure, unholy just like the afflicted person. Notice the operative word both in this reading and in the gospel: "unclean." The consequence of contracting an unclean condition was that one had to "dwell apart ... outside the camp."

For Western individualists, the impact of such a fate is difficult to appreciate. A quarantined and isolated individualist would simply take along magazines, books, CDs, a palm pilot, and computer games and patiently wait until the condition changed. Individualists don't need the company of others to find happiness and fulfillment. Yet individualists constitute only 20 percent of the current world population. Fully 80 percent of the people on the face of the planet are collectivistic personalities. Such persons depend on community for meaning in life. To expel such a person from community is equivalent to a death sentence. Leviticus is simply content to identify the problem and prescribe the action necessary for maintaining the community in holiness that it might be pleasing to God. It is Jesus who by touching such afflicted persons demonstrates that they are not polluting, that are not displeasing to God and they should be restored to the community.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 32:1–2, 5, 11)

Psalm 32 is a hymn for those who know they have sinned and are overjoyed by God's forgiveness. The final verse of the selection of today's psalm calls upon others to join in the praise. The just and upright of heart are invited by the psalmist to exult in the song. It is significant to call upon the community to sing praise together in light of the stories we hear today of lepers separated from their community because they were considered unclean. One can imagine the joy of a leper, or a sinner, who is restored to the bonds of community and those whom they love. Such is the joy of salvation!
I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.
Blessed is he whose fault is taken away, whose sin is covered.
Blessed the man to whom the LORD imputes not guilt, in whose spirit there is no guile.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you, my guilt I covered not.
I said, “I confess my faults to the LORD,” and you took away the guilt of my sin.
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you just; exult, all you upright of heart.

* [Psalm 32] An individual thanksgiving and the second of the seven Penitential Psalms (cf. Ps 6). The opening declaration—the forgiven are blessed (Ps 32:1–2)—arises from the psalmist’s own experience. At one time the psalmist was stubborn and closed, a victim of sin’s power (Ps 32:3–4), and then became open to the forgiving God (Ps 32:5–7). Sin here, as often in the Bible, is not only the personal act of rebellion against God but also the consequences of that act—frustration and waning of vitality. Having been rescued, the psalmist can teach others the joys of justice and the folly of sin (Ps 32:8–11).

This post-exilic psalm of thanksgiving is the second of a group of seven identified as penitential psalms A pious Israelite notes that God initiates forgiveness (1-2) The challenge to the sinner is to be honest and stop dissimulating (5). The experience of being forgiven or cleansed is definitely refreshing (11). Trust in the Lord!

SECOND READING

In chapter 10 of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he recounts the story of the Israelites and their Exodus in the desert. He reminds them that the Israelites were tempted and they failed. They worshipped other idols, blamed God for their troubles, and complained about their situation. Paul reminds Corinth about the potential for this to happen there, too.

In today’s reading, Paul tells the Corinthians what kind of example they should be: they should do everything for the glory of God, and avoid things that would cause offense. Another translation of this reading says that they should avoid doing anything that would cause another to stumble. Paul says that they should avoid causing Jews, Greeks, or members of the Church of God - basically, everyone - to stumble. Clearly, Paul expects that Christians are to be examples to the world.

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (10:31–11:1)

Brothers and sisters,
Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, 
do everything for the glory of God.
Avoid giving offense, whether to the Jews or Greeks or the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit but that of the many, 
that they may be saved.
Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

* [10:32–11:1] In summary, the general rule of mutually responsible use of their Christian freedom is enjoined first negatively (1 Cor 10:32), then positively, as exemplified in Paul (1 Cor 10:33), and finally grounded in Christ, the pattern for Paul’s behavior and theirs (1 Cor 11:1; cf. Rom 15:1–3).

"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 10:31). Is this bluster, arrogance, or honesty? Because he repeats it so often (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; Gal 4:2; Phil 3:17; 4:9; 1 Cor 4:16) to communities that knew him
personally, Paul is probably giving his honest self-appraisal. These are clear claims to honor. No one in this culture would make this kind of claim if it could be denied. The shame would be too great and too costly.

The claim is not preposterous. Since Jesus is no longer physically visible in this community, his followers must mirror "the life of Jesus" (2 Cor 4:10) for others to learn and imitate. In what way did Paul think he was worthy of imitation?

Chiefly by behaving in such a way that God would be honored. This is the general truth of his statement. Specifically in this instance, however, the behavior to imitate is not to put stumbling blocks in the way of those (Judeans, non-Judeans, or the ekklesia) who want to draw near to Jesus. Since he mentions eating and drinking, the stumbling blocks might entail practices that could be viewed as belittling or denying the value of food regulations such as Leviticus 12. While Jesus and his followers believed God had changed these (see Acts 10; compare Mark 7:19), their liberated behaviors could prove offensive and off-putting to those who did not share this belief. Paul's idea was to "save" these people rather than repulse them.

In today's gospel (Mark 1:40-45), Jesus breaks purity rules by touching the man afflicted with a skin condition negatively evaluated by Leviticus 13-14 in order to restore meaning to his life (to heal him). Paul, too, is concerned with bringing new meaning to life to all who are attracted to Jesus. Paul, however, seems to manifest greater sensitivity by warning against setting up stumbling blocks, perhaps by blatantly insisting on one's liberated views to the hurt of others. The strategies are worth pondering: full-steam ahead with liberating ideas? or sensitive respect for others who do not yet feel so liberated?

**ALLELUIA (Lk 7:16)**

A great prophet has arisen in our midst, God has visited his people.

**GOSPEL**

Today's medical science has classified leprosy as a single skin condition, also known as Hansen's disease. In Jesus' time, though, leprosy was a term that referred to multiple skin disorders. As we hear in today's First Reading, leprosy made a person unclean and unfit for life within the community. We read in Leviticus that lepers wore torn clothes, and had to announce themselves with cries of "Unclean!" Lepers were not allowed to participate in public worship and were banished from the community. This practice continued even into the Middle Ages, when lepers were forbidden to attend any religious service, and had to watch through holes in cathedral walls. It was a terrible fate.

The leper in today's Gospel should not have been anywhere near Jesus nor close enough to speak with him. He broke the law. Yet Jesus did not shun the man. Instead, he listened when the man approached him. Then, Jesus broke the law by touching him. By breaking that law, Jesus showed his disciples and followers that God does not shun. We are not to shut anyone out from the community of the People of God, no matter what. This is the Good News of salvation that Jesus preached.

**+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark (1:40–45)**

A leper came to Jesus and kneeling down begged him and said,

"If you wish, you can make me clean."

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand,

touched him, and said to him,

"I do will it. Be made clean."

The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.

Then, warning the him sternly, he dismissed him at once.
He said to him, “See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.”

The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

* [1:21–45] The account of a single day’s ministry of Jesus on a sabbath in and outside the synagogue of Capernaum (Mk 1:21–31) combines teaching and miracles of exorcism and healing. Mention is not made of the content of the teaching but of the effect of astonishment and alarm on the people. Jesus’ teaching with authority, making an absolute claim on the hearer, was in the best tradition of the ancient prophets, not of the scribes. The narrative continues with events that evening (Mk 1:32–34; see notes on Mt 8:14–17) and the next day (Mk 1:35–39). The cleansing in Mk 1:40–45 stands as an isolated story.

In 1868, the Norwegian scientist Gerhard Hansen discovered the biomedical cause of leprosy, an extremely chronic but not very infectious disease. Spouses rarely contract it from their infected partners. Basically it causes a loss of sensation and a progressive though painless ulceration of the extremities. Facial nodules develop, but leprosy very rarely affects the scalp. It is never white in color. On the basis of this and even more detailed scientific knowledge, scholars are quite certain that biblical leprosy such as discussed in Leviticus 13-14 and in today's gospel is not modern leprosy. Even the Hebrew and Greek words used in the Bible are not the proper words for "real" leprosy.

What then is the concern? and what did Jesus do?

THE CONCERN

In Leviticus, it is quite definite that our ancestors in the faith are describing a repulsive, scaly condition. When it affected the skin, modern scientists think it may have been something like psoriasis. It was a real experience, but it was not modern leprosy.

Leviticus 13-14 notes that even clothes and the walls of homes can suffer from it. The significance of the descriptions baffles modern readers, but it clearly meant something serious to the ancients. Our ancestors in the faith were mindful of the divine command to "be holy as the Lord your God is holy" (Lev 19:2) Holiness encompassed many qualities, not the least important of which was bodily wholeness and integrity. Anyone with physical imperfections was clearly not holy as the Lord is holy. "For no one who has a blemish may draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man with an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunch-back, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles" (Lev 21:16-20). None of these can approach the Lord. Leviticus commands that the person afflicted with "biblical" leprosy must "live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Lev 13:46). It is impossible to underestimate the impact of this judgment. Mediterranean cultures are gregarious and group-oriented. They need community to live just as a fish needs water. Without community, social network, connections and relations with others, the other-directed Mediterranean person suffers and can die from seclusion.

JESUS HEALS THE LEPER

Moved with compassion, Jesus came to the petitioner's rescue. Notice that Jesus’ command is in the passive voice: 'Be made clean.' In biblical literature this is known as the theological or divine passive, that is, it acknowledges God as the one who performs the action without having to use God's name. Jesus willed it; God cleanses the leper.
It is impossible to say what really happened. Did the problem disappear on the spot? Was the condition "debatable;" such that Jesus could look at it and say it was not there, while the priests in the Temple might look at it and say it still was there?

What is of much greater import in Jesus' behavior is that he touched the man. While touching is common in this culture, touching a leper is not. Remember, "modern" leprosy is minimally "catchy."

The ancients surely knew this of that scaly skin condition as well. The concern of the ancients was not that the situation was "catchy;" but that it was "dirty": not infectious, but polluting. People who had the problem did not infect the community; they polluted it. For this reason, they had to live outside the camp, apart from God's holy people, alone, until the pollution was gone.

By touching the "leper" Jesus challenges his culture's judgment. In Jesus' view, the "leper's" problem is not polluting, and with his touch he restores the leper to full membership in God's community, to solidarity in human fellowship.

The ancient distinction between an infecting and a polluting condition is worth pondering. The consequences are very different, too. Can you identify parallel or comparable situations in contemporary society? How should a Christian respond to them?

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "Listening to the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures, and hearing the appeal of a world that by its perversity contradicts the plan of its Creator, we have shared our awareness of the Church's vocation to be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted" (JM, 5).
- "Love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future" (SRS, 42).
- "Humanity is able to hope. Indeed it must hope: the living and personal Gospel, Jesus Christ himself, is the 'good news' and the bearer of joy that the Church announces each day, and to whom the Church bears testimony before all people" (CL, 7).
SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

In this passage, Isaiah writes to comfort his people in exile. He declares that God is changing history: "Remember not the events of the past." Even while the passage clearly recalls the past, it proclaims that what is to come will be like a new Exodus: "In the desert I make a way." But this new way will be even more marvelous. In Exodus 15:23-27, God taught Moses how to sweeten brackish water and led the people to springs. Now, God will give them nothing less than rivers in the wasteland. And, lest they forget their unworthiness of all of this, Isaiah makes it absolutely clear that it is all God's free action. This people who wearies God is forgiven, not because of their merit but, as God says, "for my own sake." The new thing, the free and forgiven status of the forsaken people, is a reve-lation of God's goodness.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (43:18–19, 21–22, 24b–25)

Thus says the LORD:
Remember not the events of the past,
the things of long ago consider not;
see, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
In the desert I make a way,
in the wasteland, rivers.
The people I formed for myself,
that they might announce my praise.
Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob,
for you grew weary of me, O Israel.
You burdened me with your sins,
and wearied me with your crimes.
It is I, I, who wipe out,
for my own sake, your offenses;
your sins I remember no more.
The word of the Lord.

* [43:18] Remember not: God's new act of delivering Israel from the Babylonian captivity is presented as so great a marvel as to eclipse even the memory of the exodus from Egypt. This comparison of the return from Babylon to the exodus from Egypt recurs throughout Second Isaiah (cf. 41:17–20; 43:18–21; 48:20–21; 49:8–13; 51:9–11).
* [43:22–28] The reason for the liberation of the Israelites is not their constancy but rather God's faithfulness to his promise (cf. 40:6–8).

It is probable that the notion of forgiveness of sins links this reading with the gospel (Mark 2:1-12). Immediately prior to these verses in Isaiah, the prophet recalls the great titles of YHWH: Redeemer committed to helping kin; Holy One source of all holiness; Creator of all things from nothing; King who protects his people; a new Moses; First and Last. In today's verses the prophet says that great as all
these deeds were, God is about to do something far greater than anything before. God will create a new paradise far surpassing the Garden in Genesis 2. Verses 22-28 contain elements of a trial. God makes accusations against the people ("you did not call upon me") but follows this with forgiveness ("I wipe out your offenses"). This good news finds fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus reported by Mark.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 41:2–3, 4–5, 13–14)

Our collection of 150 psalms is ordered into five books, each of which ends with a prayer of praise. Psalm 41 is the last of the first book. Interestingly, like Psalm 1, Psalm 41 opens by describing the one who is happy or blessed. In Psalm 1, the blessed one follows the law of the Lord; here, the blessed is the one who has regard for the lowly and poor. Between the first and last psalm of the first book, we have love of God and neighbor. Although this Psalm begins with a beatitude, it is actually a prayer for help, which the psalmist admits is not fully deserved. In the psalmist’s worldview, sin and illness are intimately connected; lack of moral integrity results in lack of physical integrity. By the time we reach the last verses, the penitent psalmist makes a proclamation of faith: Those who place all their trust in God will be healed and will bless God for all eternity.

Lord, heal my soul, for I have sinned against you.
Blessed is the one who has regard for the lowly and the poor; in the day of misfortune the LORD will deliver him.
The LORD will keep and preserve him; and make him blessed on earth, and not give him over to the will of his enemies. The LORD will help him on his sickbed, he will take away all his ailment when he is ill. Once I said, “O LORD, have pity on me; heal me, though I have sinned against you.” But because of my integrity you sustain me and let me stand before you forever.
Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from all eternity. Amen. Amen.

* [Psalm 41] A thanksgiving for rescue from illness (Ps 41:4, 5, 9). Many people, even friends, have interpreted the illness as a divine punishment for sin and have ostracized the psalmist (Ps 41:5–11). The healing shows the return of God’s favor and rebukes the psalmist’s detractors (Ps 41:12–13).
* [41:2] Blessed the one concerned for the poor: cf. Ps 32:1–2; 34:9; 40:5; 65:5. The psalmist’s statement about God’s love of the poor is based on the experience of being rescued (Ps 41:1–3).
* [41:4] You turn down his bedding whenever he is ill: the Hebrew is obscure. It suggests ongoing attentive care of the one who is sick.

The heart of this psalm is the petition for healing in verse 4: though I am a sinner, please heal me, O Lord. The petition is rooted in solid confidence that God will not neglect the needy among the chosen people. Despite experience which often suggests that God has indeed abandoned faithful servants to the machinations of their enemies, this psalmist is confident it will not happen to him. The conclusion indicates that it didn't.
This is the last psalm in the First Book of the Psalter (there are five, perhaps imitating the five books of Moses). The final verse of today's response concludes this First Book. The actual ending of the psalm is the preceding verse. "Let me stand before you forever" is inspired by the psalmist's participation in the Temple liturgy. Having been rescued by God from his predicament, the psalmist would willingly remain in the presence of God, safe from his enemies, forever.

SECOND READING

In this first selection from 2 Corinthians, from which the Second Readings are taken from the Seventh to the Fourteenth Sundays in Ordinary Time, refutes a charge that he has been capricious about visiting Corinth. Later, he will say that he did not go there to cause grief. But before he explains his travel plans, he moves from self-defense into a theological proclamation. Paul insists that he is as reliable as the word he preached to them, and that Word was Jesus Christ, in whom all of God's promises have been fulfilled. Beyond affirming the absolute yes of God's Word and his own steadfastness, the closing verses of the reading reveal Paul's Trinitarian theology and the anthropology that flows from it. He reminds his readers that it is God who has brought them together in Christ, and it is God who has given them the first installment of the Spirit in their hearts. This would quite likely remind them of the theme of unity and love he expounded in 1 Corinthians 12-13. Thus, as Paul begins what many see as his most personal letter, he calls the community to express the forbearance and self-awareness that should spring from their unity with and in Christ.

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (1:18–22)

Brothers and sisters:

As God is faithful,
our word to you is not “yes” and “no.”

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ,
who was proclaimed to you by us, Silvanus and Timothy and me,
was not “yes” and “no,” but “yes” has been in him.

For however many are the promises of God, their Yes is in him;
therefore, the Amen from us also goes through him to God for glory.

But the one who gives us security with you in Christ
and who anointed us is God;
he has also put his seal upon us
and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.
The word of the Lord.

* [1:18–22] As God is faithful: unable to deny the change in plans, Paul nonetheless asserts the firmness of the original plan and claims a profound constancy in his life and work. He grounds his defense in God himself, who is firm and reliable; this quality can also be predicated in various ways of those who are associated with him. Christ, Paul, and the Corinthians all participate in analogous ways in the constancy of God. A number of the terms here, which appear related only conceptually in Greek or English, would be variations of the same root, ’mn, in a Semitic language, and thus naturally associated in a Semitic mind, such as Paul’s. These include the words yes (2 Cor 1:17–20), faithful(2 Cor 1:18), Amen (2 Cor 1:20), gives us security (2 Cor 1:21), faith, stand firm (2 Cor 1:24).

* [1:21–22] The commercial terms gives us security, seal, first installment are here used analogously to refer to the process of initiation into the Christian life, perhaps specifically to baptism. The passage is clearly trinitarian. The Spirit is the first installment or “down payment” of the full messianic benefits that God guarantees to Christians. Cf. Eph 1:13–14.
The background to Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians is that disunity and other problems noted in the first letter seem to have worsened. To complicate matters, Paul broke his promise to visit them (1Cor 16:5), and his opponents in Corinth used that claim that Paul could not be trusted. Perhaps his preaching too should be doubted.

Today's verses are a theological digression which is rooted in a peculiar Middle Eastern cultural trait. Because honor is the core cultural value, no one ever wants to cause shame to self or others. If you ask me a question, and I don’t know the answer, I will give you one anyway. It is imperative for me not to admit I don't know the answer, for that would shame me. The challenge to you is to evaluate my answer as reliable or unreliable. Or if I know you are seeking a certain kind of information, I will give it to you. I will always say what you want to hear. The son in Jesus' parable who told his father he would go work in the vineyard when he had no intention of so doing at all acted very honorably (Matt 21:28ff.). He said what his father wanted to hear, thus honoring his father rather than shaming him as the brother did. Because he broke his promise to visit them, Paul's Corinthian enemies accuse him of saying what people want to hear though he probably had no intention of visiting them at all. Paul defends himself as trustworthy because he preaches the sure and reliable gospel of a faithful and trustworthy God and the totally committed and faithful son, Jesus Messiah. God would not have selected an unreliable minister to preach the sure gospel. All God's promises were realized in Jesus: seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16), Davidic Messiah (Rom 1:4), the last Adam (1 Cor 15:45), and more. Our Amen joins with the Son's agreement to fulfill the faithful Father's promises. Believers arc visibly marked (his seal upon us) as belonging to the Messiah Jesus. They also have received the Spirit as a down payment, a guarantee that the promises will be fulfilled.

In today’s gospel (Mark 1:1-12), Jesus is moved by the steadfast loyalty of those who brought the paralytic to him for healing. This is the kind of loyalty Paul sees in God and which Paul insists that he too possesses. Modern believers tend to give the word "faith" an intellectual content. Trans-lating this Middle Eastern cultural concept more fittingly as loyalty or unswerving fidelity offers a new consideration.

**ALLELUIA (cf. Lk 4:18)**

The Lord sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, and to proclaim liberty to captives.

**GOSPEL**

In the beginning of Mark’s account of the Gospel, Jesus has been depicted as so successful that people crowd around him, even block-ing the door to the house where he stays. As mentioned in the commentary for the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time, the crowds originally responded to Jesus' words and deeds with amazement and astonishment. Now, for the first time, people come to Jesus with faith. Judging by all they did, the friends who brought the paralytic to Jesus believed that he could and would heal. Jesus’ immediate response to that faith was to forgive the man's sins. Those were audacious words; everyone knew that only God can forgive sin. The scribes correctly understood that Jesus was assuming a divine right. It should come as no surprise that Jesus would perceive their thoughts and respond with a question that would trap them. Because both healing and forgiving were considered divine prerogatives, Jesus' healing activity was a sign that he was acting with God's power (see Isaiah 35:6, Micah 3:6).

While the scribes sulked, the crowds glorified the God who makes all things new. Some were beginning to recognize Jesus as one who made God’s healing love and forgiveness present among them. Finally, it should be noted that while Jesus both forgave and healed, he did not link illness and guilt. In fact, when
he broached the topic, he contradicted the accepted wisdom about it, denying that victims of calamity or illness were more sinful than others (John 9:2-3, Luke 13:2).

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark (2:1–12)

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it became known that he was at home. Many gathered together so that there was no longer room for them, not even around the door, and he preached the word to them. They came bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. Unable to get near Jesus because of the crowd, they opened up the roof above him. After they had broken through, they let down the mat on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Child, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there asking themselves, “Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming. Who but God alone can forgive sins?” Jesus immediately knew in his mind what they were thinking to themselves, so he said, “Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, pick up your mat and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth”—he said to the paralytic, “I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home.” He rose, picked up his mat at once, and went away in the sight of everyone. They were all astounded and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

* [2:1–3:6] This section relates a series of conflicts between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees in which the growing opposition of the latter leads to their plot to put Jesus to death (Mk 3:6).
* [2:1–2] He was at home: to the crowds that gathered in and outside the house Jesus preached the word, i.e., the gospel concerning the nearness of the kingdom and the necessity of repentance and faith (Mk 1:14).
* [2:5] It was the faith of the paralytic and those who carried him that moved Jesus to heal the sick man. Accounts of other miracles of Jesus reveal more and more his emphasis on faith as the requisite for exercising his healing powers (Mk 5:34; 9:23–24; 10:52).
* [2:6] Scribes: trained in oral interpretation of the written law; in Mark’s gospel, adversaries of Jesus, with one exception (Mk 12:28, 34).
* [2:7] He is blaspheming: an accusation made here and repeated during the trial of Jesus (Mk 14:60–64).
* [2:10] But that you may know that the Son of Man...on earth: although Mk 2:8–9 are addressed to the scribes, the sudden interruption of thought and structure in Mk 2:10 seems not addressed to them nor to the paralytic. Moreover, the early public use of the designation “Son of Man” to unbelieving scribes is
most unlikely. The most probable explanation is that Mark’s insertion of Mk 2:10 is a commentary addressed to Christians for whom he recalls this miracle and who already accept in faith that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God.

WANDERING NEWSPAPERS
In the Mediterranean world, everybody minds everybody else's business. Verse 1 signals the effectiveness of the gossip network which spread the news that Jesus was at home. In the ancient world, women were the primary purveyors of community news, assisted by young boys and girls who could wander freely through other households to snoop on adults and report back (see 1 Tim 3:11 and compare 2 Tim 3:6-7). Because of the power of such information, women played a key role in controlling the social behavior of the community.

GROUP-ORIENTATION
The entire story resonates with indications of the group-centered character of Mediterranean culture. Notice that the paralytic was brought to Jesus by a group and carried by four men (v. 3). This is not just camaraderie but customary, strong Mediterranean social cohesiveness. In fact, it is the loyalty of this group to Jesus that moves him to heal the paralytic (v. 5).

The Greek word ordinarily translated “faith” is more appropriately translated “loyalty.” It describes people who pledge themselves to another person “no matter what.” This group was well aware of the hostile scribes who sat in Jesus’ home watching him carefully (v. 6). That didn’t deter them from publicly demonstrating their loyalty to Jesus.

PARALYSIS
Leviticus (21:16-24) specifies that among other physically challenged people, a lame person may not approach to offer the bread of his God (see also Deut 23:1-2). To our ancestors in the faith, the physical condition itself was not as serious as the social consequences: exclusion from God’s holy community. In today’s episode, Jesus phrased it thus: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ [repairing the social condition], or to say ‘Rise, take up your mat and walk’ [repairing the physical condition; v 9]?” Clearly his culture sees restoration to normal functioning as easier to achieve than restoring someone to full membership in the community.

HEALING
Recall the distinction between disease and illness offered by medical anthropology (see Fifth Sunday above). Sickness, one among many misfortunes in human life, can be viewed as disease or illness. The disease view focuses on causes of sickness from a scientific, biomedical perspective. It looks for germs, viruses, and the like and seeks to find the “silver bullet” (penicillin, radiation, chemotherapy) that will destroy the cause and restore health. The illness view focuses on social consequences of a sickness (v. 8), he takes yet a further step. He cures the man’s dis-ability: “Take up your mat and go home!” (v. 11). Even here, Jesus demonstrates his primary interest in healing. By telling him to “go home:’ Jesus restores the man to his own com-munity. Regaining full membership in his community and finding welcome in Jesus' community truly restores meaning to this group-oriented man's life. He is definitely healed.

By mentioning the man’s mat (vv. 9, 11-12), Mark indicates the social status of the man or of his community: poor. Matthew and Luke raise the social status by replacing mat with “bed;’ In either case, the commitment of the entire an-cient Mediterranean community to caring about the health and well-being of all its members—poor and rich—is a stirring challenge to individualistic Western believers. We must in-deed be our sisters' and brothers' keepers.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
"The world which the council has in mind is the world of women and men, the entire human family seen in its total environment. ... It is the world which Christians believe has been created and is sustained by the love of its maker, has fallen into the slavery of sin but has been freed by Christ, who was crucified and rose again in order to break the stranglehold of the evil one, so that it might be fashioned anew" (GS, 2).

"God forgives sin by grace and ... frees human beings from sin's enslaving power and imparts the gift of new life in Christ. When persons come by faith to share in Christ, God ... effects in them an active love" (JDDJ, 22).

"The liberation and salvation brought by the kingdom of God come to the human person both in his physical and spiritual dimensions. Two gestures are characteristic of Jesus' mission: healing and forgiving" (RMI, 14).

"Jesus shows the salvific meaning of his death and resurrection, a mystery which renews history and the whole cosmos" (SacCar, 10).
EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

Hosea prophesied in the last years of the Northern Kingdom (Israel). Like most of Israel’s prophets, heanguished over his people’s failure to keep the Sinai Covenant. His approach, however, was unique. Instead of scrupulously avoiding the sexual imagery characteristic of Canaanite religion, Hosea borrowed that imagery and applied it to Israel’s relationship to God. Hosea pictured the Exodus as Israel’s marriage to God and their sojourn in the wilderness as their honeymoon. Unfortunately, Israel did not stay faithful. They committed adultery with other gods, most notably the gods of Canaan.

In Sunday’s reading, God tries to win Israel back with long walks together in the desert where they first met, with thoughtful gifts and tender words of affection. God even engages in a bit of wordplay in hopes of woo-ing the errant Israel. (The Hebrew word for “husband” is also the word for Canaan’s chief deity, Ba’al.)

Tradition has often described God’s invitation as if it were an “offer we can’t refuse.” Hosea, however, prefers to think of God’s invitation more in terms of a valentine. For Hosea, God is a long-lost lover seeking to win back our hearts. There is no coercion here, only tenderness and love.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Hosea (2:16b, 17b, 21–22)

Thus says the LORD:
I will lead her into the desert
and speak to her heart.
She shall respond there as in the days of her youth,
when she came up from the land of Egypt.
I will espouse you to me forever:
I will espouse you in right and in justice,
in love and in mercy;
I will espouse you in fidelity,
and you shall know the LORD.
The word of the Lord.

* [2:17] Valley of Achor: lit., valley of trouble (Jos 7:26). Here this valley becomes a valley of hope, a new entry into the promised land.
* [2:21–22] Betroth...with: the betrothal was the legal moment before cohabitation when the dowry was paid to the father of the bride. In this remarriage the Lord gives the bride price to Israel herself “forever.” Justice...judgment: refer to equity and fairness of conduct. The next two terms, “loyalty” (hesed), the steadfast love between the covenant partners, and “compassion,” maternal love (cf. 1:6; 2:3, 25) are characteristic of Hosea. You shall know: not an abstract but a practical knowledge which means acknowledgment of God’s will and obedience to his law (4:1; 5:4; 6:3, 6).

The question of fasting in today’s gospel (Mark 2: 18-22) is a plausible basis for selecting this segment of Hosea as its partner. Fasting, or refusing to eat, is essentially a protest pat-tern intended to move
another person to a response. Therefore fasting is a strategy that belongs primarily to the realm of politics, the realm of power. While Jesus, the broker, is among his disciples, the clients, they have a powerful mediator with God, the patron. They need no other strategy to contact and have an impact upon God. When the mediator is no longer present they can resort to fasting, an alternate means of motivating God to act on their behalf.

These verses from Hosea describe the covenant between Israel and YHWH in terms of a marriage contract. The preposition "in" that follows the word "espouse" designates what follows as the bride-price (Heb. mohar), the gift the groom’s family offers to the bride’s family. In other words, YHWH the groom is bestowing on the bride’s family (and therefore on her, too) basic dispositions: justice, which is the concrete working out of right, and mercy (an attitude of giving-in-to the other), which characterizes steadfast-loving kindness (Heb: hesed). Thus, YHWH manifests to Israel those qualities which please the deity. If believers adopt and practice these qualities (Hosea’s message) then believers won’t need to re-sort to other strategies for moving God to a desired response (Jesus' point about fasting in today's gospel).

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 103:1–2, 3–4, 8, 10, 12–13)

By genre, Psalm 103 is an individual hymn of praise. Interestingly, however, the psalmist does not sing it to God nor does he sing it for the worshiping congregation. Instead, he sings it to himself, lest he forget God's benefits. These benefits are many: forgiveness, healing, redemption, steadfast love, mercy, goodness, vindication, compassion, and righteousness. Only in the last strophe does the psalmist then think to turn to others, inviting them, too, to praise the God who has been so gracious to the psalmist. Like Hosea, the psalmist describes God's invitation to us in terms of tenderness and love. Perhaps because he has experienced it firsthand, the psalmist is particularly mindful of God's enduring mercy. It doesn't matter that we are rather frail creatures. It doesn't matter that we often feel woebegone. It doesn't even matter that we are not perfect and often make mistakes. God still sets a table before us, overflowing with an abundance of good things.

The Lord is kind and merciful.
Bless the LORD, O my soul;
and all my being, bless his holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.
He pardons all your iniquities, he heals all your ills.
He redeems your life from destruction,
he crowns you with kindness and compassion.
Merciful and gracious is the LORD,
slow to anger and abounding in kindness.
Not according to our sins does he deal with us,
nor does he requite us according to our crimes.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he put our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.

A psalmist very likely around 450 B.C.E., in the post-exilic age, has regained health and meaning in life (vv. 3-4) and sings gratefully about YHWH who has worked this great favor in his life. YHWH is merciful
and gracious but particularly to "those who fear him;• that is, who recognize their dependent relationship with God.

SECOND READING

Once again Paul is defending his version of the Gospel and his style of ministry to the Corinthians. This time he addresses the charge that he had come to Corinth without any recommendation from other believers. Such recommendations were common Greek business practice and had become commonplace among traveling preachers in the early church, too. Paul was under strong pressure to explain himself. He doesn't need written letters of recommendation, he says. Why? Because the Corinthians themselves are his letters of recommendation. Their faith is living proof that his Gospel is true and his ministry genuine. It is also proof that God, not Paul, is at work in Corinth.

According to Paul, our invitation to God's new life is not written on some piece of paper, however fancy. It isn't even carved in stone. Instead, Paul says, God's invitation is a living one that the Spirit has inscribed on our hearts by faith.

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (3:1b–6)

Brothers and sisters:
Do we need, as some do,
letters of recommendation to you or from you?
You are our letter, written on our hearts,
known and read by all,
shown to be a letter of Christ ministered by us,
written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God,
not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are hearts of flesh.

Such confidence we have through Christ toward God.

Not that of ourselves we are qualified
to take credit for anything as coming from us;
rather, our qualification comes from God,
who has indeed qualified us as ministers of a new covenant,
not of letter but of spirit;
for the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life.
The word of the Lord.

* [3:1] Paul seems to allude to certain preachers who pride themselves on their written credentials. Presumably they reproach him for not possessing similar credentials and compel him to spell out his own qualifications (2 Cor 4:2; 5:12; 6:4). The Corinthians themselves should have performed this function for Paul (2 Cor 5:12; cf. 2 Cor 12:11). Since he is forced to find something that can recommend him, he points to them: their very existence constitutes his letter of recommendation (2 Cor 3:1–2). Others who engage in self-commendation will also be mentioned in 2 Cor 10:12–18.

* [3:2–3] Mention of “letters of recommendation” generates a series of metaphors in which Paul plays on the word “letter”: (1) the community is Paul's letter of recommendation (2 Cor 3:2a); (2) they are a letter engraved on his affections for all to see and read (2 Cor 3:2b); (3) they are a letter from Christ that Paul merely delivers (2 Cor 3:3a); (4) they are a letter written by the Spirit on the tablets of human hearts (2 Cor 3:3b). One image dissolves into another.

* [3:3] This verse contrasts Paul’s letter with those written...in ink (like the credentials of other preachers) and those written...on tablets of stone (like the law of Moses). These contrasts suggest that the other preachers may have claimed special relationship with Moses. If they were Judaizers zealous for the Mosaic law, that would explain the detailed contrast between the old and the new covenants...
If they were charismatics who claimed Moses as their model, that would explain the extended treatment of Moses himself and his glory (2 Cor 3:7–4:6). Hearts of flesh: cf. Ezekiel’s contrast between the heart of flesh that the Spirit gives and the heart of stone that it replaces (Ez 36:26); the context is covenant renewal and purification that makes observance of the law possible.

* [3:4–6] These verses resume 2 Cor 2:1–3:3. Paul’s confidence (2 Cor 3:4) is grounded in his sense of God-given mission (2 Cor 2:17), the specifics of which are described in 2 Cor 3:1–3. 2 Cor 3:5–6 return to the question of his qualifications (2 Cor 2:16), attributing them entirely to God. 2 Cor 3:6 further spells out the situation described in v 3b and “names” it: Paul is living within a new covenant, characterized by the Spirit, which gives life. The usage of a new covenant is derived from Jer 31:31–33 a passage that also speaks of writing on the heart; cf. 2 Cor 3:2.


Middle Eastern culture is basically agonistic or combative. This means it tends toward confrontation and conflict. Anyone who reads Paul’s letters, especially the Corinthian correspondence, can see this trait quite clearly in these verses. Paul is defending himself once again against attacks by his opponents. They claim he has recommended himself (e.g., See 1 Thess 2:1-12). In contrast, they point with pride that they have been commissioned and sent by another congregation, perhaps Jerusalem.

One example of a letter of recommendation is Rom 16: 1-2. It isn't very long, but the authority of the sender (Paul) makes it easier for Phoebe to receive hospitality from that community which does not know her and which she has never visited before. In general in Middle Eastern culture, foreigners or strangers are suspected of being up to no good. Travel is deviant, and once one has gone beyond one’s own home village, a letter of recommendation or gracious hospitality is necessary to guarantee safe passage. Paul says the Corinthian community in which he ministered is his letter of recommendation; they assure the legitimacy of his apostleship (See 1 Cor 9:2). [It seems preferable to read "written in your hearts" rather than "our" hearts which doesn't seem to make sense, even though it is supported by better manuscript evidence. Such a letter that is the existence of this community is a letter of recommendation from Jesus Himself. God makes it possible for Paul to accomplish his ministry of a new covenant. Paul then distinguishes two views of the new covenant: his opponents view which insisted on the law (letter), and his view which emphasizes the Spirit. The law (letter) its death dealing, but the Spirit is life giving.

Another conflict is reflected in the gospel (Mark 2:18-22) on the topic of fasting. Jesus' reflection on old and new are comparable to Paul’s reflection on the difference between himself and his opponents. Westerners are generally reluctant to give offense, hence they tend to gloss over differences politely. Is there an advantage to the conflicts that characterize agonistic cultures?

**ALLELUIA (Jas 1:18)**

The Father willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

**GOSPEL**

When this reading opens, Jesus has just called the tax collector, Levi. The religious leaders immediately grumbled, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Now they grumble because he doesn’t encourage his disciples to fast. In fine rabbinic fashion, Jesus responds to their grumbling with a question of his own, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"

Originally, the story probably ended there. Mark, however, has a few more points he wants to make, so he adds several other stories of Jesus that he is familiar with. To make sure that no one forgets the
Cross, Mark adds a prediction of Jesus' death (v. 20). (That prediction also served to explain why Mark's church had now begun to fast again.) Then, to make sure his readers would understand how radically different the way of Jesus was to the ways of their religious leaders, he adds two parables. Both maintain that the new order inaugurated by Jesus was not just a patched-up or remodeled version of the old. It was indeed a "new teaching." When Jesus invites Levi to follow him that day, Mark says, he is calling him to an entirely new way of life. The same is true when Jesus invites us to follow him today. Now that the bridegroom has come, everything is new - so new that it often breaks the boundaries and limits of our old way of life.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark (2:18–22)
The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were accustomed to fast. People came to him and objected,

"Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

Jesus answered them,

"Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. If he does, its fullness pulls away, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins."

The Gospel of the Lord.

* [2:18–22] This conflict over the question of fasting has the same pattern as Mk 2:16–17; see notes on Mt 9:15; 9:16–17.

* [2:19] Can the wedding guests fast?: the bridal metaphor expresses a new relationship of love between God and his people in the person and mission of Jesus to his disciples. It is the inauguration of the new and joyful messianic time of fulfillment and the passing of the old. Any attempt at assimilating the Pharisaic practice of fasting, or of extending the preparatory discipline of John’s disciples beyond the arrival of the bridegroom, would be as futile as sewing a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak or pouring new wine into old wineskins with the resulting destruction of both cloth and wine (Mk 2:21–22). Fasting is rendered superfluous during the earthly ministry of Jesus; cf. Mk 2:20.

Like many other familiar ideas in the Bible, fasting in the ancient Mediterranean world is a very different practice from contemporary fasting.

FASTING
The only fasting prescribed in the Law of Moses is associated with the Day of Atonement (see Lev 16:3-28; 23:26-32; 25:9; Num 29:7-11; Exod 30:10). The key Hebrew phrase in these passages translated "afflict yourselves" literally means "bow down your soul?" Psalm 35:13 connects the phrase with fasting: "I afflicted myself with fasting." By New Testament times, fasting was so closely associated with the Day of Atonement that the feast was called simply "the fast day" (Acts 27:9; Josephus Antiquities 3.10.3).
A review of the occurrences of these Hebrew words and phrases reveals that the key idea associated with fasting and afflicting oneself is self-humiliation. Indeed the Hebrew word that describes fasting rituals is ta’anit, that is, humiliation.

**FASTING AS SELF-HUMILIATION**

A person who fasts refuses to eat or drink or sometimes even to engage in sexual relations (see 2 Sam 12:16-24). Like everything else in the Mediterranean world, so too is fasting a very public event. One fasts in the presence of one's fellow citizens and, of course, God. The purpose of this kind of public self-humiliation is to move others to action. The one fasting is begging for assistance from others without ever saying so explicitly in words. Fasting speaks louder than words.

**FASTING IN JESUS' TIME**

The fasting required on the Day of Atonement was intended to move God to forgive the sins of those fasting. The idea was that if human beings can be effectively moved to compassion and practical assistance by the self-humiliation of a needy person caught in a crisis, how much more promptly should God act when faced with fasting.

The Pharisees established a custom of fasting twice a week (see Luke 18:12), on Mondays and Thursdays. Matthew's report (6: 16-18) suggests that some Pharisees fasted not because they were needy but rather to impress others with their asceticism. They used make-up to look gaunt, making sure no one could miss the fact that they were fasting. Jesus compared them to actors (the Greek word translated "hypocrites" literally means "actor").

Today's gospel states that John's disciples were also fasting. Since John preached a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin" (Mark 1:4), he and his disciples humiliated themselves with fasting (and he in addition with his camel's hair garb) to move the populace to heed their warnings. People were urged to prepare themselves for the coming of one mightier than John (Mark 1:7) who would claim: "Yahweh-God is about to intervene on behalf of his people-in-crisis (Roman occupation]. Place your unswerving loyalty in him!" (Mark 1:14-15).

**JESUS AND COMPANY DO NOT FAST**

Jesus began his ministry as a disciple of John, but after John's imprisonment Jesus struck out on his own (Mark 1:14). He gathered his own disciples (Mark 1:16-20) and embarked on a healing ministry (Mark 1:21-2:12).

Jesus' successes in his ministry, so different from John's, persuade him God indeed is already rescuing his people. If this is so, there is no need of self-humiliation to persuade God to act. This, in effect, is what Jesus says to those who ask why he and his disciples are not fasting. Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom and his followers to guests at the wedding feast. It would be a serious insult and an indication that they did not approve of the wedding if guests refused to enjoy fully the celebration (e.g., if they fasted).

To drive his point home, Mark's Jesus concludes with another parable highlighting that something very new is happening. New wine must be put in new wineskins. Old wineskins may not be able to withstand the creative pressures of the new vintage.

Though fasting does not carry the same meaning in the modern Western world as it did in the ancient Mediterranean, human beings continue to suffer severe crises and overwhelming evil. Americans cry for help out of their humbling experiences of unemployment, loss of health benefits, loss of home, and more. Cultural analysts observe, however, that Americans are moved more by crises televised from halfway around the world than by tragedy on their doorsteps.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- The Gospel is the revelation in Jesus Christ of God's mercy to sinners (CCC, 1846).
■ In Baptism we enter the Body of Christ (CCC, 537). Together we testify to God’s goodness by participating in the celebration of Eucharist (CCC, 2182).

■ The new law, the Gospel, is the new wine that bursts old wineskins; sinners and tax collectors are called to dine with the Savior of the world (CCC, 1965-1974).
NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

To prepare us for the Sabbath controversy found in Sunday's Gospel, the lectionary has chosen the original Sabbath law itself for our First Reading. Two versions of this law are in the Pentateuch, one in Exodus and this one, in Deuteronomy. The emphasis in each is slightly different. In Exodus, the Sabbath was instituted as a memorial of the creation and as a foretaste of the world to come. Deuteronomy grounds the Sabbath in the Exodus from Egypt. As such it is primarily a sign of God's grace and a reminder of our dependence on God. By including slaves, visitors, even farm animals in its provision, the Sabbath law was also seen by Deuteronomy as a sign of God's justice. Time is valuable and how we spend it reveals our values. We can use time as if it were a commodity to be used. But the commandment to keep the Sabbath day guides our use of time much more constructively. It encourages us to take time for important relationships. It also encourages us to be more just by insuring that we do not enjoy leisure at the expense of others or at the expense of the environment.

A reading from the Book of Deuteronomy (5:12–15)

Thus says the Lord:

“Take care to keep holy the sabbath day as the Lord, your God, commanded you.
Six days you may labor and do all your work;
but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord, your God.
No work may be done then, whether by you, or your son or daughter,
or your male or female slave,
or your ox or ass or any of your beasts,
or the alien who lives with you.
Your male and female slave should rest as you do.
For remember that you too were once a slave in Egypt,
and the Lord, your God, brought you from there with his strong hand and outstretched arm.
That is why the Lord, your God, has commanded you to observe the sabbath day.”
The word of the Lord.

Clearly the Sabbath links this reading with today's gospel (Mark 2:23-3:6). The match is well made. The version of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy (5:6-21) is slightly different from that in Exodus 20: 1-17. This is also true regarding the command of Sabbath rest. The Exodus tradition (20:8-11) points to God resting on the seventh day after creation, hence aligning itself with the P tradition. This is the reason given for keeping the Sabbath holy. In contrast, Deuteronomy doesn't mention God's Sabbath rest but rather proposes a humanitarian consideration. Let your male and female slaves rest as you rest, for you know from experience what it means to be a slave. This is why the Lord has commanded you to keep holy the Sabbath. This would seem to be the understanding of Jesus in today's gospel. If humanitarian considerations are the foundation of the commandment, then humanitarian considerations (easing hunger, restoring a sick man to whole-ness) can also legitimate relaxing the commandment.
RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 81:3–4, 5–6, 6–8, 10–11)

Psalm 81 was written as a festival song, most likely for the Feast of Tabernacles. It begins with a stirring call to worship complete with musical accompaniment. Then a voice speaks. Apparently it is a voice Israel has not listened to for a while. God reminds the people that they were delivered from Egypt and God urges them to listen and to obey the words they were given at Sinai.

If they do, God promises to take care of them and guide them, but if they choose to go another way, they are unfortunately on their own. Again we find the commandments of God inviting us to a Sabbath style of living. The psalmist is very specific about what this means. It means a close relationship with God and a willingness to walk in God's ways.

Sing with joy to God our help.
Take up a melody, and sound the timbrel,
the pleasant harp and the lyre.
Blow the trumpet at the new moon,
at the full moon, on our solemn feast.
For it is a statute in Israel,
an ordinance of the God of Jacob,
Who made it a decree for Joseph
when he came forth from the land of Egypt.
An unfamiliar speech I hear:
“`I relieved his shoulder of the burden;
his hands were freed from the basket.
In distress you called, and I rescued you.”
“There shall be no strange god among you
nor shall you worship any alien god.
I, the LORD, am your God
who led you forth from the land of Egypt.”

* [Psalm 81] At a pilgrimage feast, probably harvest in the fall, the people assemble in the Temple in accord with the Sinai ordinances (Ps 81:2–6). They hear a divine word (mediated by a Temple speaker) telling how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt (Ps 81:7–9), gave them the fundamental commandment of fidelity (Ps 81:9–11), which would bring punishment if they refused to obey (Ps 81:12–13). But if Israel repents, God will be with them once again, bestowing protection and fertility (Ps 81:14–16).

* [81:4] New moon; full moon: the pilgrimage feast of harvest began with a great assembly (Lv 23:24; Nm 29:1), used the new moon as a sign (Nm 29:6), and included trumpets (Lv 23:24).


* [81:10] There shall be no foreign god among you: as in Ps 50 and 95, Israel is challenged to obey the first commandment of fidelity to God after the proclamation of the exodus.

This psalm and Psalms 50 and 95 are recognized as examples of liturgical preaching during feasts celebrated in the Temple. Verse 6 ("relieved his shoulder . . . hands were freed") refers to God’s action of rescuing Israel from bondage and slavery in Egypt. The selected verses constitute a suitable bridge between the first reading and today’s gospel which speak of rest from slavery, from labor.

SECOND READING
In this reading, Paul replies to another charge leveled at him by opponents in Corinth: that he is not very impressive in person. And he always seems to be in trouble—hardly the marks of a true apostle. Paul admits that he and his coworkers are not impressive. But, he says, this is exactly what God intended. If Paul had been impressive and if things always went well for him, it would be easy for people to think he had done it all himself. But because he is in fact weak and unimpressive, there can be no doubt that whatever he achieves is achieved through the power of God.

Like Paul's opponents in Corinth, our society is obsessed with image. It doesn't matter whether there is substance behind the image; the important thing is that we look good. Paul, on the other hand, is more concerned that God look good. Instead of focusing on himself, Paul focuses on God and on the people he hopes to bring to God. Nurturing those relationships is Paul's primary goal, and he is willing to endure just about anything to accomplish it.

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (4:6–11)

Brothers and sisters:

God who said, Let light shine out of darkness,
    has shone in our hearts to bring to light
    the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ.

But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels,
    that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained;
    perplexed, but not driven to despair;
    persecuted, but not abandoned;
    struck down, but not destroyed;
    always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus,
    so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body.

For we who live are constantly being given up to death
    for the sake of Jesus,
    so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

The word of the Lord.

* [4:6] Autobiographical allusion to the episode at Damascus clarifies the origin and nature of Paul's service; cf. Acts 9:1–19; 22:3–16; 26:2–18. “Let light shine out of darkness”: Paul seems to be thinking of Gn 1:3 and presenting his apostolic ministry as a new creation. There may also be an allusion to Is 42:6, 16; 49:6; 60:1–2, and the use of light imagery in Acts 26:13–23. To bring to light the knowledge: Paul's role in the process of revelation, expressed at the beginning under the image of the odor and aroma (2 Cor 2:14–15), is restated now, at the end of this first moment of the development, in the imagery of light and glory (2 Cor 4:3–6).

* [4:7–5:10] Paul now confronts the difficulty that his present existence does not appear glorious at all; it is marked instead by suffering and death. He deals with this by developing the topic already announced in 2 Cor 3:3, 6, asserting his faith in the presence and ultimate triumph of life, in his own and every Christian existence, despite the experience of death.

* [4:7] This treasure: the glory that he preaches and into which they are being transformed. In earthen vessels: the instruments God uses are human and fragile; some imagine small terracotta lamps in which light is carried.

* [4:8–9] A catalogue of his apostolic trials and afflictions. Yet in these the negative never completely prevails; there is always some experience of rescue, of salvation.
Both the negative and the positive sides of the experience are grounded christologically. The logic is similar to that of 2 Cor 1:3–11. His sufferings are connected with Christ’s, and his deliverance is a sign that he is to share in Jesus’ resurrection.

Four times in the Corinthian letters Paul mentions his hardships (1 Cor 4:8-13; 2 Cor 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:23-30). These passages raise two questions. What kind of a person dwells on suffering? And whence come these sufferings? In our culture, we frown on people who recount their suffering, especially if it is done in detail. One reason for this attitude is that we believe all human beings can be in charge of their lives and do something about suffering whatever its source. The Middle Eastern cultural belief was that human beings are not at all in control of their existence, and the best they can do is endure heroically whatever suffering comes their way. Those who would hear Paul’s report of his sufferings and how he endures them would applaud him as a male who has been so well socialized into his role that he can serve as a role model to others. This is certainly one of Paul’s purposes here. He is not a masochist; he is a type of cultural hero.

Whence come these sufferings? Like everyone else in his agonistic culture, Paul perceived himself as living in and in-deed experiencing a hostile world that was out to harm and ruin him. We really cannot trust anyone outside of our families. The hostile forces could be evil men or evil spirits. No matter, the point is that these sufferings are undeserved and therefore unjust.

But Paul is more than a cultural hero. He points to the distinctive nature of suffering by a believer. Paul’s life (his practice) conforms to his preaching. (Christ and him crucified). It is God’s plan that believers will be tested and worn down by suffering: so as to manifest the life of Jesus in the body. What should emerge from this is that the life of Jesus, authentic human existence, might become all the more clearly manifest. Mark (2:23-3:6) notes that Jesus’ opponents were so piqued by his blatant violations of the Sabbath (which nevertheless brought renewed life to those in need of it, that they colluded with the Herodians to put Jesus to death. Ironically, the death of Jesus resulted in new life for those who believe in him. Paul sees his own life experiences testifying to this new life in his ministry. How can modern believers bear witness to new life that derives from suffering, often unjust and undeserved?

ALLELUIA (cf. Jn 17:17b, 17a)
Your word, O Lord, is truth; consecrate us in the truth.

GOSPEL

With this reading, we come to the final two controversies in this section of Mark’s account of the Gospel. Both are controversies over the Sabbath law and both assert the power and authority of Jesus. In the first, Jesus and his disciples are traveling on the Sabbath and stop in a grain field to glean some food. Immediately the religious leaders accuse them of breaking the Sabbath. Jesus counters with a story about King David. The story offers a perfect precedent, for just like Jesus, David was rightfully king at the time but he was not recognized as such. In the second story, Jesus is the one who issues the challenge: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good?” To illustrate his point, he immediately turns to a man with a withered hand and heals him. The religious leaders are appalled. Of course it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath, but this was no emergency. It was, however, the proverbial last straw that seals Jesus’ fate.

Like many of us, the religious leaders thought of the Sabbath in terms of what one was not supposed to do. Jesus, however, thought of the Sabbath in terms of relationship. For him, that was the whole point of the Sabbath. It was meant to nurture our relationship with God and with those around us, particularly those in need.
A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark (2:23–3:6)

As Jesus was passing through a field of grain on the sabbath,
his disciples began to make a path while picking the heads of grain.

At this the Pharisees said to him,
“Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the sabbath?”

He said to them, “Have you never read what David did
when he was in need and he and his companions were hungry?

How he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest
and ate the bread of offering
that only the priests could lawfully eat,
and shared it with his companions?”

Then he said to them,
“The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.
That is why the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

Again he entered the synagogue.
There was a man there who had a withered hand.

They watched him closely
to see if he would cure him on the sabbath
so that they might accuse him.

He said to the man with the withered hand,
“Come up here before us.”

Then he said to them,
“Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil,
to save life rather than to destroy it?”

But they remained silent.
Looking around at them with anger
and grieved at their hardness of heart,
he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.”

He stretched it out and his hand was restored.
The Pharisees went out
and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him
to put him to death.
The Gospel of the Lord.

* [2:23–28] This conflict regarding the sabbath follows the same pattern as in Mk 2:18–22.
* [2:25–26] Have you never read what David did?: Jesus defends the action of his disciples on the basis
of 1 Sm 21:2–7 in which an exception is made to the regulation of Lv 24:9 because of the extreme
hunger of David and his men. According to 1 Samuel, the priest who gave the bread to David was
Ahimelech, father of Abiathar.
* [2:27] The sabbath was made for man: a reaffirmation of the divine intent of the sabbath to benefit
Israel as contrasted with the restrictive Pharisaic tradition added to the law.
* [2:28] The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath: Mark’s comment on the theological meaning of the
incident is to benefit his Christian readers; see note on Mk 2:10.
* [3:1–5] Here Jesus is again depicted in conflict with his adversaries over the question of sabbath-day
observance. His opponents were already ill disposed toward him because they regarded Jesus as a
violator of the sabbath. Jesus’ question Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do
evil? places the matter in the broader theological context outside the casuistry of the scribes. The
answer is obvious. Jesus heals the man with the withered hand in the sight of all and reduces his
opponents to silence; cf. Jn 5:17–18.
In reporting the plot of the Pharisees and Herodians to put Jesus to death after this series of conflicts in Galilee, Mark uses a pattern that recurs in his account of later controversies in Jerusalem (Mk 11:17–18; 12:13–17). The help of the Herodians, supporters of Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, is needed to take action against Jesus. Both series of conflicts point to their gravity and to the impending passion of Jesus.

**SABBATH**

The Gospels record that it was Jesus' custom to attend synagogue on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21, 29; see Luke 4:16). They also report that he provoked conflict by his behavior on the Sabbath. Already in Mark's Gospel, it was on the Sabbath that Jesus cast an unclean spirit out of a man in the synagogue (1:21-28) and healed Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-30). In today's reports, it is again a Sabbath when Jesus and his disciples pluck and eat ears of grain, and Jesus heals another man in the synagogue (2:18-3:6).

On the one hand, it is clear that the Pharisees and other authorities perceive Jesus as challenging their traditional interpretation of Sabbath obligations. On the other hand, Mark's Jesus claims authority ("the Son of man is lord of the Sabbath:' v. 28) to reinterpret the Sabbath or restore its original understanding ("the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath:' v. 27).

**HONOR**

In the larger picture, something even more serious is going on. Jesus is winning every hostile encounter with his opponents. This is bound to have serious repercussions.

Honor is a public claim to worth and a public recognition of that worth. In the Gospels, the Pharisees never miss an opportunity to claim their share of honor. Experts on proper religious behavior and minute observance of the Torah, they tallied 613 commandments that obligated every member of the Judaic religion. Many Pharisees took special pride in observing all the commandments (see Luke 18:9-12).

Yet each time they challenge Jesus with a question, he shuts them up with his response. The episode in the corn-field is particularly interesting. The Pharisees challenge Jesus by pointing out that his disciples are doing something unlawful on the Sabbath (v. 24).

Jesus refers them to the Scripture they claim to know so well. As usual, he begins with an insult: "Have you never read ... " (v. 25). Only 2 to 4 percent of the populace was literate, but experts in the Law were very likely in that elite group. When dealing with the illiterate peasantry, Jesus is very careful to ask: "Have you never heard ... ?"

Then Jesus reminds the Pharisees of a story they surely read concerning the time David entered the house of God and ate the bread intended only for the priests, at the time when "Abiathar" was high priest. This is erroneous. The incident is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 where the high priest is Ahimelech. Abiathar was high priest at a much later point in David's career, after he became king (2 Sam 15:32-37).

Who made the mistake? If Mark or an earlier tradition recorded an erroneous recollection, some scribe would have "corrected" it in a subsequent manuscript. (For instance, John 4:2 is a scribal "correction" of John 3:22.) But the manuscript evidence indicates that Abiathar was the name reported consistently in this passage of Mark's Gospel.

Did Jesus make the mistake? If he did, someone among these scholars should and would have pounced on it. No one did! If Jesus made the mistake intentionally, then the report indicates that he had the last laugh at these experts. Perhaps Mark didn't record that part of the exchange in which Jesus revealed how he tripped them up at their own game. No matter. The Scripture-savvy reader knows that Jesus has beaten these Scripture experts at their own game.

**THE PENALTY FOR CAUSING SHAME**
However one might resolve the grain field episode, it is not difficult to appreciate the cumulative effect of being beaten in games of honor. "The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (Mark 3:6). In the Mediterranean world, honor is a matter of life and death.

Americans, especially those whose ethnic heritage does not derive from a circum-Mediterranean culture, have enormous difficulty appreciating the pivotal importance of honor in these cultures. During the Persian Gulf crisis, American leaders mistakenly insisted that honor did not enter the picture. In the Middle East, honor permeates all of life.

Americans have a difficult time understanding that Jesus' consummate ability to shame his opponents contributed to his death. In modern-day America, it would have contributed to his wealth.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "Jesus shares the life of the poor, from the cradle to the cross; he experiences hunger, thirst and privation.1 Jesus identifies himself with the poor of every kind and makes active love toward them the condition for entering his kingdom" (CCC, 544).
- "Because of certain acts of his expelling demons, forgiving sins, healing on the sabbath day, his novel interpretation of the precepts of the Law regarding purity, and his familiarity with tax collectors and public sinners1 some ill-intentioned persons suspected Jesus of demonic possession. He is accused of blasphemy and false prophecy, religious crimes which the Law punished with death by stoning" (CCC, 574).
- "The Gospel reports many incidents when Jesus was accused of violating the sabbath law. But Jesus never fails to respect the holiness of this day. He gives this law its authentic and authoritative interpretation: 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.' With compassion, Christ declares the sabbath for doing good rather than harm, for saving life rather than killing. The sabbath is the day of the Lord of mercies and a day to honor God. 'The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath'" (CCC, 2173).
TENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

The first eleven chapters of Genesis contain two creation stories. Ancient peoples often dealt with abstract concepts through story. Who are we and where did we come from? Who is God? Why are there problems in the world? These are some of the questions answered in the two creation stories.

These first chapters of Genesis are similar to ancient stories from other cultures that also attempt to answer the questions of where and how we began, such as the Babylonian stories of Enuma Elish and Gilgamesh. In contrast to these stories, however, Genesis introduces one God, a creator and sustainer, with whom it is possible to have an intimate relationship.

The reading for this Sunday is part of the second creation story. At the heart of this section are the questions: Why is there evil in the world? How did it get here? It is clear that Adam and Eve had a choice; they were not manipulated by the serpent. Their immediate response to God's query was to blame each other. Adam and Eve misused God's gift and are guilty and ashamed. Verse 15 verifies the consequences of the first parents' choice of personal desire over God's will: disharmony and conflict. The punishment of the serpent (not necessarily the devil) has been interpreted by Christians to mean the triumph of good over evil in the person of Jesus. But it can be translated literally as the disdain of all her offspring for snakes.

A reading from the Book of Genesis (3:9–15)

After the man, Adam, had eaten of the tree, the LORD God called to the man and asked him, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself.” Then he asked, “Who told you that you were naked? You have eaten, then, from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat!” The man replied, “The woman whom you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, and so I ate it.” The LORD God then asked the woman, “Why did you do such a thing?” The woman answered, “The serpent tricked me into it, so I ate it.” Then the LORD God said to the serpent: “Because you have done this, you shall be banned from all the animals and from all the wild creatures; on your belly shall you crawl, and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel.”
Each of the three punishments (the snake, the woman, the man) has a double aspect, one affecting the individual and the other affecting a basic relationship. The snake previously stood upright, enjoyed a reputation for being shrewder than other creatures, and could converse with human beings as in vv. 1–5. It must now move on its belly, is more cursed than any creature, and inspires revulsion in human beings (v. 15).

They will strike...at their heel: the antecedent for “they” and “their” is the collective noun “offspring,” i.e., all the descendants of the woman. Christian tradition has seen in this passage, however, more than unending hostility between snakes and human beings. The snake was identified with the devil (Wis 2:24; Jn 8:44; Rev 12:9; 20:2), whose eventual defeat seemed implied in the verse. Because “the Son of God was revealed to destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn 3:8), the passage was understood as the first promise of a redeemer for fallen humankind, the protoevangelium. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. A.D. 130–200), in his Against Heresies 5.21.1, followed by several other Fathers of the Church, interpreted the verse as referring to Christ, and cited Gal 3:19 and 4:4 to support the reference. Another interpretive translation is ipsa, “she,” and is reflected in Jerome’s Vulgate. “She” was thought to refer to Mary, the mother of the messiah. In Christian art Mary is sometimes depicted with her foot on the head of the serpent.

Some contemporary biblical scholars offer fresh insight to this very familiar story. All have recognized a play on Hebrew words translated "naked" in Genesis 2:25 and "wise" or "subtle" in Genesis 3:1. Polish Jesuit biblical scholar Julian Sulowski proposes this translation: "And the man and his wife were both wise (rather than naked) and did not disgrace themselves. Now the serpent was more wise than any other wild creature..." He believes that the sacred author (the Yahwist) is targeting Baal worship (fertility rites, sacred prostitution) with which child sacrifice was associated. The first couple were wise and did not practice sacred prostitution in the Baal cult (symbolized by the serpent). But the serpent deceived them. The conclusion of this segment (3:7) he translates thus: "And the eyes of both were opened, and they recognized that they had been shamed (or exposed, or made naked)."

Viewed in this context, today’s verses (Gen 3:9-15) describe the shock and reaction of the man and the woman to what happened to them: the serpent shamed them by means of clever deception—which to this day is still a valuable strategy in circum-Mediterranean cultures for preserving one’s honor, which is what the serpent successfully did: he remains the wisest of God’s creatures. God punishes the serpent (which may have been a dragon that lost its legs, see Rev 12:9) and sets its offspring (other serpents) at odds with the woman’s offspring (other human beings). The appropriate historico-critical, literal understanding of Genesis 3:15 is that human beings regard snakes as enemies. Father Sulowski’s interpretation situates the story in the context of polemic against Baal worship.

Christian tradition, of course, has developed other interpretations of this passage. It would seem that the architects of the lectionary have dipped into later Christian tradition to link this reading from Genesis with the gospel (Mark 3:20-35) which focuses on Satan. The development of understanding of the serpent/satan from the time of the Yahwist (author of Genesis 2-3, ca. 950 B.C.E.) to Mark (ca. 69 C.E.) is too complex to consider in a homily but certainly deserving of a continuing education program (personal or communal) when opportune. Jesus is certainly not concerned about snakes but about Satan.

RESPONSOIRAL PSALM (Ps 130:1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8)

Psalm 130 is a lament. These complaining psalms reveal intimacy with God as a very human response to suffering or adversity. Imagine the first parents pleading this psalm. Psalm 130 is a personal rather than a community psalm. The psalmist trusts that there is nothing God will not forgive (v. 4), and with God
there is "plenteous redemption" (v. 7). The psalm reflects the cry of humanity after the devastation of sin and evil.

**With the Lord there is mercy, and fullness of redemption.**

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive to my voice in supplication.
If you, O LORD, mark iniquities, LORD, who can stand?
But with you is forgiveness, that you may be revered.
I trust in the LORD; my soul trusts in his word.
More than sentinels wait for the dawn,
let Israel wait for the Lord. For with the LORD is kindness
and with him is plenteous redemption and he will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.

* [Psalm 130] This lament, a Penitential Psalm, is the De profundis used in liturgical prayers for the faithful departed. In deep sorrow the psalmist cries to God (Ps 130:1–2), asking for mercy (Ps 130:3–4). The psalmist's trust (Ps 130:5–6) becomes a model for the people (Ps 130:7–8).
* [130:1] The depths: Sheol here is a metaphor of total misery. Deep anguish makes the psalmist feel “like those descending to the pit” (Ps 143:7).
* [130:4] And so you are revered: the experience of God’s mercy leads one to a greater sense of God.

This is the sixth of the psalms traditionally identified as "penitential" (Psalms 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; and 143). It is also usually identified as an "individual psalm of lament," but given that this is a collectivistic culture populated by collectivistic (not individualistic) personalities, one needs to read the psalm more closely. Even if, as some suggest, verses 7-8 are spoken by a priest in the assembly, or are a reflection on what is occurring in the Temple liturgy, the switch from the individual in verses 1-6, to the community in verses 7-8 is typical of the behavior of a collectivistic personality. The individual finds meaning in life only in community. This being said, the psalm focuses on sin, that is, on shaming God, and is once again a suitable bridge between the first reading (the serpent shaming the first creatures) and the gospel (Jesus' enemies striving to shame Jesus).

**SECOND READING**

In this passage it is clear what sustained Paul. He had a faith that carried him through every difficulty and impelled him to proclaim his faith in Jesus Christ. To explain himself, he quoted from Psalm 116:10, "I believed, and so I spoke."
Contrary to the beliefs of his Greek contemporaries, Paul did not believe in the duality of human nature. Rather, Paul called for an appreciation of the body as created and blessed by God, and as raised from the dead in Jesus Christ. Paul believed that with body and soul he would one day experience and enjoy an eternal resurrection with his Savior. That vision sustains him in all things.

**A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (4:13–5:1)**

Brothers and sisters:
Since we have the same spirit of faith,
   according to what is written, *I believed, therefore I spoke,*
we too believe and therefore we speak,
knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus
will raise us also with Jesus
and place us with you in his presence.
Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God. Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal. For we know that if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in heaven. The word of the Lord.

* [4:13–14] Like the Psalmist, Paul clearly proclaims his faith, affirming life within himself despite death (2 Cor 4:10–11) and the life-giving effect of his experience upon the church (2 Cor 4:12, 14–15). And place us with you in his presence: Paul imagines God presenting him and them to Jesus at the parousia and the judgment; cf. 2 Cor 11:2; Rom 14:10.

* [4:16–18] In a series of contrasts Paul explains the extent of his faith in life. Life is not only already present and revealing itself (2 Cor 4:8–11, 16) but will outlast his experience of affliction and dying: it is eternal (2 Cor 4:17–18).

* [4:16] Not discouraged: i.e., despite the experience of death. Paul is still speaking of himself personally, but he assumes his faith and attitude will be shared by all Christians. Our outer self: the individual subject of ordinary perception and observation, in contrast to the interior and hidden self, which undergoes renewal. Is being renewed day by day: this suggests a process that has already begun; cf. 2 Cor 3:18. The renewal already taking place even in Paul’s dying is a share in the life of Jesus, but this is recognized only by faith (2 Cor 4:13, 18; 2 Cor 5:7).

* [5:1] Our earthly dwelling: the same contrast is restated in the imagery of a dwelling. The language recalls Jesus’ saying about the destruction of the temple and the construction of another building not made with hands (Mk 14:58), a prediction later applied to Jesus’ own body (Jn 2:20).

The composite picture that Paul presents of himself throughout his letters is curious. He boasts that he does not allow the local Corinthian to support him and thereby play the role of ‘friends’ in his life. (1Cor 9:4-12; 2Cor 11:7-9; he did, however, allow this in Philippi, 4:15-19). Some scholars believe this is part of Paul’s crisis at Corinth. He refused to accept patronage and the lower status into which that would place him, that of a client. The reason for this is that Paul wanted to be viewed as a broker who puts clients in contact with God. A broker has no clients, no one has to be beholden to a broker.

In today’s verses, Paul demonstrated how he faces death without fear. Though externally he appears to be a wreck (perhaps even physically), his inner self is being renewed day by day. He is absolutely confident that the one who raised Jesus will raise him also. If his physical life should end, he will have a new existence with God in heaven. Everything he does is for the benefit of the community so that, as the community grows, increasing numbers can give glory and thanks to God. The Gospel for today (Mark 3:20-35) recounts growing hostility to Jesus and alienation from his family, high prices to pay for conviction and single-minded devotion to God. Paul’s sentiments also reflect the high price he paid for single-minded devotion to his ministry as willed by God. What price does the modern believer risk paying for steadfast loyalty to god?
GLELUIA (Jn 12:31b–32)
Now the ruler of this world will be driven out, says the Lord; and when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.

GOSPEL

The reading from Mark could reflect a personal low point in Jesus' ministry. Instead Jesus uses it as a starting point for a message on relationships.

In verse 21 hoi par' autou, literally, "those around him," can mean "family" or "neighbors" or even "friends." These people come to take Jesus away. They think he is out of his mind. They cannot understand or accept him any more than his enemies. Maybe he is even possessed. Why else would he abandon the security of a good trade in their village to go about preaching a message that only brings abuse and ridicule?

In contrast, the scribes took the message of Jesus to heart and conscience. To deflect the truth of his words, they accuse him of acting by the power of evil. Jesus refutes their accusations with supreme logic: If Jesus' power was from Satan, why would he undermine him by driving out demons?

Jesus concludes his lesson to the scribes with a teaching about the sin against the Holy Spirit. How does Mark interpret that sin? He returns to the context of the scribes' accusation. By accusing Jesus of demonic possession, they deny the presence of the Holy Spirit and the reign of God in Jesus. Mark sees this as a habitual refusal to accept Jesus, which perverts the mind and heart until they cannot recognize Jesus and the reign of God. And so there is no wish for forgiveness.

Mark concludes with a final word: acceptance of Jesus entitles one to a relationship that takes precedence over relationship by blood.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark (3:20–35)
Jesus came home with his disciples.
Again the crowd gathered,
making it impossible for them even to eat.
When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him,
for they said, “He is out of his mind.”
The scribes who had come from Jerusalem said,
“He is possessed by Beelzebul,”
and “By the prince of demons he drives out demons.”
Summoning them, he began to speak to them in parables,
“How can Satan drive out Satan?
If a kingdom is divided against itself,
that kingdom cannot stand.
And if a house is divided against itself,
that house will not be able to stand.
And if Satan has risen up against himself
and is divided, he cannot stand;
that is the end of him.
But no one can enter a strong man’s house to plunder his property
unless he first ties up the strong man.
Then he can plunder the house.
Amen, I say to you,
all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be
forgiven them.
But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit
will never have forgiveness,
but is guilty of an everlasting sin.”
For they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”
His mother and his brothers arrived.
Standing outside they sent word to him and called him.
A crowd seated around him told him,
“Your mother and your brothers and your sisters
are outside asking for you.”
But he said to them in reply,
“Who are my mother and my brothers?”
And looking around at those seated in the circle he said,
“Here are my mother and my brothers.
For whoever does the will of God
is my brother and sister and mother.”
The Gospel of the Lord.

* [3:20–35] Within the narrative of the coming of Jesus’ relatives (Mk 3:20–21) is inserted the account of
the unbelieving scribes from Jerusalem who attributed Jesus’ power over demons to Beelzebul (Mk
3:22–30); see note on Mk 5:21–43. There were those even among the relatives of Jesus who disbelieved
and regarded Jesus as out of his mind (Mk 3:21). Against this background, Jesus is informed of the arrival
of his mother and brothers [and sisters] (Mk 3:32). He responds by showing that not family ties but
doing God’s will (Mk 3:35) is decisive in the kingdom; cf. note on Mt 12:46–50.
* [3:22] By Beelzebul: see note on Mt 10:25. Two accusations are leveled against Jesus: (1) that he is
possessed by an unclean spirit and (2) by the prince of demons he drives out demons. Jesus answers the
second charge by a parable (Mk 3:24–27) and responds to the first charge in Mk 3:28–29.
* [3:29] Whoever blasphemes against the holy Spirit: this sin is called an everlasting sin because it
attributes to Satan, who is the power of evil, what is actually the work of the holy Spirit, namely, victory
over the demons.

"Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me:' American youngsters often
repeat this piece of street wisdom during name-calling disputes with their peers. That someone may
ultimately break into tears and flee or de-cide to retaliate with physical force suggests that the saying
reflects wishful thinking more than actual reality.
In the ancient Mediterranean world, calling people names was a key strategy for honoring or shaming
them. Honorable titles applied to Jesus include "Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24), "bridegroom" (Mark
2:19-20), "Son of God" (Mark 3:11), "the Messiah" (Mark 8:29), among others.
Today’s episode records phrases intended to shame and discredit Jesus: "beside himself" (= crazy, from
his "rela-tives"!), "possessed by Beelzebub: "acts by the power of the prince of demons:" "has an
unclean spirit:' If such descrip-tions can be made to stick, Jesus' career is ended. The pur-pose of these
labels is to identify him as deviant, as failing to measure up and stick to his honor status, which derives
from birth. Names can "break bones" and end life in this culture. The response of his relatives is
significant. A Western reader might wonder: "Relatives call him crazy? With rela-tives like that who
needs enemies?’ Actually, declaration of insanity is a legitimate cultural ploy for protecting the life of
one who deserved death. It also helped maintain the honor of the family in which the serious shame
originated.
Earlier in Mark's story line, Jesus so infuriated the Pharisees that they plotted with the Herodians to destroy him (Mark 3:6). Honor and shame are very public matters in the Mediterranean world. If the shame is particularly egregious it can require the death of the one who caused it. For example, a rapist deserved death (see 2 Sam 13), but his life could be spared if the family declared him crazy. Even so, he would never be able to participate fully in the life of the community and would be culturally dead though physically alive.

Jesus prefers to defend himself. He has already demonstrated superb skill in challenge and riposte and is about to do it again. First he denies the charge (w. 23-26). Jesus is Satan's foe and not his servant. Jesus' ministry snatches victims back from Satan's dominion.

Second, Jesus' ministry of healing and exorcism is a boon and not a bane to his clients. The only one hurt is Satan whom Jesus has effectively restrained ("he first binds the strong man," v. 27).

Third, Jesus aligns himself with God, a higher and more powerful authority than Satan in the hierarchy of the spirit world (vv. 28-30). The word "spirit" means power, activity, behavior, the ability to perform or do things. The word "holy" identifies the source of this power, namely God. Jesus functions by the power of God and not the power of Satan.

Whoever denies this claim, which is what Jesus' opponents are doing, severs any possible connection with God. This is what the Greek word "blasphemy" entails. Literally, the word means to shame another person by outrageous verbal insult. Denying God's activity and attributing it to an evil spirit insults God.

Earlier (Mark 2:1-12), Jesus' opponents accused him of blaspheming by claiming to act on God's behalf in forgiving sin. It was this and not his healing and exorcism that so disturbed his opponents that they plotted to kill him (3:6). Now Jesus turns the charge of blasphemy right back at his opponents. By denying that divine forgiveness is accessible through Jesus they insult God outrageously, cut themselves off from the source of forgiveness, and seal their own destruction. Once again, Jesus wins a game of challenge and riposte. His honor increases; his reputation spreads.

The concluding segment of today's gospel reports Jesus' re-action to the efforts of his relatives (including his mother and brothers, v. 31) to spare his life by declaring him crazy (v. 21). The harsh tone of Jesus' question: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" indicates that Jesus did not appreciate their earlier efforts on his behalf. In a truly startling move, Jesus redefines family. More valuable than bonds of flesh and blood is ready obedience to the will of God. Such people constitute Jesus' new family. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of honor in the cultural world of Jesus. What value or values in the United States would stir similar passions? Would wealth be among them?

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "Since the beginning the Christian faith has been challenged by responses to the question of origins that differ from its own. Ancient religions and cultures produced many myths concerning origins. Some philosophers have said that everything is God, that the world is God, or that the development of the world is the development of God (Pantheism). Others have said
  - that the world is a necessary emanation arising from God and returning
  - to him. Still others have affirmed the existence of two eternal principles, Good and Evil, Light and Darkness, locked in permanent conflict (Dualism, Manichaeism) .... This inquiry is distinctively human" (CCC, 285).
- "The signs worked by Jesus attest that the Father has sent him. They invite belief in him .... But his miracles can also be occasions for 'offence'1; they are not intended to satisfy people's curiosity or desire for magic. Despite his evident miracles some people reject Jesus; he is even accused of acting by the power of demons(CCC, 548, 57 4, 187 4)."
Believers often tell the story of faith in hindsight. In painful times it may be difficult to see the hand of God. This is true in the story from Ezekiel the prophet. When the Israelites experienced many of their people being taken off into exile by the Babylonians, they were desolate and turned to Egypt rather than to God to be saved. They experienced another destruction of their land and people by Babylon and finally began to realize that it was their unfaithfulness that caused their suffering and loss. The prophet reminded them that God promised never to abandon them. Using the image of a cedar tree, he told them God would save a remnant of the exiles, placing a tender shoot high on the mountain to dwell in majesty. Their God is so powerful that even a withered, lowly, almost dead branch will prosper and bloom. Ezekiel told the Israelites to practice faithfulness, trust God, and fulfill their part of the covenant. A new twig will sprout, connecting to the coming Messiah from the sprout of David’s tree, or lineage. The new king will practice the true virtues of a king: humility, faithfulness to the covenant, and concern for the least for whom God cares.

A reading from the Book of Ezekiel 17:22-24
Thus says the Lord GOD: I, too, will take from the crest of the cedar, from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot, and plant it on a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it. It shall put forth branches and bear fruit, and become a majestic cedar. Birds of every kind shall dwell beneath it, every winged thing in the shade of its boughs. And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the LORD, bring low the high tree, lift high the lowly tree, wither up the green tree, and make the withered tree bloom. As I, the LORD, have spoken, so will I do.

These verses are quite likely selected because the mention of creatures living in the cedar tree is superficially related to Jesus’ mention of birds living in the mustard bush (Mark 4:26-34). Beyond this association, however, the readings do not have anything in common. Ezekiel presents an allegory in 17:1-10 whose features relate to historical personages and places like Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Jerusalem, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, etc. Then the prophet interprets the allegory in verses 11-18 by noting that Zedekiah was wrong in breaking a covenant he had made with Nebuchadnezzar, and in verses 19-21 YHWH replaces Nebuchadnezzar as the one who will use the Babylonians as a weapon for punishing Israel. Finally, verses 22-24 return to the imagery of the open-ing fable. The new twig is a future Davidic king (see 2 Sam 7:13), and the trees of the field are kings of the surrounding nations who will recognize the power of YHWH. This is the God who will raise a new king from the humility of exile to which Judah has fallen as noted in the first twenty-one verses of this chapter.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM PS 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16
Birthday greetings often wish people many more years of life. The RESPONSORIAL PSALM conveys that image of anticipating the promise of long life like palms and cedars. The symbolic connection of these trees to royalty is found in Ezekiel, 1 Kings, and Isaiah. They convey longevity, loyalty, and strength. The psalm says those who practice justice will bear fruit like these trees, even in old age. Echoing the tree metaphor of the First Reading, the psalm invites us to join our voices in thanksgiving to God for all he has done. The righteous and just are like trees planted in royal courts, giving witness to the king's splendor. Yet the king is called to serve God's people with the righteousness and justice that the Lord bestows. The steadfast compassion that God so freely gives must be rooted in the king's actions. We, too, are called to bear these same fruits as witness to the justice and peace of God's kingdom on earth in how we act toward the children of God, our brothers and sisters.

Lord, it is good to give thanks to you.
It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praise to your name, Most High, To proclaim your kindness at dawn and your faithfulness throughout the night. The just one shall flourish like the palm tree, like a cedar of Lebanon shall he grow. They that are planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall bear fruit even in old age; vigorous and sturdy shall they be, Declaring how just is the LORD, my rock, in whom there is no wrong.

* [Psalm 92] A hymn of praise and thanks for God's faithful deeds (Ps 92:2–5). The wicked, deluded by their prosperity (Ps 92:6–9), are punished (Ps 92:10), whereas the psalmist has already experienced God's protection (Ps 92:11–15).
* [92:14] Planted: the just are likened to trees growing in the sacred precincts of the Temple, which is often seen as the source of life and fertility because of God's presence, cf. Ps 36:9, 10; Ez 47:1–12.

The palm tree can live two hundred years and grows like the cedar of Lebanon, which lives still longer. This is the length of life promised to a just person well established in the house

Reading 2

St. Paul's image of being at home in the body and away from the Lord conveys his acknowledgment that we are not completely united to Christ at the moment; we are separated. Only death will bring us to the fullness of that union and ability to be at home with the Lord. In their earthly time, believers are to walk in faith. Paul uses that often-quoted phrase "we walk by faith, not by sight" (v. 7). Faith acknowledges our belief here and now even though we do not see. Faith allows us, like the Israelites, to stay rooted in our belief in God and in the covenant as fulfilled in his Son, Jesus Christ. Paul says all will be judged according to the good or evil they have done. Followers of Christ are urged to live their lives well, with courage and confidence, so they will live with Christ for eternity.

2 COR 5:6-10

Brothers and sisters: We are always courageous, although we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yet we are courageous, and we would rather leave the body and go home to the Lord. Therefore, we aspire to please him, whether we are at home or away. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil.
[5:6–9] Tension between present and future is expressed by another spatial image, the metaphor of the country and its citizens. At present we are like citizens in exile or far away from home. The Lord is the distant homeland, believed in but unseen (2 Cor 5:7).

[5:10] We must all appear: the verb is ambiguous: we are scheduled to “appear” for judgment, at which we will be “revealed” as we are (cf. 2 Cor 11; 2:14; 4:10–11).

The main point Paul makes is that he aspires to please God and God alone (v. 9) so that he might receive his proper recompense (v. 10). What prompts this declaration? His opponents in Corinth concluded that Paul's sufferings and tribulations weakened his claim to be an apostle. Why would God treat an apostle this way, and what good is a sickly and weak apostle? Paul argues that suffering and tribulation are integral to a believer’s life. He insists that he remains courageous in the face of danger or testing.

One of the difficulties in reading English translations of Paul's letters is recognizing when he is "quoting" his opponents and when he is, presenting his response. The Corinthians considered human bodily existence as an obstacle to union with Jesus: "While we are here in the body, we are away from the Lord" (v. 6). Paul replies: "I would rather leave the body and be with the Lord" (v. 7). The opponents set up a contrast between "here" and "there". Paul replies that he moves progressively through life from "here" to "there" with the Lord. So whether one is away from the Lord (at home, in the body) or with the Lord (after death) is of less consequence than striving to please him.

Finally, Paul draws on another familiar theme: judgment and receiving recompense according to what one has done (v. 10). Of special note is the importance of the body’s activities in the final judgment. Unlike his opponents, Paul holds the body in high esteem (though he frequently complains of being frail and likely to die).

Just as Jesus taught in parables (Mark 4:26-34) whose meanings were not immediately self-evident, so did Paul use rhetoric and a style in his letters which pose a challenge to modern readers. Cross-cultural communication isn’t easy, but efforts to understand it pay rich dividends.

Alleluia

The seed is the word of God, Christ is the sower. All who come to him will live forever.

Gospel

Jesus often used common experiences to help people understand his teachings, and he used images for God and his Kingdom. In the first parable we do not understand how a seed grows and produces, but that is how the reign of God manifests itself. In the second, the Kingdom of God is like the smallest of seeds but becomes so large that birds build nests in the shades of its branches.

Sometimes the term "Kingdom of God" causes us to imagine a place, perhaps associated with heaven, and we all aspire to that kingdom. Scripture scholars also translate kingdom as reign, which may convey a broader image than a specific place. Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God as a way of being or following God's way: if we believe and practice a way of life, then God's reign would look like this. The image helps us understand our role in this. Our work is to proclaim this Kingdom of God by demonstrating through our actions toward God and one another that we are true followers. Like the palm and cedar trees, like the mustard seed and the seed upon the ground, we show the fruits of our belief here on earth in our treatment of one another, in the way we practice justice and peace, and in the way we right our relationships with our sisters and brothers.
A reading from the Gospel of Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said to the crowds: “This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and through it all the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.” He said, “To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.” With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.

* [4:1–34] In parables (Mk 4:2): see note on Mt 13:3. The use of parables is typical of Jesus’ enigmatic method of teaching the crowds (Mk 4:2–9, 12) as compared with the interpretation of the parables he gives to his disciples (Mk 4:10–25, 33–34) to each group according to its capacity to understand (Mk 4:9–11). The key feature of the parable at hand is the sowing of the seed (Mk 4:3), representing the breakthrough of the kingdom of God into the world. The various types of soil refer to the diversity of response accorded the word of God (Mk 4:4–7). The climax of the parable is the harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold, indicating the consummation of the kingdom (Mk 4:8). Thus both the present and the future action of God, from the initiation to the fulfillment of the kingdom, is presented through this and other parables (Mk 4:26–29, 30–32).

* [4:26–29] Only Mark records the parable of the seed’s growth. Sower and harvester are the same. The emphasis is on the power of the seed to grow of itself without human intervention (Mk 4:27). Mysteriously it produces blade and ear and full grain (Mk 4:28). Thus the kingdom of God initiated by Jesus in proclaiming the word develops quietly yet powerfully until it is fully established by him at the final judgment (Mk 4:29); cf. Rev 14:15.


Jesus seemed especially fond of using parables. In its form, the ancient Middle Eastern parable is a simile, that is, an ex-plicit comparison of one item to another. Jesus' parables tell his listeners what God is like by comparing God’s being or behavior to something familiar and known in the culture. The reason why parables were and are difficult to interpret is because they point out how things are similar but also dif-ferent. In other words, God is similar to, yet different from, whatever is presented as the point of comparison.

KINGDOM OF GOD

Many parables begin with the phrase "the kingdom of God is like . . . ". The English phrase is unfortunate because Jesus is not describing a place (kingdom) but rather a person (God). Many scholars prefer to translate: "The reign of God is like . . . ". In other words, a parable describes, or presents a scenario that illustrates what happens when God is totally in charge of life.

SEED

To understand the parable about the sown seed (vv. 26-29), a Western reader must be familiar with a very fundamental, ancient Middle Eastern conviction (common to all peasant societies): "All goods are finite in quantity, that is, limited in number, and already distributed." In other words, there is no more where this came from.

Any Middle Easterner who suddenly realized an increase in goods was considered a thief, because one peasant’s gain usually meant another peasant’s loss. Recall how the woman who lost a few coins rejoiced and invited friends to a party that cost more than the value of the rediscovered coins (Luke 15:8-9). It was imperative to demonstrate that she had not stolen the coins from another person or found what some-one else had lost.
Yet peasants recognized certain yields, like livestock, a good crop, and children as exceptions. These increases were viewed as imponderable but very welcome gifts from God.

Even so, a limited-good culture expected that anyone who realized a sudden windfall should immediately share it with others rather than store it up for personal use in the future (see Luke 12:16-21). To keep it for one’s personal benefit manifested greed.

In Mark’s first parable today, the man is ignorant and perhaps even slothful. After planting the seed, he does nothing to help it along. He neither tills, weeds, nor irrigates the crop. Yet the earth itself brings forth the harvest.

What is God’s reign like? If it depends upon human effort, one risks failure. If humans choose to trust God instead of relying upon themselves, unimaginable success can result. The choice is up to the one who hears the parable.

MUSTARD SEED

This parable presents a slight variation on the previous one. Mark makes the parable botanically correct: the mustard seed becomes a shrub, sometimes rather large, but it never grows into a tree (see Luke 13:19). Yet Mark notes that the shrub has large branches and that birds can make nests in its shade. The listener is challenged to imagine how great the kingdom will be: will it be small and selective, only admitting a few? or will it look small (like a shrub) but actually be large enough to shelter varieties of birds?

The choice is up to the listener.

The puzzling remark about Jesus teaching the crowds in parables but explaining things in private to his disciples casts the parables into yet another light. To appreciate this light, a reader needs to understand the importance of secrecy in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Honor requires that outsiders should learn nothing damaging about insiders. Hence, secrecy is an important strategy for family groups. Yet it is also socially unacceptable because others will suspect that those who keep secrets are plotting to damage their honor. A troubling dilemma.

Jesus’ parables spoken to the public (the outsiders) carry one meaning, but explained to his disciples (the insiders) carry another (e.g., compare the interpretation in Mark 4:10-20 to the parable in Mark 4:1-9).

Should the believer settle for the outsider interpretation or strive to gain the insider understanding? The choice is up to the listener!

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "The Gospel has an intrinsic principle of totality: it will always remain good news until it has been proclaimed to all people, until it has healed and strengthened every aspect of humanity, until it has brought all men and women together at table in God’s kingdom" (EG, 237).
- "Believers witness to the presence and word of Jesus in the world and are a continuing sign of the Kingdom of God, which is present both in and through Jesus, and still to come to its fullness through the power of the Holy Spirit" (FYH, p. 6).
- "[Jesus] poured out on his disciples the Spirit promised by the Father.1 From this source the Church ... receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and is, on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom" (LG, 5).
TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

The Book of Job deals with the mystery of human suffering. Job was a righteous man afflicted with numerous difficulties. His friends told him he suffered because he sinned. These friends represent a traditional, religious point of view: obedience to God brings blessing; disobedience brings suffering. Job vehemently disagreed because he knew he was a good man. He couldn't believe his sin caused him to suffer. Job turned to God and repeatedly asked why he was afflicted. God does not answer his questions or tell Job that his sins caused his misfortune. Instead, God portrays the great mystery and marvels of the universe. In verses 8-11, the creation of the sea is described as if it were the birth of a baby. The waters that burst forth are controlled by God's activity and word. Like a tender parent, God clothes the sea with clouds and darkness. The tone of God's response to Job is "Can you match divine activity? Can you even understand it? I, God, control the force you fear most, the sea. What do you know about the order of the universe?" The truth is that God's order is more mysterious than Job will ever understand. What Job can understand is that God, not he, is in charge.

A reading from the Book of Job (38:1, 8–11)
The Lord addressed Job out of the storm and said:
Who shut within doors the sea,
when it burst forth from the womb;
when I made the clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling bands?
When I set limits for it
and fastened the bar of its door,
and said: Thus far shall you come but no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stilled!

* [38:1] Now the Lord enters the debate and addresses two discourses (chaps. 38–39 and 40–41) to Job, speaking of divine wisdom and power. Such things are altogether beyond the capacity of Job. Out of the storm: frequently the background of the appearances of the Lord in the Old Testament; cf. Ps 18; 50; Na 1:3; Hb 3:2–15.

The link between this reading from Job and the gospel (Mark 4:35-41) is the working of nature as God has created it. In the world of our ancestors in faith, human beings did not fully understand how nature worked nor could they control it. In the gospel, Jesus appears to have control over nature, hence he seems to know nature in a way that Job didn't. The storm or whirlwind is a common vehicle employed by God for self-disclosure, especially to the prophets (see Isa 29:6; 40:24; 41:16; Jer 23:19; 30:23; Ezek 1:4; 13:11, 13; Zech 9:14). It swept Elijah up to the sky (2 Kgs 2:1, 11). Throughout this book, Job has been demanding that God should answer him and explain his situation. He has even appealed beyond God to some god beyond that. God's reply is a challenge to Job. "What do you know about creation?" The reply may sound like that of a bully, but it
actually fits well with Job's ongoing dialogue with his three companions. They represent the Wis-dom
tradition in which sages were expected to think about and explore the workings of nature (see 1 Kgs
4:29-34). God's answer is that for all their reflection on nature, neither your friends nor you understand
it at all. There is a rationale in nature that surpasses your comprehension.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 107:23–24, 25–26, 28–29, 30–31)

The Israelites considered the desert and the sea to be the two most dangerous and mysterious places on
earth. They experienced the vastness, power, and overwhelming intensity of the desert and sea and
knew that only God could control them.
The psalm response focuses on the experience of sailors who ventured forth from safe shores and
encountered a storm. The sailors recognize God's authority when they call out, and God responds by
bringing them to a safe harbor. The psalmist invites everyone to praise this loving God, the one who
rescues those near drowning.

Give thanks to the Lord, his love is everlasting.
They who sailed the sea in ships,
trading on the deep waters,
These saw the works of the L ORD
and his wonders in the abyss.
His command raised up a storm wind
which tossed its waves on high.
They mounted up to heaven; they sank to the depths;
their hearts melted away in their plight.
They cried to the L ORD in their distress;
from their straits he rescued them,
He hushed the storm to a gentle breeze,
and the billows of the sea were stilled.
They rejoiced that they were calmed,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
Let them give thanks to the L ORD for his kindness
and his wondrous deeds to the children of men.

* [Psalm 107] A hymn inviting those who have been rescued by God to give praise (Ps 107:1–3). Four
archetypal divine rescues are described, each ending in thanksgiving: from the sterile desert (Ps 107:4–
9), from imprisonment in gloom (Ps 107:10–16), from mortal illness (Ps 107:17–22), and from the angry
sea (Ps 107:23–32). The number four connotes totality, all the possible varieties of rescue. The same
saving activity of God is shown in Israel's history (Ps 107:33–41); whenever the people were endangered
God rescued them. The last verses invite people to ponder the persistent saving acts of God (Ps 107:42–
43).

The verses selected from this psalm of thanksgiving relate to one kind of distress against which human
beings in the ancient world had little power, namely dangers in travel by sea. This is curious since only
for a brief period during the rule of Solomon and Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 9:26-28; 22:49) did Israel have at
its disposal a fleet of ships. They sailed from Ezion-geber in the direction of the Red Sea. Jehoshaphat's
ships were wrecked even before they got under way (1 Kgs 22:59). Still, experience on the Sea of Galilee which generates sudden storms (Mark 3:35-41, today’s gospel) could also stir the same sentiments as experience on a larger body of water. Those who sail cry to the Lord in their distress, and God rescues them. The Lord’s love is everlasting.

SECOND READING

Paul wants the Corinthians to understand what a true Apostle is, because his authority is questioned by some in Corinth. He defines a true Apostle as one who has been transformed by faith in Christ. A true Apostle is someone who lives not for himself, but for Christ. Paul explains, using a creed-like statement, that because “one died for all; therefore, all have died” (14). Christ’s Death enables true Apostles to die to themselves and to live in a completely new way for Christ. Unlike some, who judge with ordinary human understanding, true Apostles have a Christ-like perspective. Believers are not simply improved, they are totally changed. Paul urges the Corinthians to convert and be reborn.

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (5:14–17)

Brothers and sisters:
The love of Christ impels us,
once we have come to the conviction that one died for all;
therefore, all have died.
He indeed died for all,
so that those who live might no longer live for themselves
but for him who for their sake died and was raised.
Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh;
even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh,
yet now we know him so no longer.
So whoever is in Christ is a new creation:
the old things have passed away;
behold, new things have come.

* [5:16–17] Consequently: the death of Christ described in 2 Cor 5:14–15 produces a whole new order (2 Cor 5:17) and a new mode of perception (2 Cor 5:16). According to the flesh: the natural mode of perception, characterized as “fleshly,” is replaced by a mode of perception proper to the Spirit. Elsewhere Paul contrasts what Christ looks like according to the old criteria (weakness, powerlessness, folly, death) and according to the new (wisdom, power, life); cf. 2 Cor 5:15, 21; 1 Cor 1:17–3:3. Similarly, he describes the paradoxical nature of Christian existence, e.g., in 2 Cor 4:10–11, 14. A new creation: rabbis used this expression to describe the effect of the entrance of a proselyte or convert into Judaism or of the remission of sins on the Day of Atonement. The new order created in Christ is the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6).

Our ancestors in the faith, and notably Paul, divided time in terms of "time before Jesus" and "time after Jesus:' Similar divisions included: then vs. now (Gal 4:8-9); once but now (Gal 4:3-7); mystery hidden vs. mystery now revealed (1 Cor 2:6-10); and mystery promised vs. mystery now given (Titus 1:2ff.). The
time after Jesus is qualitatively different from the time before Jesus. The new context is one of holiness and sinlessness as the normative way of life for all believers.

In this new state, the love shown by Jesus who selflessly died for all becomes a new model of authentic human existence. The pattern of Jesus' death becomes the pattern according to which those who benefitted must now live. The new life Jesus has gained for all must be made manifest in a concern for others.

Old ways of judgment (according to the flesh, that is, the criteria of the unredeemed world) must be replaced. Paul admits that as a Pharisee, he misjudged Jesus because he used the wrong criteria. Now, however, Paul knows Jesus differently, he views Jesus from a different perspective. The concluding exhortation is that whoever belongs to the community of believers (whoever is in Christ) is a new creation. Therefore, within such a context, the standard of judgment must change, too.

Mark (4:35-41) in today's gospel recounts an occasion on which the disciples saw Jesus in a fresh light when he stilled the storm. Understanding Jesus isn't as easy as some might think. The disciples and Paul had to work toward a correct understanding. Why would modern believers think they have an advantage over Paul and the disciples?

**ALLELUIA (Lk 7:16)**
A great prophet has risen in our midst God has visited his people.

**GOSPEL**

In the first century, the Sea of Galilee was a boundary between the Jews and the Gentiles. Jesus challenged his followers to cross the sea and enter the unknown territory of the Gentiles. The sea symbolized the fear and doubts the disciples and the early Church must have felt when faced with outreach to the Gentiles. Although Jesus was with them, they felt as if they faced the journey alone. It might have seemed that Jesus was asleep.

In their fear, the disciples cry out and awaken Jesus. They believe Jesus will let them drown. Jesus' words are enough to calm the waters. Like the God of Israel, Jesus has authority over the sea, over chaos, and over the entire world.

Jesus questions the disciples: **"Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?"** The little band in the boat does not understand. They only respond with awe that their teacher has power over the water.

For those with faith, this miracle is a clear sign that Jesus is the one from God.

The early Church, like the boat - battered and blown about - will not sink. Jesus will not let any of his followers sink into chaos. With Jesus, we can survive any storm.

**+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark (4:35–41)**

On that day, as evening drew on, Jesus said to his disciples:
"Let us cross to the other side."

Leaving the crowd, they took Jesus with them in the boat just as he was.
And other boats were with him.

A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up.

Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion.

They woke him and said to him,
"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

He woke up,
rebuffed the wind, and said to the sea, “Quiet! Be still!”
The wind ceased and there was great calm.
Then he asked them, “Why are you terrified?
Do you not yet have faith?”
They were filled with great awe and said to one another,
“Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?”

* [4:35–5:43] After the chapter on parables, Mark narrates four miracle stories: Mk 4:35–41; 5:1–20; and two joined together in Mk 5:21–43. See also notes on Mt 8:23–34 and 9:8–26.
* [4:39] Quiet! Be still!: as in the case of silencing a demon (Mk 1:25), Jesus rebukes the wind and subdues the turbulence of the sea by a mere word; see note on Mt 8:26.
* [4:41] Jesus is here depicted as exercising power over wind and sea. In the Christian community this event was seen as a sign of Jesus’ saving presence amid persecutions that threatened its existence.

Though contemporary Western believers read this story as a 'miracle;' first-century Mediterranean peasants would have seen that honor, the core value of that culture, permeates the story through and through.

FEAR
Mediterranean culture trains and expects males to behave bravely, especially in the face of danger. Nothing should ever shake the courage of a man. A public expression of fear is shameful. Sirach (22:17-18) contrasts a firm resolution based on prudent understanding with a timid resolution based on foolish plans. He concludes that the latter will be unable to "with-stand fear of any kind!'
In today's gospel, there does not seem to have been any plan. At the end of the day Jesus suggested that he and his companions cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (v. 35). They depart, just as they are. Sudden and violent storms are common on this sea. Surely the men who sailed and fished there knew that.
That these experienced sailors and fishermen should yield to fear (see v. 40) is shameful and could be potentially dam-aging to their honor status if it ever became known to some outgroup like the people on either shore, or perhaps even to those in the other boats (v. 36). Jesus appears to “rub it in" by asking the embarrassing question, "Why are you afraid? Is your loyalty still weak?" (lit. "have you no faith;' v. 40).

JESUS' POWER
Western readers of this story struggle to understand how a human being could control nature by word alone. Jesus' Middle Eastern contemporaries had no such problem. Rabbinic tradition speaks of people such as flioni the rain-making saint who challenged God to make it rain while he stood in a ring he drew on the ground (first century B.C.E., Taanit 24a), and Banina ben Dosa who once caused a shower of rain to stop for his personal convenience and then begin again (Taanit 24b).
The first-century concern was not Jesus' power but the honor status that derived from this power. Peasants recognized an extensive hierarchy of spirits and people who possessed power to do things ordinary humans could not do. It was imperative to know where to rank such powerful beings in order to give them proper honor.
The disciples' question, "Who then is this, that even sea and wind obey him?" (v. 41), is not an attempt to fathom Jesus' identity but rather to rank him properly in the honor hierarchy. Besides being more powerful than ordinary human beings, Jesus is also more powerful than sea and wind.
In the ancient world, anyone who behaved contrary to what was expected of their birth status (as Jesus seemed to do on a regular basis) posed a huge problem. Their power had to come from another source. The disciples' question about Jesus concerns the source of his extraordinary power.
In the case of Honi the rain-making saint, Simeon ben Shatab believed that he was clearly a spoilt child of God and therefore should be left alone rather than excommunicated for his irreverence toward God. In the case of Jesus, opinion in the Gospels is mixed. Some, like the disciples in this story, are inclined to believe that he acted by the power of God, as he often claims. Others, like the scribes, believe that his power derives from the prince of demons (Mark 3:22).

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- Jesus demonstrated mighty works and wondrous signs showing God's reign to be present (see CCC, 547).
- We have complete faith in God, whose authority is above all things. God is infinitely benevolent (see CCC, 2086).
- Having a Christian attitude means putting oneself into the hands of providence (see CCC, 2115).
The Book of Wisdom, written approximately one hundred years before the birth of Jesus, may well have been the last Old Testament book written. This passage combines insights from both Jewish and Greek thought, affirming that all humans are created for immortality because we are all created in the image and likeness of God. By reinterpret-ing Genesis 3, the author asserts that God created us for eternal life. Death entered the world through the serpent, who is equated with Satan. Those who cooperate and live the way God created us will never die, despite the ravages of physical death. Those who do not live in this manner will not experience eternal life. The author, in the tradition of Wisdom literature, is presenting us with a choice: eternal life or everlasting death. We trust in God and pray that God helps us to choose rightly.


God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living. For he fashioned all things that they might have being; and the creatures of the world are wholesome, and there is not a destructive drug among them nor any domain of the netherworld on earth, for justice is undying. For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him. But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who belong to his company experience it.

* [1:14] Hades: the Greek term for the Hebrew Sheol, the dwelling place of the dead.
* [1:15] Undying: immortality is not seen as an innate quality of the soul but as a gift of God to the righteous.
* [2:24] Envy: perhaps because Adam was in the image of God or because Adam had control over all creation. Devil: the first biblical text to equate the serpent of Gn 3 with the devil.

These verses were probably selected as a companion to the account of Jesus’ restoring Jairus’ daughter to life (Mark 5:21-43). In their own context, however, the author of Wisdom is not talking about physical death but rather spiritual death, the state of being separated from God for all eternity (see Wis 2:24). Nothing in the physical world (e.g., “a destructive drug”) can contribute to spiritual death. Justice leads to immortality, which is a free gift of life eternal with God.

Verses 23-24 are the first biblical text-segment to equate the serpent of Genesis 3 with the devil. (In later tradition, see John 8:44; Rev 12:9; 20:2.) God’s plan for human beings was not innate immortality (“immortal”) but rather eternal life with the deity. The devil was envious of this, and envy in the Mediterranean world always entails a wish for the destruction of the object envied. Intertestamental traditions suggest that the devil was envious that human beings were made in God’s image (Life of Adam and Eve 12-17) or because the first human had control over all creation (2 Enoch 31:3-6). Driven by this envy, the devil brought spiritual death into the world, but it is experienced only by the wicked (“those who belong to his company”).
RESPONSORIAL PSALM  PS 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11, 12, 13

Psalm 30 is a song of praise and thanksgiving to God, who has rescued the psalmist from some horrendous fate, comparable to going down to the netherworld or the pit of death. God is a God of life who desires not death but life. Calling upon and trusting in the Lord results in reliable deliverance by God. Having experienced God’s deliverance, the psalmist invites the whole community to praise and thank, whose good will lasts a lifetime. God acts on our behalf to change our weeping into rejoicing and our mourning into dancing. God is ever gracious and reliable, ready to answer whenever we call. Praise and thanksgiving to God are always appropriate and fitting.

I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.
I will extol you, O LORD, for you drew me clear and did not let my enemies rejoice over me. O LORD, you brought me up from the netherworld; you preserved me from among those going down into the pit. I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me. Sing praise to the LORD, you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger lasts but a moment; a lifetime, his good will. At nightfall, weeping enters in, but with the dawn, rejoicing. Hear, O LORD, and have pity on me; O LORD, be my helper. You changed my mourning into dancing; O LORD, my God, forever will I give you thanks.

This is a thanksgiving psalm composed by a very sick person who was at the brink of death (netherworld; the pit) but rescued by God. The psalmist invites the entire congregation which has heard his story to join in his thanksgiving. He exhorts them to be loyal, for all distress is but temporary. In the end, God will rescue the one who remains faithful.

Reading 2

Paul encourages the Christian community in Corinth to share with others their material abundance. He praises them for excelling in following Christ, and for the many gifts they have received through the Spirit. Other communities are in need, and Paul asks the Corinthians to share so that all may have life’s necessities. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to imitate Jesus, who, as God, was rich beyond all measure yet chose to become poor, to become human, for their sake. So, too, they are to share their riches with others in need, thus being true imitators of Jesus. Those helped would, in return, be motivated to share whatever riches they possess. In this fashion all would experience the graciousness of God, richly expressed in Christ Jesus.

A reading from the Second Letter to the Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15

Brothers and sisters: As you excel in every respect, in faith, discourse, knowledge, all earnestness, and in the love we have for you, may you excel in this gracious act also. For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. Not that others should have relief while you are burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their needs, so that their abundance may also supply your needs, that there may be equality. As it is written: Whoever had much did not have more, and whoever had little did not have less.

* [8:1–9:15] Paul turns to a new topic, the collection for the church in Jerusalem. There is an early precedent for this project in the agreement mentioned in Gal 2:6–10. According to Acts, the church at Antioch had sent Saul and Barnabas to Jerusalem with relief (Acts 11:27–30). Subsequently Paul organized a project of relief for Jerusalem among his own churches. Our earliest evidence for it comes in 1 Cor 16:1–4—after it had already begun (see notes
there); by the time Paul wrote Rom 15:25–28 the collection was completed and ready for delivery. 2 Cor 8–9 contain what appear to be two letters on the subject. In them Paul gives us his fullest exposition of the meaning he sees in the enterprise, presenting it as an act of Christian charity and as an expression of the unity of the church, both present and eschatological. These chapters are especially rich in the recurrence of key words, on which Paul plays; it is usually impossible to do justice to these wordplays in the translation.
* [8:12–15] Paul introduces the principle of equality into the discussion. The goal is not impoverishment but sharing of resources; balance is achieved at least over the course of time. In 2 Cor 8:15 Paul grounds his argument unexpectedly in the experience of Israel gathering manna in the desert: equality was achieved, independently of personal exertion, by God, who gave with an even hand according to need. Paul touches briefly here on the theme of “living from God.”

The architects of the lectionary have strung select verses together to reshape Paul’s original thought (see Sloyan). It is important to recognize this because this second letter to the Corinthians is composed of at least two letters (some would say as many as five), and chapters 8-9 occasion discussion as to whether they should be attached to chapters 1-7 or considered yet another letter. In these reflections, we follow the opinion that they continue from chapter 7. Those who would undertake a longer and more detailed study of Paul’s Corinthian correspondence can find and evaluate the details of the argumentation (Murphy-O’Connor 1997).

In today’s select verses, Paul is urging the Corinthians to be generous in a collection being taken up for the needs of the Jerusalem church. Ordinaril in this culture, people relate to each other by means of an implicit dyadic contract (I do you a favor, you owe me; you pay back my favor, I owe you; etc.). This is also called balanced reciprocity. It would seem that this is the principle Paul is invoking here. He prefaced his request by flattering the Corinthians with regard to their spiritual gifts, the very things in which they took excessive pride and which occasioned Paul’s corrective to them about these things in 1 Corinthians. Next, he presents the image of Jesus who by despoiling himself made others rich.

Finally, he lays out his request: from your surplus send what you can (without despoiling yourself) to help the church in Jerusalem. If you should ever become needy, they will be able and willing to help you in return. To bolster his request, Paul cites Exod 16:18 concerning the manna: “he that gathered much had nothing over; he that gathered little, had no lack:’ Everyone had enough, neither too little nor surplus.

In today’s gospel (Mark 5:21-43) Jesus performs two life-renewing deeds: he heals the woman with the menstrual irregularity and raises Jairus’ daughter from the dead. Few have shared in Jesus’ life-giving abilities, but all believers are capable of the life-restoring strategy Paul proposes to the Corinthians: from your surplus help those in need that they may have a meaningful life. What kind of life-giving and meaning-restoring activities are open to modern believers?

Paul encourages the Christian community in Corinth to share with others their material abundance. He praises them for excelling in following Christ, and for the many gifts they have received through the Spirit. Other communities are in need, and Paul asks the Corinthians to share so that all may have life’s necessities. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to imitate Jesus, who, as God, was rich beyond all measure yet chose to become poor, to become human, for their sake. So, too, they are to share their riches with others in need, thus being true imitators of Jesus. Those helped would, in return, be motivated to share whatever riches they possess. In this fashion all would experience the graciousness of God, richly expressed in Christ Jesus.

 Alleluia 2 TM 1:10
Our Savior Jesus Christ destroyed death and brought life to light through the Gospel.
This passage speaks of faith in God, which enables us to cross boundaries and reach out to one another. In doing this, we become living witnesses to God's compassion and healing touch. Mark's Jesus confronts the powers of evil, sickness, and death, while affirming life. In sandwiching one healing event within another, Jesus highlights the essence of discipleship. The request by Jairus, a synagogue official, that Jesus come to heal his daughter surrounds the healing of the hemorrhaging woman. The woman, long afflicted with hemorrhages, dares to reach out and touch Jesus in public, without his knowledge or consent. In so doing, she violates both social custom and religious purity laws. Yet, her trust in God and in Jesus' healing powers emboldens her to act. Jesus, deeply touched by her faith, restores her to community life by calling her "daughter" and sends her on her way both healed and at peace.

As Jesus continues on to Jairus' home, news of the daughter's death reaches them. Jesus counsels Jairus not to fear but to have faith. In the midst of the crowd's ridicule and doubt, Jesus approaches the dead girl and touches her, calling her to rise. Like the hemorrhaging woman, Jesus breaks both social custom and ritual purity laws by touching the dead body of a woman he does not know. This daughter of God is brought to life by Jesus, and he encourages her parents to give her something to eat. Both incidents address issues of what discipleship entails. Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman call us to have faith in God's life-giving touch. Like Jesus, disciples are called to cross boundaries so that God's healing touch and compassion can be experienced and activated. Both stories focus on Jesus' mission to lead people from isolation, sickness, and the powers of evil, to God and the life-giving support of family and community.

A reading from the Gospel of Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered around him, and he stayed close to the sea. One of the synagogue officials, named Jairus, came forward. Seeing him he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, saying, "My daughter is at the point of death. Please, come lay your hands on her that she may get well and live." He went off with him, and a large crowd followed him and pressed upon him. There was a woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years. She had suffered greatly at the hands of many doctors and had spent all that she had. Yet she was not helped but only grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. She said, "If I but touch his clothes, I shall be cured." Immediately her flow of blood dried up. She felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. Jesus, aware at once that power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who has touched my clothes?" But his disciples said to Jesus, "You see how the crowd is pressing upon you, and yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" And he looked around to see who had done it. The woman, realizing what had happened to her, approached in fear and trembling. She fell down before Jesus and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction." While he was still speaking, people from the synagogue official's house arrived and said, "Your daughter has died; why trouble the teacher any longer?" Disregarding the message that was reported, Jesus said to the synagogue official, "Do not be afraid; just have faith." He did not allow anyone to accompany him inside except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they arrived at the house of the synagogue official, he caught sight of a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. So he went in and said to them, "Why this commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but asleep." And they ridiculed him. Then he put them all out. He took along the child's father and mother and those who were with him and entered the room where the child was. He took the child by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise!" The girl, a child of twelve, arose immediately and walked around. At that
they were utterly astounded. He gave strict orders that no one should know this and said that she should be given something to eat.


* [5:23] Lay your hands on her: this act for the purpose of healing is frequent in Mk 6:5; 7:32–35; 8:23–25; 16:18 and is also found in Mt 9:18; Lk 4:40; 13:13; Acts 9:17; 28:8.

* [5:28] Both in the case of Jairus and his daughter (Mk 5:23) and in the case of the hemorrhage victim, the inner conviction that physical contact (Mk 5:30) accompanied by faith in Jesus’ saving power could effect a cure was rewarded.

* [5:35] The faith of Jairus was put to a twofold test: (1) that his daughter might be cured and, now that she had died, (2) that she might be restored to life. His faith contrasts with the lack of faith of the crowd.


* [5:41] Arise: the Greek verb egeirein is the verb generally used to express resurrection from death (Mk 6:14, 16; Mt 11:5; Lk 7:14) and Jesus’ own resurrection (Mk 16:6; Mt 28:6; Lk 24:6).

Today’s reading provides an excellent opportunity to reflect upon health and healing in the ancient Mediterranean world. Modern Western readers must suspend all that they know of the wonders of contemporary scientific medicine in order to enter a world where germs, microscopes, cat scanner,” and the impressive array of modern drugs were unknown.

THE HERMORRAGNING WOMAN

This woman suffered from her problems of menstrual irregularity for twelve years. Mari is often unfairly accused of physician basking for his comment that she suffered much under many physicians, spent all he had, and was no better but grew worse: (v.26).

The ancient world knew at least two kinds of healers: professional physicians and folk healers. Mark tells us that until the moment she encountered Jesus, the hemorrhaging woman put all her trust and resources in professional physicians. Perhaps she was of elite status. Luke, who is very likely not a physician and probably not the one mentioned by Paul in Colossians 4:14, says the woman :could not be healed by anyone: (8:43).

Professional physicians hesitated to treat patients, because if the patient died the physician could be put to death too. They preferred to discuss illness (many were philosopher physicians) and may well have offered this woman little more than philosophical reflection. In the New Testament, professional physicians are mentioned very infrequently (Mark 2:17 and parallels; 5:16; Luke 4:23; 8:43; Col 4:14) and chiefly in proverbs that were common in the ancient world.

Professional physicians in antiquity have little if anything in common with contemporary physicians. Because the Hebrews considered God to be their chief healer (Exod 15:26) they developed an ambivalent attitude toward professional physicians, as reflected in Sirach 38:1-23.

Folk healers in antiquity were much more commonly avail-able to the peasants. They were willing to use their hands (John 9:6), touch people (Mark 8:22-26), and even risk failed treatments (Mark 6:5-6). In the gospel reports, people definitely identified Jesus as a folk healer, specifically a spirit-filled prophet who could still storms, conquer malevolent spirits, and restore people to their rightful and proper place in community.

In modern anthropological terms, we cannot know whether Jesus cured anyone because curing is directed to-ward disease (germs, viruses, and the like), and we have no evidence of the diseases his petitioners may have been suf-fering. Moreover, even in classical Greek literature, there is no indication that cures were expected to be permanent.
But in the same terms, Jesus definitely healed all who wanted to be healed. Healing is the restoration of meaning to people's lives no matter what their physical condition might be. Curing is very rare, but healing takes place infallibly, 100 percent of the time, because sooner or later all people regain meaning in life and resume their rightful place in society.

This is certainly what Jesus accomplished for the hemor-rhaging woman. Her condition rendered her ritually unclean and not only prevented her from entering the Temple but also required that she remove herself from the community, the equivalent of social death in the Mediterranean world.

Notice that Jesus sometimes is unaware of and has no control over his power (see v. 39). The woman evoked it without his awareness or permission. Nevertheless, Jesus declares what he and the woman know has occurred: "the condition no longer exists; welcome back to the community, daughter!"

THE DEAD TEENAGER

In the first century, 60 percent of live births usually died by their mid-teens. The scene presented here was a very common one.

Like other ancient healers, Jesus sometimes used a formula. The fact that the Greek Gospel retains Jesus' Aramaic words "Talitha cum" ("little girl, get up") reflects the ancient belief that power is in the original words and not the translation. Some associate this with magic.

The crowd's laughter at Jesus' claim that the girl is only sleeping challenges his honor. Jesus' command that the family say nothing is his way of getting even with the crowd. They'll never know what happened.

As proof that the girl is healed, that is, restored to her rightful place in community, Jesus command that she eat with her family. Jesus the healer restores meaning to life and returns people to communal solidarity.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

■ "Prayer to Jesus is answered by him already during his ministry, through signs that anticipate the power of his death and Resurrection" (CCC, 2616).

■ "While Jesus sometimes simply spoke some words to accomplish a healing, he often touched the afflicted person to bring about the cure. In the Church’s Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, through the ministry of the priest, it is Jesus who touches the sick to heal them from sin - and sometimes even from physical ailment" (USCCA, 251).

■ "It is Jesus himself who ... will raise up those who have believed in him .... Already now in this present life he gives a sign and a pledge of this by restoring some of the dead to life"1 (CCC, 994).
FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Reading 1:

The great Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, sacked Jerusalem in 598 and took the king of Judah, Jehoiachin, captive along with members of the royal family and other important Judeans. The new king of Judah, Zedekiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar had placed on the throne, and the remaining residents of Judah later rebelled against Babylon, but Judah and Jerusalem were ultimately destroyed. During this turbulent period, Ezekiel received his prophetic call.

The Lord spoke to Ezekiel and the spirit entered him, giving him the strength and power to respond to his call. Ezekiel accepts the responsibility of preaching the Word of God to the Israelites at a time when few are interested in listening. The people turned rebellious, and they hardened themselves against God.

God reassures Ezekiel that whether the people listen to him and repent, or reject his message, they will know that God was among them (v. 5). The rejection of the message does not mean that the message is false. Ezekiel is assured that he is truly God's messenger.

A reading from the Book of Ezequiel 2:2-6

As the LORD spoke to me, the spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard the one who was speaking say to me: Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have revolted against me to this very day. Hard of face and obstinate of heart are they to whom I am sending you. But you shall say to them: Thus says the LORD GOD! And whether they heed or resist—for they are a rebellious house—they shall know that a prophet has been among them.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  PS 123:1-2, 2, 3-4

The psalm response stands in contrast to the first reading. Here the faithful seek God, watching for any gesture that God might make toward them. The tragic events of Israel's past subjected them to human scorn but increased their trust and dependence on God (vv. 3-4)

Our eyes are fixed on the Lord, pleading for his mercy.
To you I lift up my eyes who are enthroned in heaven — As the eyes of servants are on the hands of their masters. As the eyes of a maid are on the hands of her mistress, So are our eyes on the LORD, our God, till he have pity on us. Our eyes are fixed on the Lord, pleading for his mercy. Have pity on us, O LORD, have pity on us, for we are more than sated with contempt; our souls are more than sated with the mockery of the arrogant, with the contempt of the proud.

* [Psalm 123] A lament that begins as a prayer of an individual (Ps 123:1), who expresses by a touching comparison exemplary confidence in God (Ps 123:2). The Psalm ends in prayer that God relieve the people’s humiliation at the hands of the arrogant (Ps 123:3–4).

This pilgrimage psalm was composed for a time of distress (either individual or communal). The prayer is that God would eventually heed the rest of people who place their confidence and trust in the deity. The image is the household. God is the lord of the household who dispenses all good things to every-one. Since they are dependent on the good grace and mood of the lord of the household, servants watch the lord's hands. The maid also depends upon the good graces of the mistress of the household. With this image fixed, the congregation now begs: Have pity on us, O Lord. If, as some scholars pro-pose, this psalm dates from the Persian period, we can under-stand why the congregation suffers contempt and mockery. They seek rescue from God, speedy intervention.

Reading 2

In this section of Paul’s letter, he wants to con-vince the Corinthians that he is the true apostle, in contrast to some "false apostles, deceitful workers" (2 Corinthians 11 :13) who have been promot-ing themselves in the community. To this end, Paul described his trials and tribulations for the sake of the Gospel (11 :23-30) and shared the story of his conversion (12:1-6).

Paul sees his malady, the mysterious "thorn ... in the flesh" (v. 7), as something that enables him to keep a proper perspective. No one knows what this thorn is. Some scholars speculate that it is a physical disability; others claim it is the persecution he endured as an apostle. Whatever it is, Paul understands it to be a reminder that the good he accomplishes is not due to his efforts but to God. His disability is a window into the power of God, for the weaker Paul is, the more receptive he is to God's strength.

A reading from the Second Letter to the Corinthians 12:7-10

Brothers and sisters: That I, Paul, might not become too elated, because of the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

* [12:7] That I might not become too elated: God assures that there is a negative component to his experience, so that he cannot lose proper perspective; cf. 2 Cor 1:9; 4:7–11. A thorn in the flesh: variously interpreted as a sickness or physical disability, a temptation, or a handicap connected with his apostolic activity. But since Hebrew “thorn in the flesh,” like English “thorn in my side,” refers to persons (cf. Nm 33:55; Ez 28:24), Paul may be referring to some especially persistent and obnoxious opponent. The language of 2 Cor 12:7–8 permits this interpretation. If this is correct, the frequent appearance of singular pronouns in depicting the opposition may not be merely a stylistic variation; the singular may be provoked and accompanied by the image of one individual in whom criticism of Paul’s preaching, way of life, and apostolic consciousness is concentrated, and who embodies all
the qualities Paul attributes to the group. An angel of Satan: a personal messenger from Satan; cf. the satanic
language already applied to the opponents in 2 Cor 11:3, 13–15, 20.
* [12:8] Three times: his prayer was insistent, like that of Jesus in Gethsemane, a sign of how intolerable he felt the
thorn to be.
* [12:9] But he said to me: Paul’s petition is denied; release and healing are withheld for a higher purpose. The
Greek perfect tense indicates that Jesus’ earlier response still holds at the time of writing. My grace is sufficient for
you: this is not a statement about the sufficiency of grace in general. Jesus speaks directly to Paul’s situation. Is
made perfect: i.e., is given most fully and manifests itself fully.
* [12:9b–10a] Paul draws the conclusion from the autobiographical anecdote and integrates it into the subject of
this part of the boast. Weaknesses: the apostolic hardships he must endure, including active personal hostility, as
specified in a final catalogue (2 Cor 12:10a). That the power of Christ may dwell with me: Paul pinpoints the ground
for the paradoxical strategy he has adopted in his self-defense.
* [12:10] When I am weak, then I am strong: Paul recognizes a twofold pattern in the resolution of the weakness-
power (and death-life) dialectic, each of which looks to Jesus as the model and is experienced in him. The first is
personal, involving a reversal in oneself (Jesus, 2 Cor 13:4a; Paul, 2 Cor 1:9–10; 4:10–11; 6:9). The second is
apostolic, involving an effect on others (Jesus, 2 Cor 5:14–15; Paul, 2 Cor 1:6; 4:12; 13:9). The specific kind of
“effectiveness in ministry” that Paul promises to demonstrate on his arrival (2 Cor 13:4b; cf. 2 Cor 10:1–11)
involves elements of both; this, too, will be modeled on Jesus’ experience and a participation in that experience
(2 Cor 9; 13:3b).

These verses belong to letter B (2 Cor 10:1-13:13), a con-trast to letter A While tact and control
characterized letter A, letter B is filled with unrestrained outrage in which Paul justifies himself but also
heaps scorn on his opponents. This, of course, is perfectly normal in the Mediterranean world. Insult js
appropriate, and a master of insult is viewed as an honorable person. Paul’s Corinthian opponents
boasted of visions and revelations which they felt gave them an edge of superiority, even relative to
Paul. His counter argument is to demonstrate that he is equal if not superior to these oppo-nents. His
superiority is evident not only in his endurance of labors, hardships, dangers, and the like, but most
especially in that God's power compensates for his weakness. God said: "My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made per-fect in weakness:' Indeed, in weakness Paul is strong, and through weakness he is
made perfect because God’s activity is all the more evident. Lest his enemies remain ignorant, Paul
reminds them that he too has had an "abundance of revelations:'
The "thorn in the flesh" might have been an illness, a com-mon opinion, but perhaps it is more likely to
view this as enemies, people within believing communities who oppose him and direct hostility to him (com-
pare Num 33:55). Jesus encountered similar resistance and hostility in his own home town (Mark
6:1-6). What kind of image do modem believers present to others? Are they perceived as overflowing
with divine favor or do they appear weak, buffeted by insults, per-secutions, constraints, and the like?
How do others respond to this perception?

Alleluia  LK 4:18
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor.

John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, is persecuted for proclaiming an unpopular
message. Although Jesus will share the same fate, Jesus is the best example of God's power made
perfect in weakness. Jesus' birth, his friendship with outcasts, and his crucifixion were not typical signs
of glory. He was not a powerful person in the world's view, yet the power and glory of God were
manifested in him.
The reading is a rehearsal of the Passion story. The hometown folks are amazed at Jesus' teaching. The
next step would be for them to affirm or deny their faith in him. Are their hearts softened enough by his
teaching to accept him? No. They could not grasp the fact that the Messiah seems to be an ordinary
person, a carpenter in their neighborhood. Further, they know his relatives well and, presumably, these people were not remarkable in their eyes. Ironically, the people who think they know him fail to recognize him. Like the prophets of old, Jesus, too, will go without acknowledgment of his role in God's plan. At Nazareth the stark reaction of Jesus' neighbors fore-shadows his rejection and Death on the Cross.

Gospel

A reading from the Gospel of Mark 6:1-6

Jesus departed from there and came to his native place, accompanied by his disciples. When the sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands! Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house." So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

* [6:1] His native place: the Greek word patris here refers to Nazareth (cf. Mk 1:9; Lk 4:16, 23–24) though it can also mean native land.
* [6:3] Is he not the carpenter?: no other gospel calls Jesus a carpenter. Some witnesses have "the carpenter's son," as in Mt 13:55. Son of Mary: contrary to Jewish custom, which calls a man the son of his father, this expression may reflect Mark's own faith that God is the Father of Jesus (Mk 1:1, 11; 8:38; 13:32; 14:36). The brother of James…Simon: in Semitic usage, the terms "brother," "sister" are applied not only to children of the same parents, but to nephews, nieces, cousins, half-brothers, and half-sisters; cf. Gn 14:16; 29:15; Lv 10:4. While one cannot suppose that the meaning of a Greek word should be sought in the first place from Semitic usage, the Septuagint often translates the Hebrew 'āh by the Greek word adelphos, "brother," as in the cited passages, a fact that may argue for a similar breadth of meaning in some New Testament passages. For instance, there is no doubt that in v. 17, "brother" is used of Philip, who was actually the half-brother of Herod Antipas. On the other hand, Mark may have understood the terms literally; see also 3:31–32; Mt 12:46; 13:55–56; Lk 8:19; Jn 7:3, 5. The question of meaning here would not have arisen but for the faith of the church in Mary's perpetual virginity.
* [6:4] A prophet is not without honor except...in his own house: a saying that finds parallels in other literatures, especially Jewish and Greek, but without reference to a prophet. Comparing himself to previous Hebrew prophets whom the people rejected, Jesus intimates his own eventual rejection by the nation especially in view of the dishonor his own relatives had shown him (Mk 3:21) and now his townspeople as well.
* [6:5] He was not able to perform any mighty deed there: according to Mark, Jesus' power could not take effect because of a person's lack of faith.

Honor governs every dimension of life in the Mediterranean world. This is particularly evident in today's reading, where Jesus is "in his own country:" that is, Nazareth or the vicinity.

INHERITED HONOR

One's basic claim to honor derives from birth and is determined by the circumstances of birth. Technically, this is called ascribed honor. In today's episode, the people are fully aware of Jesus' "ascribed honor:" "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" These family members help identify Jesus' honor rating.

Of particular interest in this Jn. is the statement that Jesus is "the son of Mary." In the Middle East, a son is always identified by the father (e.g., Simon bar [= son of] Jonah; James and John, the sons of
Zebedee). Identifying a son by the mother's name usually signals some confusion about the father. Luke (4:22) corrects Mark's report and removes any hint of scandal by identifying Jesus as "Joseph's son:' A second important point is the crowd's identification of Jesus' status: an artisan. In the Middle East, a son is expected to take up his father's occupation or profession. There is no expectation of "doing better than one's parents" or "getting ahead in life:' Honor requires that persons remain in their inherited status and make no effort to improve on it.

ACHIEVED HONOR
Teaching in the synagogue was permissible to qualified males. Jesus' teaching is so impressive that people were as-tonished by his words. "Many who heard him were aston-ished" by his teaching and moved by his mighty deeds (v. 2). They seemed ready to grant the honor Jesus was claiming by his striking teaching.

But the crowd, the ultimate judge and bestower of achieved honor, stops short and refuses to concur. To begin with, Jesus is recognized as a craftsman, that is, a worker in wood (scarce and precious in ancient Palestine) and stone (more plentiful than wood). Craftsmen at that time, especially those who lived in hamlets like Nazareth, had to leave home to find work. This means they left their women (wives, mothers, sisters) at home without requisite male protection to safeguard the family's honor. For this reason, craftsmen were viewed as persons "without shame;' that is, without sufficient sensitivity to the requirements of honor.

Secondly, where could a person born to a manual craftsman gain such astounding wisdom? Even more, how could a craftsman presumably busy at his craft ever obtain such wisdom? "And they took offense at him" (v. 3; compare Sir 38 :24-39 :5).

JESUS' RIPOSTE
The Gospels indicate that Jesus was a shrewd man of his cul-ture. He could readily size up a situation and respond with a perfectly appropriate comment. In the vast majority of in-stances, the perfectly appropriate comment is an insult. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus demonstrates that he is a master of insult.

Anticipating that the crowd is not going to grant him honor, Jesus takes the offensive. He quotes a proverb to those who wanted to shame him: "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house" (v. 4 ). With one fell swoop Jesus in-sults his neighbors, his relatives, and his family. He shames them before they can shame him.

His point is that outsiders are better able to determine the honor rating of a prophet, one who speaks the will of God for the here and now, than insiders, the people who should know him best. Mark does not tell us how the crowd responded, but we can well guess that Luke's report is on target. They were so enraged that they wanted to kill him (4:29).

Because Jesus' neighbors, relatives, and family could not ex-tend to him emotion-filled loyalty, commitment, and solidar-ity ("faith" in traditional translations), he could not perform for them the mighty works he did for others. Self-inflicted problems are the worst.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
■ Jesus is a prophet (CCC, 436), but unlike John the Baptist, he is more than a prophet (CCC, 719).
■ The Church honors the prophets of Israel as saints (CCC, 61, 64, 218) for their holiness.
■ The Church is a communion of saints (CCC, 946-959) through whom Jesus invites us to prophetic saintly holiness (CCC, 3, 542-543, 2013-2014, 2028-2029).
FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Reading 1

Around the year 750 BC, Amos, a herdsman from Judah (the Southern Kingdom) who also tended sycamore trees, hears God calling him to prophesy to the Northern Kingdom (Israel) at the royal sanctuary in Bethel. Amos travels to Bethel to proclaim God's judgment on the prosperous north for its failure to act with justice toward the poor. Amaziah, priest of Bethel, banishes him because he has dared to call into question the fidelity of the king and his people to God's covenant in their dealings with the poor and needy. In an attempt to undermine his words of judgment, Amos is accused of profiting from his prophetic vocation. Amos responds by letting Amaziah know that this prophetic task was not his choice but God's. He is not a prophet that can be bought by priests or kings to make religiously or politically convenient pronouncements. Rather, Amos' only loyalty is to God who called him and to the words that God commissioned him to speak to an unjust and oppressive people.

A reading from the Book of Amos 7:12-15

Amaziah, priest of Bethel, said to Amos, “Off with you, visionary, flee to the land of Judah! There earn your bread by prophesying, but never again prophesy in Bethel; for it is the king’s sanctuary and a royal temple.” Amos answered Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores. The LORD took me from following the flock, and said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”

* [7:14] I am not a prophet: Amos reacts strongly to Amaziah's attempt to classify him as a "prophet-for-hire" who "earns [his] bread" by giving oracles in exchange for payment (cf. 1 Sm 9:3–10; Mi 3:5). To disassociate himself from this kind of "professional" prophet, Amos rejects outright the title of nabi' ("prophet"). By profession he is a herdsman/sheepbreeder and a dresser of sycamore trees, but God's call has commissioned him to prophesy to Israel.

Quite likely this Old Testament and gospel reading (Mark 6:7-13) are intended to be related by the idea of God's spokespersons going away from their home base to preach the message in a different locale. Mark does not limit the mission of the Twelve in the way Matthew does (10:5-6). Amos is the first of the "classical prophets;' that is, the first whose oracles were written down, saved, and transmitted in a "book!' He was a Judahite, that is, from the south, whose prophetic career took him to Israel, the Northern Kingdom. As such, even in the house of Israel, he would be considered an outsider. The treatment he received appears to reflect this. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, speaks to Amos in these verses spewing contempt at him. The word he uses for prophet ( ozeh) is correctly translated in today's verses as "visionary" or "seer;' but it is not the customary word for prophet (nabi) and somewhat obsolete. The priest may be insinuating that Amos is not what he claims to be. Further, since prophets spoke the will of God for the here and now, his message concerning the social and political corruption of the Northern Kingdom, which would eventually lead to subjugation by Assyria. The priest's advice is simple: "Get out of here, you fraud. Go back to where you came from!" Amos' response is that this mission is not his choice but God's appointment. He admits to Amaziah that he is not a nabi, nor did he belong to such a circle, a "professional" guild of prophets as it were, but God selected and appointed...
him, and prophesy is what he must do to the people Israel. God's charge ("Go, prophesy") contrasts with and negates Amaziah's ("Go, do not prophesy").

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  PS 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14

Psalm 85 expresses the longing of a suffering and deprived community for restoration, justice, and peace. Such longing is linked to God's covenant love and fidelity, which the community recalls and seeks to respond to. God is the only one who can help them, and they turn to his promises for assurance and fulfillment. God's covenant qualities - loving-kindness, truth, justice, and peace - are personified to act on behalf of the people and the land, restoring both economic prosperity and communal well-being. Renewed attentiveness to covenant promises focuses the community's hope and anticipates restoration. God will animate those qualities and send them forth to restore the people.

Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.
I will hear what God proclaims; the LORD —for he proclaims peace. Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him, glory dwelling in our land. Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss. Truth shall spring out of the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven. The LORD himself will give his benefits; our land shall yield its increase. Justice shall walk before him, and prepare the way of his steps.

A speaker represents the people who wait humbly with open hearts (Ps 85:9–10): God will be active on their behalf (Ps 85:11–13). The situation suggests the conditions of Judea during the early postexilic period, the fifth century B.C.; the thoughts are similar to those of postexilic prophets (Hg 1:5–11; 2:6–9).
* [85:11–13] Divine activity is personified as pairs of virtues.

The Lord proclaims peace, perhaps after the fashion of Isaiah 57:19-21, a peace that will bring healing to all. This is what God is about to do. If God's people respond to the gifts of kindness and truth, justice and peace, then the soil will once again become productive. They are praying for a good agricultural year in this psalm which seems to have been used at this festival. The damage of the exile will be undone, but the people must embrace righteousness. God will respond with good autumn rains.

Reading 2

This powerful message to the Ephesians is an extended act of praise to God, stressing the Trinitarian nature of God and extolling him for the great love by which we were chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world." In Christ, we were chosen for adoption, for filial relationship with God, "to be holy and without blemish before him." God's endless choice and love were manifested through Christ, in whose Blood we are redeemed. That filial relationship, made possible through Christ, makes us privy to God's eternal plan of salvation for all humanity. The promised Holy Spirit, given to all at Baptism, is the "first installment of our inheritance" as children of God. All this calls forth from us is blessings and praise of God to be shared with all creation. In Baptism, God gifts us with the Spirit, choos-ing us to be children and heirs, and empowers us to be living witnesses of Christ. All are chosen by God for love and intimacy. Knowing this, we are called to share that knowledge with others so that all may become aware of God's deep mysterious love and enter deeply into it.
A reading from the letter to the Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved. In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth. In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ. In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised holy Spirit, which is the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s possession, to the praise of his glory.

* [1:3–14] While a Pauline letter usually continues after the greeting with a prayer of thanksgiving, as in Eph 1:15–23 below, Ephesians first inserts a blessing of God for the blessings Christians have experienced, as in 2 Cor 1:3–4 and 1 Pt 1:3–12. The blessing here, akin to a Jewish berakah, is rich in images almost certainly drawn from hymns and liturgy. Many ideas here are also found in Col 1:3–23. Certain phrases are frequently repeated, such as in Christ (Eph 1:3, 10, 12) or in him (Eph 1:4, 7, 9, 11, 13) or in the beloved (Eph 1:6) and (for) the praise of (his) glory (Eph 1:6, 12, 14). Some terms like chose (Eph 1:4) and destined (Eph 1:5) reflect Old Testament theology (Dt 7:7; 9:4–6; 23:5) or Pauline themes (redemption, Eph 1:7; 14; grace, Eph 1:6; 7) or specific emphases in Colossians (forgiveness, Col 1:14). A triadic structure is discernible in Eph 1:3–14: God the Father (Eph 1:3–6, 8, 11), Christ (Eph 1:3, 5, 7–10, 12), and the Spirit (Eph 1:13–14). The spiritual blessings Christians have received through Christ (Eph 1:3) are gratefully enumerated: the call to holiness (Eph 1:4; cf. Col 1:22); the gift of divine adoption establishing a unique spiritual relationship with God the Father through Christ (Eph 1:5; cf. Gal 4:5); liberation from sin through Christ’s sacrificial death (Eph 1:7); revelation of God’s plan of salvation in Christ (Eph 1:9; cf. Eph 3:3–4; Rom 16:25); the gift of election and faith in Christ bestowed upon Jewish Christians (see note on Eph 1:12, we who first hoped in Christ); and finally, the same gift granted to Gentiles (Eph 1:13, you also). In the Christ-centered faith and existence of the Christian communities the apostle sees the predetermined plan of God to bring all creation under the final rule of Christ (Eph 1:4–5, 9–10) being made known (Eph 1:9) and carried through, to God’s glory (Eph 1:6, 12, 14).

* [1:3] In the heavens: literally, “in the heavenlies” or “in the heavenly places,” a term in Ephesians for the divine realm.

* [1:9] Mystery: as in Rom 16:25; Col 1:26, 27 and elsewhere, a secret of God now revealed in the plan to save and sum up all things in Christ (Eph 1:10); cf. Eph 3:3–6.

* [1:12] We who first hoped: probably Jewish Christians (contrast Eph 1:13, you, the Gentiles); possibly the people of Israel, “we who already enjoyed the hope of Christ,” or perhaps present hope in contrast to future redemption (cf. Eph 1:14).


* [1:14] First installment: down payment by God on full salvation, as at 2 Cor 1:22.

These verses from a letter in the Pauline tradition (written probably between A.O. 80-100) are part of the customary blessing (vv. 3-14) with which most of the letters begin. Why should we bless God? Primarily because God chose us in Jesus just as he chose special people before us (see Deut 14:2). Given the gratuitous nature of the choice, one can only marvel and be grateful. Of course, that election involves an obligation: God’s chosen people must be holy and without blemish in God’s presence. Yet another reason for requiring such holiness and purity is the Ephesian congregation’s conviction that it too, perhaps like the Colossians, was convinced that angels were in the midst of the worshiping community (see Eph 3:10; also 2:6). This is similar to the sentiments at Qumran where anyone physically
blemished "shall not enter to take their place among the congregation of famous men, for the angels of holiness are among their congregation" (IQSa 2:8-9).

Being chosen is only the first in a series of reasons for blessing God who has also adopted us. Scholars observe that in this culture where family (kinship) is one of the dominant social institutions and is rather extensive and complex, there was no mechanism for adoption. That Paul would reach this conclusion would be an interesting breakthrough. Those who heard this from Paul and his circle would be awed and perhaps even skeptical. God's election bestows incredible honor and far-reaching consequences. The clusters of words and ideas that include beloved, adopted children, redemption, forgiveness of transgression, and sealed with the Spirit reflect early baptismal traditions. Some scholars think this letter was intended for newly baptized believers to help them appreciate the implications of their baptism. All of this, of course, is God's will, expressed in these verses with the word "mystery." God controls everything: the human world, the angelic, and the cosmic. The mysteries have been revealed to select interpreters, in this instance, Paul who uses this word to summarize the content of the gospel he preaches. Today's gospel (Mark 6:7-13) tells how Jesus summoned twelve and sent them out to preach repentance, cast out demons, and anoint and heal the sick. How reassuring when preachers can share such good news with their listeners.

Alleluia CF. EPH 1:17-18

May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten the eyes of our hearts, that we may know what is the hope that belongs to our call.

Mark's account of Jesus sending forth the Twelve two by two emphasizes Jesus' desire to send out his followers to continue his mission. Mark's Jesus has come to announce and bring into being God's reign by confronting the powers of evil in whatever way they manifest themselves. Sickness, death, and possession by demons were all manifestations of the power of evil at work. In sending out his followers, Jesus gives them "authority over unclean spirits," the same mission that he has initiated by his presence among them. In sending them off, Jesus instructs them to let go of things that could prevent them from being effective ministers. To travel light, to trust and depend on others, and to be content with what others offer are all necessary components of mission. Jesus further warns them that rejection will be a component of their ministry experience. When rejection occurs, they are to "shake the dust off [their] feet" and move on.

The Twelve go forth, successful in preaching repentance, healing, anointing, and driving out demons. Like them, we are commissioned to reconcile, heal, and drive out evil. When we are faithful to Jesus' guidance and instruction, we become instruments through which God's care and love are actualized in the world. By carrying on the work of proclaiming and activating God's reign, we become living witnesses to Jesus.

A reading from the Gospel of Mark 6:7-13

Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits. He instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick—no food, no sack, no money in their belts. They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave. Whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet in testimony against them." So they went off and preached repentance. The Twelve drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

* [6:7–13] The preparation for the mission of the Twelve is seen in the call (1) of the first disciples to be fishers of men (Mk 1:16–20), (2) then of the Twelve set apart to be with Jesus and to receive authority to preach and expel
demons (Mk 3:13–19). Now they are given the specific mission to exercise that authority in word and power as representatives of Jesus during the time of their formation.

* [6:8–9] In Mark the use of a walking stick (Mk 6:8) and sandals (Mk 6:9) is permitted, but not in Mt 10:10 nor in Lk 10:4. Mark does not mention any prohibition to visit pagan territory and to enter Samaritan towns. These differences indicate a certain adaptation to conditions in and outside of Palestine and suggest in Mark’s account a later activity in the church. For the rest, Jesus required of his apostles a total dependence on God for food and shelter; cf. Mk 6:35–44; 8:1–9.

* [6:10–11] Remaining in the same house as a guest (Mk 6:10) rather than moving to another offering greater comfort avoided any impression of seeking advantage for oneself and prevented dishonor to one’s host. Shaking the dust off one’s feet served as testimony against those who rejected the call to repentance.

* [6:13] Anointed with oil...cured them: a common medicinal remedy, but seen here as a vehicle of divine power for healing.

Jesus gathers his faction (the Twelve) and sends them out with authority over unclean spirits. This is an astonishing authorization which moves these Twelve up a notch in their honor status.

SPIRITS
People in the ancient Mediterranean world not only held a strong belief in the existence of spirits but also ranked them according to power. At the top of the list was "our" God, then "other" gods, sons of god, or archangels. In third place were still less powerful nonhuman persons: angels, spirits, and demons. Humans were in fourth place, and creatures lower than humans in last place.

By giving the Twelve power over unclean spirits, Jesus moves them up from level four at least into level three. Greeks called hostile spirits "demons;' while Semites called them "unclean spirits;' When Jesus expels an unclean spirit (Mark 5:2, 8) out of a possessed man in pagan territory, the people of that region call the man a demoniac (Mark 5:15-16).

Modern believers tend to call this activity "exorcism;' but the New Testament does not use this word. The entire consideration is rather based on "authority" or "power;' Jesus has authority over unclean spirits, and the Gospel writers frequently note that his success in expelling unclean spirits is evidence for his authority. Notice in today’s reading that Jesus shares this authority with the Twelve (v. 7) and they cast out many demons (v. 13).

HEALING
The authority over unclean spirits also extends to conditions believed to be caused by these spirits, namely, sickness. That the distinction between possession and sickness is fuzzy in the ancient world is evident in the story of Peter's mother-in-law. In Mark (1:30) she is "sick with a fever;' but the context of Luke (4:38-39) indicates that the "high fever" that grips her is actually a demon named "Fever" whom Jesus "rebukes" and expels.

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY
In the ancient world, travel was deviant and dangerous. It was deviant because there was little reason to leave one's ancestral dwelling where one was normally surrounded by extended family network. Everything one needed or desired was here. It was dangerous because robbers waited to ambush travelers, particularly those travelling alone (Luke 10:30). For this reason, Jesus tells his newly authorized faction members to travel in pairs. Very likely these pairs joined larger caravans for greater safety.

The instruction to travel lightly (no bread, no money, etc.) is not unusual. The needs of travelers (lodging and food) were to be provided chiefly through hospitality. Jesus continues his instruction with special attention to hospitality (e.g., "receiving" or "welcoming").

In the Middle Eastern world, hospitality is a value extended exclusively to strangers. (Relatives and friends are extended steadfast loving kindness.) The process involves three steps: the stranger is taken under the protection of a host for a given time, transformed into a temporary guest, with hopes that the two will part friends (but parting as enemies is also possible).
The host provides lodging, food, and especially a safe haven or protection from the suspicions and possible attacks of villagers. After all, strangers are always suspected of being up to no good' and plotting damage to the village. Failure to extend hospitality in the Middle East is a serious breach of honor. Jesus' advice to "shake off the dust on your feet as a testimony against those who would not extend hospitality" is a major insult. It effectively writes these people out of the human community. The gesture implied total rejection, hostility, and an unwillingness to be touched by anything the others have touched. These culturally different understandings of spirits, travel, and hospitality challenge Western believers to gain a well-founded grasp of Middle Eastern culture. Contemporary books about angels and other spirits tend to reflect modern Western theological or spiritual concepts that sometimes have slim foundation in the Middle Eastern biblical texts. A sound, cross-cultural approach to reading and understanding the Bible can lay a much stronger foundation for the commendable exploration of these traditional topics.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Jesus' mission is to inaugurate the kingdom of his Father; he commands his disciples to proclaim the good news that 'the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matthew 10:7)" (EG, 180).
- "God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations. Therefore Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion (see Corinthians 1:20; 3:13; 4:6), commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching, and to impart to them heavenly gifts" (DV, 7).
SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Reading 1

The Hebrew word for shepherd shares a root with the verb "to rule." Kings were called shepherds because their primary responsibility was to manifest care for all and to rule with justice. Jeremiah rants against kings for their failure to care for God's people, resulting in the Exile, which scattered God's people from their land. Jeremiah warns the kings that God will deal with them in the same fashion they dealt with the people. God will then take over the king's responsibilities, restoring the people to the land and ruling them with justice and peace.

Jeremiah then articulates poetically the hope that one day God would "raise up a righteous shoot to David." Such a king would rule wisely and justly, and do "right in the land." Peace, security, and right relationship would be so evident under this "righteous shoot" that they would name him "the Lord, our justice." Christians believe that this "righteous shoot" is Jesus, who perfectly epitomizes God's justice and compassion toward all. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows us and cares for us. Should we not listen deeply to his voice?

A reading from the Book of Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture, says the LORD. Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, against the shepherds who shepherd my people: You have scattered my sheep and driven them away. You have not cared for them, but I will take care to punish your evil deeds. I myself will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands to which I have driven them and bring them back to their meadow; there they shall increase and multiply. I will appoint shepherds for them who will shepherd them so that they need no longer fear and tremble; and none shall be missing, says the LORD. Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up a righteous shoot to David; as king he shall reign and govern wisely, he shall do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah shall be saved, Israel shall dwell in security. This is the name they give him: "The LORD our justice."

* [23:1–8] With the false rulers (shepherds) who have governed his people the Lord contrasts himself, the true shepherd, who will in the times of restoration appoint worthy rulers (vv. 1–4). He will provide a new king from David's line who will rule justly, fulfilling royal ideals (vv. 5, 6). "The Lord our justice" is an ironic wordplay on the name of the weak King Zedekiah ("The Lord is justice"). Unlike Zedekiah, the future king will be true to the name he bears. Verses 7–8 may have been added during the exile.

Jeremiah began his prophetic career as a propagandist for King Josiah's reform (622-621 B.C.E.), calling the people of Judah to repentance. When Josiah was killed in a futile attempt to head off the Egyptian army on their way across Palestine to help the weakened Assyrian army to fend off Babylon, a son who succeeded him, Jehoiakin, became an Egyptian vassal.

Jeremiah was livid. He preached against trusting in Egypt and thereby irritated King Jehoiakin, who tore up Jeremiah's dictated prophecy. Optimistic prophets rallied to the king's support and persecuted and harassed Jeremiah for his never-ending gloom-and-doom message to Judah. The verses selected for today are Jeremiah's response to the "optimistic" prophets. Recent kings have been bad shepherds whose political maneuverings have hurt the people. A righteous king will emerge soon who will be a
truly worthy successor to David. God’s people need to know God’s will. They do not need to hear feel-good messages that make the prophet popular. God’s people need courageous leaders to face reality squarely rather than to engage in deception and false optimism.

**RESPONSORIAL PSALM  PS 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6**

Psalm 23 presents the Lord as a shepherd who cares for the sheep. The shepherd leads the sheep to food and water, protects the sheep from enemies, and guides them. The psalmist experiences that same care and concern from God, with a secure space and table in the very sight of his enemies. All this is possible because God’s covenant love, God’s goodness and loving kindness, follow us at all times. We are thus assured of an everlasting relationship with God. Nothing could be more secure than to be with the shepherd. In return, we must trust in God. Listening to and being guided by the Lord will always lead to security, harmony, and right relationship with all. For Christians, Jesus is that Good Shepherd who models care and concern for all, and calls us to the same mission.

**The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. In verdant pastures he gives me repose; beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul. He guides me in right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage. You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for years to come.

This psalm echoes Israel’s exodus under Moses or its experience at the end of Exile. God’s tender care stands out, for God is the shepherd whom human leaders strive to imitate.

**Reading 2**

The author of Ephesians tackles the division that divided the early followers of Christ between Jews and Gentiles who accepted Christ as their Lord and Messiah. Because of their different traditions, teachings, and rituals, Christian Jews lived differently from Christian Gentiles. This division led some Christian Jews to advocate that the only correct way to follow Christ was through the Jewish Torah and rituals. The letter to the Ephesians addresses and corrects this mistaken notion. The blood of Christ has saved all humanity, restoring unity between God and humanity, as well as between all people. Christ is "our peace," who in his body "broke down the dividing wall of enmity." Those who were near, the Jews, and those who were far, the Gentile Ephesians, are united as one in the sacrifice of Christ, who destroyed death and all that divided humanity. Because of Christ, all now have access to God through the power of the Spirit.
A reading from the Letter to the Ephesians 2:13-18

Brothers and sisters: In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it. He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

* [2:11–22] The Gentiles lacked Israel’s messianic expectation, lacked the various covenants God made with Israel, lacked hope of salvation and knowledge of the true God (Eph 2:11–12); but through Christ all these religious barriers between Jew and Gentile have been transcended (Eph 2:13–14) by the abolition of the Mosaic covenant-law (Eph 2:15) for the sake of unifying Jew and Gentile into a single religious community (Eph 2:15–16), imbued with the same holy Spirit and worshipping the same Father (Eph 2:18). The Gentiles are now included in God’s household (Eph 2:19) as it arises upon the foundation of apostles assisted by those endowed with the prophetic gift (Eph 3:5), the preachers of Christ (Eph 2:20; cf. 1 Cor 12:28). With Christ as the capstone (Eph 2:20; cf. Is 28:16; Mt 21:42), they are being built into the holy temple of God’s people where the divine presence dwells (Eph 2:21–22).


* [2:14–16] The elaborate imagery here combines pictures of Christ as our peace (Is 9:5), his crucifixion, the ending of the Mosaic law (cf. Col 2:14), reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–21), and the destruction of the dividing wall such as kept people from God in the temple or a barrier in the heavens.


In this second of seven sequential readings in Cycle B from an encyclical letter written to many churches in Asia (modern Turkey), a disciple of Paul paints a fascinating picture of an undivided Church even as his vocabulary still reflects a "we" (Israelites) and "you" (non-Israelites) perspective. The actual phrases, those "who once were far off" and those "who were near," reflect spatial imagery. The most visible dividing wall between these two groups surely was the Temple, which fea-tured a "courtyard for non-Israelites" and an inner sanctum reserved for Israelites alone. The message over the entrance to the inner courts reminded non-Israelites: "No person of an-other nation is to enter . . . and whoever is caught will be per-sonally responsible for that death which ensues:'

But the word "enmity" that describes the "dividing wall" suggests that the author is thinking of interpersonal contexts, in-group and out-group hostilities, as is reflected in Peter’s realization that such should end (Acts 10:28). The reason given here is that through his death, Jesus has united Israel-ites and non-Israelites in his body, the Church, as one new humanity. The result is peace between both groups and union with God, just as for individuals the result was reconciliation and peace with God. The hungry disciples and crowds in today’s gospel (Mark 6:30-34) stir Jesus to pity and prompt him to teach them many things. Paul’s disciple in today’s epistle teaches his communities many things about the love and mercy of God. One doesn’t need specialized certification to share this good news. him to teach them many things. Paul's disciple in today's epistle teaches his communities many things about the love and mercy of God. One doesn’t need specialized certification to share this good news.

Alleluia JN 10:27

My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord; I know them, and they follow me.
Gospel

After the Apostles' successful mission to preach and heal, Jesus instructs them to rest away from the ever-present crowd. They set out in a boat to find such a place, but the crowds notice where they are heading. When Jesus and the Apostles arrive, the crowd is there already. Even Jesus and the Apostles they are frustrated in their attempt to find rest, Jesus is moved with pity for crowd and begins "to teach them many things." Mark provides this setting to articulate some strongly held beliefs of his community. Jesus is the true shepherd who is not only attuned to the people's needs, but also is willing to sacrifice his own needs for theirs. Unlike the leadership of his day, Jesus leads by instructing the community in the ways of the Lord, as well as providing for their physical needs. This deserted place is Mark's setting for the feeding of the five thousand, another clear manifestation of the shepherd's care for the people. The hope of Jeremiah for a true shepherd is fulfilled for Christians in the person of Christ.

A Reading from the Gospel of Mark 6:30-34

The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place. People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them. When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

* [6:30] Apostles: here, and in some manuscripts at Mk 3:14, Mark calls apostles (i.e., those sent forth) the Twelve whom Jesus sends as his emissaries, empowering them to preach, to expel demons, and to cure the sick (Mk 6:13). Only after Pentecost is the title used in the technical sense.

* [6:31–34] The withdrawal of Jesus with his disciples to a desert place to rest attracts a great number of people to follow them. Toward this people of the new exodus Jesus is moved with pity; he satisfies their spiritual hunger by teaching them many things, thus gradually showing himself the faithful shepherd of a new Israel; cf. Nm 27:17; Ez 34:15.

Mark 6:30-34

The image of a "lonely" place (vv. 31, 32) painted in today's reading prepares for Mark's next story, about the feeding of five thousand. But the image is worth pondering for fresh insights it can give into our Mediterranean ancestors in the faith.

In the New Testament, the Greek word translated "lonely" or "deserted" and used with "place" basically describes an uninhabited region or one with a very small population. The word can also describe a place of sparse vegetation. Although the two ideas are related, the New Testament usage applies more often to population.

In first-century Palestine, there were fewer than three or four large cities like Jerusalem. Ninety percent of the population lived outside the large cities in hamlets or villages with a small number of residents. The population of Nazareth may not have been more than 150 and could have been as small as 50. Try to imagine "privacy" in a settlement of this size! These small settlements were not packed densely close to each other. There was a significant distance between them, and this uninhabited space was generally viewed as chaos or "a lonely place!" The modern experience of "a family picnic in the park" simply could and did not occur in the first-century Mediterranean world.

Jesus' suggestion that he and his disciples, freshly returned from their journey, leave his neighborhood (Nazareth) and go off to a lonely place is well explained by the next sentence: "Many were coming and
going, and they had no leisure even to eat” (v. 31). If Jesus is still in his own country (Mark 6:1), then he and his disciples are well known to everybody. In the Middle East, everybody minds everybody else's business. Privacy is practically nonexistent. Rest is all but impossible. And if anyone is eating, it would be impolite and inconsiderate not to share with others.

Western readers given to fast-food outlets and the tendency to eat on the run might even miss the significance of Jesus' remark about "no leisure even to eat!" All meals in the Mediterranean world are leisurely events. Even more important than the nourishment, meals provide opportunities for strengthening personal bonds between those at table. Since the disciples were away from Jesus for a while, it was important to renew the bonds between them. What better way to do it than with a leisurely meal? So it was quite likely that Jesus and the Twelve took food with them which they could not eat in leisure in his neighborhood. Perhaps it was the five loaves and two fish that appear at the feeding of the multitude (Mark 6:38).

Yet the nosey crowds give Jesus and his followers no rest. Mark presents a humorous picture. "Many saw them going, and knew them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of them" (Mark 6:33). It is not just that they "saw them;' but some were certainly keeping an eye on them. Any group going off to a lonely place raised suspicions. What did they have to hide? What are they up to? Why are they being secretive? Who goes off to uninhabited places known to be rife with demons and wild beasts? If nosey people wanted to stay "in the know;' they had to run to get to the boat's landing place even before the vessel arrived.

Jesus' response to them is compassion (v. 34) because they were like "sheep without a shepherd." The Hebrew word for "compassion" derives from the word for "womb!" In the Middle East, compassion is considered a female value and virtue.

Sheep are basically dumb animals. No one can lead them; they have to be driven. Without a shepherd, sheep simply lie down and don't move ahead. Jesus perceives that the people have basic needs that are going unmet. Moved to compassion; for them, Jesus teaches the great throng many things sufficiently interesting and engaging to keep them there dangerously late. Being in an uninhabited place far from kin and without provisions, everyone wondered: what's next?

The story continues in the next weeks.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
■ Jesus selected the apostles and called them to share in his mission. Jesus continues to protect and guide his flock (CCC, 1575).
■ "Through the signs of his presence, it is the Face of the Lord that we seek and desire; it is his Word that we want to hear and keep" (CCC, 2656).
■ "The church is, accordingly, a sheepfold, the sole and necessary entrance to which is Christ.1 It is also a flock, of which God ... would himself be the shepherd,2 and whose sheep ... are ... at all times led and brought to pasture by Christ himself, the Good Shepherd and prince of shepherds, who gave his life for his sheep"1 (LG, 6).
SEVENTTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Reading 1

Elisha, the disciple of Elijah, is a prophet attending to the people and the Lord at the place of worship, the tent made during the Exodus. An offering of twenty barley loaves from the harvest's first fruits, the best of the crop, is offered to the Lord. The bread is to be placed before the Lord and later consumed by those who served at the Lord's tent. Instead of offering it to the Lord, Elisha commands that it be given to the people to eat, most likely because there is famine in the land, and these hundred people need food.

The servant alerts Elisha that the loaves will not be enough for so many people. Elisha insists that the loaves be shared, and that God would make certain that there would be more than enough. Elisha's words become reality when bread is left over after all have been satisfied. This event becomes the prototype for the Gospel feeding stories. Our God knows our needs and works with what is available to provide abundantly for all our needs.

A reading from the Second Book of Kings 4:42-44

A man came from Baal-shalishah bringing to Elisha, the man of God, twenty barley loaves made from the firstfruits, and fresh grain in the ear. Elisha said, "Give it to the people to eat." But his servant objected, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" Elisha insisted, "Give it to the people to eat." "For thus says the LORD, 'They shall eat and there shall be some left over.'" And when they had eaten, there was some left over, as the LORD had said.

The superficial link between this reading and the gospel (John 6:1-15) is feeding a crowd with incredibly few resources. This reading from 2 Kings is the final story in a collection of four about Elisha, the man of God, who performs wonders of various kinds. He and Elijah, his master, were known as "prophets of action" (in contrast to the classical prophets who were known as "prophets of the word"). At one level, the sacred author seeks to demonstrate that Elisha was equal in power to his master, Elijah. Just as Elijah resolved a food shortage for the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 1:1-15), so does Elisha resolve a food shortage.

The Elisha stories follow a pattern in which a problem is presented, a tension is highlighted, and the man of God comes up with a solution. The problem is the famine (v. 38). One hundred men, very likely companions of Elisha, are hungry ("sons of the prophets;" see 2 Kgs 2:7, 16, 17). Tension is intro-duced when an unnamed man brings twenty barley loaves and fruit from his orchard to the man of God. Since these barley loaves are "bread of the first fruits," and the famine has been going on for quite a while, we get an idea of how severe their hunger may have been at this point of the story. It has not yet been assuaged or relieved.

The number of loaves (twenty) heightens the tension. Can one hundred men be satisfied with twenty loaves of bread? The servant is skeptical, but Elisha highlights the generosity of the donor and confirms it with a word of the Lord. That word is God's immediate response to the pressing need in time of famine. Its meaning: be generous, share-and there will even be leftovers.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  PS 145:10-11, 15-16, 17-18
The refrain from Psalm 145 highlights the fact that "the hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs." This praise psalm is replete with reasons for calling upon all people to praise God. Foremost among those reasons is that God is always faithful and can be relied upon whenever anyone calls. All who trust in the Lord never go away empty or unsatisfied, for the Lord feeds us and "answers all our needs." God is always openhanded in response to our needs.

The last stanza emphasizes two qualities of God that need remembering and deserve praise. The Lord is just in all things, seeking right relationship with all of creation and providing all that is needed for life. The holiness of the Lord suffuses all of creation and everything that God does. This covenant love is what enables us to trust and call upon God in our need, and what enables God to draw near to all who call. Praise of God is therefore fitting, just, and proper.

The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs.

Let all your works give you thanks, O LORD, and let your faithful ones bless you. Let them discourse of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might. The eyes of all look hopefully to you, and you give them their food in due season; you open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing. The LORD is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth.

This alphabetical psalm (the first word of each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet) probably dates from late in the post-exilic age. The verses selected for today highlight God's goodness and providence. All sustenance ultimately comes from God.

Reading 2

Many New Testament letters contain ethical exhortations, practical suggestions for living that flow from the author's theological and doctrinal presentation. Chapters 4 through 6 of Ephesians provide such an ethical exhortation. Given the divisions between Jews and Gentiles that plagued Jesus' early followers, the letter to the Ephesians emphasizes unity and oneness. Through his life and death, Jesus broke down the barriers that divide us, calling all to be one through the power of his Spirit. To do this well, Ephesians exhorts us to live "with all humility and gentleness, ... bearing with one another through love." Unity is based on the "one body and one Spirit" that bonds Jesus' followers. Sharing "one hope, ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" should unite us. Our Trinitarian God is one, totally powerful and fully present in us and in all of creation. In imitation of and obedience to God, we strive toward unity and oneness.

A reading from the Letter to the Ephesians 4:1-6

Brothers and sisters: I, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

* [4:1–16] A general plea for unity in the church. Christians have been fashioned through the Spirit into a single harmonious religious community (one body, Eph 4:4, 12; cf. Eph 4:16), belonging to a single Lord (in contrast to the many gods of the pagan world), and by one way of salvation through faith, brought out especially by the significance of baptism (Eph 4:1–6; cf. Rom 6:1–11). But Christian unity is more than adherence to a common belief. It is manifested in the exalted Christ’s gifts to individuals to serve so as to make the community more
As customary in this part of the letter, the author begins to exhort the letter recipients to proper conduct. The basis for such conduct has already been presented. All things have been united in Jesus and subjected to him (1:10, 22-23). A new humanity has been created through Jesus' sacrifice (2:15-16). Israelites and non-Israelites alike constitute a united community, the Church (3:4-6). Now it is time to urge that that unity be maintained.

Recalling that Mediterranean culture in general is agonistic helps to appreciate this exhortation to unity. Accepting Jesus as Messiah does not automatically guarantee unanimity in belief and uniformity in practice. We are quite familiar with disagreements among the apostles and disciples regarding requirements for accepting non-Israelites into the community of believers. Even within congregations, such as Corinth, people disagreed depending on which apostle won their allegiance. In this letter, Paul's disciple singles out the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another through love. Humility means never giving the slightest indication that one is impinging on another. Hence one does not insist on rights or honor claims, but stands one step behind one's rightful and deserved place or honor.

Gentleness is the virtue by which a Middle-Easterner would strive to refrain from engaging too vigorously in the daily competition for honor known as challenge and riposte. Patience means making even greater attempts to control the cultural tendency to spontaneous, unreflexive, emotionally driven responses to provocative situations. Such responses can escalate to hostility, erupt in bloodshed, and result in long-standing blood feuds. The key is "bearing with one another through love." Love here is not an affection or emotion; it is group glue. Love in this culture is the commitment to keep a group together, preserve it's unity, and do all to avoid tearing it apart.

Then follows a list of seven areas in which unity should be pursued and displayed: one body, the community; one Spirit, the Spirit that unites rather than divides. All have the same confidence (hope) because of God's call. All recognize one Lord, Jesus to whom everything has been subjected. One faith is very plausibly unity in belief, in accepting the authoritative apostolic tradition (Eph 2:20) and distinguishing it from false teaching (Eph 4:14). This unity makes sense because all have been baptized with one baptism that for-mally initiates newcomers into one body, a unified community.

Today's gospel (John 6:1-15) is quite clearly about the Eucharist which is not mentioned at all in the epistle. On the other hand, scholars suggest that these verses in Ephesians reflect baptismal ritual in which the "one" phrases may have been liturgical "shouts" which occurred during the sacramental ritual. Modern believers who experience both sacraments have plenty to consider in the reflections by the evangelist and today's letter writer.

Alleluia LK 7:16
A great prophet has risen in our midst. God has visited his people.

Gospel
The Gospel passages for this Sunday and the next four Sundays focus on chapter 6 of John's account of the Gospel, known as the Bread of Life discourse. The miracle of feeding the multitudes is the only one...
that appears in all four accounts of the Gospel. The accounts are suffused with language that directly relates to the Eucharistic action of Jesus’ followers.

John's version is replete with Eucharistic themes that connect back to Moses, Passover, manna, Elisha, and barley loaves. The emphasis throughout is on God's constant desire to provide for all living things. With a large crowd following him, Jesus articulates his desire to feed them, thus offering another sign that communicates his identity and mission.

"Five barley loaves and two fish" become signs of God's transforming power among us. Jesus takes charge by directing that people recline as he takes, gives thanks, and personally distributes the bread and the fish till all "had their fill." Twelve baskets are left over.

The sign clearly underscores Jesus' identity as the divine one, ever generous, openhanded, and always ready to nourish us. To follow Jesus is to perceive his identity and to understand his mission. In John's account of the Gospel, signs are done so that all may see and believe. In seeing and believing, we become living witnesses to God's transforming power in our lives. We make Jesus' mission our own by loving others as he loved us and

A reading from the Gospel of John 6:1-15

Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee. A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. The Jewish feast of Passover was near. When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, "Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?" He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Two hundred days' wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people recline." Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining, and also as much of the fish as they wanted. When they had had their fill, he said to his disciples, "Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted." So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat. When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, "This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world." Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.

* [6:1–15] This story of the multiplication of the loaves is the fourth sign (cf. note on Jn 5:1–47). It is the only miracle story found in all four gospels (occurring twice in Mark and Matthew). See notes on Mt 14:13–21; 15:32–39. John differs on the roles of Philip and Andrew, the proximity of Passover (Jn 6:4), and the allusion to Elisha (see Jn 6:9). The story here symbolizes the food that is really available through Jesus. It connotes a new exodus and has eucharistic overtones.
* [6:1] [Of Tiberias]: the awkward apposition represents a later name of the Sea of Galilee. It was probably originally a marginal gloss.
* [6:5] Jesus takes the initiative (in the synoptics, the disciples do), possibly pictured as (cf. Jn 6:14) the new Moses (cf. Nm 11:13).
* [6:6] Probably the evangelist’s comment; in this gospel Jesus is never portrayed as ignorant of anything.
* [6:7] Days’ wages: literally, “denarii”; a Roman denarius is a day’s wage in Mt 20:2.
* [6:13] Baskets: the word describes the typically Palestinian wicker basket, as in Mk 6:43 and parallels.
Scholars recognize that John did not copy his account of the feeding of the crowds from the Synoptics but rather worked from an independent tradition. His account contains some very ancient elements as well as creative elaboration of details found in his sources. One example of an ancient or perhaps "original" element is Jesus’ question to Philip: "How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" (v. 5). That Jesus' apparent ignorance about this was embarrassing to the early Christians is evident in the editorial comment that follows: 'he said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do;'

An example of creative elaboration is in verses 11-12 which carry clear Eucharistic overtones and quite likely depended on the Synoptic account of the institution of the Eucharist, a tradition not included in John's passion story.

SYNAGOGUE READINGS
To appreciate John's creative elaboration of tradition, it is helpful to reflect upon a hypothesis proposed years ago by Aileen Guilding. She attempted to reconstruct a three-year cycle of Scripture readings in the synagogue. The first reading was from the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). An accompanying reading, the haphtarah, was taken from the Prophets. (Others think a third reading may have been later drawn from the Psalms. Three years of readings amounted to 150 selections and there are 150 psalms.)

In the Gospel traditions about Jesus feeding the people, only John mentions the calendrical time of the event. "Now the Passover, the feast of the Judeans, was at hand" (v. 4). The story of Jesus feeding the people seems to echo the story of God feeding his people in the Exodus with manna and quail (Exod 16). In Guilding's reconstruction of the synagogue lectionary, Exodus was read in cycle 2, and Exodus 11-16 would be read during the six weeks after Pentecost. The haphtarah reading at the same time would be Isaiah 54-55, and Isaiah 54 is quoted in John 6:45. Guilding hypothesizes that it was these synagogue readings at Passover time that provided early Christians with ideas for creating the Johannine story of Jesus feeding a large crowd of people.

Many disagree with her view that the story is fictional. But the parallels and relationships she highlights make it plausible that the synagogue readings may well have contributed to the creation of the discourse Jesus delivered after the feeding. John notes: "This he [Jesus] said in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum" (v. 59). Jesus himself may have drawn on the lectionary themes to develop his discourse.

BREAD AND FISH
The people are fed with bread and fish. John specifies barley loaves. Barley was the most common grain after wheat. It manages to survive extreme heat as well as water shortages much better than wheat. Moreover, it ripens in less time. Since the feast of Passover coincides with the barley harvest, the presence of barley loaves in this story makes plausible sense.

The Greek word for "fish" here derives from another word that means "food that is cooked and eaten with bread:" The idea is that the fish is not fresh but already prepared, or, more correctly, processed. Rabbinic sources indicate that fish were processed for preservation and transportation in a variety of forms: cured, pickled, salted, or dried. And wine would sometimes be mixed in with fish-brine. In John's story, the fish are most likely dried or preserved.

Scholars wonder why Jesus should single out Philip to ask, "Where shall we ever buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip indicates that he is not unaware of the challenge because in his experienced judgment, two hundred days' wages couldn't buy enough loaves to feed the crowd.

Philip was from Bethsaida, which was the capital of Gaulanitis. Located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, the village's name means "fishing village" (Mark 6:45). Therefore, if this scene takes place in Bethsaida (as Luke suggests), then Philip is exactly the one to ask. He would be most familiar with local conditions.
Background information about synagogue lectionaries, local geography, and food and fish help contemporary believers to appreciate how much they need to know about ancient culture in order to begin to interpret the Scripture respectfully.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "Love faces a vast field of work and the Church is eager to make her contribution with her social doctrine, which concerns the whole person and is addressed to all people. So many needy brothers and sisters are waiting for help .... 'How can it be that today there are still people dying of hunger?"" (CSDC, 5).
- "The words of Christ ... will then resound for all people: 'Come, 0 blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink ... as you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it to me"" (CSDC, 57).
- "The social teaching of the Church is also fertile soil for dialogue and collaboration in the ecumenical sphere. This is already happening in various places ... concerning ... the miseries of today's world such as hunger and poverty ... [and] the unequal distribution of the goods of the earth .... This ... increases awareness that all are brothers and sisters in Christ"" (CSDC, 535).
EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Reading 1

God delivers the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt through their leader, Moses. Despite this, the people complain to Moses and God at every difficulty they encounter in the desert. Each time God responds with a gift. When they complain they have neither bread nor meat, quails cover the ground in the evening, and manna covers the ground like dew in the early morning. "What is it?" (in Hebrew, man hu or "manna"), the people ask, and Moses answers, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat" (v. 15). There may be a natural explanation for how the Israelites are fed in the wilderness, but nothing seems to fit the exact description of whatever fell on the ground like "fine flaky substance, as fine as frost" (v. 14). When the people gather the "bread from heaven" (v. 4), they have as much as they need. Whatever the means God used, the miracles suggest that God provides for the people at every stage on their journey. The answer to "What is it?" is "God's providence." Even so, the people continue to ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (17:7). Each time God answers, "I am."

A reading from the Book of Exodus 16:12-15

The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "Would that we had died at the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you had to lead us into this desert to make the whole community die of famine!" Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will now rain down bread from heaven for you. Each day the people are to go out and gather their daily portion; thus will I test them, to see whether they follow my instructions or not. "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them: In the evening twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread, so that you may know that I, the LORD, am your God." In the evening quail came up and covered the camp. In the morning a dew lay all about the camp, and when the dew evaporated, there on the surface of the desert were fine flakes like hoarfrost on the ground. On seeing it, the Israelites asked one another, "What is this?" for they did not know what it was. But Moses told them, "This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

* [16:1] On the fifteenth day of the second month: just one full month after their departure from Egypt. Cf. 12:2, 51; Nm 33:3–4. The Septuagint takes the date to be the beginning of the Israelites' grumbling.
* [16:4] Bread from heaven: as a gift from God, the manna is said to come down from the sky. Cf. Ps 78:24–25; Wis 16:20. Perhaps it was similar to a natural substance that is still found in small quantities on the Sinai peninsula—probably the honey-like resin from the tamarisk tree—but here it is, at least in part, clearly an extraordinary sign of God's providence. With reference to Jn 6:32, 49–52, the Christian tradition has regarded the manna as a type of the Eucharist. Test: as the text stands, it seems to leave open the question whether the test concerns trusting in God to provide them with the daily gift of food or observing the sabbath instructions.
* [16:15] What is this: the Hebrew man hu is thus rendered by the ancient versions, which understood the phrase as a popular etymology of the Hebrew word man, “manna”; but some render man hu, “This is manna.”

This reading links to the gospel (John 6:24-3) with the idea of God providing nourishment (manna) for the people. The story in Exodus is one of many tests of the people's allegiance to God. The tests involve food and drink for the people, as in these verses, or Moses' authority. Other versions of this story
appear in Numbers 11 and Psalms 105:40; 78:17-31. The people grumble against Moses and Aaron, but actually they are grumbling against God. Incredibly, they prefer the Pharaoh's nourishment to that which God gives them. God does not re-probate them but provides food in the form of quail and manna. The quail is a migratory bird that comes to Palestine and the Sinai in March or April following the wind. If the wind shifts, the exhausted birds land and are easy to catch. The manna is a honey-like dropping from the tamarisk tree of the same region. These droppings are actual secretions of scale lice and cannot be harvested in great quantity. The sacred author's point is that God comes to the aid of the people with manna in a manner that is not a usual occurrence. Bedouin of the region call these droppings mann, the Hebrew Bible presents a folk etymology: man hu ("What is it?") "It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat:"

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  PS 78:3-4, 23-24, 25, 54

This psalm was written after the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, but before the fall of Judah, the Southern Kingdom. It is a didactic psalm, drawing new meaning from the past. Each stanza recalls an incident in which God acted on behalf of the people and their ungrateful response of sin and rebellion. Despite God's gracious care of his people in the desert, they spoke against him, saying, "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?" (78:19). The lessons learned in the past must be taught by the older generation so "the next generation might know them" (v. 6). If Judah makes the same mistakes that Israel made, they will not avoid their fate.

The Lord gave them bread from heaven.
What we have heard and know, and what our fathers have declared to us, We will declare to the generation to come the glorious deeds of the LORD and his strength and the wonders that he wrought. He commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven; he rained manna upon them for food and gave them heavenly bread. Man ate the bread of angels, food he sent them in abundance. And he brought them to his holy land, to the mountains his right hand had won.

Psalm 78 retells Israel's history and includes observations about God's impatience with the people and God's rebuke and punishment to the people. Those elements are omitted in the verses selected for today's response. The focus is on God feeding the people with bread from heaven, "the bread of angels!" This latter phrase designates a source of superhuman strength, something the people would need in the desert. The final line ("brought them to his holy land") is God's approval of Israel's long process of acquiring the country.

Reading 2

Ephesus was a seaport with a way of life and values that were far from those who followed Christ. This letter insists "that is not the way you learned Christ!" (v. 20). Christians "must no longer live as the Gentiles live" (v. 17). Enlightened by Baptism, they must put away their former corrupt lives and clothe themselves in "righteousness and holiness" (v. 24). By the renewal of their minds, they will acquire a fresh, spiritual way of thinking. When Christians join together as one with Christ as the head, the whole church grows by "building itself up in love" (v. 16).

A reading from the Letter to the Ephesians 4;17, 20-24

Brothers and sisters: I declare and testify in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; that is not how you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard of him and
were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, that you should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.

* [4:17–24] Paul begins to indicate how the new life in Christ contrasts with the Gentiles' old way of existence. Literally, the old self (Eph 4:22) and the new self (Eph 4:24) are “the old man” and “the new man” (anthrōpos, person), as at Eph 2:15; cf. note on Eph 4:13.

Continuing the hortatory portion of this epistle, the letter writer contrasts the ungodly lifestyle of non-Israelites with the kind of life that new members of the body of Christ should lead. This is traditional opinion presented in stereotypical language and in no way suggests that the letter recipients were guilty of these behaviors. Similar charges against non-Israelites can be found in Rom 1:21-25 echoing Wis 13:1-41. These bad behaviors are all rooted in idolatry, that is, the fact these people did not know the true God. Everyone knew that there were models of virtue among non-Israelites, but when a speaker needed a straw person with immoral behaviors to attack, this stereotypical view of non-Israelite behavior was trotted out. The author of Wisdom presents one of these stock "vice-lists" when he writes: "All is confusion-blood and murder, theft and guile, corruption, faithlessness, tur-moil, perjury, disturbance of good men, neglect of gratitude, besmirching of souls, unnatural lust, disorder in marriage, adultery and shamelessness" (Wis 14:25-26). The distinctive idea of this sacred author is that believers through baptism have put on a new nature (v. 24) and therefore should behave as befits this new nature, namely, in righteousness and holiness of truth. Righteousness is a person's rightful claim to innocence, or a rightful judgment that this is indeed the case. This condition not only sets the believer right with God because God had so willed and effected it, but this is also how the believers ought to treat others. These verses are probably a summary of baptismal instruction emphasizing the need for ongoing conversion ("be renewed in the spirit of your minds"). Anyone who thinks that a once-and-for-all-time event works wonders is deceived. In a sense, Jesus gives this advice to those whom he fed (John 6:24-35). You ate and were satisfied at this time. "Strive after [the tense of the Greek verb designates an ongoing activity] the food that endures for eternal life!" Everything worthwhile requires enduring effort.

**Alleluia MT 4:4B**

One does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.

**Gospel**

After the multiplication of loaves in the wilderness, the crowds respond to the sign by saying, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14). When they try to carry Jesus off and make him king, he flees to the mountain while his disciples cross the lake in a boat. The crowds realize Jesus and his disciples have left, and they go around the lake to meet them when the boat arrives on the opposite shore. Jesus knows they are not looking for him but for the bread he gave them to eat. He tells them, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life" (v. 27). The people demand another sign (John's word for Jesus' miraculous acts) such as Moses gave the people in the wilderness. Although they saw the sign, they miss the reality to which it points, God's providential presence in Jesus. By seeking signs, they are missing the true nourishment that God wants to give them. Jesus uses the divine name given to Moses, YHWH, when he says, "I am the bread of life" (v. 35). The discourse that follows is a combination of several Old Testament quotations from Exodus and Psalms. In
the same way that the Scriptures offered their teaching and nourished all who accepted it, Jesus offers the bread of understanding to all who put their faith in him.

A reading from the Gospel of John 6:24-35
When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. And when they found him across the sea they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" Jesus answered them and said, "Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal." So they said to him, "What can we do to accomplish the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent." So they said to him, "What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do? Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat." So Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." So they said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst."

* [6:27] The food that endures for eternal life: cf. Jn 4:14, on water “springing up to eternal life.”
* [6:31] Bread from heaven: cf. Ex 16:4, 15, 32–34 and the notes there; Ps 78:24. The manna, thought to have been hidden by Jeremiah (2 Mc 2:5–8), was expected to reappear miraculously at Passover, in the last days.
* [6:35–59] Up to Jn 6:50 “bread of life” is a figure for God’s revelation in Jesus; in Jn 6:51–58, the eucharistic theme comes to the fore. There may thus be a break between Jn 6:50–51.

The highlight of this passage is faith, or more precisely as John states it: "believing in Jesus!' The fourth evangelist uses this phrase thirty-four times, indicating that it has special meaning for him.

FAITH
This word appears often in the Bible and is frequently mentioned by believers. As with all words and with human language itself, meaning derives basically and primarily from the society that uses the word. In the United States, faith or belief has a strong intellectual character. It is considered primarily to be an act of the mind.

Furthermore, faith usually indicates (to Americans) that a person believes something or someone on the basis of authority. Thus, any person, including an actor or impostor, who wears a white laboratory coat with a stethoscope tucked into its pocket is thought to be "believable."

Actors playing physicians on American television became so influential in past years that prestigious medical schools used to invite them as commencement speakers. Scientific medicine recognizes that in the final analysis, all healing is faith healing. Whatever a person believes can be effective. This is the basis for the placebo effect.

"BELIEVING IN(TO)"
In the Middle Eastern world, the words "faith;' "belief;' "fi-delity;' and "faithfulness" describe the social glue that binds one person to another person. These are not acts of the mind so much as sentiments that spring from the heart, the seat of thought in Middle Eastern psychology.

These terms really describe the social, externally manifested, emotionally rooted values known as loyalty, commitment, and solidarity. John W1derlines this aspect (rather than the intellectual one) by his favorite phrase: "believing in" or "into" Jesus.

In today's episode, people come looking for Jesus but for the wrong reason: they don't want to miss out if he is going to offer more to eat (v. 26). Given the subsistence diet on which first century peasants
lived, one might say Jesus was very insensitive to scold them for seeking him because he fed them. Jesus tried to move their thoughts from perishable food to that which "endures to eternal life which the Son of Man will give to you!" Yet it is difficult to think lofty thoughts when one's stomach growls from hunger.

The people understand Jesus' point and ask a follow-up question. "What works of God ought we do in order to gain this sustenance?" (v. 28). Qumran literature indicates that the phrase "works of God" describes those things that please God. People should do these and avoid what is displeasing. According to Jesus, what truly pleases God is to "believe in him whom God has sent" (v. 29). This is not simply intellectual assent, but authentic Mediterranean commitment, loyalty, and solidarity. Stick with Jesus no matter what!

If the people sound as if they are making headway in understanding Jesus, their next statement indicates just how much further they have yet to travel. They ask Jesus for a sign to authenticate himself. This was, of course, normal in the tradition. A true prophet must legitimate himself and his announcement with a sign.

Thinking of the great prophet, Moses, the people ask Jesus for a sign like manna. How quickly they have forgotten about the bread which he gave just the day before. Jesus, of course, has already noted that these people missed the point of the bread-"sign" (v. 26) because their minds were elsewhere. He corrects their understanding of Exodus 16:15: it was not Moses but God who gave and continues to give bread from heaven. Now, Jesus not only gives the bread of life (John 6:11, 27) but also is the bread of life (John 6:35, 48). The giver and the gift are one and the same.

The parallel structure of Jesus' concluding comment expresses a synonym for John's favorite phrase, "believing into." "He who comes to me shall not hunger, he who believes in me shall never thirst" (v. 35). Other synonyms are "abide with;" "follow;" "love;" "keep the words of;" "receive;" "have;" and "see." All of these underscore the need for believers to establish commitment and solidarity with Jesus the bread of life.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- The Eucharist enacts our passage from death to life (CCC, 1524) and is the summation of our faith (CCC, 1327).
- The Eucharist enables us to participate in the divine life that unites the people of God (CCC, 1325).
- The Eucharist is the source of strength for all Christian ministry (CCC, 1566), and it celebrates our commitments, especially to the poor (CCC, 1397).
This event in the Elijah narratives takes place soon after Elijah has overcome the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Furious at Elijah, King Ahab and his wife Jezebel are determined to kill him. Fleeing to the desert, Elijah becomes despondent and dejected, asking God for death. The prophetic vocation is fraught with opposition, rejection, and persecution, and Elijah has had enough for one lifetime. But God has other plans. Resting under a broom tree, Elijah twice experiences an angel waking him and ordering him to eat. Elijah eats and drinks from the hearth cake and water miraculously provided. Nourished and refreshed, Elijah is again energized, walking forty days and nights to encounter the Lord at Horeb, or Mount Sinai.

Like Moses, Elijah journeys through the desert to encounter the Lord and to be reenergized for service to God and others. Like Moses and the people in their desert journey, God does not give up on Elijah, but nourishes and sustains him. Christians affirm that God nourishes us on our life's journey through Christ, the living bread that came down from heaven.

1 KGS 19:4-8
A reading from the First Book of Kings 19:4-8
Elijah went a day's journey into the desert, until he came to a broom tree and sat beneath it. He prayed for death saying: "This is enough, O LORD! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers." He lay down and fell asleep under the broom tree, but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat. Elijah looked and there at his head was a hearth cake and a jug of water. After he ate and drank, he lay down again, but the angel of the LORD came back a second time, touched him, and ordered, "Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!" He got up, ate, and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb.

* [19:1–21] The story of Elijah’s journey to Mount Horeb begins as a flight from danger, but takes a surprising turn. The prophet makes his solitary way to the mountain where the Lord had appeared to Moses and the Israelites (“Horeb” is an alternate name for “Sinai”). Like Moses on the holy mountain, Elijah experiences a theophany and receives a commission.

* [19:5–7] Sound asleep, Elijah is startled awake by an unspecified “messenger.” Only in v. 7 is the figure identified as a messenger (or “angel”) of the Lord.

God's provident feeding of Elijah with a hearth cake and water links this reading to the gospel reflection on Jesus as the bread come down from heaven. The circumstances of Elijah’s journey into the desert are Ahab's continuing commitment to Baal and the people's less than certain loyalty to Yahweh. Elijah proceeds to Horeb, the mountain where Moses encountered God in ecstatic trance (Exod 3-4; 33:18-34:8). Elijah seeks to encounter God here too, and of course to save his life. Curiously, in his successful escape he prays for death! After a day's journey for which he seems to have taken no provision, he is fed in ecstatic trance by an angel of the Lord. The nourishment is powerful enough to sustain his journey for the next forty days and nights until he reached the mountain.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM PS 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
For the next three Sundays, various verses from Psalm 34 will be our response to the readings, all connected with the same refrain, "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord." The refrain correlates with the Bread of Life Gospel passages from John, chapter 6. On all three Sundays, we will be invited to come to know the Lord not just with our minds, but with our whole being. To "taste and see" the Lord is to experience the Lord holistically, not superficially or intellectually.

Psalm 34 is a psalm of praise to God who has rescued the psalmist from danger, fear, and affliction. The psalmist invites all to trust and have confidence in God, who hears our pleas and responds to our calls for help. The "angel of the Lord," a euphemism for God, actually "encamps" around those who call upon the Lord and "delivers" them. The psalmist again invites all to put trust in God by playing on the image of food. Taste and you will see, or experience, the goodness of the Lord.

**Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.**

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth. Let my soul glory in the LORD; the lowly will hear me and be glad. Glorify the LORD with me, Let us together extol his name. I sought the LORD, and he answered me And delivered me from all my fears. Look to him that you may be radiant with joy. And your faces may not blush with shame. When the afflicted man called out, the LORD heard, And from all his distress he saved him. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him and delivers them. Taste and see how good the LORD is; blessed the man who takes refuge in him.

* [Psalm 34] A thanksgiving in acrostic form, each line beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In this Psalm one letter is missing and two are in reverse order. The psalmist, fresh from the experience of being rescued (Ps 34:5, 7), can teach the “poor,” those who are defenseless, to trust in God alone (Ps 34:4, 12). God will make them powerful (Ps 34:5–11) and give them protection (Ps 34:12–22).

These verses give thanks to God who answers prayers and provides rescue to those who request it. The phrase "angel of the Lord" is a reverential way of talking about YHWH, very much like "name of the Lord" or "face of the Lord." The reference is to the person of YHWH, and very often this "angel" merges into the person of YHWH (see Gen 16:9, 13; Exod 3:2-6). The "angel" most commonly is associated with YHWH’s help in danger and in war (see Exod 23:20-33). The exhortation to "taste and see" is an invitation to learn by experience, in this case, the experience of being nourished by God.

**Reading 2**

Using baptismal imagery, this passage from Ephesians exhorts the community to live in imitation of God, as exemplified in Christ. Anything that disrupts the love, unity, and harmony of the community "grieves" the Spirit of God. Rather, all bitterness, rivalry, and anger must be replaced by kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. In imitation of God who has forgiven us in Christ, we are called to forgive one another.

Christ was willing to sacrifice himself completely for our sake. Through our Baptism, we are called to give of ourselves for others. In so doing, we become living witnesses to Jesus, through the power of the Spirit. Like Jesus, we too become "a fragrant aroma" to God and to all we encounter. In the Spirit, we become more like Jesus, the source of all our growth, nourishment, and right living.

**A reading from the Letter to the Ephesians 4:30-5:2**

Brothers and sisters: Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were sealed for the day of redemption. All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in
Christ. So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma.

* [5:1] Imitators of God: in forgiving (Eph 4:32) and in loving (as exhibited in how Christ loved us).

To properly understand the point of these exhortations, modern Western readers need to recall that the letter recipients—like 80 percent of the people on the face of the planet today—are collectivistic personalities. For such people, the community is paramount; individual identity and purpose derive from membership in the community. For such personalities, the individual is subservient and subordinate to—yes, even expendable for—the group. With this understanding, three things take on greater clarity in today’s reading.

First, the author repeats (in Eph 2:20–22) what Paul himself taught quite explicitly: "your [plural] body [singular] is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you [plural], which you [plural] have from God" (1 Cor 6:19). The plurals indicate Paul’s belief that the corporate body, the Church, is the temple of the Spirit. Difficulty of perceiving these plural in English translation leave this passage susceptible to mis-understanding and misinterpretation. In the world of our ancestors in the faith, the spirit is never private property, a personal possession. The spirit belongs to the group, informs the group, makes the group its temple.

Thus, the author of Ephesians exhorts, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God," and then proceeds to list behaviors which are divisive in a community. All of these behaviors are threats to the honor and reputation of others. They are shameful behaviors which very clearly destroy the harmonious unity of a group.

Second, the proper behaviors proposed by the author are summed up in the exhortation "walk in love:' In collectivistic societies which are typically non-introspective and not psychologically driven, love has little to do with feelings of affection, sentiments of fondness, and warm, glowing affinity. Love in this context is "the value of group attachment and group bonding:' Love is the willingness to sacrifice whatever is required in order to maintain group integrity. Forgiveness, or perhaps better the forgoing of retaliation or revenge for besmirched honor, will guarantee "love;' that is, it will maintain the unity of the group (see Pilch 1999: 59–64). No one can argue with the motive: "forgive one another, as God in Christ forgave you.'

Jesus’ fellow ethnics in today's gospel (John 6:41–51) who murmur about his claim to have come down from heaven are only acting out the scenario presumed by the author of Ephesians. Anyone who raises himself above his birth status as Jesus seems to be doing is a threat to the community. Sometimes the evangelist's ideology blunts for the modern reader the shock that Jesus' Middle Eastern peers surely felt. Believers are left to decide which is the preferable course of action: challenge the community values as Jesus does, or strive to preserve the community intact as the author of Ephesians counsels. Perhaps there is a right time for each action.

Alleluia JN 6:51

I am the living bread that came down from heaven, says the Lord; whoever eats this bread will live forever.

Gospel
The Gospel continues Jesus' argument with an unbelieving crowd after his declaration in being the bread that came down from heaven. The crowd, in murmuring reminiscent of the Exodus desert experience, responds that they know Jesus' parentage, so how can he claim heavenly origins. Jesus responds that to know him demands that they be open to being drawn to him by the Father, who is the true teacher in all matters of faith. If they were open to the Father's actions in their lives, they would come to know and accept Jesus, the "bread of life."

Jesus continues to instruct them by affirming that to know him is to know the Father. Since he is the bread of life, whoever believes in him will have eternal life. The desert manna that came down from heaven did not provide eternal life. Rather, Jesus, the "living bread that came down from heaven," is true bread that provides eternal life to all who believe and par-take, "whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Jesus, our true source of nourishment, specifies that the bread he will give is his "flesh for the life of the world." Partaking of Jesus, the "bread of life," calls the partakers to give of themselves for the life of the world. We are nourished by Jesus so that we can nourish others both physically and spiritu-ally. Jesus came to model how we are to be nourishment for one another: by partaking of the rich nourishment that the Father has given us in Christ.

A reading from the Gospel of John 6:41-51

The Jews murmured about Jesus because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," and they said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Stop murmuring among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day. It is written in the prophets: They shall all be taught by God. Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

* [6:1–15] This story of the multiplication of the loaves is the fourth sign (cf. note on Jn 5:1–47). It is the only miracle story found in all four gospels (occurring twice in Mark and Matthew). See notes on Mt 14:13–21; 15:32–39. John differs on the roles of Philip and Andrew, the proximity of Passover (Jn 6:4), and the allusion to Elisha (see Jn 6:9). The story here symbolizes the food that is really available through Jesus. It connotes a new exodus and has eucharistic overtones.

* [6:35–59] Up to Jn 6:50 “bread of life” is a figure for God’s revelation in Jesus; in Jn 6:51–58, the eucharistic theme comes to the fore. There may thus be a break between Jn 6:50–51.

* [6:43] Murmuring: the word may reflect the Greek of Ex 16:2, 7–8.

* [6:54–58] Eats: the verb used in these verses is not the classical Greek verb used of human eating, but that of animal eating: “munch,” “gnaw.” This may be part of John’s emphasis on the reality of the flesh and blood of Jesus (cf. Jn 6:55), but the same verb eventually became the ordinary verb in Greek meaning “eat.”

American cultural heroes invariably include the person of humble origins who rises to achieve great status. Abraham Lincoln is but one familiar example. That such achievement is possible is a corollary of the American cultural belief in the equality of all persons. When real experience belies this belief, Americans fall back on the idea of equal opportunity. At least, every one can rise to a greater position than the one that came with birth.

Such a notion is entirely lacking in the ancient Mediterranean world. Basic honor derives from birth into very specific circumstances. Honor requires that a person remain in this status, maintain and preserve it, and never consider “getting ahead.” Any attempt to improve upon or behave not in keeping with one's birth status is shameful because it is a divisive force in community.
CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATIONS

Even as the listeners are impressed by Jesus' teaching and marvel at the themes he develops from the Scripture read in the synagogue for the season of Passover, the application he makes to himself is jarring. It causes them to murmur.

The Greek word for "murmur" that appears here is the same one that appears in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures when they describe the murmuring of the Israelites during the Exodus (Exod 16:2, 7, 8). This associational allusion is a masterful piece of artistry.

Even more striking is the critical complaint that erupts over the interpretation of Exodus 16! Earlier (6:31) the people put forth their interpretation, which Jesus corrected (6:32, 35). They are skeptical of Jesus' interpretation and voice their concern in typical Mediterranean fashion. They attack Jesus for stepping outside of his inherited honorable status (vv. 42-43).

The demonstrative pronoun in the phrase "Isn't this Jesus . . . ?" (v. 42) implies a disrespectful tone and would be appropriately translated as "this fellow" or "this chap." The people recite Jesus' inherited status: son of Joseph; they know full well the honor-ratings of his father and mother. Parents and family of origin constitute one's claim to basic honor. The claim "to have come down from heaven" (6:32) is audacious, incredible, and threatening to an established and well-ordered community. How dare Jesus claim more honor than he deserves?

Scholars suggest that the word "murmur" among interpreters of the Torah in Jesus' world indicated a disagreement with another interpretation of the Scripture. The disagreement is expressed in a sentence beginning with "how." Clearly the people disagree with Jesus' interpretation of Scripture and his application of it to himself. Jesus' response is quite direct: "Stop your murmuring."

CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION

As is often the case in John's Gospel, communication is going on at many levels. The Church reminds Bible readers to distinguish the meaning a passage might have had in Jesus' life-time from the meaning it could have had at the time of the evangelist.

The discussion in John 6:35-50 very plausibly reflects the lifetime of Jesus. No mention is made of eating the bread until verse 51. Bread in the Old Testament frequently represents divine instruction. In verse 45 Jesus quotes loosely from Isaiah 54:13: "They shall all be taught by God:" Thus the point that would be understood in Jesus' day is that the instruction Jesus gives about the Father is life-yielding bread for those who believe in him whom God has sent.

The idea of eating the bread which emerges and becomes strong in verses 51-58 is likely the product of early Christian insight, now placed on Jesus' lips. Yet it is also a secondary theme in verses 35-50. In other words, while modern Bible readers recognize the creative work of the evangelists in the Gospels, much of it is rooted in the life of the historical Jesus himself.

Over the last fifty years and more, the Church has given scholars and believers an impressive set of guidelines for respectfully reading and interpreting the Gospels. The reflections above are drawn from scholars who reached their conclusions with the aid of these guidelines. A respectful interpretation of Scripture is very demanding but very rewarding.

Ninety-five percent of the population of Jesus' time was illiterate, but their familiarity with Scripture made for heated discussions. This should encourage a contemporary Christian to learn the guidelines and master the Scriptures.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "I cannot let this Holy Thursday ... pass without halting before the 'Eucharistic face' of Christ and pointing out ... the centrality of the Eucharist. From it the Church draws her life. From this 'living bread' she draws her nourishment. How could I not feel the need to urge everyone to experience it ever anew?" (EE, 7).

342
Jesus is the only one who can reveal God to others because he has seen him and knows him (CCC, 151).

"'Daily' ... taken literally ... refers directly to the Bread of Life, the Body of Christ" (CCC, 2837).
TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

READING 1

Some biblical archaeologists suspect that Israel had help conquering Canaan. What had been thought of as an invasion may have been more of a revolution from within. The oppressed rural Canaanites saw the radical religion and politics of their new neighbors and immediately identified with them. Together they overthrew the ruling urban Canaanite city states.

Our reading is a record of the covenant made between those loosely federated tribes from Egypt and the native tribes of Canaan. This covenant formed what we know today as the people of Israel.

Joshua puts this covenant in terms of a choice. For the tribes who had come from bondage in Egypt, it was a chance to renew the covenant they had made at Sinai. Joshua was smart to do this. Most of the first generation had passed away and the current generation needed to decide for themselves. Will they serve the gods of their new land, the gods of the Canaanite rulers, or the God who had rescued their parents from Egypt?

For the Canaanite revolutionaries, this was a chance to show their new allegiance to the liberating God of the Exodus. It cemented relations between the tribes and made a peaceful settlement of the land possible.

That same choice is still before us. Will we serve the gods of the powerful (possessions, status, money, security) or will we serve the liberating God we know in Christ?

A reading from the Book of Joshua 24:1-2A, 15-17, 18B

Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, summoning their elders, their leaders, their judges, and their officers. When they stood in ranks before God, Joshua addressed all the people: "If it does not please you to serve the LORD, decide today whom you will serve, the gods your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." But the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD for the service of other gods. For it was the LORD, our God, who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, out of a state of slavery. He performed those great miracles before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among the peoples through whom we passed. Therefore, we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."


A few things are noteworthy about Joshua’s proposition. First, he calls for a definitive, once-and-for-all choice. It was common for many people in antiquity to choose gods appropriate to the moment. In contrast, Israel was faced with a more radical choice, one that would determine her future existence as well as her cult. Joshua and his family lead the way by personal example. Second, the decision here is made by the family patriarch or elder for the entire family. This reflects the normal way in which collectivistic personalities function (see also Acts 16:15, 31-33). Collectivistic personali-ties currently comprise 80 percent of the world’s population. They stand in stark contrast to individuals or individualistic personalities. Families comprised of individualistic personali-ties would take a family vote, with each member free to make a personal decision. Third, no force or threat is leveled at the people. The heads of the households are free to decide for or against YHWH. Finally, whereas Joshua based his
reasoning on YHWH's victories in battles, the people base their decision upon God's provident care for them and God's leading them from captivity. Their decision concurs with Joshua's. This challenge was indeed hard. "Who can accept it?" (John 6:60–69, today's gospel).

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  PS 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21

On this third and final time we sing from Psalm 34 on a Sunday this year, we reach the final strophe in the psalmist's song. In it, the psalmist offers us a choice like the one Joshua offered. Are we among the righteous (willing to stand up for our faith even in the face of opposition) or are we among the evildoers (living as if there is no God)? Again, the choice is ours, but the psalmist wants us to understand the consequences. The righteous, he says, have a special relationship to God. That doesn't necessarily mean life will be less of a challenge for them. Like everyone else, the righteous suffer affliction. But, the psalmist explains, when the righteous cry for help, God hears them.

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth. Let my soul glory in the LORD; the lowly will hear me and be glad. The LORD has eyes for the just, and ears for their cry. The LORD confronts the evildoers, to destroy remembrance of them from the earth. When the just cry out, the LORD hears them, and from all their distress he rescues them. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves. Many are the troubles of the just one, but out of them all the LORD delivers him; he watches over all his bones; not one of them shall be broken.

Very likely written by a person who experienced more than a normal share of life's problems, this alphabetical psalm highlights thanksgiving and instruction. Today's verses emphasize a principle of moral retribution: God rewards the good and punishes the evil. God actively confronts evildoers, but their downfall is due in part to their own misdeeds. Most importantly, God watches over the just.

Reading 2

The household code in Ephesians offers us a perfect example of second-century Christianity's struggle to retain the radical teaching of Jesus while gaining acceptance in wider society. Such household codes were a common Hellenistic literary form, but the author of Ephesians has added some surprisingly radical elements.

As expected, he begins by assigning people into a hierarchy. "Wives," he says, "be subject to your husbands." This is the part he borrowed. But note what else the author says. "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." This introduces a new element of equality unheard of in traditional society. "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." This, too, is new. It gives husbands an example of servanthood which undermines any ideas they may have had about being traditional heads of household.

The author's words reflect an old hierarchy, but his examples reflect a radical reinterpretation of human relations. For those in authority, the lordship of Christ means giving up power over people. For those on the lower rungs of society, the lordship of Christ means giving up victimization. It means respecting each other, caring for each other, cherishing each other just as Christ cherishes us. The challenge before us is to live this new way in a culture that constantly pulls us into old patterns of injustice.
A reading from the Letter to the Ephesians 5:21-32

Brothers and sisters: Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.

* [5:21–6:9] Cf. notes on Col 3:18–4:1 and 1 Pt 2:18–3:7 for a similar listing of household duties where the inferior is admonished first (wives, Eph 5:22; children, Eph 6:1; slaves, Eph 6:5), then the superior (husbands, Eph 5:25; fathers, Eph 6:4; masters, Eph 6:9). Paul varies this pattern by an emphasis on mutuality (see Eph 5:20); use of Old Testament material about father and mother in Eph 6:2; the judgment to come for slave-owners (you have a Master in heaven, Eph 6:9); and above all the initial principle of subordination to one another under Christ, thus effectively undermining exclusive claims to domination by one party. Into the section on wives and husbands an elaborate teaching on Christ and the church has been woven (Eph 5:22–33).
* [5:21–33] The apostle exhorts married Christians to a strong mutual love. Holding with Gn 2:24 that marriage is a divine institution (Eph 5:31), Paul sees Christian marriage as taking on a new meaning symbolic of the intimate relationship of love between Christ and the church. The wife should serve her husband in the same spirit as that of the church's service to Christ (Eph 5:22, 24), and the husband should care for his wife with the devotion of Christ to the church (Eph 5:25–30). Paul gives to the Genesis passage its highest meaning in the light of the union of Christ and the church, of which Christlike loyalty and devotion in Christian marriage are a clear reflection (Eph 5:31–33).

These verses belong to the literary form known as "household codes;' Though very common in Greco-Roman popular philosophy, they are found in the New Testament only in the Deutero-Paulines (see introduction) and in 1 Peter. In general the codes treat of various relationships: husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters. Those relationships which in general are of subordinates to superiors cover all the occupants of the household in antiquity. To properly interpret this household code, it is important to review some basic cultural ideas. These are collectivistic personalities embedded in kinship or surrogate kinship groups. As in all cultures so too in this one persons are so-cialized into values and duties. We call this social formation or education. Since "household codes" concern kinship, the primary issues will stem from gender and generation, namely, the social expectations of gender identity in a particular family or clan. It is also important to remember that human rights which emerged in Western history only during the Enlightenment were of no interest in antiquity. The majority of persons in ancient Mediterranean collectivist cultures did not have any rights in the modern legal sense. But they did have duties, and these duties or obligations are what the household codes prescribed not in the sense of new ideas but rather as re-minders of how men and women had been socialized. In general, this passage in Ephesians reflects the cultural conviction that a husband must treat his wife with respect owed blood relatives, even though she may not be his kin. She in turn must show loyalty to the male in whom she is now embedded, transferring to him the loyalty formerly owed her father. This passage expands Col 3:18-4:1 by adding reflections on the relationship of Jesus and the Church. Notice two things in this passage: there is a balance of imagery and an exhortation to mutuality. Masculine imagery is reflected in Christ and husband; feminine imagery is clear in Church and wife. The culturally determined division of labor according to gender underpins this balanced imagery. Yet the
passage is not presenting ideal marriage relationships for all times and places. Rather, it is discussing the Church and its relationship to Christ. The note of mutuality is sounded in v. 21 (be subordinate to one another). Then Jesus' lordship over the body serves as the model for the husband as head of the wife. Further, the rather uncustomary listing of the husband's obligations presented in vv. 25-33 is associated with Jesus' love for the Church which is his bride. Thus Jesus is the bridegroom who purifies his bride, the Church, in the waters of baptism in order that she might be clothed in holiness and purity.

The concluding verse is very significant. The sacred author clearly states: "this is a great mystery." The reference is to Gen 2:23 whose real meaning was not in the original context but rather in the present, namely, the union of Jesus and the Church. It is this relationship cast into a household code that now becomes the model of union in one flesh between hus-bands and wives. In the gospel which concludes the "eucharistic discourse" in John (6:60-69), the disciples observe: "This is a hard saying; who can accept it?" It is plausible that the opinion of the sacred author of Ephesians about marriage met with a similar response. Modern believers might respond in like manner to many of the convictions of our ancestors in the faith. Yet surely all would conclude as did the Twelve: "to whom [else] shall we go? You have the words of eternal life;"

Alleluia JN 6:63C, 68C
Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life; you have the words of everlasting life.

Gospel

Mark, and Luke's accounts of the Gospel, the crowds follow Jesus gladly right up to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

In John's account, however, the ministry in Galilee falls apart much earlier. Once Jesus claims that he is the "living bread that came down from heaven," John says, the crowds dwindle. When Jesus begins to talk about ascending to heaven, even his disciples leave. Eventually, only the Twelve are left. "Do you also wish to go away?" Jesus asks. Speaking for the rest, Peter replies, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Peter confesses, "We have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God."

Once again, faith presents us with a choice. In John's language, do we believe Jesus is the Holy One of God or not? That is John's challenge.

A reading from the Gospel of John 6:60-69

Many of Jesus' disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, "Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe." Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father." As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

[6:60–71] These verses refer more to themes of Jn 6:35–50 than to those of Jn 6:51–58 and seem to be addressed to members of the Johannine community who found it difficult to accept the high christology reflected in the bread of life discourse.
This unfinished conditional sentence is obscure. Probably there is a reference to Jn 6:49–51. Jesus claims to be the bread that comes down from heaven (Jn 6:50); this claim provokes incredulity (Jn 6:60); and so Jesus is pictured as asking what his disciples will say when he goes up to heaven.

Spirit, flesh: probably not a reference to the eucharistic body of Jesus but to the supernatural and the natural, as in Jn 3:6. Spirit and life: all Jesus said about the bread of life is the revelation of the Spirit.

COMMITMENT AND Factions

In a late spring issue of a student newspaper published at a prestigious Catholic university, the graduating editor reflected on things he was glad he had done. Number two on his list was leaving the Catholic Church. Already as a freshman, he knew that for moral reasons he could not remain part of the Church and be true to all the values I believed in.

The scene in today's gospel is not quite parallel to this student's situation, but there is a small similarity. Here in the middle of Jesus' ministry, just after an extraordinary reflection on the synagogue readings, the listeners are divided. Some react negatively: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (v. 60). Others desert him: "Many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (v. 66).

Jesus reminds those who are taken aback that though the manna was a gift from heaven, it belonged to the realm of life on earth. It was a temporary aid with no use beyond its time. The words Jesus has spoken to them (6:35-58) are "spirit and life" (v. 63). They put the believer in touch with the Spirit and therefore with life at its source.

Jesus knew that there were some among his listeners who were not loyal to him, would refuse to have solidarity with him ("there are some of you who do not believe:' v. 64). There was even one that would prove to be totally disloyal, aloof, and not deeply committed to Jesus and his group (the one who would betray him). Faith, loyalty, commitment, and solidarity are gifts. "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father" (v. 65).

Those who deserted Jesus certainly disappointed him, but to a faction founder such desertion would be serious only if the core group, the Twelve, deserted him. He asks them point-blank: "Will you also go away?" (v. 67). Speaking on behalf of the faction, Simon Peter responds, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (v. 68).

Peter's response translated into Mediterranean cultural values is: we have made a commitment to you, no matter what ("we have believed"). Identifying Jesus as the "Holy One of God" echoes the Old Testament use of this phrase to identify men consecrated to God. Samson was so described Gudg 13:7; 16:7), as was Aaron (Ps 106:16). In John 10:36, Jesus describes himself as "the one whom the Father made holy;' and in John 17:19, Jesus says, "It is for them [my disciples] that I make myself holy?" Peter thinks he speaks for the Twelve, but Jesus knows better. Actually, any Mediterranean person would know better. In the Mediterranean world, allegiance between each member of a faction and its leader is strong. The leader has recruited each member personally and individually.

But the allegiance between faction members is very weak. If they know each other at all, it is only superficially. They have no in-depth psychological insight into other persons. Moreover, they could care less about the other faction members. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approach Jesus to seek higher honors than the other ten when Jesus enters into the fullness of his rightful honor (Mark 10:37). The others become understandably indignant (an understatement in view of the typical Mediterranean penchant for venting emotions).

Jesus' observation that one of the Twelve is "a devil" may well have come from the hand of the editor who adds his after-the-fact comment: "He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him?" Mediterranean people generally judge others only on externals (see 1 Sam 16:7).
Those who abandoned Jesus in today's story choose to re-main faithful to another set of values. Some who stayed with him did not fully understand Jesus and his values. One betrayed him, another denied him, and all abandoned him. The ultimate question may well be, by whose values will we live?

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Jesus' messianic consecration reveals his divine mission, 'for the name "Christ" implies "he who anointed," "he who was anointed" and "the very anointing with which he was anointed." The one who anointed is the Father, the one who was anointed is the Son, and he was anointed with the Spirit who is the anointing. '1 His eternal messianic consecration was revealed during the time of his earthly life at the moment of his baptism by John, when 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power,' 'that he might be revealed to Israel'Z. as its Messiah. His works and words will manifest him as 'the Holy One of God'"J (CCC, 438).

- "'Will you also go away?'"4 The Lord's question echoes through the ages, as a loving invitation to discover that only he has 'the words of eternal life'§. and that to receive in faith the gift of his Eucharist is to receive the Lord him-self" (CCC, 1336).
TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

JOSHUA 24:1-2, 15-17, 18B Some biblical archaeologists suspect that Israel had help conquering Canaan. What had been thought of as an invasion may have been more of a revolution from within. The oppressed rural Canaanites saw the radical religion and politics of their new neighbors and immediately identified with them. Together they overthrew the ruling urban Canaanite city states.

Our reading is a record of the covenant made between those loosely federated tribes from Egypt and the native tribes of Canaan. This covenant formed what we know today as the people of Israel.

Joshua puts this covenant in terms of a choice. For the tribes who had come from bondage in Egypt, it was a chance to renew the covenant they had made at Sinai. Joshua was smart to do this. Most of the first generation had passed away and the current generation needed to decide for themselves. Will they serve the gods of their new land, the gods of the Canaanite rulers, or the God who had rescued their parents from Egypt?

For the Canaanite revolutionaries, this was a chance to show their new allegiance to the liberating God of the Exodus. It cemented relations between the tribes and made a peaceful settlement of the land possible.

That same choice is still before us. Will we serve the gods of the powerful (possessions, status, money, security) or will we serve the liberating God we know in Christ?

A Reading from the Book of Joshua (24:1–2a, 15–17, 18b)

Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, summoning their elders, their leaders, their judges, and their officers.

When they stood in ranks before God, Joshua addressed all the people:

“If it does not please you to serve the Lord, decide today whom you will serve, the gods your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling.

As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

But the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord for the service of other gods. For it was the Lord, our God, who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, out of a state of slavery.

He performed those great miracles before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among the peoples through whom we passed. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

A few things are noteworthy about Joshua’s proposition. First, he calls for a definitive, once-and-for-always choice. It was common for many people in antiquity to choose gods appropriate to the moment. In contrast, Israel was faced with a more radical choice, one that would determine her future existence.
as well as her cult. Joshua and his family lead the way by personal example. Second, the decision here is made by the family patriarch or elder for the entire family. This reflects the normal way in which collectivistic personalities function (see also Acts 16:15, 31-33). Collectivistic personalities currently comprise 80 percent of the world's population. They stand in stark contrast to individuals or individualistic personalities. Families comprised of individualistic personalities would take a family vote, with each member free to make a personal decision. Third, no force or threat is leveled at the people. The heads of the households are free to decide for or against YHWH. Finally, whereas Joshua based his reasoning on YHWH's victories in battles, the people base their decision upon God's provident care for them and God's leading them from captivity. Their decision concurs with Joshua's. This challenge was indeed hard. "Who can accept it?" John 6:60-69, today's gospel.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21 (9A) On this third and final time we sing from Psalm 34 on a Sunday this year, we reach the final strophe in the psalmist's song. In it, the psalmist offers us a choice like the one Joshua offered. Are we among the righteous (willing to stand up for our faith even in the face of opposition) or are we among the evildoers (living as if there is no God)? Again, the choice is ours, but the psalmist wants us to understand the consequences. The righteous, he says, have a special relationship to God. That doesn't necessarily mean life will be less of a challenge for them. Like everyone else, the righteous suffer affliction. But, the psalmist explains, when the righteous cry for help, God hears them.

℟. (9a) Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall be ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the Lord;
the lowly will hear me and be glad.
The Lord has eyes for the just,
and ears for their cry.
The Lord confronts the evildoers,
to destroy remembrance of them from the earth.
When the just cry out, the Lord hears them,
and from all their distress he rescues them.
The is close to the brokenhearted;
and those who are crushed in spirit he saves.
Many are the troubles of the just one,
but out of them all the Lord delivers him;
he watches over all his bones;
not one of them shall be broken.

Very likely written by a person who experienced more than a normal share of life's problems, this alphabetical psalm highlights thanksgiving and instruction. Today's verses emphasize a principle of moral retribution: God rewards the good andpunishes the evil. God actively confronts evildoers, but their downfall is due in part to their own misdeeds. Most importantly, God watches over the just.
SECOND READING

EPHESIANS 5:21-32 The household code in Ephesians offers us a perfect example of second-century Christianity's struggle to retain the radical teaching of Jesus while gaining acceptance in wider society. Such household codes were a common Hellenistic literary form, but the author of Ephesians has added some surprisingly radical elements.

As expected, he begins by assigning people into a hierarchy. "Wives," he says, "be subject to your husbands." This is the part he borrowed. But note what else the author says. "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." This introduces a new element of equality unheard of in traditional society. "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." This, too, is new. It gives husbands an example of servanthood which undermines any ideas they may have had about being traditional heads of household.

The author's words reflect an old hierarchy, but his examples reflect a radical reinterpretation of human relations. For those in authority, the lordship of Christ means giving up power over people. For those on the lower rungs of society, the lordship of Christ means giving up victimization. It means respecting each other, caring for each other, cherishing each other just as Christ cherishes us. The challenge before us is to live this new way in a culture that constantly pulls us into old patterns of injustice.

A Reading from the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians (5:21-32)

Brothers and sisters:
Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body.
As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.
He who loves his wife loves himself.
For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.
For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.
This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.

These verses belong to the literary form known as "household codes;" Though very common in Greco-Roman popular philosophy, they are found in the New Testament only in the Deutero-Paulines (see introduction) and in 1 Peter. In general the codes treat of various relationships: husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters. Those relationships which in general are of subordinates to superiors cover all the occupants of the household in antiquity.
To properly interpret this household code, it is important to review some basic cultural ideas. These are collectivistic personalities embedded in kinship or surrogate kinship groups. As in all cultures so too in
this one persons are socialized into values and duties. We call this social formation or education. Since "household codes" concern kinship, the primary issues will stem from gender and generation, namely, the social expectations of gender identity in a particular family or clan.

It is also important to remember that human rights which emerged in Western history only during the Enlightenment were of no interest in antiquity. The majority of persons in ancient Mediterranean collectivist cultures did not have any rights in the modern legal sense. But they did have duties, and these duties or obligations are what the household codes prescribed not in the sense of new ideas but rather as re-minders of how men and women had been socialized. In general, this passage in Ephesians reflects the cultural conviction that a husband must treat his wife with respect owed blood relatives, even though she may not be his kin. She in turn must show loyalty to the male in whom she is now embedded, transferring to him the loyalty formerly owed her father.

This passage expands Col 3:18-4:1 by adding reflections on the relationship of Jesus and the Church. Notice two things in this passage: there is a balance of imagery and an exhortation to mutuality.

Masculine imagery is reflected in Christ and husband; feminine imagery is clear in Church and wife. The culturally determined division of labor according to gender underpins this balanced imagery. Yet the passage is not presenting ideal marriage relationships for all times and places. Rather, it is discussing the Church and its relationship to Christ. The note of mutuality is sounded in v. 21 (be subordinate to one another). Then Jesus' lordship over the body serves as the model for the husband as head of the wife.

Further, the rather uncustomary listing of the husband's obligations presented in vv. 25-33 is associated with Jesus' love for the Church which is his bride. Thus Jesus is the bridegroom who purifies his bride, the Church, in the waters of baptism in order that she might be clothed in holiness and purity.

The concluding verse is very significant. The sacred author clearly states: "this is a great mystery;" The reference is to Gen 2:23 whose real meaning was not in the original context but rather in the present, namely, the union of Jesus and the Church. It is this relationship cast into a household code that now becomes the model of union in one flesh between husbands and wives. In the gospel which concludes the "eucharistic discourse" in John (6:60-69), the disciples observe: "This is a hard saying; who can accept it?" It is plausible that the opinion of the sacred author of Ephesians about marriage met with a similar response. Modern believers might respond in like manner to many of the convictions of our ancestors in the faith. Yet surely all would conclude as did the Twelve: "to whom [else] shall we go? You have the words of eternal life;"

ALLELUIA
Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life; you have the words of everlasting life.

GOSPEL

JOHN 6:60-69 In Matthew, Mark, and Luke's accounts of the Gospel, the crowds follow Jesus gladly right up to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

In John's account, however, the ministry in Galilee falls apart much earlier. Once Jesus claims that he is the "living bread that came down from heaven," John says, the crowds dwindle. When Jesus begins to talk about ascending to heaven, even his disciples leave. Eventually, only the Twelve are left. "Do you also wish to go away?" Jesus asks. Speaking for the rest, Peter replies, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Peter confesses, "We have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God."

Once again, faith presents us with a choice. In John's language, do we believe Jesus is the Holy One of God or not? That is John's challenge.
+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John (6:60–69)

Many of the disciples of Jesus who were listening said,
“This saying is hard; who can accept it?”
Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this,
he said to them, “Does this shock you?
What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending
to where he was before?
It is the spirit that gives life,
while the flesh is of no avail.
The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.
But there are some of you who do not believe.”
Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe
and the one who would betray him.
And he said,
“For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me
unless it is granted him by my Father.”
As a result of this,
many of his disciples returned to their former way of life
and no longer accompanied him.
Jesus then said to the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave?”
Simon Peter answered him, “Master, to whom shall we go?
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COMMITMENT AND FACTIONS

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graduating editor re-flected on things he was glad he had done. Number two on his list was leaving the
Catholic Church. Already as a fresh-man, he knew that for moral reasons he could not remain part of the
Church and be true ’/to all the values I believed in.'
The scene in today's gospel is not quite parallel to this stu-dent's situation, but there is a small similarity.
Here in the middle of Jesus' ministry, just after an extraordinary reflec-tion on the synagogue readings,
the listeners are divided. Some react negatively: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” (v. 60).
Others desert him: "Many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (v. 66).
Jesus reminds them: "Many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (v. 66).
Jesus knew that there were some among his listeners who were not loyal to him, would refuse to have
solidarity with him ("there are some of you who do not believe:' v. 64). There was even one that would
prove to be totally disloyal, aloof, and not deeply committed to Jesus and his group (the one who would
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- "'Will you also go away?' The Lord's question echoes through the ages, as a loving invitation to discover that only he has 'the words of eternal life'§, and that to receive in faith the gift of his Eucharist is to receive the Lord himself" (CCC, 1336).
TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

Before entering the Promised Land, Moses ad-monishes the Israelites to hear the Lord's statutes and decrees. Only active attentiveness to God's Word will lead to fullness of life and possession of the land God promised. Not adding to or subtracting from God's commands, a common stipulation in the laws of the ancient world, insured fidelity to what had been communicated. Two reasons are given for attentiveness and fidelity to God's commands. Observance of God's law ensures God's blessings on the land and the people. Secondly, the wisdom and intelligence of God's laws will be evident to all nations through the Israelites' manner of living. Their closeness to God and the wisdom of God's commands manifested when they live lives of justice will be admired and envied by all nations.

A reading from the Book of Deuteronomy (4:1–2, 6–8)

Moses said to the people:

“Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. In your observance of the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin upon you, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it. Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, ‘This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.’ For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him? Or what great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today?”

In Deuteronomy, Moses is preeminently a teacher (Deut 1:5; 4:5; 5:31; 6:1). His teaching includes positive legal decrees (statutes) and judicial decisions based on case law (decrees, ordinances). Observance of the Law is an absolute requirement for gaining and maintaining possession of the land. If they faithfully observe this Law, Israelites will manifest to all nations their wisdom and intelligence (or discernment, which is one way of describing the wisdom tradition of other nations). This is what the Israelites should learn. The injunction not to add or subtract from the Law is probably the sentiment that links this reading with today's gospel (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23), which concerns “the tradition of the elders: something the Pharisees added to observance of the Torah.
RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 15:2–3, 3–4, 4–5)

Psalm 15 has temple and ritual worship as its backdrop. Some have called it an entrance liturgy for pilgrims or anyone desiring to know the requirements for temple worship. The response given by the temple priests is both an instruction in living and an examination of the life path one has chosen to walk. Living in the presence of the Lord demands a life lived justly, exercising right relationship with all in thought, word, and deed. Specific examples of right relationship are offered to the worshipper who desires temple entrance. These include doing justice, speaking truth and not slander, causing harm to no one, fearing the Lord, not charging interest on money lent (usury), and not accepting bribes. Living thusly will bring about communal harmony and peace, along with personal wellbeing and integrity. Choosing this path insures God's blessings, for it integrates God's commands with everyday living and enables authentic communal worship.

One who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Whoever walks blamelessly and does justice;
who thinks the truth in his heart
and slanders not with his tongue.
Who harms not his fellow man,
nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor;
by whom the reprobate is despised,
while he honors those who fear the LORD.
Who lends not his money at interest
and accepts no bribe against the innocent.
Whoever does these things
shall never be disturbed.

* [Psalm 15] The Psalm records a liturgical scrutiny at the entrance to the Temple court (cf. Ps 24:3–6; Is 33:14b–16). The Israelite wishing to be admitted had to ask the Temple official what conduct was appropriate to God's precincts. Note the emphasis on virtues relating to one’s neighbor.
* [15:5] Lends no money at interest: lending money in the Old Testament was often seen as assistance to the poor in their distress, not as an investment; making money off the poor by charging interest was thus forbidden (Ex 22:24; Lv 25:36–37; Dt 23:20).

This psalm enumerates the requirements for entering the Temple precincts, or more exactly the requirements for taking part in Temple services. It could have served as an entrance rite for Temple services, as an examination of one’s behavior especially regarding failures in speaking truth or using wealth to damage the innocent. Interest rates in the ancient world sometimes hovered between 33 to 50 percent. The Torah condemned taking such advantage of needy fellow Israelites (Exod 22:25; Deut 23:19). These verses reflecting some of the commandments serve as a suitable bridge between Deuteronomy and today’s gospel.

SECOND READING

For the next five Sundays, the Second Reading will proclaim selections from the Letter of James. The letter is better characterized as a moral exhortation to the baptized, those given "birth by the word of truth" who are the "firstfruits" of God's creative activity. James begins by highlighting his image of God.
God, the source of all goodness, shows us with abundant blessings. Since God is changeless, God can be relied upon eternally. God desires to recreate the world, with those baptized into Christ being the "firstfruits" of God's creative love.

James exhorts God's "firstfruits" to welcome God's word with humility and to become "doers of the word and not hearers only." Warning that we can easily delude ourselves, James specifies what is required to stand before God "pure and undefiled." Care and concern for all powerless and defenseless people, "orphans and widows," is foremost. "Doers of the word" are ever diligent about removing all that would prevent them from serving God and others. James exhorts all to be and do justice.

A reading from the Letter of Saint James (1:17–18, 21b–22, 27)

Dearest brothers and sisters:

All good giving and every perfect gift is from above,
coming down from the Father of lights,
with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change.

He willed to give us birth by the word of truth
that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you
and is able to save your souls.

Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.
Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this:
to care for orphans and widows in their affliction
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

* [1:17] All good giving and every perfect gift may be a proverb written in hexameter. Father of lights: God is here called the Father of the heavenly luminaries, i.e., the stars, sun, and moon that he created (Gn 1:14–18). Unlike orbs moving from nadir to zenith, he never changes or diminishes in brightness.

* [1:18] Acceptance of the gospel message, the word of truth, constitutes new birth (Jn 3:5–6) and makes the recipient the firstfruits (i.e., the cultic offering of the earliest grains, symbolizing the beginning of an abundant harvest) of a new creation; cf. 1 Cor 15:20; Rom 8:23.

* [1:27] In the Old Testament, orphans and widows are classical examples of the defenseless and oppressed.

This letter was written by an unknown Christian teacher in the name of James of Jerusalem, "brother of the Lord" (Gal 1:19; Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3), probably in the early or middle 60s. The theme of the letter is announced in 1:2-12: the completeness and wholeness of the recipients, of their community, and of their relationship to God (vv. 2-4, revised NAB: "perfect and complete"). Completeness and wholeness are contrasted with incompleteness, fragmentation, and division in vv. 5-9, signaling seven sets of similar contrasts that will follow in the body of the letter, the negative aspect first, then the positive.

[For additional background see Third Sunday of Advent, Cycle A.]

Today's verses are part of the first contrast (1: 13-17). Negative: no one should deceive self by attributing trials to God, but rather should acknowledge that they stem from human desire (vv. 13-16). Positive: from God, rather, come complete gifts, in response to which believers ought to integrate hearing and doing in their worship. The complete, integral, whole human person lives with all three symbolic body zones perfectly aligned and operating in harmony. The word has been planted in believers (in the heart/eyes zone), hence they should be doers (hands/feet) and not just hearers (mouth/ears zone) of the word. Deluding oneself (v. 22) is equivalent to deluding one's heart (v. 26). The relationship with today's gospel (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23) is obvious: the Pharisees say the right things
(mouth/ears= honor with lips), but their hearts are far from me (heart/eyes). Jesus points out that their zones are misaligned and operate dysfunctionally. The pseudonymous author of this letter, James the brother of the Lord, takes a similar view of human beings. What does this have to do with holiness? Believers are to "put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness" (v. 21), and instead practice "pure and undefiled" worship before God. Concretely, this means to care for the most vulnerable in the community (orphans and widows, both experiencing a temporary dislocation from ascribed or acquired status) and to remain "unstained" by "the world:" In other words, "the world" refers to a polluting society with standards of valuation that differ markedly from those of God's holy people. God's people must resist following the ways of the world but seek rather to be perfect like God is perfect. God cares for the widows and orphans (Ps 67:6), so must those who claim to worship the deity.

**ALLELUIA (Jas 1:18)**
The Father willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

**GOSPEL**

This Sunday's return to Mark's account of the Gospel has Jesus being confronted by some religious authorities who question his disciples' fidelity to religious laws, especially ritual purity. Since Mark writes primarily for a non-Jewish audience, he spells out some of the pharisaic regulations concerning ritual purity. Jesus responds to their questions by quoting from Isaiah, who criticized the people of his day for external show in worship without internal conviction, and for elevating human precepts to the level of doctrine.

Jesus challenges the Pharisees and scribes by asserting that defilement has its source not in external actions but in interior disposition. One cannot judge merely on the basis of external actions. Rather, one has to search the heart and one's interior disposition to adequately and justly judge external actions. The list of vices, a common catalogue in moral exhortations, is used as examples of actions that manifest an interior disposition averse to God and neighbor. True defilement begins in the heart.

Jesus is not saying that laws and regulations have no value. Rather, Jesus is emphasizing the necessity of establishing laws and traditions that enhance, not minimize or distort, a person's relationship to God and others. They should help all be effective "doers of the word and not hearers only."

**+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23)**

When the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands. —For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds. —So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?"
He responded,  
“Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written:  
This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
in vain do they worship me,  
teaching as doctrines human precepts.  
You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.”  
He summoned the crowd again and said to them,  
“Hear me, all of you, and understand.  
Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person;  
but the things that come out from within are what defile.  
“From within people, from their hearts,  
come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder,  
adultery, greed, malice, deceit,  
licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.  
All these evils come from within and they defile.”

* [7:1–12] In Mt 7:1 Matthew returns to the basic traditional material of the sermon (Lk 6:37–38, 41–42). The governing thought is the correspondence between conduct toward one’s fellows and God’s conduct toward the one so acting.  
* [7:1] This is not a prohibition against recognizing the faults of others, which would be hardly compatible with Mt 7:5, 6 but against passing judgment in a spirit of arrogance, forgetful of one’s own faults.  
* [7:5] Hypocrite: the designation previously given to the scribes and Pharisees is here given to the Christian disciple who is concerned with the faults of another and ignores his own more serious offenses.  
* [7:6] Dogs and swine were Jewish terms of contempt for Gentiles. This saying may originally have derived from a Jewish Christian community opposed to preaching the gospel (what is holy, pearls) to Gentiles. In the light of Mt 28:19 that can hardly be Matthew’s meaning. He may have taken the saying as applying to a Christian dealing with an obstinately impenitent fellow Christian (Mt 18:17).  
* [7:13–14] The metaphor of the “two ways” was common in pagan philosophy and in the Old Testament. In Christian literature it is found also in the Didache (1–6) and the Epistle of Barnabas (18–20).  
* [7:15–20] Christian disciples who claimed to speak in the name of God are called prophets (Mt 7:15) in Mt 10:41; Mt 23:34. They were presumably an important group within the church of Matthew. As in the case of the Old Testament prophets, there were both true and false ones, and for Matthew the difference could be recognized by the quality of their deeds, the fruits (Mt 7:16). The mention of fruits leads to the comparison with trees, some producing good fruit, others bad.  
* [7:21–23] The attack on the false prophets is continued, but is broadened to include those disciples who perform works of healing and exorcism in the name of Jesus (Lord) but live evil lives. Entrance into the kingdom is only for those who do the will of the Father. On the day of judgment (on that day) the morally corrupt prophets and miracle workers will be rejected by Jesus.  

**DEAF AND MUTE**  
The Greek word often translated as "deaf" may sometimes mean "mute!" Indeed in Matthew 11:5 and Luke 7:22, the deaf are made to hear, while in Matthew 9:32; 12:22; and Luke 11:14, the deaf are made
to speak. The association of both meanings with one Greek word is understandable because the two skills are related. Speaking involves the ability to imitate what one hears.

In this story, Mark intends the meaning "deaf" since he adds another very specific Greek word that means "unable to speak properly." That this man could speak at all suggests he may not have been congenitally deaf, or that his hearing loss was not total.

**JESUS' HEALING ACTIVITY**

First, Jesus takes the man aside "in private." Given the very public and nosey nature of Mediterranean culture, privacy is practically impossible. Also, people tend to stand very close to each other. Touching or leaning against other people is not at all a problem. What Jesus did here was gain some elbow-room or breathing space for himself and his client.

Second, given the readiness of people in this culture to touch and make contact with others, Jesus' laying on of hands does not have the significance it might have in antiseptic and aloof Western culture. In antiquity, the hands were the customary vehicle by which a healer transmitted therapeutic power to the client. At other times, the healer's garments transmitted healing power without the healer's awareness or will (Mark 5:28-29). Sometimes the healer could be effective at a distance by word alone (Luke 7:7).

Third, spitting is a common Middle Eastern precaution against evil. A person who suspects another of possessing or casting the "evil eye" will spit to deflect or deactivate that power. The Galatians "spit" when they saw Paul whom they suspected of having an "evil eye" (Gal 4:14, literal translation). Traditional healers routinely use this strategy to ward off evil.

Fourth, Mark is careful to report the precise Aramaic word used by Jesus: 'eppattah,' or as reported in English translations, ephphatha. The ancients believed that words contain power. If translated, the word would lose its power. By reporting the original Aramaic word, Mark underscores Jesus' power as a traditional healer.

The result: immediately the man's ears were opened, the bond of his tongue was released, and he spoke properly or plainly.

**HONOR**

Once again Jesus ordered the crowd to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And earlier generations of scholars identified this strange injunction as part of "the messianic secret" in Mark's strange Gospel. Contemporary scholars point out that the issue is much more complex.

To begin with, in the first century of the common, there was no single, uniform, widely accepted concept of who the Messiah would be and what he was expected to accomplish. There were rather, so many and conflicting and contradictory notions of the Messiah that keeping it a secret need imply no deep purpose; it would at simply be a relief. One less puzzle to deal with.

Second, honor requires that each person remain within the bonds of honor, deriving from birth status. With his travels and healing activity, Jesus has stepped outside the bounds of his honor rating and now poses a serious threat to his culture. As an honorable man, he must do his utmost to keep this potentially damaging information hidden from public awareness. Third the most common strategy for safeguarding the honor of Jesus' on family he is secrecy, deception and lying. By urging secrecy on his benefactors, Jesus, could continue to do ministry to the benefit of everyone including his family, kin, and neighbors. In the long run, of course, it didn't work.

Scientifically sophisticated Western believers would prefer to debate whether or not the man "really" was deaf and tongue-tied in order to discern "scientifically what Jesus really did. None of this was of interest to antiquity. Whatever "really" happened, Jesus restored meaning to his clients' lives. That is what healing means. What fresh meaning can this episode add to the life of a modern believer?
CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

■ "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor and afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts" (GS, 1).

■ "... the invitation we give to celebrate Peace resounds as an invitation to practice Justice: 'Justice will bring about Peace.' 1 We repeat this today in a more incisive and dynamic formula: 'If you want Peace, work for Justice'' (DOP).

■ "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation" (JM, 6).

■ "[The Church] recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just. ... Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church herself" (JM, 40).
TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

Isaiah's salvation proclamation begins with a call to "be strong, fear not." No matter what struggles surround or overwhelm us with fear, trust that God comes to save. God's salvation is for all, most especially for those suffering any physical infirmity that would prevent them from full participation in religious, cultural, and communal involvement. The blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute will experience God's saving power, enabling them to become full and active members of the community. Creation will also be renewed with new life and fertility as deserts teem with life from streams and rivers that overflow in abundance. Both human beings and nature will experience the life-giving power of God that restores and renews. Isaiah firmly asserts that God does not and will not give up on us no matter how bad things may appear. All are called to be open to the saving power of God, a power that is attuned to the weak and the powerless, the frightened and those bereft of life. Christians believe that in the person of Jesus, God's salvation has come, healing, renewing, and restoring all to newness of life.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (35:4–7a)

Thus says the LORD:

Say to those whose hearts are frightened:
   Be strong, fear not!
Here is your God,
   he comes with vindication;
with divine recompense
   he comes to save you.
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
   the ears of the deaf be cleared;
then will the lame leap like a stag,
   then the tongue of the mute will sing.
Streams will burst forth in the desert,
   and rivers in the steppe.
The burning sands will become pools,
   and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

* [35:1–10] This chapter contains a number of themes similar to those in Deutero-Isaiah (chaps. 40–55), for example, the blossoming of the wilderness (vv. 1–2; cf. 41:18–19), which is now well-irrigated (v. 7; cf. 43:19–20); sight to the blind (vv. 5–6; cf. 42:7, 16); a highway in the wilderness (v. 8; cf. 41:3); and the return of the redeemed/ransomed to Zion (vv. 9–10; cf. 51:11). Nevertheless, it forms a unit with chap. 34 (see note on 34:1–35:10) and reflects, along with that chapter, themes found in chaps. 1–33.

First Isaiah describes what will happen in the return from Exile, God himself will bring it about. The result will be a re-versal of circumstances: the blind will see, deserts will become fertile, etc. Isaiah's ideas become clearer as the reader recognizes that the prophet has organized his thoughts according to a pattern of perception that permeates the Bible. Our ancestors in the faith viewed human beings in terms of three zones on the human body interpreted symbolically: heart-eyes (zone of emotion-fused
thought); mouth-ears (zone of self-expressive speech); and hands-feet (zone of pur-poseful activity). They did not see the human person in three zones, but rather they evaluated human beings by attending to what was said, perceived, done, etc. They paid attention exclusively to external things, since only God could look inside a person and read hearts (1 Sam 16:7).

Thus, the blind (heart-eyes zone malfunction) will see; the deaf (mouth-cars zone malfunction) will hear; the lame (hands-feet zone malfunction) will leap; the mute (mouth-ears zone malfunction) will sing. God restores human beings to whole-ness and integrity. God also vivifies "dead" parts of creation. In the gospel (Mark 7:31-37), Jesus restores health to a man’s mouth-ears symbolic body zone, and the man and the crowd proceed to announce the Good News to all.

**RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 146:6–7, 8–9, 9–10)**

This psalm calls the entire community to praise the Lord with all their being (soul). Such total praise is due because God "keeps faith forever," secures justice, feeds the hungry, and liberates the captives. The Lord heals and restores the blind and those bowed down. The stranger, the fatherless, and the widow—all those socially and eco-nomically powerless and marginalized—are cared for by God's empowering love. Our faithful God is attuned to all who are in need of healing, care, protection, and fullness of life. We are called to be people who imitate God in our dealings with all, most especially those in need. A life of justice chal-lenges us to work toward establishing right relationship with all. To be open to God operating in our lives demands that we be open to all who are in need of God’s healing touch and renewing love.

**Praise the Lord, my soul!**

The God of Jacob keeps faith forever,
   secures justice for the oppressed,
   gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets captives free.
The LORD gives sight to the blind;
   the LORD raises up those who were bowed down.
The LORD loves the just;
   the LORD protects strangers.
The fatherless and the widow the LORD sustains,
   but the way of the wicked he thwarts.
The LORD shall reign forever;
   your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

* [Psalm 146] A hymn of someone who has learned there is no other source of strength except the merciful God. Only God, not mortal human beings (Ps 146:3–4), can help vulnerable and oppressed people (Ps 146:5–9). The first of the five hymns that conclude the Psalter.

Today's verses are drawn from the first in a series of "Hallel" or "Praise" psalms. They underscore the fact that all salvation, all rescue, all healing, all meaning in life come from God alone. In these verses, the psalmist is especially concerned with the hungry, those in prison, the blind, those who are op-pressed, those whom illnesses may have brought low, the resident aliens, the widows and orphans. It is very likely that the psalmist himself is in one of these categories. Yet he is confident that God will thwart the wicked, those who cause these problems. May this God reign forever in the hearts of faithful believers, to which the congregation replied: Alleluia!
SECOND READING

James counsels all followers of Christ to live lives that manifest love for all, most especially the poor and those that society easily marginalizes because of their looks, appearance, or social status. The assembly of believers is not to operate according to the standards of those who discriminate based on wealth or possessions. James refers to these people as "judges with evil designs." We have been called by God to be "brothers and sisters" in the Lord. In Christian communities, all are treated equally, with preferential option given to the poor. The poor are especially close to the Lord because they are more attuned to depending on God and trusting God above all else. The rich tend to put their trust in other objects besides God. Ultimately, James states that God chose the poor to be "rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." We are to imitate God in love of the poor, caring for them as they challenge us by their deep trust and love of God.

A reading from the Letter of Saint James (2:1–5)

My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. For if a man with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here, please," while you say to the poor one, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?

* [2:1–13] In the Christian community there must be no discrimination or favoritism based on status or wealth (Jas 2:2–4; cf. Mt 5:3; 11:5; 23:6; 1 Cor 1:27–29). Divine favor rather consists in God’s election and promises (Jas 2:5). The rich who oppress the poor blaspheme the name of Christ (Jas 2:6–7). By violating one law of love of neighbor, they offend against the whole law (Jas 2:8–11). On the other hand, conscious awareness of the final judgment helps the faithful to fulfill the whole law (Jas 2:12).

* [2:4] When Christians show favoritism to the rich they are guilty of the worst kind of prejudice and discrimination. The author says that such Christians set themselves up as judges who judge not by divine law but by the basest, self-serving motives.

* [2:5] The poor, “God’s poor” of the Old Testament, were seen by Jesus as particularly open to God for belief in and reliance on him alone (Lk 6:20). God’s law cannot tolerate their oppression in any way (Jas 2:9).

The recipients of this letter are a mix of Israeliite and non-Israelite believers in Jesus who live in the dispersion. They are linked with the identity, history, and traditions of the twelve tribes of Israel (1:1). In reality they are a culturally mixed audience from various social strata. There are rich and poor (2:1-13), teachers (3:1-18), and elders (5:14) on one side, and ordinary members on the other. Such a mix brings in its wake a plurality of perspectives and norms concerning appropriate social behavior, tension and
conflict between the haves and have-nots, trials, dispiriting strife and divisions within the community, and serious questions about how to relate with non-believing outsiders. Today's verses indicate that this cultural pluralism and social-economic disequilibrium fomented discrimination between social classes, and the seeking of favor from wealthy and powerful patrons outside the community. This in turn led to personal doubt, dissimulation, despair, and defection. The community was suffering an erosion of integrity and cohesion at the personal and social levels of life. The problem in today's verses is social and communal. Community members are discriminating against others and showing partiality to the rich. The solution is to refrain from showing partiality. The word translated "assembly" is literally "synagogue." This not only indicates the mixed nature of this community but is a unique example in the New Testament of the retention of a Judean term and concept for describing a gathering of folk who have accepted Jesus as Messiah (compare Matt 4:23, "their synagogues;" implying a difference from "our synagogues"). Moreover, in this hypothetical example, the two visitors are strangers to the assembly, and their status can be surmised only from their garments. The instruction is that God has chosen the poor rooted in the conviction that the poor are objects of God's special care (Ps 35:10), a notion familiar from the gospel (Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20). As such the poor are heirs of the kingdom. Today's gospel (Mark 7:31–37) recounts Jesus' healing of a deaf mute. The divided community which received the letter of James also needed to have their ears opened. If the ears of modern believers are closed to divisive behaviors in the community, who will open them, and how?

**ALLELUIA (cf. Mt 4:23)**

Jesus proclaimed the GOSPEL of the kingdom and cured every disease among the people.

**GOSPEL**

This healing of the deaf and mute man is unique to Mark and is unique in the manner in which Jesus performs the miracle. Jesus' way of touching this man (inserting fingers in his ears and placing saliva on his tongue) is not his usual manner of healing. Mark communicates lessons through this narrative that are instructive for discipleship. The locale places Jesus in Gentile territory. For Mark, Jesus' mission is not exclusively for Jews, but for all people. Jesus breaks boundaries so that all might experience God's saving power. Gentiles are open to approaching Jesus, a Jew, to request healing. Jesus does not shrink from touching, going out of his way to use fingers, saliva, groaning, and a word of command - Ephphatha, "be opened" - to heal and restore the person to wholeness. Made whole by becoming able to speak and hear, the healed man becomes a sign of God's reign and saving power, realized and activated through Jesus. Isaiah's salvation oracle in the First Reading is being fulfilled in the person of Jesus. The forces of evil are being defeated through Jesus' life-giving touch. Both Jew and Gentile, along with disciples then and now, are made aware that Jesus opens ears and mouths, enabling all to hear God's words and to speak God's praises. We, too, are made whole, in order to reach out to others and make them whole with God's help. Like the crowd, we, too, are "exceedingly astonished," for Jesus "has done all things well."

**+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (7:31–37)**

Again Jesus left the district of Tyre 
   and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee,
into the district of the Decapolis.
And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment 
   and begged him to lay his hand on him.
He took him off by himself away from the crowd.
He put his finger into the man’s ears
and, spitting, touched his tongue;
then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him,
“Ephphatha!”—that is, “Be opened!”—
And immediately the man’s ears were opened,
his speech impediment was removed,
and he spoke plainly.
He ordered them not to tell anyone.
But the more he ordered them not to,
the more they proclaimed it.
They were exceedingly astonished and they said,
“He has done all things well.
He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

* [7:24–37] The withdrawal of Jesus to the district of Tyre may have been for a respite (Mk 7:24), but he
soon moved onward to Sidon and, by way of the Sea of Galilee, to the Decapolis. These districts
provided a Gentile setting for the extension of his ministry of healing because the people there
acknowledged his power (Mk 7:29, 37). The actions attributed to Jesus (Mk 7:33–35) were also used by
healers of the time.
* [7:27–28] The figure of a household in which children at table are fed first and then their leftover food
is given to the dogs under the table is used effectively to acknowledge the prior claim of the Jews to the
ministry of Jesus; however, Jesus accedes to the Gentile woman’s plea for the cure of her afflicted
daughter because of her faith.
* [7:36] The more they proclaimed it: the same verb proclaim attributed here to the crowd in relation to
the miracles of Jesus is elsewhere used in Mark for the preaching of the gospel on the part of Jesus, of
his disciples, and of the Christian community (Mk 1:14; 13:10; 14:9). Implied in the action of the crowd is
a recognition of the salvific mission of Jesus; see note on Mt 11:5–6.

DEAF AND MUTE
The Greek word often translated as "deaf" may sometimes mean "mute!" Indeed in Matthew 11:5 and
Luke 7:22, the deaf are made to hear, while in Matthew 9:32; 12:22; and Luke 11:14, the deaf are made
to speak. The association of both meanings with one Greek word is understandable because the two
skills are related. Speaking involves the ability to imitate what one hears. In this story, Mark intends the meaning "deaf" since he adds another very specific Greek word that means "unable to speak properly:' That this man could speak at all suggests he may not have been
congenitally deaf, or that his hearing loss was not total.

JESUS’ HEALING ACTIVITY
First, Jesus takes the man aside "in private." Given the very public and nosey nature of Mediterranean
culture, privacy is practically impossible. Also, people tend to stand very close to each other. Touching or
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HONOR
Once again Jesus ordered the crowd to tell no one, but the more he ordered them the more zealously they proclaimed it. An earlier generation of scholars identified this strange injunction as part of “the messianic secret” in Mark’s gospel. Contemporary scholars point out that this issue is much more complex.

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Scientifically sophisticated Western believers would prefer to debate whether or not the man "really" was deaf and tongue-tied in order to discern "scientifically" what Jesus really did. None of this was of interest in antiquity. Whatever "really" happened, Jesus restored meaning to his clients' lives. That is what healing means. What fresh meaning can this episode add to the life of a modern believer?

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel" (DCE, 22).
- "The church ... claims charitable works as its own mission and right ... mercy to the poor and sick, charitable works and works ... for the alleviation of all kinds of human need, are especially esteemed in the church1" (AA, 8).
- "Parishes should be measured by our help for the hungry, the homeless, the troubled, and the alienated - in our own community and beyond" (CSL).
- "The Fathers ... of the Church ... taught that people are bound to come to the aid of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods" (GS, 69).
Popular preaching often makes an association between sin and suffering, or between holiness and good fortune. Those links cannot be legitimated by using the Old Testament, much less the New Testament. Throughout scriptural history, the prophets suffer for remaining faithful to their vocation, and the psalms often depict the innocent as undergoing unjust punishments. In today’s reading, from the third of four sections of Isaiah known as Servant Songs, Isaiah describes the servant of God as one who is willing to undergo torment.

As we ponder this reading, there is no indication of who is inflicting the suffering. The central characters are the testifying servant and God. Unlike the complaints we hear from prophets in some prophetic books (Jeremiah 20), the servant of Isaiah 50 expresses nothing but gratitude. He recognizes God as the one who opens his ears, who keeps him from disgrace and from being proven wrong. This is the song of a disciple who values a faithful relationship with God above all else.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (50:5–9a)

The Lord God opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back.
I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.
The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.
He is near who upholds my right; if anyone wishes to oppose me, let us appear together.
Who disputes my right?
Let that man confront me.
See, the Lord God is my help; who will prove me wrong?

It is well to remember the core values of Mediterranean culture when reading these verses from the third of Isaiah’s four Servant Songs: honor and shame. Honor is a claim to value and an acknowledgment of that claim; shame is a denial of the claim or a failure to negate the denial. In these verses, insults ("beat me;" "plucked my beard;" and "buffets and spitting") are a very clear indication that other citizens are not granting the Servant’s claim to worth or value. In this cultural context, the Servant has to be judged a cultural failure. This is why the key statement in today’s reading is verse 7: "The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; . . . I shall not be put to shame." The Servant himself is firmly
convinced that God has indeed called him, opened his ears to hear, inspired him to speak truthfully. Even though his pronouncements have brought him abuse, rejection, and shame instead of respect and acclaim, God will vindicate him and restore honor to him. "Who will prove me wrong?" is the Servant's challenging question to his opponents. In the gospel (Mark 8:27-35), Jesus expects similar shameful treatment, but chides Peter for not realizing that what looks like shame in human opinion does not at all reflect God's outlook.

**RESPONSORIAL PSALM** (Ps 114:1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 8–9)

This psalm of thanksgiving follows the first reading from one of the Servant Song in beautiful harmony. Whereas the servant proclaimed that his ear was opened by God, we are invited to join the psalmist in singing the praise of the God who gives ear to our cries. There is no doubt that the psalmist knew mortal danger as well as near despair. But, the plea "Lord, save my life" shows that even in the midst of a living nightmare, one can both have and express faith.

The third strophe of our psalm speaks in a particular way to the theme proclaimed by the servant. As it expresses God's special concern for the little ones and those brought low, it emphasizes the fact that, although we frequently forget it, before God we are all little and lowly. The gratitude this psalm expresses reminds us that only when we recognize our own frailty can we become aware of the immense privilege of walking in the sight of God in the land of the living.

*I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.*

I love the **LORD** because he has heard my voice in supplication,  
Because he has inclined his ear to me  
the day I called.  
The cords of death encompassed me;  
the snares of the netherworld seized upon me;  
I fell into distress and sorrow,  
And I called upon the name of the **LORD**,  
"O **LORD**, save my life!"  
Gracious is the **LORD** and just;  
yes, our God is merciful.  
The **LORD** keeps the little ones;  
I was brought low, and he saved me.  
For he has freed my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.  
I shall walk before the **LORD**  
in the land of the living.

* [Psalm 114] A hymn celebrating Israel's escape from Egypt, journey through the wilderness, and entry into the promised land, and the miracles of nature that bore witness to God’s presence in their midst. In the perspective of the Psalm, the people proceed directly from Egypt into the promised land (Ps 114:1–2). Sea and Jordan, which stood like soldiers barring the people from their land, flee before the mighty God as the earth recoils from the battle (Ps 114:3–4). The poet taunts the natural elements as one taunts defeated enemies (Ps 114:5–6).

* [114:3–4] Pairs of cosmic elements such as sea and rivers, mountains and hills, are sometimes mentioned in creation accounts. Personified here as warriors, the pairs tremble in fear before the Divine Warrior. The quaking also recalls the divine appearance in the storm at Sinai (Ex 19:16–19) and elsewhere (Jgs 5:4–5; Ps 18:7–15).
This late post-exilic psalm of thanksgiving makes a very fitting bridge between the first reading and the gospel in verse 6: "The LORD keeps the little ones; I was brought low, and he saved me." The psalmist was sick (close to death), maybe even in chains awaiting execution, but God rescued him. He was in sorrow, but now feels great joy. He experienced great insecurity, but now feels quite secure (feet won't stumble). For all of this he praises the Lord.

SECOND READING

Our selection from James fits well with today's other readings. It responds to the question of what it means to have faith. James insists that genuine faith in Christ is more than intellectual. Real faith is demonstrated through Christ-like actions, such as caring for the needy. The teaching in this reading from James leads us into our Gospel reading, where Peter is told that authentic faith in Jesus as Messiah implies a readiness to accept and share his cross.

A reading from the Letter of Saint James (2:14–18)

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Indeed someone might say, "You have faith and I have works." Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works.

* [2:14–26] The theme of these verses is the relationship of faith and works (deeds). It has been argued that the teaching here contradicts that of Paul (see especially Rom 4:5–6). The problem can only be understood if the different viewpoints of the two authors are seen. Paul argues against those who claim to participate in God's salvation because of their good deeds as well as because they have committed themselves to trust in God through Jesus Christ (Paul's concept of faith). Paul certainly understands, however, the implications of true faith for a life of love and generosity (see Gal 5:6, 13–15). The author of James is well aware that proper conduct can only come about with an authentic commitment to God in faith (Jas 2:18, 26). Many think he was seeking to correct a misunderstanding of Paul's view.

In this third contrast, the sacred author highlights negative communal behavior (lack of faith-in-action toward the needy, 2:14-17) with the positive ideal (show faith through action, 2:18-26). Faith in this context means the free acceptance of God's saving activity on behalf of human beings, and works refers to the obedient implementation of God's saving will in every aspect of life. The specific focus here is on
"speaking-completed-in-doing:' that is, the mouth/ears symbolic body zone (see also Jas 1:13, 19, 26; 2:3, 7, 12, 14-26; 3:1-12, 14; 4:3, 11-12, 13-17; 5:9, 12, 13-18). Since all zones are ex-pected to work harmoniously in a healthy and whole person, it is not enough to say nice things without also doing what-ever is necessary to bring the nice things to fruition. If good works do not implement faith, it is dead. Such faith is the exact opposite of the kind described by Paul as "faith work-ing through love" (Gal 5:6).

Situated in the cultural world of the Eastern Mediter-ranean, this discussion is hardly unusual. In this world, the ideal is more important than the real. Since honor depends on an external show of work, external perception, and pub-lic approval, what one says is valued more highly than what one does. This is because deeds often don't measure up to what one claims. Contemporary Bedouins agree that the son who responded politely to his father and said what the father wanted to hear, though he had no intention of going to work in his father’s vineyard, behaved more honorably than the other son who publicly insulted his father (Matt 21:28-30). The natives of Jesus’ time also knew the correct answer to his question in v. 30: Who did the will of the father? For them, however, the ideal is more important than the real; what one says is more important than what one does. This is why throughout Matthew's gospel Jesus insists that doing the right thing is equally important as knowing and saying it (7:21-23; 12:46-50).

Another cultural dimension of today’s verses is the argu-ment in v. 18. This is an agonistic society, prone to conflict. The sacred author does not hesitate to cast his instruction into the form of an argument. Some community members specialize in faith, others in works. The author sides with those who are perceived to focus on works alone. "I will demonstrate my faith to you;' which underlies my works. It is difficult to relate this reading to the gospel (Mark 8:27-35) where the topic is not so much about saying the right thing as it is about the high cultural value placed on se-crecy. While Peter does indeed say the right thing about him, Jesus’ advice not to tell anyone is normal and not part of a literary strategy ir.t Mark (the so-called Messianic secret). Mediterranean males in particular specialize in "making oneself out to be" characterized by this or that quality, etc. Since there is confusion in the populace, and all guesses (in-cluding Peter’s) about Jesus’ identity actually honor him, Jesus makes the appropriate cultural decision. Shh! Keep it quiet. Life becomes more difficult as people learn more about a person.

Given that the verses of today’s epistolary reading contain an inclusion (vv. 14, 18 = faith, without works), it could be possible to interpret Jesus' concern in the gospel as a caution that if the populace did indeed know his identity as Messiah, their interpretation (according to what Jesus adds) would be incorrect, and therefore the actions based on misunderstand-ing would be wrong-headed.

ALLELUIA (Gal 6:14)
May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

GOSPEL

This incident takes place during Jesus' final journey with the disciples (Mark 8:27 -10:45). They are entering into a long period in which Jesus tries to teach them who he is and what it means to be his follower. To-day's Gospel provides a summary statement of each of those points. Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" This question touches the central theme of Mark's account of the Gospel. While Peter's response, "You are the Christ," sounded very good, his understanding of what that implied had little in common with Jesus' own understanding of himself and his mis-sion. That is why Jesus ordered the disciples not to tell anyone about him: they didn't know what they were talking about!
Faced with their lack of understanding, Jesus had to shatter their expectations. Mark tells us that "he began" to teach them. That "beginning" would last through the rest of the Gospel. It was beyond their imagination that a Messiah would be rejected and killed. The job of a warrior Messiah was to route Israel's enemies, not suffer at their hands. The job of a priestly Messiah was to rebuild or renew the temple, not be rejected by all the religious leaders.

Jesus' retort to Peter's rebuke underlined the problem they had to deal with. Peter had pulled Jesus aside to plead against the fate he predicted. When Jesus called Peter "Satan," the effect was not to say he was a devil, but rather a tempter. The phrase "get behind me," pointed out that Jesus, not Peter, was the teacher. The place for a disciple was following the master's lead, not vice versa.

Jesus had discerned God's plan. He knew that his confrontation with evil would lead evil to lash out at him. Peter's perspective focused on safety and triumph. Jesus knew that his prophetic ministry would bring him suffering, but he also trusted that God would see him through. That was and still is a hard message to communicate.

+A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (8:27–35)

Jesus and his disciples set out
   for the villages of Caesarea Philippi.
Along the way he asked his disciples,
   "Who do people say that I am?"
They said in reply,
   "John the Baptist, others Elijah,
      still others one of the prophets."
And he asked them,
   "But who do you say that I am?"
Peter said to him in reply,
   "You are the Christ."
Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him.
He began to teach them
   that the Son of Man must suffer greatly
      and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes,
      and be killed, and rise after three days.
He spoke this openly.
Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.
At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples,
   rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan.
You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."
He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them,
   "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself,
      take up his cross, and follow me.
For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,
   but whoever loses his life for my sake
      and that of the GOSPEL will save it."

* [8:27–30] This episode is the turning point in Mark’s account of Jesus in his public ministry. Popular opinions concur in regarding him as a prophet. The disciples by contrast believe him to be the Messiah. Jesus acknowledges this identification but prohibits them from making his messianic office known to avoid confusing it with ambiguous contemporary ideas on the nature of that office. See further the notes on Mt 16:13–20.
Son of Man: an enigmatic title. It is used in Dn 7:13–14 as a symbol of “the saints of the Most High,” the faithful Israelites who receive the everlasting kingdom from the Ancient One (God). They are represented by a human figure that contrasts with the various beasts who represent the previous kingdoms of the earth. In the Jewish apocryphal books of 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra the “Son of Man” is not, as in Daniel, a group, but a unique figure of extraordinary spiritual endowments, who will be revealed as the one through whom the everlasting kingdom decreed by God will be established. It is possible though doubtful that this individualization of the Son of Man figure had been made in Jesus’ time, and therefore his use of the title in that sense is questionable. Of itself, this expression means simply a human being, or, indefinitely, someone, and there are evidences of this use in pre-Christian times. Its use in the New Testament is probably due to Jesus’ speaking of himself in that way, “a human being,” and the later church’s taking this in the sense of the Jewish apocrypha and applying it to him with that meaning. Rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes: the supreme council called the Sanhedrin was made up of seventy-one members of these three groups and presided over by the high priest. It exercised authority over the Jews in religious matters. See note on Mt 8:20.

This utterance of Jesus challenges all believers to authentic discipleship and total commitment to himself through self-renunciation and acceptance of the cross of suffering, even to the sacrifice of life itself. Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it…will save it: an expression of the ambivalence of life and its contrasting destiny. Life seen as mere self-centered earthly existence and lived in denial of Christ ends in destruction, but when lived in loyalty to Christ, despite earthly death, it arrives at fullness of life.

For my sake and that of the gospel: Mark here, as at Mk 10:29 equates Jesus with the gospel. In Jesus the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross of and grasped the meaning of the Gospel passage: "If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and come follow me” (Mark 8:34 and parallels). Shortly thereafter when his father summoned him before Bishop Guido of Assisi to renounce all claims to inheritance, Francis went even further and severed all ties with his father. "Until now I called you my father, but from now on I can say without reservation 'Our Father who art in heaven.'" What prompted the Italian Francis to interpret “denying oneself” as “denying one’s father and family?” The Mediterranean cultura! understanding of "self" as a communal rather individualistic identity lay at the foundation of Francis’ mindset.

TAKING UP THE CROSS
In the, Synoptic “triple statement tradition" (Mark in 8:34; Matt 16:24; Luke the 9:23) is constructed in this way:
A - follow me; B - deny oneself; B' - take up cross; A' - follow me.
Phrases A and A' are identical or synonymous. So too are phrases Band B'. Therefore, to take up one's cross means to deny oneself.
In the "double tradition" (Matt 10:34-38; Luke 14:25-27), taking up one's cross is associated with denial of one's fam-ily or kin. This cluster of matching passages informs the dis-cerning reader that taking up one's cross is equivalent to denying oneself (triple tradition) and to denying one's fam-ily or kin group (double tradition).
MEDITERRANEAN PERSONALITY

Crosscultural specialists underscore the contrast between Western and Mediterranean notions of personality and the self. In Western culture, people develop a keen sense of individualism, self-reliance, independence from others, and personal competence.

In the Middle East, people are urged to focus primarily on the family and forge their identity according to the family. Simon Peter is known as son of Jonah; Jesus is the carpenter's or Mary's son. Middle Easterners depend upon the family for everything. Indeed, the rule is "take care of family first." In modern Middle Eastern countries, a royal family exclusively hires relatives as government servants. People in these cultures always feel the need of forming a coalition to achieve anything. No one dares to dream of personal initiative.

From a social-psychological perspective, Western individualists care nothing about what others may say or think of them and their behavior. They march to the beat of a different drummer and sing "I gotta be me" or "I did it my way!" In the Mediterranean world, everyone needs to know, "Who do others say that I am?" (Mark 8:27). It is critically important to meet and measure up to the expectations of the group and never to frustrate or surpass those expectations. The stubborn and rebellious son will be killed (Deut 21:18-21).

A Western person who hears these biblical exhortations to take up one's cross and deny one's self generally initiates a personal and individual plan of asceticism and penitential behaviors. The Mediterranean person who hears these same exhortations, like Jesus' immediate disciples and his medieval disciple Francis of Assisi, will sever ties with blood relatives but seek to join another group. Mediterranean people simply cannot exist without a group of one kind or another.

By leaving his family and village and travelling from place to place (Mark 1:38), Jesus effectively rejected the honor ascribed to him by birth (Mark 6:1-6). His teaching and healing activities and other behavior deviated from what his culture might expect from someone of his origins. Summoning twelve followers (Mark 3:13-19), Jesus created a new fictive family group around himself. Then Jesus redefined the family by asserting, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mark 3:31-35). The questions Jesus poses to his followers in today's gospel (vv. 27-30) are an effort to learn his new honor status both among the general public and among his new kin. The answer (Messiah) reconfirms his status and authority to proclaim the reign of God.

Against this background, Jesus' exhortation to sever ties with other groups and become loyally attached to him and his group is powerfully impressive. Americans who belong to groups only so long as they are personally fulfilling will have to think twice.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

■ "Our experiences of evil and suffering ... can shake our faith .... It is then we must turn to the witnesses of faith: to Abraham ... , to the Virgin Mary who ... walked into the 'night of faith'1 in sharing the darkness of her son's suffering and death" (CCC, 164-165).

■ "The Son of God 'loved me and gave Himself up for me.'2_ By suffering for us he not only gave us an example so that we might follow in his footsteps, but he also opened up a way. If we follow this path, life and death are made holy and acquire a new meaning" (GS, 22).
TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

FIRST READING

The words that we hear in today's First Reading are neither the words of God nor of anyone who speaks for God. They are the words of the wicked, as seen by the author of the Book of Wisdom. This author, often called "the Sage," wrote in Greek shortly before the birth of Jesus. His purpose was to justify the God of Israel in the eyes of sophisticated Jewish students who were often tempted to devalue their Jewish beliefs in favor of secular culture. Aware and appreciative of the positive insights of Hellenistic culture, the Sage is nevertheless firm in his conviction that the true meaning of life will only be realized through the revelation of Israel's God.

As the wicked speak in today's reading, they reveal the ignorance that leads them astray. They attack the "just one" (v. 12) because he does not agree with their philosophy. They seek to revile and torture him in order to test whether he possesses the particular virtues they promote. "Gentleness" and "patience" (v. 19) were virtues celebrated by Greek ethical teachers such as Epictetus. These Hellenistic virtues are contrasted to the beliefs of the just one who trusts that "God will take care of him" (v. 20). Even though the just one's belief in God is ridiculed by the wicked, the reader knows that such a belief is true. The Sage uses the disdain of the wicked to make his point: one can study the philosophy of this world, but true wisdom is found by trusting in the power of God.

A reading from the Book of Wisdom (2:12, 17–20)

The wicked say:

Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us;
he sets himself against our doings,
reproaches us for transgressions of the law
and charges us with violations of our training.
Let us see whether his words be true;
let us find out what will happen to him.
For if the just one be the son of God, God will defend him
and deliver him from the hand of his foes.
With revilement and torture let us put the just one to the test
that we may have proof of his gentleness
and try his patience.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death;
for according to his own words, God will take care of him.

* [2:1–20] In this speech the wicked deny survival after death and indeed invite death by their evil deeds.
* [2:12] Law: the law of Moses; “training” has the same meaning.
In this section of Wisdom, the sacred author borrows images from Isaiah 52-66, specifically the fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13-53:12), to illustrate how the Just One will be tested. The test, of course, is to see if the Servant will remain faithful, and whether God indeed rescue him. Written about 50 B.C.E., this last book of the Christian Old Testament and today's verses in particular reflect the historical context quite well. Today's verses report the kinds of taunts apostate Israelites (those who abandoned the tradition) hurled at faithful Israelites who still awaited rescue from God, perhaps in the person of a Messiah. The verses are apparently intended to be associated with the first part of today's gospel in which Jesus reports his destiny for the second of three times in Mark's gospel (9:30-37).

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 54:3–4, 5, 6 and 8)

Psalm 54 clearly echoes the belief of the Sage: the truth of human existence can only be found in relationship with the true God. This brief psalm is an individual prayer for help. The reason for confidence is grounded in God's faithfulness to the one who prays. The psalmist proclaims, "God is my helper; the Lord sustains my life" (v. 6). The opening verse of the psalm parallels the name of God with God's might. This connection is more than poetry. In the theology of the psalms, the name of God is understood to be the actual power of God's presence. The psalmist is confident because he believes God is with him.

O God, by your name save me, and by your might defend my cause.  
O God, hear my prayer; hearken to the words of my mouth.  
For the haughty men have risen up against me, the ruthless seek my life;  
they set not God before their eyes.  
Behold, God is my helper; the Lord sustains my life.  
Freely will I offer you sacrifice; I will praise your name, O LORD, for its goodness.

* [Psalm 54] A lament in which the person under attack calls directly upon God for help (Ps 54:3–5). Refusing to despair, the psalmist hopes in God, who is active in history and just (Ps 54:6–7). The Psalm ends with a serene promise to return thanks (Ps 54:8–9).  
* [54:3] By your name: one is present in one's name, hence God as revealed to human beings.

The psalmist's very life is at stake, but he trusts in God who sustains life. The situation is urgent. Haughty and ruthless men seek his life, but the Lord sustains life. Grammatically, the Hebrew phrase describing God as one who sustains life indicates that that feature pertains to God's very essence: God is savior, rescuer, one who cares about and protects basic human existence. This sentiment characterizes the Old Testament reading and today's gospel.

SECOND READING

This reading from James contains a catalogue of virtues and vices. Purity, peace, gentleness, compliancy, and mercy all flow from true wisdom. Coveting, envy, fighting, and killing all result from the war that rages within our passions. James may have drawn the virtues offered here from the list composed by the Sage who authored today's First Reading (see Wisdom 7:21-28).  
The virtues are not only important in themselves. Although the list of virtues and vices describes what we should and should not do, James wants us to understand why we should do one and avoid the other. In the verses before the Lectionary selection (James 3: 13-15) James criticizes his readers because they are unwise and immature. Their stance toward the poor demonstrates that they have not yet replaced
the worldly evaluation of power and importance with God’s perspective. Following virtues and avoiding vices must flow from adopting that perspective. This requires humility (James 3:13). The Sage of the Book of Wisdom would fully agree. So will Jesus in the Gospel.

A reading from the Letter of Saint James (3:16–4:3)

Beloved:
Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist,
    there is disorder and every foul practice.
But the wisdom from above is first of all pure,
    then peaceable, gentle, compliant,
    full of mercy and good fruits,
    without inconstancy or insincerity.
And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace
    for those who cultivate peace.
Where do the wars
    and where do the conflicts among you come from?
Is it not from your passions
    that make war within your members?
You covet but do not possess.
You kill and envy but you cannot obtain;
    you fight and wage war.
You do not possess because you do not ask.
You ask but do not receive,
    because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

* [3:13–18] This discussion of true wisdom is related to the previous reflection on the role of the teacher as one who is in control of his speech. The qualities of the wise man endowed from above are detailed (Jas 3:17–18; cf. Gal 5:22–23), in contrast to the qualities of earthbound wisdom (Jas 3:14–16; cf. 2 Cor 12:20).
* [4:1–12] The concern here is with the origin of conflicts in the Christian community. These are occasioned by love of the world, which means enmity with God (4). Further, the conflicts are bound up with failure to pray properly (cf. Mt 7:7–11; Jn 14:13; 15:7; 16:23), that is, not asking God at all or using God’s kindness only for one’s pleasure (Jas 4:2–3). In contrast, the proper dispositions are submission to God, repentance, humility, and resistance to evil (Jas 4:7–10).
* [4:1–3] Passions: the Greek word here (literally, “pleasures”) does not indicate that pleasure is evil. Rather, as the text points out (Jas 4:2–3), it is the manner in which one deals with needs and desires that determines good or bad. The motivation for any action can be wrong, especially if one does not pray properly but seeks only selfish enjoyment (Jas 4:3).

Today the architects of the lectionary combine elements from the fourth exhortation in this letter (3:1–18) with the negative statement from the fifth exhortation (4:1-4). Avoid jealousy and selfish ambition (negative), but act rather with the pure, peaceful wisdom from above (positive; vv. 16-18). Do not pursue selfish desire which leads to enmity with fellow human beings and with God (negative; 4:1-4). These combined verses also join two of three interrelated dimensions of human life that the sacred author has in mind throughout this letter: the social (4:1-4) and the cosmic (3:14-18; the third dimension is the personal). Each of these dimensions of life is permeated with the same problem: a contrast and conflict between attitudes, values, actions, and agents representing wholeness, unity, and purity on the
one hand, with attitudes, values, actions, and agents representing incompleteness, disunity, and pollution on the other. Personal attitudes such as jealousy and selfish ambition spawn disorder and every foul practice. The Greek word translated here as jealousy is rendered as zeal in John 2:17: "Zeal for your house will consume me." A citation from Ps 69:9 describes a positive quality: defensive protection of God's honor and reputation. Indeed, in Greek literature such "good" jealousy characterizes "the haves" who are concerned to defend their possessions: family, property, or reputation. But here in Jas 3:14, 16 (also in Acts 5:17; 7:9; 13:45; Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 3:3; 13:4; 2 Car 12:20; Gal 5:20) that same Greek word has a negative meaning: evil, hostile action toward others, an attack on others. These attitudes (jealousy, selfish ambition) represent earthly, unspiritual, demonic "wisdom." The preferable attitudes derive from wisdom from above which is pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. The two contending wisdoms, devilish and divine (from above), derive from the cosmic dimension. Believers should embrace the divine and eschew devilish wisdom. The social consequence of these opposed sources and forms of wisdom is two contrasting societies: an antagonistic and divided society animated by devilish wisdom from below (described in 4:1-4), and a peaceful and integral so-ciety animated by divine wisdom from above (described in 4:7-10). Ultimately it is the devil (4:4-10) and an earthly, unspiritual, devilish wisdom from below (3:14-16) that pervade society (1:27). This inspires double-mindedness, duplicity, doubt, social discrimination, division, discord, disloyalty to God, pollution, and death. In contrast, God and wisdom from above are the sources of purity, peace, integrity, and life (3:17-18; 4:4-10). Simultaneous allegiance to these alterna-tive realms fragments and polarizes the community.

Today's gospel (Mark 9:30-37) reports the disciples debating among themselves "who is the greatest:' On the face of it, this sounds like something very appropriate in a society where honor is the core value, but in the zero-sum game that life is in an honor-driven culture, this kind of concern is divisive and destructive. The author of James spells out in greater detail why this is so. Western culture, which encourages individuals to have "vanity walls" (a place to display all one's achievements), may find such a concern trivial. What analogous threat to community exists in Western contexts, and how would one defend against it?

**ALLELUIA (cf. 2 Thes 2:14)**

God has called us through the GOSPEL to possess the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**GOSPEL**

Today's Gospel presents us with the second of three Passion predictions in Mark’s narrative. These predictions attempt to lead the disciples and the readers of the Gospel to reverse popular cultural con-victions, to think as God does and not as humans do (see Mark 8:33). Mark follows each of the predictions with a teaching of Jesus that centers on an understanding which must be reevaluated. In today’s Gospel, Jesus teaches that we must redefine greatness.

We are important not when we place ourselves first, but when we assume the last place. Greatness is not found in an exalted position but in service. Contrary to the assumptions of our society, humility is true power. Humility is not negating ourselves, but immersing ourselves in the truth that God has revealed. Jesus enacts a parable by embracing a child. In the ancient world, children were those without legal standing and societal influence. Jesus shows us that when we identify with those who are marginalized and vul-nerable, we are glorified in God’s sight. This is how we adopt the divine per-spective that both the Sage of Wisdom and the author of James promote. When we humbly embrace the last place, we are standing in Christ’s place.
Jesus and his disciples left from there and began a journey through Galilee, but he did not wish anyone to know about it.

He was teaching his disciples and telling them,

“The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death the Son of Man will rise.“

But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him.

They came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”

But they remained silent.

They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest.

Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them,

“If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.”

Taking a child, he placed it in the their midst, and putting his arms around it, he said to them,

“Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.“

* [9:33–37] Mark probably intends this incident and the sayings that follow as commentary on the disciples’ lack of understanding (Mk 9:32). Their role in Jesus’ work is one of service, especially to the poor and lowly. Children were the symbol Jesus used for the anawim, the poor in spirit, the lowly in the Christian community.

The scene of Jesus embracing a child, surrounded by his dis-ciples who have just been squabbling over the appropriate pecking order of honor within their group, has been repre-sented in art many times. Art, as we know, often reflects the culture of the artist much more than the cultural setting of the subject. At other times, art idealizes reality.

CHILDREN

In antiquity, childhood was a time of terror. Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30 percent of live births. Sixty per-cent were dead by the age of sixteen. These figures reflect not only the ravages of unconquered diseases but also the out-comes of poor hygiene.

Moreover, while Western cultures tend to place children first and risk everything to save the child above all, ancient Middle Eastern cultures would place the child last. The me-dieval Mediterranean theologian Thomas Aquinas t-ught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child. When a famine came upon the land, children would be fed last, after the adults. Such priorities are still common in many non-Western cultures.

Within the family and the community, the child had next to no status. A minor child was considered equal to a slave. Only after reaching maturity did a child become a free person with rights to inherit the family estate. When Jesus compares his adult compatriots to children who do not know how to re-pond to cultural cues (Matt 11:16-19), he effectively insults them.

Proverbs and Sirach exhort fathers to punish sons phy-sically because they are considered basically evil and need strong correction if the father does not want to suffer neglect and abuse later in life (Prov 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17, 19; Sir 30:1-13).

This does not mean that children were not loved or appre-ciated. Mediterranean discipline fuses love with violence as parents explain: “We only do this because we love them.” Even God disciplines “him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Prov 3:11-12).
Children are loved because they provide "social security" for parents. Obviously if they survive to adulthood, they also assure family continuity. Children are so greatly desired in the family that a wife will never be fully accepted into the patriarchal family setting until she bears a child, preferably a son. The emotional bond between that son and his mother is the strongest of all ties in the typical Mediterranean family.

Against this background, Jesus' statements in today's gospel take on fresh meaning. In verses 30-32, Jesus for the second time speaks to his disciples of impending betrayal, death, and return to life. Mark notes that they did not understand, and very likely they could not understand the combination of all these elements in a single statement.

There is no difficulty understanding betrayal leading to death. In the Mediterranean world, one would try to thwart such a plan but if that were impossible, the honorable person would strive to die in manly fashion. Rising to new life muddies the picture. Yet the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus for enlightenment.

HONOR IN A FACTION

Since Jesus' announcement has to do with his honor, it is no surprise that the disciples engage in a squabble over their honor in his group. The surprise again is Jesus' response to their squabble. Jesus' question is superfluous. No one whispers in this culture, and squabbles over honor would be quite vociferous. To pose the question bluntly as Jesus does is his first move in shaming the disciples. But Jesus doesn't stop there. Asking the disciples to extend hospitality ("to welcome a child, a creature of low status in their culture, Jesus further shames these grown men. Hospitality is extended to complete strangers to guarantee safe transit in unfamiliar and hostile territory. To extend hospitality to children ("to the welcome them") would be a laugh to everyone else in the culture. Further, though guests are not expected to reciprocate hospitality, they are expected to broadcast the kindness of the host far and wide, thus extending his honorable reputation. Unpredictable children couldn't be counted upon to do that so why bother?

Jesus teaches that life is full of surprises. True honor can be found in the most unlikely places.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Let us never forget that authentic power is service, and that the Pope too, when exercising power, must enter ever more fully into that service which has its radiant culmination on the Cross. His open arms to protect all of God's people and embrace with tender affection the whole of humanity, especially the poorest, the weakest, the least important, those whom Matthew lists in the final judgment on love: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison (cf. Matthew 25:31-46)"
  (Pope Francis, Homily for the Inauguration of his Pontificate).
- "Unless humility precede, accompany, and follow every good action which we perform, being at once the object which we keep before our eyes, the support to which we cling, and the monitor by which we are restrained, pride wrests wholly from our hand any good work on which we are congratulating ourselves" (St. Augustine, Letter 118, 22).
- "Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real" (Thomas Merton, No Man Is an Island).
FIRST READING

Moses seems to be overwhelmed by the responsibilities of leading the people and calls upon God for help. God takes some of the spirit that was on Moses and bestows it on seventy elders who will assist him. The ritual is to take place at the meeting tent outside the camp. Two of the seventy elders, Eldad and Medad, do not attend the ritual but remain in the camp. Yet, they too receive the spirit and prophesy. Joshua tells Moses to stop them since they were not at the tent ritual, thus are not officially appointed elders. Moses refuses, allowing God to dispense the spirit on whomever he desires. Moses has learned that God knows better than we do who has the gifts to assist in building up the community. Like Joshua, some want God to act in an orderly matter, going through the right channels. But God's spirit moves where it wills. Our task is to attune ourselves to the presence of God's spirit wherever and whenever it is experienced.

A reading from the Book of Numbers (11:25–29)

The Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses. Taking some of the spirit that was on Moses, the Lord bestowed it on the seventy elders; and as the spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied. Now two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, were not in the gathering but had been left in the camp. They too had been on the list, but had not gone out to the tent; yet the spirit came to rest on them also, and they prophesied in the camp. So, when a young man quickly told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp,” Joshua, son of Nun, who from his youth had been Moses’ aide, said, “Moses, my lord, stop them.” But Moses answered him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!”

* [11:25] They prophesied: in the sense, not of foretelling the future, but of speaking in enraptured enthusiasm. Such manifestations are mentioned in the early days of Hebrew prophecy (1 Sm 10:10–12; 19:20–21; Jl 3:1) and in the first years of the Church (Acts 2:6–11, 17; 19:6; 1 Cor 12–14).

These verses describe the prophetic ecstatic trance that results from receiving the spirit, but they also report a concern about institutional control of prophecy. Yet since these people are not prophets in the strict sense but simply community leaders, it is clear that this is a once-for-all experience. The seventy received a share of Moses’ spirit, hence these leaders were in a sense subordinate to Moses. The two men outside the camp received the spirit independently of Moses. They represent nonprofessional or "unofficial" prophecy. Joshua reflects those who would subject ecstatic trance to institutional control. He urged Moses to stop those two. Moses' reply is ambiguous. The Hebrew word can be translated
jealous (Num 5:14, 30) or zealous (Num 25:11). The jealousy would pertain to the two "independent" prophets, zeal would of course pertain to safeguarding Moses' authority. Yet the further comment by Moses indicates that he would not at all want to restrict or control the power of God's energizing spirit. The congregation will benefit no matter who receives the spirit. It ought not be restricted to an elite group or a privileged few. As gift of God, the spirit should encounter no boundaries, limitations, or obstacles. Community leadership which does not heed prophetic insight can very likely lose its way and become misguided. The point of association between this reading and the gospel (Mark 9:38, 45, 47-48) is obvious.

Psalm 19 celebrates God by focusing on two images that guide us in living faithfully to him. The first seven verses are a hymn to the sun which, as an image of God, provides light, warmth, and life to all of creation. Creation responds by gloriously praising God for this wondrous gift. God continues to guide creation by revealing the divine name and by giving the Law or Torah to the people. Verses 8-12 sing the praises of God's Law. Like the sun, the Law gives light, teaching us how to live in fidelity to God. The Law is perfect and trustworthy, dispensing wisdom to all, even the simple. The Law is just and God's ordinances are true. The last few verses address the possibility that even though we strive to live faithfully according to the Law, we might not be aware of our own weaknesses. If the Law expresses God's desires and designs for us, then all should pray with the psalmist to discover and adhere to the "precepts of the Lord" which "give joy to the heart."

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 19:8, 10, 12–13, 14)

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.
The law of the L ORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul;
the decree of the L ORD is trustworthy,
giving wisdom to the simple.
The fear of the L ORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the L ORD are true,
all of them just.
Though your servant is careful of them,
very diligent in keeping them,
Yet who can detect failings?
Cleanse me from my unknown faults!
From wanton sin especially, restrain your servant;
let it not rule over me.
Then shall I be blameless and innocent
of serious sin.

The Law in these verses represents all of Israel's directives and traditions as YHWH's chosen people. It is perfect, refreshes the soul, is trustworthy, bestows wisdom, is pure, endures forever, is true and just. Standing in the brilliant light of the Law, it becomes easier to notice one's shortcomings, unknown faults. Worse yet would be presumptuous (wanton) sins. The psalmist begs for protection against such.

SECOND READING
James presents one of the strongest condemnations of the rich in the New Testament. Like other prophets before him, James accuses the rich of injustices against workers who have toiled but have not been justly compensated. He charges that the rich have become so by cheating and taking advantage of workers whose rights and dignity they consistently violate. Thus, the wealthy do not live faithfully according to God's wisdom. Rather, they live to please and satisfy only themselves. James warns the rich that God has heard the cry of the abused workers. Like other prophets, James guarantees God will right injustice, if not in this life, then definitely in the next.

A reading from the Letter of Saint James (5:1–6)
Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like a fire. You have stored up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter. You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous one; he offers you no resistance.

* [5:1–6] Continuing with the theme of the transitory character of life on earth, the author points out the impending ruin of the godless. He denounces the unjust rich, whose victims cry to heaven for judgment on their exploiters (Jas 5:4–6). The decay and corrosion of the costly garments and metals, which symbolize wealth, prove them worthless and portend the destruction of their possessors (Jas 5:2–3).

* [5:6] The author does not have in mind any specific crime in his readers’ communities but rather echoes the Old Testament theme of the harsh oppression of the righteous poor (see Prv 1:11; Wis 2:10, 12, 20).

This final reading from James reports a negative behavior, namely, oppression of laborers and the just by the rich (5:1-6). The balancing, positive advice is: wait patiently for the Lord’s coming and be steadfast (5:7-11). These are clearly behaviors in the social dimension that can work for ill or good. Modern Western readers whose focal social institution is economics, especially as formulated and developed by Karl Marx and Adam Smith, must realize that it is anachronistic and disrespectful to impose these ideas on today's verse. "Rich" in the Bible is not primarily an indicator of economic standing. It can have many meanings depending on context, but basically it designates people who belong to the urban elite, who hold high status accompanied by power, influence, and great wealth. Notice that status brings power and wealth, quite the opposite from the West in which wealth brings status and power. In the biblical world, status (deriving primarily from birth) was more important than money. Toll collectors might have had money, but they did not have status. As today's reading indicates (fields, harvesting, fattening, and slaughter, vv. 4, 5), owning land and cattle gave a person high status in antiquity and, of course, brought in wealth. The reference to wealth that
has rotted (v. 2) could be a reference to poor crops, poor harvest, or stored grain that has indeed rotted. Status requires "conspicuous consumption" so that everyone will know that person is wealthy. Status also requires associating with others of like status. To accomplish this, one needs resources routinely gained by withholding just wages from those who make the elite life possible (see Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14). In addition, status is signaled by attire, another "expense" of keeping others aware of one's status (see Matt 6:9; Acts 20:33).

But the wealth that status helps to accumulate easily builds up to surplus, and surplus entails a new obligation: to become a patron, that is, to distribute surplus wealth to people in need who become clients. These clients in turn would proclaim the benevolence of the benefactor, thereby increasing his reputation and adding to real "wealth;" namely, honor and status. If the "rich" do not pay wages due, then clearly they also refuse to be patrons (the problem in Luke 12:15-21). Shameful in their culture, such persons are damnable in God's eyes. The final verse (6) may be an allusion to Sir 34:22: "He slays his neighbor who deprives him of his living; he sheds blood who denies the laborer his wages;"

Scholars do not think these verses reflect an actual situation in the community but rather are a generic warning of the challenges accompanying high status, known to one and all but often neglected. There is a very tenuous connection (perhaps intended by the architects of the lectionary) between this reading from James and today's gospel (Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48): the word "fire;" A stronger relationship is Jesus' remark: "Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ . . . will surely not lose his reward." The reading from James sharpens the focus. In our society where donations to charity are tax-deductible, and aid to the poor and needy can be shared in the most anonymous and antiseptic fashion, what insights do today's readings offer?

ALLELUIA (cf. Jn 17:17b, 17a)
Your word, O Lord, is truth; consecrate us in the truth.

GOSPEL

Part of what prevents humans from living faithfully according to God's desires is our consistent temptation to want things our way, to control life. This temptation is the root of all sinfulness and leads to prejudice, blindness, lack of openness, insincerity, lack of compassion and understanding, injustice, and many other ills. Jesus addresses these issues in today's reading from the Gospel.

Jesus reprimands John for desiring to control who can or cannot act compassionately toward others. Because a particular person is not one of Jesus' followers, John wants him prevented from acting in Jesus' name. Like Moses in the First Reading, Jesus does not stop, but rather welcomes any and all who would live and act in accordance to God's wishes and designs. Such a manifestation of faithful living expressed in compassionate concern for the other should be welcomed and encouraged. Rather than controlling, we should be attentive to the surprising ways in which God directs others to act, even if different from our way of acting.

In this context, the passage about personal sin and causing others to sin hits the mark. We lead ourselves and others to sin when we refuse to live faithfully according to God's wisdom and precepts. Our desire to control persons and things prevents us from allowing God to be God.

Once we place our wisdom and precepts above God's, we become attuned only to ourselves, missing completely what God is saying through other people, places, and things. Faithful living no longer centers on God and others, but focuses solely on self, leading to unfaithful living. This is what Jesus condemns in today's reading from the Gospel.
A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (9:38–43, 45, 47–48)

At that time, John said to Jesus,

“Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name,
and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.”

Jesus replied, “Do not prevent him.

There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name
who can at the same time speak ill of me.

For whoever is not against us is for us.

Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink
because you belong to Christ,
amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,
it would be better for him if a great millstone
were put around his neck
and he were thrown into the sea.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.
It is better for you to enter into life maimed
than with two hands to go into Gehenna,
into the unquenchable fire.

And if your foot causes you to sin, cut if off.
It is better for you to enter into life crippled
than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna.

And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.
Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye
than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna,
where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ ”

* [9:38–41] Jesus warns against jealousy and intolerance toward others, such as exorcists who do not follow us. The saying in Mk 9:40 is a broad principle of the divine tolerance. Even the smallest courtesies shown to those who teach in Jesus’ name do not go unrewarded.

* [9:43, 45, 47] Gehenna: * [Mt 5:22] Anger is the motive behind murder, as the insulting epithets are steps that may lead to it. They, as well as the deed, are all forbidden. Raqa: an Aramaic word rēqā' or rēqâ probably meaning “imbecile,” “blockhead,” a term of abuse. The ascending order of punishment, judgment (by a local council?), trial before the Sanhedrin, condemnation to Gehenna, points to a higher degree of seriousness in each of the offenses. Sanhedrin: the highest judicial body of Judaism. Gehenna: in Hebrew gê-hinnôm, “Valley of Hinnom,” or gê ben-hinnôm, “Valley of the son of Hinnom,” southwest of Jerusalem, the center of an idolatrous cult during the monarchy in which children were offered in sacrifice (see 2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 7:31). In Jos 18:16 (Septuagint, Codex Vaticanus) the Hebrew is transliterated into Greek as gaienna, which appears in the New Testament as geenna. The concept of punishment of sinners by fire either after death or after the final judgment is found in Jewish apocalyptic literature (e.g., Enoch 90:26) but the name geenna is first given to the place of punishment in the New Testament.

* [9:44, 46] These verses, lacking in some important early manuscripts, are here omitted as scribal additions. They simply repeat Mk 9:48 itself a modified citation of Is 66:24.
Experts agree that Mediterranean culture is group centered. A pivotal Virtue in such societies is loyalty to the group and its leader. The Greek and Hebrew word ordinarily translated as 'faith' should more appropriately be translated "loyalty."

This leads today's reading even though the word faith or loyalty is not explicitly used.

GROUP LOYALTY
Groups gather around a leader, and group members pledge and display their loyalty to that leader. The disciples of Jesus want to safeguard the distinct identity and prerogatives of their group. Thus, they do not deny that a nonmember of their group can cast out demons, but if he uses Jesus' name he should join the group and pledge loyalty to its leader. If not, he ought to stop using Jesus' name. That is the normative perspective in a group-centered society.

Jesus broadens the notion of loyalty. In his judgment, there is no reason why people not of his group cannot be loyal to him and act in his name. "Whoever is not against us is for us" (v. 40). (The very use of "us" again reflects the group focus.)

IMPORTANCE OF LOYALTY
In recent years, "kiss and tell" books have become an American political fashion. Friends of a president who served by appointment on his administration feel perfectly free to tell all sorts of stories when their appointment is completed. In the American cultural value system, loyalty is provisional and pragmatic.

The remaining verses of today's gospel passage display a radically different idea of loyalty in the Mediterranean world. The people whose loyalty is of concern to Jesus are the "little ones" who believe in (are loyal to) him (v. 42). Thus, the "little ones" are not children but rather adult followers of Jesus whom he sometimes calls children (Mark 10:24; cf. Matt 11:25).

Jesus' concern about those who cause his "little ones" to "sin" is a concern about those who rupture the faithfulness or loyalty of those little ones to him. Jesus considers unshaken loyalty to him so important that anyone who might disrupt it deserves capital punishment (being drowned with a stone tied around one's neck).

The comments of Jesus about sources of disruption to personal loyalty reflect first-century Mediterranean psychology, which is not at all introspective but rather based on values attributed to external dimensions of human life.

From the beginning to the end of the Bible, it is clear that the Hebrews viewed human beings as consisting of three interlocking zones symbolized by parts of the body. Hands and feet symbolize purposeful activity. If one's activity (hand or foot) causes one to stumble during tests of loyalty, one must put an end to such behavior.

Eyes are invariably paired with the heart in the Bible to symbolize the zone of emotion-fused thought, reflective consideration of proper courses of action. If the eye, the organ that feeds information to the heart, is unreliable in tests of loyalty, one must take serious action to halt the damage.

Interpreters incline toward giving these verses figurative rather than literal meaning. Surely Jesus did not intend to gather a band of lame and blind followers around himself. While this view has merit, one should not forget that even today in the Middle East physical punishment of this sort is still meted out to convicted criminals.

Jesus' point is that no matter how painful, any effort to in-sure loyalty to him in this life is far less painful than the punishment for disloyalty to be administered in the world to come.

The seriousness of Jesus' exhortation becomes painfully apparent in the accounts of his crucifixion and death. Judean authorities who conspired to have Jesus put to death stand by the cross and mock him, saying: "He rescued others but he cannot rescue himself. If he comes down from the cross now, we will place our loyalty and faithfulness in him" (see Mark 15:32; Matt 27:42).

Mediterranean loyalty means "faithfulness no matter what." It challenges the conditional loyalty proposed by the authorities to Jesus on the cross and the American idea of pragmatic loyalty. What does loyalty mean to you?
CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "[T]he life of holiness ... constitutes the simplest and most attractive way to perceive at once the beauty of truth, the liberating force of God's love, and the value of unconditional fidelity to all the demands of the Lord's law" (JS, 107).
- "In her teaching the Church constantly returns to this relationship be-tween charity and justice ... The Council Fathers strongly recommended that . .. 'what is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity'' (CSDC, 184 ).
- "Love for the poor is incompatible with immoderate love of riches or their selfish use" (CCC, 2445).
- "Whoever contributes to the development of the human community... is also contributing in no small way to the community of the church" (GS, 44).
TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

There are two creation accounts in Genesis. This reading comes from the second or older creation account. Here a human being, the heart of creation, is created first, and then everything else is created for the good of the human. The passage begins with God expressing the insight that it is not good for the man to be alone. God goes about finding a suitable partner for him by creating animals. When none prove to be suitable partners, the first human being is put to sleep and God creates another human being from the rib of the first. When the man sees the woman, two significant truths are expressed about the meaning of being human. First, the truth of difference, namely man is different from woman. Second, the truth of oneness, namely that each has a desire to be one with the other. This desire for unity amid differences is the heart of human community. God created us for community; we need one other. Marriage is the most explicit expression of this unity, “the two of them become one flesh.” But desire for unity with God and others is true for all humans, even when they do not marry.

A reading from the Book of Genesis (2:18–24)

The LORD God said: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.”

So the LORD God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all wild animals; but none proved to be the suitable partner for the man.

So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man.

When he brought her to the man, the man said: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of ‘her man’ this one has been taken.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh.
Helper suited to him: lit., “a helper in accord with him.” “Helper” need not imply subordination, for God is called a helper (Dt 33:7; Ps 46:2). The language suggests a profound affinity between the man and the woman and a relationship that is supportive and nurturing.

The man recognizes an affinity with the woman God has brought him. Unlike the animals who were made from the ground, she is made from his very self. There is a play on the similar-sounding Hebrew words ‘ishsha (“woman,” “wife”) and ‘ish (“man,” “husband”).

One body: lit., “one flesh.” The covenant of marriage establishes kinship bonds of the first rank between the partners.

This familiar reading from the Yahwist reports God creating a fitting partner for the first human creature, the man. True to form, the Yahwist puts a pun in the man’s mouth when he says "this one shall be called 'ishshah' [woman],/ for out of 'her ish' [man] this one has been taken:' The next verse, Genesis 2:24, requires some cultural background for proper understanding. For millennia in the Middle East, the ideal marriage partner has been one's father's brother's daughter. See the stories of the Patriarchs, e.g., the story of how and from where Isaac's wife was selected in Genesis 24. In general, the men never leave the patriarchal household; they will always live with their father. Women, in contrast, must always move into their husband’s household, which will be with his father. In a superficial reading Genesis 2:24 seems to contradict this practice: the man leaves father and mother and clings to his wife.

One needs to understand how families lived and continue to live in traditional settings in the Middle East. The extended family still remains the focal institution. Often it comprises part of a village or even an entire village. Male members dominate such family settings. The family may occupy a cluster of dwellings all under the leadership of the patriarch. One’s father’s brother will be living within this cluster of dwellings, hence so too will the ideal marriage partner be living there. In this context, an unmarried male can indeed leave the actual home of his father in which he has been living and move into his own dwelling with his father’s brother's daughter living in the same complex. Here in this house he will cling to his wife and become one flesh without really leaving the wider family community (village?) over which the patriarch rules. The wife, too, enters the groom's father's domain without actually living under the same roof with her father-in-law. In today's gospel (Mark 10:2-16), Mark's Jesus cites Genesis 2:24 and reflects upon it (see John J.' Pilch, The Cultural World of Jesus Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B [College-ville: The Liturgical Press, 1996] 145-7).

Wisdom literature affirms that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This pilgrimage psalm begins with a blessing on all those who fear the Lord. Most likely, the blessing would have been given as pilgrims began their return home from pilgrimage. Fear is understood as awe and reverence of the gracious and mighty deeds the Lord has done. Those who reverence the Lord are blessed and favored by him. The best manifestation of God’s blessing in this life is the harmony, peace, and fruitfulness of family life, where abundance of children is present.

From the family, blessings such as peace are extended to the tribe and to all of Israel. Community has its source in God and becomes the source of personal, familial, and national strength and blessing.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 128:1–2, 3, 4–5, 6)

May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.
Blessed are you who fear the LORD,
who walk in his ways!
For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork;
blessed shall you be, and favored.
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine
in the recesses of your home;
your children like olive plants
around your table.
Behold, thus is the man blessed
who fears the LORD.
The LORD bless you from Zion:
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.
May you see your children’s children.
Peace be upon Israel!

* [Psalm 128] A statement that the ever-reliable God will bless the reverent (Ps 128:1). God’s blessing is concrete: satisfaction and prosperity, a fertile spouse and abundant children (Ps 128:2–4). The perspective is that of the adult male, ordinarily the ruler and representative of the household to the community. The last verses extend the blessing to all the people for generations to come (Ps 128:5–6).

This personalized psalm begins with a macarism, often called a beatitude. Macarisms report approved cultural values along with the rewards for upholding the value. Since the core cultural value in the ancient Middle East is honor, the opening verse could be translated: "Truly honorable are you who fear the Lord:' The psalm acclaims the joy such an honorable person will experience in labor, in the family setting, and indeed in all of Israel. It is a pilgrimage psalm sung for those departing Jerusalem, hence it functions as a blessing to accompany pilgrims on their journey home.

SECOND READING

This Sunday begins a series of readings from the letter to the Hebrews. Today’s selection focuses on the affirmation that God, in Jesus, became one of us. As a human being, Jesus entered into solidarity with all humanity in every way save sin. This was the only way to communicate how much God desired to be with us and to repair the ruptured relationship that had been caused by humans.
The rupture is ultimately repaired through the suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. Not only was Jesus willing to empty himself of divinity, but he was also willing to give all as a human being, even to empty himself by suffering and dying, so all could live once more in communion with God. This restoration to communion with God affirms once again God’s intention for all humanity to be one with him through our life in community with others. Because all have God as their origin, Jesus, by becoming one of us, restores the familial relationship between us and God, not ashamed to identify with us as brothers and sisters.

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (2:9–11)
Brothers and sisters:
He “for a little while” was made “lower than the angels,”
that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.
For it was fitting that he, for whom and through whom all things exist,
in bringing many children to glory,
should make the leader to their salvation perfect through suffering.
He who consecrates and those who are being consecrated
all have one origin.
Therefore, he is not ashamed to call them “brothers.”
The humanity and the suffering of Jesus do not constitute a valid reason for relinquishing the Christian faith. Ps 8:5–6 is also applied to Jesus in 1 Cor 15:27; Eph 1:22; and probably 1 Pt 3:22. This christological interpretation, therefore, probably reflects a common early Christian tradition, which may have originated in the expression the son of man (Heb 2:6). The psalm contrasts God’s greatness with man’s relative insignificance but also stresses the superiority of man to the rest of creation, of which he is lord. Hebrews applies this christologically: Jesus lived a truly human existence, lower than the angels, in the days of his earthly life, particularly in his suffering and death; now, crowned with glory and honor, he is raised above all creation. The author considers all things as already subject to him because of his exaltation (Heb 2:8–9), though we do not see this yet. The reference to Jesus as leader (Heb 2:10) sounds the first note of an important leitmotif in Hebrews: the journey of the people of God to the sabbath rest (Heb 4:9), the heavenly sanctuary, following Jesus, their “forerunner” (Heb 6:20). It was fitting that God should make him perfect through suffering, consecrated by obedient suffering. Because he is perfected as high priest, Jesus is then able to consecrate his people (Heb 2:11); access to God is made possible by each of these two consecrations. If Jesus is able to help human beings, it is because he has become one of us; we are his “brothers.” The author then cites three Old Testament texts as proofs of this unity between ourselves and the Son. Ps 22:22 is interpreted so as to make Jesus the singer of this lament, which ends with joyful praise of the Lord in the assembly of “brothers.” The other two texts are from Is 8:17, 18. The first of these seems intended to display in Jesus an example of the trust in God that his followers should emulate. The second curiously calls these followers “children”; probably this is to be understood to mean children of Adam, but the point is our solidarity with Jesus. By sharing human nature, including the ban of death, Jesus broke the power of the devil over death (Heb 2:4); the author shares the view of Hellenistic Judaism that death was not intended by God and that it had been introduced into the world by the devil. The fear of death (Heb 2:15) is a religious fear based on the false conception that death marks the end of a person’s relations with God (cf. Ps 115:17–18; Is 38:18). Jesus deliberately allied himself with the descendants of Abraham (Heb 2:16) in order to be a merciful and faithful high priest. This is the first appearance of the central theme of Hebrews, Jesus the great high priest expiating the sins of the people (Heb 2:17), as one who experienced the same tests as they (Heb 2:18).

A central theme of most of Hebrews is the priestly act by which Jesus effected “purification from sins” (1:3, revised NAB). Once again the architects of the lectionary have exercised creative surgery in preparing this reading for today’s liturgy. First, they have mixed two segments of this Scripture. Verse 9 concludes the sacred author’s interpretation of Ps 8:4-6 which began in Heb 2:6. Verse 10 begins a segment (2:10-18) that reflects upon high priestly perfection through suffering. Torn from context and recombined to form today’s reading, these verses remain intelligible, but one can only lament for the sacred author who wrote an integral composition with diligence and care.

In v. 9, the sacred author has creatively reinterpreted Psalm 8 which said that human beings are “a little bit” beneath the divine and has applied it to Jesus saying that “for a little while” Jesus shared fully (not just a little bit) in the human condition, including human suffering and death. But this temporary subjection was following by a “crowning with glory and honor” (a phrase from v. 9 curiously omitted from today’s reading!). The savior’s mission culminates in his death and exaltation, which leads naturally into the next verses explaining how the savior led many children to glory.

It was God’s will that Jesus, as leader of many children to glory, should accomplish this through suffering, which makes possible life in the new covenant. The Greek word translated as "leader" has many meanings in Greek literature, but here is best interpreted as a "guide" along a path to heaven (a
no-tion common in Greek, Israelite, and Gnostic sources). Through his suffering, Jesus the guide becomes the perfect model of obedience, and the perfect intercessor who is merciful and faithful. Finally, since Jesus and his followers (the one who consecrates and those who are consecrated) have one origin, God, whose saving plan is directed to all human beings with whom Jesus is in solidarity by reason of his humanity, Jesus is not ashamed to call fellow humans brothers and sisters. This kinship terminology was very common outside the Gospels (e.g., Rom 1:13; 8:12, 29; Acts 1:15; 20:23; 11:1) perhaps because Jesus called his disciples brothers (see Matt 28:10; John 20:17).

Today's gospel (Mark 10:2-16) illustrates the depth of Jesus' humanity. He became incarnate in the ancient Mediterranean world, specifically in Israelite society. We hear him reflecting upon and refining the possibility of divorce in that tradition. We also see him upholding the role of children in that culture as "snoops" and gossip purveyors who must have the freedom to explore all "suspicious" adult behaviors so that they might report back to their families whether these are potentially threatening to family security and integrity. The sacred author of Hebrews reminds us that God honored Jesus for his good life, and God through Jesus will lead Jesus' "brothers and sisters" to the same honor. What more could one possibly want in life?

**ALLELUIA** (1 Jn 4:12)

If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is brought to perfection in us.

**GOSPEL**

Linked to the Genesis account of creation, this passage from Mark's account of the Gospel focuses on God's intentions for humanity. Marriage becomes the example par excellence of the community relationship God intended from the beginning. But what happens if there is a rupture in that communal relationship? This is the question that the Pharisees present to Jesus. God's Law is the context within which the question "Is it lawful ... ?" is posed. Moses may have allowed divorce for a husband, but it was not what God originally intended. Quoting Genesis, Jesus affirms marriage as God's intention from the very beginning. Once humans become one flesh, united so by God, there is to be no separation between them. Divorce and remarriage to another by either husband or wife is adultery and violates what God originally intended.

In teaching this, Jesus affirms two truths. One truth states both man and woman are equals in establishing community among themselves, and thus are to be treated as equals. The other truth states both are responsible for maintaining and preserving the union they have formed. Jesus' ministry was a model of how human beings can begin to work out the differences in relationships. The self-emptying that Jesus modeled is a way to maintain unity. Willingness to trust, to be open, to depend on and include others, particularly children, also contributes greatly to maintaining community.

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (10:2–16)

The Pharisees approached Jesus and asked,

"Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?"

They were testing him.

He said to them in reply, "What did Moses command you?"

They replied,

"Moses permitted a husband to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her."

But Jesus told them,

"Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment."
But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female.

For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother
and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.

So they are no longer two but one flesh.
Therefore what God has joined together,
no human being must separate.”

In the house the disciples again questioned Jesus about this.

He said to them,
“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another
commits adultery against her;
and if she divorces her husband and marries another,
she commits adultery.”

And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them,
but the disciples rebuked them.

When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them,
“Let the children come to me;
do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to
such as these.

Amen, I say to you,
whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child
will not enter it.”

Then he embraced them and blessed them,
placing his hands on them.

* [10:2–9] In the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees on the subject of divorce, Jesus declares that the law of Moses permitted divorce (Dt 24:1) only because of the hardness of your hearts (Mk 10:4–5). In citing Gn 1:27 and 2:24 Jesus proclaims permanence to be the divine intent from the beginning concerning human marriage (Mk 10:6–8). He reaffirms this with the declaration that what God has joined together, no human being must separate (Mk 10:9). See further the notes on Mt 5:31–32; 19:3–9.

* [10:15] Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child: i.e., in total dependence upon and obedience to the gospel; cf. Mt 18:3–4.

THE HONOR OF JESUS

Nearly every question in the Mediterranean world is a challenge. This is why Jesus usually responds with a counterchallenge, most often an insult. The insult here is "you:' indicating that Jesus distances himself from his hostile questioners ("Is it lawful?") and their interpretation of the Law.

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN JESUS’ WORLD

In the ancient Mediterranean world, marriages were between families. Each family selected a partner, union with whom was intended to bind the families together, forming a stronger unit. Just as children cannot choose their parents, so too children in this culture could not choose their marriage partners. God chose one's parents, and through one's parents God chose one's marriage partner. Hence Jesus' cultural truism about marriage: “What God has joined together, let no one separate” (v. 9).

Even such a brief statement of the nature of Mediterranean marriages makes it evident why divorce would be un-acceptable. Divorce is not just the separation of two partners but rather the separation of two families. In a society driven by the values of honor and shame, the family of the bride will be shamed. The bride’s male relatives in particular will have to bear the shame as well as the responsibility to remedy it. Feuding will result and undoubtedly escalate to bloodshed.
CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
"But God did not create men and women as solitary beings. Their partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between people" (GS, 12).
"The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (GS, 1).
"Man and woman are in relationship with others above all as those to whom the lives of others have been entrusted" (CSDC, 112).
"The relationship between God and man is reflected in the relational and social dimension of human nature" (CSDC, 149).
"The human person is essentially a social being because God, who created humanity, willed it so" (CSDC, 149).
TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

The author of today’s reading takes on the persona of King Solomon to extol the virtues of wisdom. Wisdom is equated with obedience to the law. It is linked to righteous conduct. It is also pictured as worth seeking for its own sake as well as for the good that it brings. These verses do not have much struggle in them nor do they raise particularly hard questions. Apparently, the author has found the help he needs as he struggles with the questions of life. He has found wisdom. His experience, however, contrasts with that of the rich man in the Gospel, who chose to keep his many possessions and in the end “went away sorrowfully.”

A reading from the Book of Wisdom (7:7–11)

I prayed, and prudence was given me;
I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me.

I preferred her to scepter and throne,
and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her,

nor did I liken any priceless gem to her;
because all gold, in view of her, is a little sand,

and before her, silver is to be accounted mire.

Beyond health and comeliness I loved her,
and I chose to have her rather than the light,

because the splendor of her never yields to sleep.

Yet all good things together came to me in her company,
and countless riches at her hands.

The Old Testament reading, and the gospel have in common the notion of deeming wealth as nothing in comparison with more precious things such as Wisdom or discipleship and treasure in heaven. In our verses, the word “riches” signals an inclusion (vv. 8, 11), hence a unity for this text-segment intended by the author. Parallelism between “prudence” and “the spirit of wisdom” in verse 7 suggests that prudence be understood as “understanding!” Solomon prayed for wisdom (1 Kgs 3:6-9) and preferred it to power, riches, health, come-li ness, and light, yet these were given to him by God also. The man in today’s gospel (Mark 10:17-20) obviously made a different choice.

Psalm 90 is a corporate lament seeking divine deliverance from national tragedy and travail. It begins with a hymn-like introduction comparing God’s eternity with human mortality. It continues with a reflection on the sorrow inherent in the human condition. The psalmist prays that people might learn from this sorrow, and then concludes with a prayer for Israel’s deliverance from trouble. The psalmist presents us with at least two hard questions. The first is his assumption that God is angry and full of wrath. Second is his assumption that calamity is often God’s punishment for sin. For centuries, both of those assumptions, and the questions that accompany them, have troubled those who seek to live God’s ways. The psalmist concludes that life is a struggle and God cares very much about the choices we make in dealing with it.
RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 90:12–13, 14–15, 16–17)
Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart.
Return, O LORD! How long?
Have pity on your servants!
Fill us at daybreak with your kindness,
that we may shout for joy and gladness all our days.
Make us glad, for the days when you afflicted us,
for the years when we saw evil.
Let your work be seen by your servants
and your glory by their children;
and may the gracious care of the LORD our God be ours;
prosper the work of our hands for us!

* [Psalm 90] A communal lament that describes only in general terms the cause of the community’s distress. After confidently invoking God (Ps 90:1), the Psalm turns to a complaint contrasting God’s eternity with the brevity of human life (Ps 90:2–6) and sees in human suffering the punishment for sin (Ps 90:7–12). The Psalm concludes with a plea for God’s intervention (Ps 90:13–17).

SECOND READING
The reading is short and to the point. In it, the author begins to conclude this long series of exhortations by reflecting on the power of God’s Word. This Word, which for the author encompasses all of God’s intention and not just the written Word, is very decisive. It sees into the soul and cuts right through all human pretension. Such an idea was not new, even in the author’s day. The sword as a symbol for the Word of God can also be found in Wisdom, Ephesians, and Revelation. The image of God as all-seeing and all-knowing is also common throughout the Scriptures.
In this reading, the author shows us that the struggle to seek God’s ways is a serious one. Not only do we live that struggle guided by discerning the Word of God, we must attend to the struggle with the sharpness that God’s word provides, pondering deeply the thoughts of our hearts for what is true and what is not.

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (4:12–13)
Brothers and sisters:
Indeed the word of God is living and effective,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow,
and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.
No creature is concealed from him,
but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him
to whom we must render an account.
This elaborate piece of florid prose brings to a conclusion the theme of God's speech which has been a major theme in the opening chapters of this letter. Human beings in all cultures fully understand the power of speech, particularly the fact that its effects are difficult if not impossible to undo. Appreciation for the effectiveness of a human word in Middle Eastern culture is rooted in the way in which young boys are raised. The customary marriage partner for the young man, a father's brother's daughter, traditionally leaves her home of origin to move in with her spouse, who will continue to live after marriage in the complex of his father. (Peter's house in Capernaum and Jesus' "home" there were in the complex of Jonah, the father of Simon and Andrew.) Even though the bride is a relative, she is not fully integrated into the family until she bears a son (see 1 Sam 1:8). This not only gives a secure place in the family but is also social security for life. The birth of a son is a great joy for all. The youngster is brought up in the women's quarters by all the women (mother, sisters, and the rest) and is pampered. Boys are traditionally breast-fed twice as long as girls and weaned around age three (see 2 Mace 7:27) long after the boy can speak. The young boy soon learns the power of his word. All he needs to say is "Feed me:" and he gets fed. It is no stretch of the imagination for such a boy to grow up and write Genesis 1 where God creates by simply commanding it.

This is the cultural background that helps to interpret this reflection on God's word which indeed is living, effective, sharper than a two-edged sword, creative (Gen 1:3; Isa 55:11), and judgmental (Amos 1:2; Ps 51:6). This latter is the sacred author's point here. God's judgment is heightened by another cultural insight. Human beings in this culture are not only non-introspective but anti-introspective. No one believes a human being knows what is going on in the heart of another or even one's own heart. Only God knows that (1 Sam 16:7). Thus only God can 'read hearts, and no secrecy, lying, or deception can distract God as it can fellow human beings. As Jesus reminds his disciples in today's gospel (Mark 10:17-30), nothing is impossible for God. Both readings offer a heart-ening message, to believers of every age. God renders just judgments, and God is truly in charge of life.

**ALLELUIA (Mt 5:3)**

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**GOSPEL**

The passage has three distinct sections. The first is the story of the rich man who comes to Jesus inquiring about eternal life. This story is also recorded by Matthew and Luke, but with some interesting changes. Only Luke, for instance, says the man was a ruler. Only Matthew says he was young. For Mark, it was enough that the man was rich. All three record that the man clearly lived a life in obedience to the law. Yet something was still lacking. Jesus wasted no time getting to the point. It was the man's possessions which held him back from experiencing the eternal life he desired. Get rid of those, Jesus said, and he would have what he sought.

The second part of this passage begins as the rich man walks away sadly. The disciples, shocked that such a man would be unable to obtain eternal life, question Jesus. Jesus answers their surprise with several sayings on wealth.

The third section is a collection of sayings on the rewards of discipleship, particularly for those who have given up much to follow Jesus. They will receive back what they have relinquished, and more besides.

This reading vividly illustrates the hard choices that confront those who are successes in this world when they try to live the way of God. The disciples are obviously struggling in this passage, too. Unlike the rich man, they have chosen to live God's ways but the ways of the world apparently still tug at them.
Not everyone needs to give up all they own; only those for whom their possessions are an impediment to eternal life. We are called to discern the impediments that we need to be rid of or find ways of making them part of the path to eternal life.

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (10:17–30)

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

You know the commandments: *you shall not kill*;
*you shall not commit adultery*;
*you shall not steal*;
*you shall not bear false witness*;
*you shall not defraud*;
*honor your father and your mother."

He replied and said to him, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth."

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, "You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples were amazed at his words.

So Jesus again said to them in reply, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

They were exceedingly astonished and said among themselves, "Then who can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God."

Peter began to say to him, "We have given up everything and followed you."

Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the GOSPEL who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come."
* [10:18] Why do you call me good?: Jesus repudiates the term “good” for himself and directs it to God, the source of all goodness who alone can grant the gift of eternal life; cf. Mt 19:16–17.
* [10:23–27] In the Old Testament wealth and material goods are considered a sign of God’s favor (Jb 1:10; Ps 128:1–2; Is 3:10). The words of Jesus in Mk 10:23–25 provoke astonishment among the disciples because of their apparent contradiction of the Old Testament concept (Mk 10:24, 26). Since wealth, power, and merit generate false security, Jesus rejects them utterly as a claim to enter the kingdom. Achievement of salvation is beyond human capability and depends solely on the goodness of God who offers it as a gift (Mk 10:27).

The questioner in this instance is not hostile, but his greeting, Good Master, signals aggression. Compliments in this culture imply that the complimented person has tried to rise above others, to their detriment. In this society, when one person gets ahead everyone else is considered to have fallen behind.

Further, paying a compliment so publicly and without precaution borders on revealing "the evil eye;" One can frequently suspect that the questioner envies the named qualities in the other person (goodness), and secretly wishes they would be destroyed. Jesus sizes up the scene perfectly expected and responds with appropriate cultural humility; He denies the compliment and successfully defuses any threat to social order that listeners might perceive in the compliment.

**CHALLENGE**

Mark alone mentions that Jesus "loved him" (v. 21; cf. Matt 19:1 -30 and Luke 18:18-30). "Love" in Mediterranean culture is appropriately translated as "attachment" in an active and practical way. The youth's claim that he lived a well-rounded moral life "since my youth" stirs Jesus' affection toward the lad to the degree that he would like to have the young man join him and his disciples. Jesus' familiar advice, however, needs to be distanced from the economic interpretation Westerners usually attribute to it. "Go sell what you have" means to part with the most precious of all possessions in the Mediterranean world: family, home, and land. It is not primarily cashing in one's stock portfolio, emptying the bank account, and disposing of other similar Western treasures.

In order to follow Jesus, one must break blood ties with one's family, as the disciples have already done. This is spelled out quite explicitly in Jesus' reflection upon Peter's statement that the disciples "have left everything;" Jesus says, "There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and the gospel" who will not be compensated (v. 29).

In a society where family and kinship ties are essential conditions for life itself, Jesus' challenge amounts to social suicide. His exhortation is morally impossible to fulfill without some compensating factors. Jesus states these immediately. The young man will have "treasure in heaven;" that is, God will replace the sources of sustenance that this person willingly sacrifices. And "come follow me" promises him fellowship in a new community, a fictive family to replace his family of flesh and blood. This is what Jesus has been creating throughout this gospel.

The young man certainly perceived that Jesus desired him to join the group and clearly understood the sacrifice Jesus demanded (but would replace). With regret and sorrow, he rejects both of Jesus' offers and departs, "for he had great possessions;"

**WEALTH AND GREED**

The conclusion of this episode instructs us about the ancient Mediterranean understanding of the word "rich;" Possessions did not constitute a problem for this man. It was his unwillingness to share that caused the problem, to give to those who had less than he ("the poor"). For this reason, wherever the word "rich" appears in the Bible it is more appropriately rendered "greedy;" This man was not simply rich but also "greedy" (cf. Luke 12:13-21).
The disciples are shocked to hear that the greedy rich have no advantage when it comes to dealing with God. "Who then can be saved?" In Mediterranean culture, the greedy rich want for nothing because they surround themselves with clients who supply their needs, including the need for honorable reputation. Clients spread the word about their benefactor and their good fortune. Jesus says all this counts for nothing with God.

Those like Jesus' followers who have severed ties with blood relationships and freely embraced a reversal of status in a society which thrives on status will receive a double reward: a hundredfold return "with persecutions?" in this life, and eternal life in the age to come. Status reversal sounds great to those whose status is raised but prompts a violent response from those who are toppled from their honorable position. How does the promise of Jesus in this episode resonate with American concern for immediate gratification and a here-and-now pay-off?

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Christ is the center of all Christian life. The bond with him takes precedence over all other bonds, familial or social" (CCC, 1618).
- "Finally, our battle has to confront what we experience as failure in prayer: discouragement during periods of dryness; sadness that, because we have "great possessions," 1 we have not given all to the Lord; disappointment over not being heard according to our own will; wounded pride, stiffened by the indignity that is ours as sinners; our resistance to the idea that prayer is a free and unmerited gift; and so forth" (CCC, 2728).
TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

These short verses are found toward the end of the last of the four "Suffering Servant Songs" in Isaiah (52: 13-53: 12). Using both the voice of God and that of a narrator, the song presents two origin ally opposite appraisals of the servant and his suffering. In the beginning, the narrator describes an innocent victim whose affliction left him frighteningly marred and finally dead and buried among the wicked. Meanwhile, God's voice presents the victim as "my servant" who will prosper and be exalted. In the beginning, the narrator assumed that the victim must be guilty of some sin fitting his punishment. Eventually it became clear that "it was our infirmities he bore, / our sufferings that he endured" (53:4). In this, the servant can be compared to Moses and the prophets who suffered at and for the sin of their people. Although the opening line of today's selection sounds exceptionally harsh, the point is not that God is pleased with pain; rather, God is pleased with the faithfulness of the servant in spite of and through the course of his suffering. As the early Church struggled to interpret Jesus' Death and Resurrection, this servant song was particularly helpful. It seemed to be a perfect description of how Jesus suffered at the hands of sinful people and bore their guilt, and how God vindicated him and brought salvation through him.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (53:10–11)

The L ORD was pleased
to crush him in infirmity.
If he gives his life as an offering for sin,
he shall see his descendants in a long life, and the will of the L ORD shall be accomplished through him.
Because of his affliction
he shall see the light in fullness of days;
through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.

* [53:10–11] Reparation offering: the Hebrew term ’asham is used of a particular kind of sacrifice, one that is intended as compensation for that which is due because of guilt. See Lv 5:14–26 and note. Justify: the verb means “to be acquitted,” “declared innocent,” but since the servant bears “their iniquity,” an effective rather than simply legal action is suggested.

Selected from the Fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13-53:12), these verses proclaim eventual victory for the Servant which he never enjoyed in his lifetime. Recall that the Servant is Is-ra-el but dressed in the best values of Israel's heroes (Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Jeremiah). YHWH crushed Israel through the exile to Babylon. As a result, Israel lamented its sins and, be-cause of this, will see light in fullness of days. Switching back from speaking about the community to speaking about Sec-ond Isaiah, YHWH notes that the innocent Servant will in-deed justify the rest of Israel through his suffering. These Songs, like so many passages in the Bible, are rooted in the notion of collectivistic personality which characterizes 80
percent of the world's cultures, including that of the ancient Middle East. In such a perception, the individual has value and importance chiefly as a member of the collectivity, in this case, the people, Israel. The reading can be associated with the gospel (Mark 10:35-45) with the ideas that the Servant's suffering will justify many, as the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many.

Psalm 33 is a thoroughgoing song of praise. It begins by praising God's Word and works - God's self-revelation to us. Then it recognizes that God's justice is expressed in kindness. The next verse reminds us that God's loving gaze is ever upon us, ready to deliver us from all evil. In the final strophe, it proclaims our faith that God is our only source of safety, the only one worth counting on. The antiphon sums up and deepens our appreciation of the prayer as we beg for God's mercy and proclaim and promise our trust.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 33:4–5, 18–19, 20, 22)

 Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.
 Upright is the word of the LORD,
 and all his works are trustworthy.
 He loves justice and right;
 of the kindness of the LORD the earth is full.
 See, the eyes of the LORD are upon those who fear him,
 upon those who hope for his kindness,
 To deliver them from death
 and preserve them in spite of famine.
 Our soul waits for the LORD,
 who is our help and our shield.
 May your kindness, O LORD, be upon us
 who have put our hope in you.

* [Psalm 33] A hymn in which the just are invited (Ps 33:1–3) to praise God, who by a mere word (Ps 33:4–5) created the three-tiered universe of the heavens, the cosmic waters, and the earth (Ps 33:6–9). Human words, in contrast, effect nothing (Ps 33:10–11). The greatness of human beings consists in God's choosing them as a special people and their faithful response (Ps 33:12–22).

The psalmist sees God's justice and right reflected in all of creation. More than that, the Lord looks from above with keen interest, steadfast loving-kindness, and mighty protection for those who show respectful fear. Those who place their trust in God will not be disappointed.

SECOND READING

These few verses from the Letter to the Hebrews introduce themes that the author will develop significantly in later parts of the letter. One of the most important of these is the image of Christ as the merciful and final High Priest. The key function of the Jewish high priest was to approach the altar of God on the Day of Atonement. He would enter the Holy of Holies with sacrifices on behalf of the people. After the sacrifice he would return wearing a different robe, representing God who was purifying the people. The allusion here is that Jesus' exaltation was his passing into the presence of God with the result that belief in him would bring salvation from sin.
As the author speaks of Jesus as Son of God, the emphasis is on divine compassion. The Son of God, far from being aloof, sympathizes with each human creature and, as we proclaimed in the psalm, offers mercy and grace whenever we are in need.

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (4:14–16)
Brothers and sisters:
Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens,
    Jesus, the Son of God,
    let us hold fast to our confession.
For we do not have a high priest
    who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
    but one who has similarly been tested in every way,
    yet without sin.
So let us confidently approach the throne of grace
    to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.

* [4:14–16] These verses, which return to the theme first sounded in Heb 2:16–3:1, serve as an introduction to the section that follows. The author here alone calls Jesus a great high priest (Heb 4:14), a designation used by Philo for the Logos; perhaps he does so in order to emphasize Jesus’ superiority over the Jewish high priest. He has been tested in every way, yet without sin (Heb 4:15); this indicates an acquaintance with the tradition of Jesus’ temptations, not only at the beginning (as in Mk 1:13) but throughout his public life (cf. Lk 22:28). Although the reign of the exalted Jesus is a theme that occurs elsewhere in Hebrews, and Jesus’ throne is mentioned in Heb 1:8, the throne of grace (Heb 4:16) refers to the throne of God. The similarity of Heb 4:16 to Heb 10:19–22 indicates that the author is thinking of our confident access to God, made possible by the priestly work of Jesus.

These verses conclude the section that began in 3:1 in which Jesus and Moses, the faithful son and faithful servant, have been compared. In particular, there are two exhortations in these verses: let us hold fast to our confession; let us confidently approach the throne of grace. The confession refers to a formal statement of belief: Jesus is the Son of God. He has been exalted as a great high priest having passed through the path (the sky or the many heavens) that leads to God’s throne (v. 16), the place of Jesus’ exaltation. The association of incarnation and humiliation (he knew our weaknesses which lead us—but not him!—to sin; v. 15) with his exaltation repeats a motif that has been sounded in the first two chapters. The throne of grace, or the throne of God who bestows grace, is a constellation in the sky (Isa 66:1: "Thus says the Lord: the sky is my throne"). The whole sky is God’s throne (Matt 5:34; 23:22; 1 Enoch 14:51–24). This is where Jesus has been exalted, and it is the place where believers can expect to receive mercy and find grace for timely help. Mercy is a value in Mediterranean culture by which persons are expected to meet their interpersonal obligations. When sick people ask Jesus for mercy, they ask that he do for them what he can: obtain remission of sin, restore to-well-being. The same is now true of the exalted Jesus. Grace is a result of a covenant or contract between unequals: parents and children, husband and wife or wives, patron and client, helper and accident victim. By reason of being patron to human beings who are clients, God "owes" life or sustains the life of clients who are said to "receive mercy." Thus from a cultural perspective, the terms are nearly synonymous, but the meaning is clear. Because of who Jesus our high priest is (Son of God) and what he has accomplished (solidarity with us, but did not sin), we can confidently obtain what we need.
In effect, this is what Jesus says in today's gospel (Mark 10:35-45). To James and John who ask for a share in his ultimate glory, Jesus replies that it is not his to give, but his - Father's to grant to those for whom it has been prepared.
The author of Hebrews illuminates what has been made available. How can this message not inspire confidence?

**ALLELUIA (Mk 10:45)**
The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

**GOSPEL**

Last week, we heard Jesus promise one hundredfold rewards, along with persecution, to his faithful followers. Now we hear two of the principal disciples make an appeal for even greater rewards and honors with no mention of the suffering. Jesus' reply, "You do not know what you are asking," could hardly have been more pointed. In the verses we skip between these two Sunday Gospel readings, Jesus predicted his Passion for a third time, again to the utter incomprehension of his chosen disciples. Now, in his reply to James and John, Jesus refers to his ultimate self-giving as a cup and a baptism, a strong reminder to the Christian community about the meaning of their sacraments. Jesus then critiqued their understanding of himself and his mission. Following his previous references to the Kingdom of God, Jesus now used the rulers of the world as a contrast to the divine. James and John had fallen into the trap of aspiring to be "great ones." What they missed was how their own Lord was leading them and giving them an example. As they were aspiring to the power of the world, Jesus tried to show them that real power, divine power, expresses itself in loving service, in giving oneself for others. Not unlike the rich man of last week's Gospel, the disciples had not yet understood that the only real security and power come from

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**+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (10:35–45)**

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus and said to him,  
“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”
He replied, “What do you wish me to do for you?”
They answered him, “Grant that in your glory
we may sit one at your right and the other at your left.”
Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking.
Can you drink the cup that I drink
or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”
They said to him, “We can.”
Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink, you will drink,
and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;
but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give
but is for those for whom it has been prepared.”
When the ten heard this, they became indignant at James and John.
Jesus summoned them and said to them,
“You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles
lord it over them,
and their great ones make their authority over them felt.
But it shall not be so among you.
Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant;
whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.
For the Son of Man did not come to be served
but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

* [10:38–40] Can you drink the cup...I am baptized?: the metaphor of drinking the cup is used in the Old Testament to refer to acceptance of the destiny assigned by God; see note on Ps 11:6. In Jesus’ case, this involves divine judgment on sin that Jesus the innocent one is to expiate on behalf of the guilty (Mk 14:24; Is 53:5). His baptism is to be his crucifixion and death for the salvation of the human race; cf. Lk 12:50. The request of James and John for a share in the glory (Mk 10:35–37) must of necessity involve a share in Jesus’ sufferings, the endurance of tribulation and suffering for the gospel (Mk 10:39). The authority of assigning places of honor in the kingdom is reserved to God (Mk 10:40).

* [10:42–45] Whatever authority is to be exercised by the disciples must, like that of Jesus, be rendered as service to others (Mk 10:45) rather than for personal aggrandizement (Mk 10:42–44). The service of Jesus is his passion and death for the sins of the human race (Mk 10:45); cf. Mk 14:24; Is 53:11–12; Mt 26:28; Lk 22:19–20.

**ACQUIRING HONOR**

The group that Jesus gathered around himself is technically called a faction. Members of such a group each have a direct, important, and relatively strong relationship with the leader but very little knowledge of or relationship with each other.

In today’s story, James and John, two blood relatives, do something very normal and customary in this culture within factions. They jockey for a higher position of honor in the group and care nothing about the others. When Jesus re-ceives his full measure of honor, these two brothers want a share in it by gaining the most prestigious positions next to him. In this culture, everything is always about honor. Each group member already possesses a degree of honor that derives from birth. Nothing can be added to or subtracted from that honor. Thus, Jesus from Nazareth is an artisan's son. Simon and Andrew are sons of Jonah, as James and John are sons of Zebedee.

But honor can also be achieved, most often through honor contests known as "challenge and riposte:' One person asks another questions in hopes of shaming him and thereby in-creasing his own honor. The request of James and John is still another way of achieving honor: personal effort. Here, the effort is little more than the request for a favor.

Since Jesus is the acknowledged leader of this group, he can do a favor for individual members and grant them privileges that would make them stand out in relationship to others. Of course, the others are incensed to learn of this move and ex-press indignation (v. 41).

**ASSIGNING HONOR**

Instead of granting th<! favor, Jesus asks if the brothers "can drink the cup" that he drinks which constitutes his claim to achieved honor. Like all metaphors, this one, too, developed from a real-life custom. In Mediterranean culture, the head of the family fills the cups of all at table. Each one is expected to accept and drink what the head of the family has given. Since all theology is based on analogy, and the behavior of God is assumed to be like the behavior of human beings in a given culture, the cup came to represent the lot in life which God has assigned for each person (see Pss 11:6; 16:5; 23:5; etc.).

If Jesus accepts his assigned lot, he will attain the honor determined by God (Mark 14:36). The brothers impetuously affirm that they can indeed accept and fulfill the same lot as-signed to Jesus. At this point, Jesus reminds them that he is a broker in the kingdom and not its patron. Jesus can put others in touch with God the patron, but it is God alone who determines each person's lot and deserved honor.
A NEW WAY
Continuing his reflection on true honor, Jesus invites the entire faction to reflect upon life as they know it. The Mediterranean "outsiders" (non-Judean rulers and great men) know how to determine personal status and how to behave accordingly. Rulers "lord it" over their subjects because this is how one exercises authority.

Jesus proposes a different way for renewed Israel, the way of status reversal. The great ones in this community should behave like servants at ceremonial meals, that is, like deacons. Those who hold positions of primacy should consider their status as equal to that of slaves.

The reason for this new rule in determining true honor in the Jesus movement lies in the behavior of the "son of Man" who served (played the role of deacon) and "gave his life as a ransom" so that others could be set free (see also 1 Tim 2:6).

What would prompt an invading power or an oppressor to accept one hostage and let others go free? Only the fact that the hostage was of higher status. An invading power would gladly accept a prince or king as hostage and let the peasant go free. There is more prestige to holding, and perhaps executing, royalty than slaughtering large numbers of peasants. In the game of chess, capturing the king ends the game even if all other pieces are still on the board.

If someone of Jesus' high status sacrificed himself for the benefit of others not so highly honored, how would such logic translate itself into American politics or the American Church?

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
■ "Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope ... the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal" (SS, 1).
■ "Anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope ..... Man's great, true hope which holds firm ... can only be God - God who has loved us and who continues to love us 'to the end,' until all 'is accomplished'" 1 (SS, 27)
■ Today a choice must be made between paths that lead to life and paths that lead to death.2, Paths of death ... are paths that mark a culture without God ... driven by the idols of power, wealth, and momentary pleasure .... faith ...... This is the life that God shares with us out of his gratuitous love, for 'it is the love that gives life'" J (Aparecida, 13).
THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

FIRST READING

Although much of the book of Jeremiah describes the people's disobedience to their covenant with God and their subsequent exile, Jeremiah's vocation had been described as "to root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant" (1:10). The selection we read today is part of the rebuilding of the people, also called the "Book of Comfort" (Jeremiah 30: 1 - 33:26), which promised a return from exile. What we hear today from the Book of Comfort is an exuberant cry of gratitude for God's restoration of the people. Addressed to a people in exile, refugees scattered "to the ends of the world," it underlines the great contrast between the weakness of the people and God's strength and faithfulness. Their restoration has nothing to do with their merit and everything to do with God's great love. Jeremiah offers us an image of God as a consoler, a shepherd who leads the people to refreshing streams, a road-building father who is careful to see that no one stumbles along the way. We also note that it is the most vulnerable who get special mention: the blind, the lame, and the pregnant women. They have a future for no other reason than having been chosen by God.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah (31:7–9)

Thus says the LORD:
Shout with joy for Jacob,
exult at the head of the nations;
proclaim your praise and say:
The LORD has delivered his people,
the remnant of Israel.
Behold, I will bring them back
from the land of the north;
I will gather them from the ends of the world,
with the blind and the lame in their midst,
the mothers and those with child;
they shall return as an immense throng.
They departed in tears,
but I will console them and guide them;
I will lead them to brooks of water,
on a level road, so that none shall stumble.
For I am a father to Israel,
Ephraim is my first-born.

Originally, this was an oracle about the restoration of the northern tribes. These verses describe a new Exodus. The very small "remnant" which escaped the Assyrian devastation of 721 B.C.E. now returns from exile, purified, to constitute a new Israel which will be faithful to God. This caravan includes people with no power (blind-the plausible link to today's gospel [Mark 10:46-52]-lame, mothers and pregnant women), thus indicating that only God could have liberated them. As in the original Exodus,
Israel had water from a rock (Exod 17:1-7; Num 20:1-13); now God leads them along level roads to bubbling brooks.
Yet the language of these verses reflects Second Isaiah (blind, lame, mothers: Isa 35:5-6; God guides them: Isa 40:11; God gathers exiles: Isa 41:9; God leads this new exodus along a smooth and level road: Isa 40:3-5). Thus after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E., Jeremiah probably reshaped an earlier oracle about the northern tribes and used the language of Temple liturgy to lift the spirits of the Exiles after the Temple had been destroyed. The final verse sounds a covenant theme. YHWH as father to Israel characterizes a covenant relationship. Actually it is a renewal of YHWH's love for Israel.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 126:1–2, 2–3, 4–5, 6.)

This psalm reflects both remembrance of God's saving actions and hope that the same will happen in the future. In recalling the return of the exiles from Babylon, it emphasizes the way God creates something new and wonderful out of disastrous circumstances. Although God's punishment may have been harsh, the people also know the appropriateness of joyous laughter in God's presence. Because their dreams were once fulfilled, they have confidence that God will again restore their fortunes and fill them with joy.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.
When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion,
   we were like men dreaming.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, 
   and our tongue with rejoicing.
Then they said among the nations, 
   “The LORD has done great things for them.”
The LORD has done great things for us; 
   we are glad indeed.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD, 
   like the torrents in the southern desert.
Those that sow in tears 
   shall reap rejoicing.
Although they go forth weeping, 
   carrying the seed to be sown,
They shall come back rejoicing, 
   carrying their sheaves.

* [Psalm 126] A lament probably sung shortly after Israel's return from exile. The people rejoice that they are in Zion (Ps 126:1–3) but mere presence in the holy city is not enough; they must pray for the prosperity and the fertility of the land (Ps 126:4). The last verses are probably an oracle of promise: the painful work of sowing will be crowned with life (Ps 126:5–6).
* [126:4] Like the dry stream beds of the Negeb: the psalmist prays for rain in such abundance that the dry riverbeds will run.

The opening verses (1-3) reminisce about the return from Babylonian exile. Even Babylon now conquered by Persia was forced to acknowledge the power and graciousness of Israel's God. In this national lament, as in all laments, once Israel voices its grief, the priest responds with a word of hope: those that sow in tears shall reap rejoicing. And since this psalm was typically sung at the New Year, the
beginning of the rainy season, the hope of rain which brings fertility to the fields is like a sign from God who will restore and enrich life for a repentant Israel.

SECOND READING

After God instructed Moses to appoint Aaron and his sons as priests, the priesthood became a hereditary office (Exodus 28: 1-5, 29:29). Thus, because Jesus was not of the priestly class, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews insists that his priesthood, like Aaron's, was specifically appointed by God. While we can see some similarity between Aaron and Jesus, there is even greater contrast between them. Repeating a citation from Hebrews 1 :1-13, which extols Christ's all-surpassing great-ness, the author uses a phrase from Psalm 2:7, "You are my son:/ this day I have begotten you," insisting that Christ is far more than Aaron: truly God's begotten Son. Finally, we have a citation from Psalm 110:4, "You are a priest forever I according to the order of Melchizedek." That same phrase will be cited in Hebrews 6:20, 7:17, and 21. Although there was no "order" of priests in the line of Melchizedek, Hebrews will indicate that Melchizedek ranked over even Abraham, and because no one knew his ancestry, his priesthood was forever (7:3). The point the author makes over and again is that Christ's priesthood is superior to any other; it is eternal and it is God the Father who has given him his glory.

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (5:1–6)
Brothers and sisters:

Every high priest is taken from among men
and made their representative before God,
to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring,
for he himself is beset by weakness
and so, for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself
as well as for the people.

No one takes this honor upon himself
but only when called by God,
just as Aaron was.

In the same way,
it was not Christ who glorified himself in becoming high priest,
but rather the one who said to him:

You are my son:
this day I have begotten you;
just as he says in another place:

You are a priest forever
according to the order of Melchizedek.

* [5:1–10] The true humanity of Jesus (see note on Heb 2:5–18) makes him a more rather than a less effective high priest to the Christian community. In Old Testament tradition, the high priest was identified with the people, guilty of personal sin just as they were (Heb 5:1–3). Even so, the office was of divine appointment (Heb 5:4), as was also the case with the sinless Christ (Heb 5:5). For Heb 5:6, see note on Ps 110:4. Although Jesus was Son of God, he was destined as a human being to learn obedience by accepting the suffering he had to endure (Heb 5:8). Because of his perfection through this experience of human suffering, he is the cause of salvation for all (Heb 5:9), a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:10; cf. Heb 5:6 and Heb 7:3).
To offer gifts and sacrifices for sins: the author is thinking principally of the Day of Atonement rite, as is clear from Heb 9:7. This ritual was celebrated to atone for “all the sins of the Israelites” (Lv 16:34).

Deal patiently: the Greek word metriopathein occurs only here in the Bible; this term was used by the Stoics to designate the golden mean between excess and defect of passion. Here it means rather the ability to sympathize.

The author of Hebrews is the only New Testament writer to cite Ps 110:4, here and in Heb 7:17, 21, to show that Jesus has been called by God to his role as priest. Heb 5:7–8 deal with his ability to sympathize with sinners, because of his own experience of the trials and weakness of human nature, especially fear of death. In his present exalted state, weakness is foreign to him, but he understands what we suffer because of his previous earthly experience.

The citation of Ps 2:7 in Heb 5:5 and Heb 1:5 forms an inclusio or inclusion for this part of the letter. This is a literary device (repetition of words or ideas) signaling the author's intention explicitly manifest in the text that this text-segment should be considered as a unit. Similarly "the one who said" (v. 5) echoes the phrase "God spoke" in 1:1, further strengthening the inclusion. The theme in this segment has been Jesus' status as divine Son.

Today's text-segment focuses on Jesus as High Priest and makes three general points of comparison between the high priest described in the Bible (see Exodus 28-29; Leviticus 8-10; Deut 33:8-11; Sir 45:6-22; 50:1-22) and Jesus as High Priest. To appreciate the comparisons, some cultural information about intermediaries might help. Ordinarily in this culture people dealt with one another by means of dyadic relationships that included informal agreements to reciprocating each other's favors. But when equals (who alone are capable of this kind of relationship) are unable to meet another's needs, then a needy person seeks a patron, a person of means or who has surplus which allows him to meet the needs of clients. The intermediary in this relationship is a broker, some-one who has no clients, but puts clients in touch with patrons.

A related function of an intermediary is to be a mediator, that is, someone who can intervene between feuding parties, or parties at odds with each other, in order to restore a harmonious relationship. Ideally in this culture, a mediator should not be related to either party, or if related should be at least five links removed. The reason for this is to render the mediator’s judgment acceptable to both feuding or alienated parties. This is the idea behind the makarism: "How truly honorable are the peacemakers (= mediators), for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt 5:9). Mediators quell feuds which can too easily escalate to violence, proceed to bloodshed, and result in blood-feud which is very difficult to halt. The first point of comparison is that a high priest is an ordinary human being appointed by God to be an intermediary (or mediator) who would make "gifts and sacrifices for sins" to the deity. In other words, when God is shamed (which is what sin does to God) and is justified in seeking redress, God's appointed mediator steps in to restrain the justified and deserved punishment. The second point of comparison is the ability of such a human mediator to empathize with human failings of this nature relative to God. Due to human nature, the mediator sometimes must act on his own behalf as he does on behalf of others. The high priest/mediator thus should show patient restraint with sinners. The third and final point of comparison is that God selects and calls the intermediary; no human being dare assume it (see Exod 28:1; though in the Maccabean period, candidates did compete and bid for the honor from the Seleucids).

Verses 5-6 demonstrate that Jesus the High Priest is superior on all counts. God designated the Son as High Priest. Just as Ps 2:7 attributed priestly status to a king, so the sacred author attributes an eternal priesthood to the Son (Ps 110 [109]:4; compare Heb 5:10; 6:20; 7:17, 21) who, of course, is fully human and totally pleasing to the Father.
In his healing ministry (Mark 10:46-52, today’s gospel), Jesus was a broker for sick clients with God their healing patron. The glorified Jesus as High Priest now does even more for God’s people. Westerners accustomed to self-service or even representing themselves in judicial proceedings might feel inclined to “do it themselves” with God. Who would want to run that risk?

**ALLELUIA (cf. 2 Tm 1:10)**

Our Savior Jesus Christ destroyed death and brought life to light through the GOSPEL.

**GOSPEL**

In the structure of Mark’s account of the Gospel, this incident is symbolic of the disciples’ slow growth in their understanding of Jesus’ mission and message. This is Mark’s second account of Jesus healing a blind man. In the first account (8:22 - 26), the healing took place in two parts; after Jesus’ first touch, the man’s vision was not clear. In between these two healing incidents, Mark has recounted Jesus’ three predictions of the Passion and the disciples’ seemingly invincible incomprehension of what he was saying. The implication seems to be that their fear and preconceptions made them blinder than the beggar.

As Mark relates the incident, Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is nearby and begins to call to him for help. By using the title "Son of David," he acknowledges Jesus as a successor to Israel’s most important king, the first to whom the words “you are my son: this day I have begotten you” (Psalm 2:7) were addressed. Although the crowds attempted to silence him, Bartimaeus’ hope in Jesus proved more powerful than their objections. The very people who tried to suppress his shouts were sent to tell him to take courage because Jesus was calling him. In his encounter with Jesus, Bartimeaus modeled the faith that the disciples had been failing to attain. Asking for healing rather than money, he responded to Jesus with the insight and courage to become disciple and join him on the fateful road to Jerusalem.

**+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (10:46–52)**

As Jesus was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd,

Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus,

sat by the roadside begging.

On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth,

he began to cry out and say,

“Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.”

And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent.

But he kept calling out all the more,

“Son of David, have pity on me.”

Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

So they called the blind man, saying to him,

“Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you.”

He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus.

Jesus said to him in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?”

The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.”

Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you.”

Immediately he received his sight

and followed him on the way.

This story was probably composed by Matthew out of Mark’s story of the healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46–52). Mark places the event late in Jesus’ ministry, just before his entrance into Jerusalem, and Matthew has followed his Marcan source at that point in his gospel also (see Mt 20:29–
In each of the Matthean stories the single blind man of Mark becomes two. The reason why Matthew would have given a double version of the Marcan story and placed the earlier one here may be that he wished to add a story of Jesus’ curing the blind at this point in order to prepare for Jesus’ answer to the emissaries of the Baptist (Mt 11:4–6) in which Jesus, recounting his works, begins with his giving sight to the blind.

The cure of the blind men is probably symbolic of what will happen to the disciples, now blind to the meaning of Jesus’ passion and to the necessity of their sharing his suffering. As the men are given sight, so, after the resurrection, will the disciples come to see that to which they are now blind. Matthew has abbreviated his Marcan source (Mk 10:46–52) and has made Mark’s one man two. Such doubling is characteristic of this gospel; see Mt 8:28–34 (//Mk 5:1–20) and the note on Mt 9:27–31.

**BLINDNESS IN ANTIQUITY**

Blindness was very common in the ancient Middle East. Most cases were due to trachoma, a contagious infection of the inner mucous lining of the eyelids (the conjunctiva) and of the cornea. The disease was transmitted by flies and by poor hygiene. A simple practice like washing one’s hands would have helped, but scarcity of water prompted many peasants to omit even required ritual ablutions (possibly the occasion for the Pharisees’ objection in Mark 7:1-5).

The real bane of blindness in ancient Israel seems to be the awareness that God who bestows this gift also withholds it or takes it away (Exod 4:11). In some though not all instances, loss of sight was associated with displeasing God, that is sin (Gen 19:11; Deut 28:28; 2 Kgs 6:18; Acts 13:11). Tobit and the man born blind in John 9 illustrate exceptions to this belief. Yet despite the pain deriving from knowing that for some mysterious reason God has deprived one of sight, a blind person did not feel cursed. In Genesis (1:3-5), God existed in darkness before creating light. Darkness therefore symbolizes the presence of God. To live in darkness, that is being unable to see, is to live in the presence of God. Such intimacy with God compensates the blind person who can interact with but not see other human beings who are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26).

**THE BLIND BEGGAR**

Even though blind, the beggar in Mark’s Gospel is very shrewd. He has heard of Jesus’ reputation as a folk healer. How can he “force” Jesus to heal him?

He bases his request to Jesus on “mercy” (vv. 47-48). “Son of David, have mercy on me!” In the Mediterranean value system, mercy describes a person’s willingness to pay personal debts. By repeating this statement over and over, the beggar insists that Jesus owes the healing to him. By shouting it out ever more loudly, the clever beggar makes the entire crowd aware of Jesus’ debt to him.

On what basis does Jesus owe this apparent stranger anything? By addressing him as "son of David;' the beggar publicly identifies Jesus as Messiah (as "son of David" is interpreted in Mark's Gospel). Even if Jesus or the crowd were to disagree about messianic imputation, the title "son of David" situates Jesus in the lineage which includes Solomon, a near omniscient and omnicompetent ruler. It would be very difficult indeed for Jesus to accept either honorific accolade without rewarding the person who announced them.

The beggar regains his sight and immediately follows Jesus. Such a response is not unusual but rather quite in line with the Mediterranean institution of patronage. Jesus, of course, is the broker and not the patron. He is the one who has ready access to God, the patron, and who can connect clients like the blind beggar with God the patron. The healed beggar joins Jesus’ entourage because he is indebted to Jesus and will sing his-and the patron's-praises far and wide. A favor received is a favor owed, even if the return favor is not expected.

By setting this story in his Gospel right after Jesus contrasts the behavior of non-Judean rulers with those who hold authority in the Jesus movement, Mark invites the reader further to reflect on the
difference. Jesus the folk healer is located by his would-be client in the royal lineage of David. But instead of "lording it over" his beneficiary, Jesus adopts the role of servant, accedes to the blind man's request, intercedes-like a servant-with the God of Israel, and obtains restoration of the man's sight. The beggar in turn feels bound to point to Jesus as his successful broker with the patron-God of Israel who does not turn a deaf ear to the requests of a humble subject.

Americans who tire of wrestling with the Mediterranean core value of honor Sunday by Sunday in the Gospels have a golden opportunity in today's gospel to compare its effectiveness in the ancient healing system with the workings of the contemporary health care system.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "The Lord tells us: 'Do not be afraid.' We have no other happiness, no other priority, but to be instruments of the Spirit ... so that Jesus Christ may be known, followed, loved, adored, announced, and communicated to all, despite difficulties and resistances. This is the best service - his service! - that the church has to offer people and nations" (Aparecida, 14).
- "In daily shared life with Jesus ... the disciples soon discover two completely original things about Jesus. First, it was not they who chose their master; it was Christ who chose them. Second, they were not chosen for something (e.g., to be purified, learn the Law) but for Someone, chosen to be closely bound up with his Person" (Aparecida, 131).
- "From God's standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly" (DCE, 28).
THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

Deuteronomy, the title of which is translated as "second law-giving," reads as if it were three long homilies in which Moses interpreted the law. It is presented as his final message. Today's selection from Deuteronomy is a bridge between two discourses. As Moses ends one, he reminds the people to "fear the Lord," revere God, and never forget his greatness. He then tells them that keeping the law will assure them a long life in a land of "milk and honey," rich with cattle and crops. The centerpiece of today's reading begins with "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God ....... " This is the beginning of the Shema, the prayer spoken by devout Jews every evening and morning, in times of danger, and when they are on their deathbed (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). As the core of the Law, the Shema reminds the people that the God who has entered their history is the only God. To love that loving God with their heart means to love God with their intellect, remembering God's great deeds. To love God with the soul means to love him with their affect. To love God with all one's strength means not only with physical strength, but with all they possess as well. Loving God in this way, they will be faithful in every dimension of their personal life. That is the injunction they are to take to heart.

A reading from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:2–6)

Moses spoke to the people, saying:

"Fear the LORD, your God,
and keep, throughout the days of your lives,
all his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you,
and thus have long life.

Hear then, Israel, and be careful to observe them,
that you may grow and prosper the more,
in keeping with the promise of the LORD, the God of your fathers,
to give you a land flowing with milk and honey.

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!
Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God,
with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your strength.

Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today."

* [6:4–5] This passage, an expansion of the first commandment (5:6–10), contains the basic principle of the whole Mosaic law, the keynote of the Book of Deuteronomy: since the Lord alone is God, Israel must love him with an undivided heart. Jesus cited these words as “the greatest and the first commandment,” embracing in itself the whole law of God (Mt 22:37–38; Mk 12:29–30; Lk 10:27).

* [6:4] Hear, O Israel!: in Hebrew, shema yisra’el; hence this passage (vv. 4–9), containing the Great Commandment, is called the Shema. In later Jewish tradition, 11:13–21 and Nm 15:37–41 were added to form a prayer recited every evening and morning. The LORD is our God, the LORD alone: other possible translations are “the Lord our God is one Lord”; “the Lord our God, the Lord is one”; “the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. of today's reading begins with "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God ....... "

415
In the name of God, Moses presents a Law for life in the land. Deuteronomy repeatedly describes the land as "flowing with milk and honey" (see Deut 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20), an image perhaps borrowed from Canaanite poetry, e.g., ANET 140: "The wadies fat with honey ... flow with honey, etc.'). The call to hear is also repeated often (Deut 5:1; 9:1; 20:3; 27:9), but on this occasion Israel is to hear the command to love YHWH alone. The cultural understanding of love is unflagging loyalty toward someone. In this case, love is rooted in covenant fidelity, basically a political idea. The client is expected to be devoted and loyal exclusively to the sovereign who selected and agreed to favor the client. Thus, "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" is not so much (if at all) a profession of monotheism but rather an expression of exclusive loyalty and attachment to YHWH alone and to no others gods. The link between this reading and the gospel (Mark 12:28b-34) is obvious.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 18:2–3, 3–4, 47, 51)
I love you, Lord, my strength.
I love you, O LORD, my strength, O LORD, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.
My God, my rock of refuge, my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold!
Praised be the LORD, I exclaim, and I am safe from my enemies.
The LORD lives! And blessed be my rock! Extolled be God my savior.
You who gave great victories to your king and showed kindness to your anointed.

Scholars believe that this song of thanksgiving may well be an authentic composition of King David himself. The opening phrase, "I love you:' is actually spoken by God to Israel. The Hebrew word (ra am, womb) never has God as its object in the Hebrew Bible, but that sentiment is frequently expressed by God toward the people. Then follow a string of titles applied to God: strength, rock, fortress, deliverer, shield, horn of salvation, stronghold. Many of these could be suggested to the author by the geography of the place where David's sanctuary and later Solomon's temple stood. The remaining verses are a personal statement of praise and thanks from the King to God for victory in battle.

SECOND READING

Today's passage from Hebrews continues the theme of the absolute superiority of Jesus' priesthood. The author cites three reasons for that: Jesus' singular priesthood is eternal, his self-sacrifice was once-for-all, and he was appointed by God's own oath (see 7:20-21 ). As a result of that, Jesus is "always able to save" and forever "makes intercession" for those who approach God through him. In that continual
priestly role, Christ is not only the high priest representing his own before God, but also the representative of God whose concern for humanity never ceases.

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (7:23–28)

Brothers and sisters:
The Levitical priests were many because they were prevented by death from remaining in office, but Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them.

It was fitting that we should have such a high priest: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens.

He has no need, as did the high priests, to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did that once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints men subject to weakness to be high priests, but the word of the oath, which was taken after the law, appoints a son, who has been made perfect forever.

* [7:20–25] As was the case with the promise to Abraham (Heb 6:13), though not with the levitical priesthood, the eternal priesthood of the order of Melchizedek was confirmed by God’s oath (Heb 7:20–21); cf. Ps 110:4. Thus Jesus becomes the guarantee of a permanent covenant (Heb 7:22) that does not require a succession of priests as did the levitical priesthood (Heb 7:23) because his high priesthood is eternal and unchangeable (Heb 7:24). Consequently, Jesus is able to save all who draw near to God through him since he is their ever-living intercessor (Heb 7:25).


* [7:22] An [even] better covenant: better than the Mosaic covenant because it will be eternal, like the priesthood of Jesus upon which it is based. Heb 7:12 argued that a change of priesthood involves a change of law; since “law” and “covenant” are used correlatively, a new covenant is likewise instituted.

* [7:25] To make intercession: the intercession of the exalted Jesus, not the sequel to his completed sacrifice but its eternal presence in heaven; cf. Rom 8:34.

* [7:26] This verse with its list of attributes is reminiscent of Heb 7:3 and is perhaps a hymnic counterpart to it, contrasting the exalted Jesus with Melchizedek.

* [7:26–28] Jesus is precisely the high priest whom the human race requires, holy and sinless, installed far above humanity (Heb 7:26); one having no need to offer sacrifice daily for sins but making a single offering of himself (Heb 7:27) once for all. The law could only appoint high priests with human limitations, but the fulfillment of God’s oath regarding the priesthood of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4) makes the Son of God the perfect priest forever (Heb 7:28).

An inclusio or inclusion (the word "oath" is repeated) in vv. 20 and 28 identifies this final unit of five reflections on Melchizedek (7:1-3, 4-10, 11-19, 20-25, 26-28). Melchizedek is mentioned only twice in the Bible (see Genesis 14 and Psalm 110), a fact which helps a reader to appreciate the creative interpretations of the sacred author of Hebrews. The sacred author uses this motif of oath to draw contrasts between Jesus and the Levitical priests in three segments. First (vv. 20-22), the author works
God's oath in Psalm 110 to show that this creates not a superior priesthood but rather a better covenant.

Today's verses contain the fourth and fifth reflections. Verses 23-24 sound the theme of abiding life. The fact that Jesus' priesthood is eternal (unlike Levitical priests who had to be replaced upon death) means there are no gaps. Jesus is always there to intercede with God for his followers.

The final segment (vv. 26-28) concludes the reflections on Jesus' priesthood which is patterned after the 'order of Melchizedek.' It makes two main points: Jesus' priesthood abides, Levites come and go; and Jesus' priestly. Status is confirmed by God's oath. The first three of the five adjectives describing Jesus the High Priest can describe Levitical high priests as well. The last two are distinctive. Jesus is separated from sinners—especially those who could oppose him—by his exalted location higher than the sky. Further, while Levitical priests offered many sacrifices, Jesus' was once for all.

The importance of God's oath might fail to make an impression on modern Western readers. In Middle Eastern cultures, lying and deception are legitimate strategies for preserving one's honor and reputation. Since all God-talk is based on human experience which is culturally fashioned, the praiseworthy trait of deception in the service of honor is something at which God would be considered to excel. Human beings in this culture certify they are telling the truth by making an oath, hence this fantastic news about an extraordinary High Priest could be seen as a ploy by God to preserve his honorable reputation (see 1 Kgs 22:23 in context). God therefore uses an oath to assure the reality and reliability of a perfect son who functions as High Priest on behalf of sinners.

In today's gospel (Mark 12:28b–34), Jesus scores love of God and neighbor as "worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices:" Today's reading from Hebrews illustrates the value of what Jesus accomplished by his sacrifice motivated by love of the Father and fellow human beings. How blessed are believers to have such a loving brother and impressive model to emulate.

**ALLELUIA (Jn 14:23)**

Whoever loves me will keep my word, says the Lord; and my Father will love him and we will come to him.

The Lectionary's progressive reading of Mark has skipped Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the curse of a fig tree, the cleansing of the Temple, and questions designed to implicate him as an insurrectionist or a heretic. Those readings belong most properly to Lent and Holy Week.

The scribe who asks Jesus about the "first" or greatest of the commandments seems to be motivated more sympathetically than most. Unlike many others, he is genuinely seeking Jesus' opinion (see verse 28a). What we witness here appears to be a conversation about faith between two men who loved their tradition. Replying to the scribe's question, Jesus recited the Shema, something he had presumably done twice a day since he had first learned to pray. Much like a creed, the Shema reminded the people of their special relationship to the one true God. That, of course, helped them maintain their unique identity in times of occupation by foreigners, exile, or other threats to their life as a people of faith. As usually happened, Jesus deepened the scribe's original question. Not stopping with the issue of the first commandment, he immediately added the injunction of Leviticus 19:18b: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." Recognizing that reference, Jesus' audience would have immediately understood Jesus' teaching: love of God necessarily expresses itself in love of neighbor.

Upon hearing Jesus' reply, the scribe did something quite unusual in the Gospel: he agreed and added to Jesus' own explanation by repeating the prophetic teaching that care for others is more important than any amount of sacrifice. As the scene closes, Jesus tells the man he is not far from the kingdom of God. Given what has gone before this, especially the Gospel passages we have heard in the past few weeks, that statement seems to have put the scribe ahead of the pain-avoiding, infighting disciples as well as...
those who clung to their wealth. This is one of the very few moments in which we see Jesus speaking
heart to heart with someone who shares and accepts his teaching.

GOSPEL

+A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (12:28b–34)

One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him,

“Which is the first of all the commandments?”

Jesus replied, “The first is this:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone!
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
There is no other commandment greater than these.”

The scribe said to him, “Well said, teacher.
You are right in saying,
‘He is One and there is no other than he.’
And ‘to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding,
with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself’
is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding,
he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

* [22:34–40] The Marcan parallel (Mk 12:28–34) is an exchange between Jesus and a scribe who is
impressed by the way in which Jesus has conducted himself in the previous controversy (Mk 12:28), who
compliments him for the answer he gives him (Mk 12:32), and who is said by Jesus to be “not far from
the kingdom of God” (Mk 12:34). Matthew has sharpened that scene. The questioner, as the
representative of other Pharisees, tests Jesus by his question (Mt 22:34–35), and both his reaction to
Jesus’ reply and Jesus’ commendation of him are lacking.

LOVE, HATE, AND GROUP ATTACHMENT

The scribe who asks Jesus "which commandment is first of all?" is not hostile. His question is not a test
or a trap but rather the solicitation of an opinion. Whatever Jesus answers can be the topic for further
discussion.

This is also one of the rare times when Jesus answers a question directly and quickly: "Love the Lord God
above all, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus weaves together two elements of his tradition:
Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Familiar as this answer is to modern believers, the word "love"
and its correlative "hate" carry different mean-ings in the Mediterranean world than they do in the
modern Western world.

For modern, introspective, individualistic Western believ-ers, these words relate to internal,
psychological states. They invariably entail feeling, emotion, affection.

In the ancient, non-introspective, group-centered Mediter-ranean world, these words involved primarily
an external, concrete expression. Affection, emotion, feeling may or may not have been involved. The
concrete, external expression of love is attachment to one's group or attachment to a person in the
group. It is the kinship group, the village group, or the faction group that one joined at some point in life
that mat-tered above all.
To love God above all means to become attached exclusively to Yahweh-God to the exclusion of any and all other deities. It would also entail attaching oneself to the group that clusters itself distinctly around this God.

To love one’s neighbor as oneself means to become exclusively attached to the people in one’s own neighborhood or village as if they were family. The full context of Leviticus 19:18 which Mark’s Jesus quotes makes it quite clear that “neighbor” means “fellow ethnic.” “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

This same idea characterizes “hate;” the correlative of love. Luke’s Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (14:26). Jesus is not commanding his followers to cultivate a negative emotion toward their intimate kinfolk but rather to detach themselves from the kinship group “for the sake of Jesus and the gospel” and join the Jesus movement.

The depth of detachment required of a follower of Jesus is expressed in the varying reports of Peter’s dialogue with Jesus. In Matthew (19:27) and Mark (10:28) Peter says, “We have left everything to follow you.” Luke specifies “everything” when Peter says, “Lo, we have left our homes and followed you” (18:28). Because one’s very life depends upon loyalty and attachment to the family, to leave home and kin is to leave everything meaningful in life, to risk death itself (see Luke 15:17).

The scribe who perfectly understands the cultural meanings just sketched wholeheartedly agrees and adds, “this is ‘much more’ than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (v. 33). Jesus approves his wise answer and grants him a public mark of honor that surely impressed the audience: “you are very close to enjoying God’s favor.”

The kind of group attachment that characterized the cultural world of Jesus is highly desired but difficult to attain in Western culture. As precious a cultural value as it is, Western individualism proves to be the biggest obstacle to community. Westerners tend to be very pragmatic with regard to group attachment. They join a group and remain members only as long as the group meets their personal needs. When it fails to do so, they drop out and join another group on similar terms.

In recent years, North Americans have been impressed with the small-group movement in Central and South America and attempted to replicate this reality in the United States. A Princeton University study of this phenomenon recently concluded that instead of fostering community the small-group movement in the United States it increased individualism.

No one had noticed that small groups play a moderating role in Latin cultures in the face of the potentially suffocating results of group attachment on a large scale. It is risky to import institutions and values across cultures without properly understanding them.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "Christian faith has retained the core of Israel's faith, while at the same time giving it new depth and breadth. The pious Jew prayed daily the words of the Book of Deuteronomy which expressed the heart of his existence:

  - ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord ’1 Jesus united into a single precept this commandment of love for God and the commandment of love for neighbor Since God has first loved us, love is now no longer a mere 'command' ; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us. In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant" (DCE, 1 ).

- "Reading these sacred texts... produces authentic fruits of conversion of heart" (EIA, 12).

- In their love for one another, the disciples imitate Jesus' love (CCC, 1823).
THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

The end of this passage is unfortunately omitted from the Lectionary. It reads, "according to the word of the Lord spoken through Elijah" (1 Kings 17:16b). Both Elijah and Elisha are called "man of God." As prophets, they were the mouthpiece of God, revealing messages of divine import and significance. Here, God speaks through the prophet and brings his words to fulfillment, bestowing blessing. We must not take for granted the fact that God is acting here; the prophet is the spokesman, but it is God who acts. Another piece of information brings a touch of color to this passage: the widow's coming from Zarephath suggests that she is a Gentile. Already in these historical books we see the dawning of a universalism in which God extends a hand of compassion and mercy to draw in all

A reading from the first Book of Kings (17:10–16)

In those days, Elijah the prophet went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the entrance of the city, a widow was gathering sticks there; he called out to her, “Please bring me a small cupful of water to drink.”

She left to get it, and he called out after her, “Please bring along a bit of bread.”

She answered, “As the L ORD, your God, lives, I have nothing baked; there is only a handful of flour in my jar and a little oil in my jug. Just now I was collecting a couple of sticks, to go in and prepare something for myself and my son; when we have eaten it, we shall die.”

Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid. Go and do as you propose. But first make me a little cake and bring it to me. Then you can prepare something for yourself and your son. For the L ORD, the God of Israel, says, ‘The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the L ORD sends rain upon the earth.’”

She left and did as Elijah had said. She was able to eat for a year, and he and her son as well; the jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, as the L ORD had foretold through Elijah.

* [17:1–24] The story of Elijah is in three parts. The first (chap. 17) describes how Elijah proclaimed a drought on God’s authority and how he survived during the drought. The second (chap. 18) describes how he ends the drought by bringing the populace back to exclusive worship of the Lord. The third
(chap. 19) describes Elijah’s despair at the failure of his prophetic mission and his consequent attempt to resign from the prophetic office.

This is but one in a series of forty-five prediction-fulfillment stories spread through the course of 1-2 Kings which emphatically emphasize God’s faithfulness in keeping promises. If God is so faithful in such small things, surely God will remain faithful to the great promise that David’s dynasty will have no end. In Mediterranean cultural context, the story plays out in this fashion. It is a period of great drought predicted by Elijah who is obviously a man on intimate terms with God. The ever-scarce food supply is even more scarce now. People live and survive in this culture by reciprocity chiefly between kin, which means mainly in the village. Villages tended to be one large, extended family. Hospitality to an outsider would be extended chiefly by a village leader. This is critical in the Middle East, a matter of life and death, because outside one’s own village, one is considered a threat and could be killed were it not for the hospitality which grants safe passage. In this story, the widow has very scarce goods. In fact, the drought is so bad she fully expects to die along with her child very shortly; still the obligation of extending hospitality to the stranger is strong, even in the direst of circumstances. Elijah, the outsider, assures the widow that God will reward her kindness. From yet another cultural perspective, Elijah is truly an effective broker or intermediary with God, the widow’s true and reliable patron. No doubt, the "widow" links this reading with today’s gospel (Mark 12:38-44). The widow with whom Elijah deals is hurt by the drought, but God comes to the rescue through the intervention of Elijah. The widow in the gospel is hurt by religious leaders who "devour the houses of widows:" and Jesus, also an effective broker with God, publicly chastises the leaders and surely urges God to rescue that widow as well.

Psalm 146 acknowledges and repeats the teaching of the preceding passage: our Creator and God cares for all, the work of divine hands. This psalm expresses so well God’s care for the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the blind, the stranger, and the widow and orphan (a connection with the First Reading). This stance is understood as divine justice, affirming the right relationship that underlies authentic righteous behavior. When the thwarted plans of the wicked are described at the end of the psalm, it subtly cries out for us to act justly, as God does.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 146:7, 8–9, 9–10)

Praise the Lord, my soul!
The L ORD keeps faith forever,  
severs justice for the oppressed,  
gives food to the hungry.  
The L ORD sets captives free.  
The L ORD gives sight to the blind.  
The L ORD raises up those who were bowed down;  
the L ORD loves the just.  
The L ORD protects strangers.  
The fatherless and the widow he sustains,  
but the way of the wicked he thwarts.  
The L ORD shall reign forever;  
your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

* [Psalm 146] A hymn of someone who has learned there is no other source of strength except the merciful God. Only God, not mortal human beings (Ps 146:3–4), can help vulnerable and oppressed people (Ps 146:5–9). The first of the five hymns that conclude the Psalter.
The psalmist sings praise to God who reliably provides for those whom society can not or will not help: the oppressed, the hungry, the captives, the blind, those bowed down, strangers, orphans, and widows. The wicked who are likely responsible for these disastrous experiences God will thwart. The congregation responds: Alleluia!

SECOND READING

The significance of this passage cannot be understood without a consideration of Leviticus 16, which describes Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). Yom Kippur was and still is considered the holiest day of the year for Jews. On this day, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies with the blood of goats and bulls, and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat. From that mercy seat, God's forgiveness would go out to the four corners of the earth and bring forgiveness and reconciliation with God. This passage in Hebrews tells us that Jesus, our perfect and blameless High Priest, has now taken his own blood and entered the heavenly sanctuary to bring about our forgiveness and reconciliation. He has become the mercy seat of the new law, from which has come our eternal redemption. Another important allusion to the Old Testament is found in the final verse of this passage where it reads, "offered once to take away the sins of many." In the fourth song of the servant in Second Isaiah (read on Good Friday), we find reference to the redemptive death of the servant, which brings about the forgiveness of sins (cf. Isaiah 53: 11-12). The author of Hebrews saw Jesus as the fulfillment of both these Old Testament images (the High Priest and the Servant). The author of Hebrews makes the point that this one perfect sacrifice of Jesus need never be repeated, for it has surpassed and completed what the Old Law never envisioned could be accomplished. When Christ appears again, this time it will be to bestow salvation at the end of time.

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (9:24–28)

Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one, but heaven itself, that he might now appear before God on our behalf.
Not that he might offer himself repeatedly,
  as the high priest enters each year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own;
  if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world.
But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice.
Just as it is appointed that human beings die once,
  and after this the judgment, so also Christ,
  offered once to take away the sins of many,
  will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him.

* [9:23–28] Since the blood of animals became a cleansing symbol among Old Testament prefigurations, it was necessary that the realities foreshadowed be brought into being by a shedding of blood that was infinitely more effective by reason of its worth (Heb 9:23). Christ did not simply prefigure the heavenly realities (Heb 9:24) by performing an annual sacrifice with a blood not his own (Heb 9:25); he offered the single sacrifice of himself as the final annulment of sin (Heb 9:26). Just as death is the unrepeatable act that ends a person's life, so Christ's offering of himself for all is the unrepeatable sacrifice that has once for all achieved redemption (Heb 9:27–28).
* [9:26] At the end of the ages: the use of expressions such as this shows that the author of Hebrews, despite his interest in the Platonic concept of an eternal world above superior to temporal reality here below, nevertheless still clings to the Jewish Christian eschatology with its sequence of “the present age” and “the age to come.”

* [9:28] To take away the sins of many: the reference is to Is 53:12. Since the Greek verb anapherō can mean both “to take away” and “to bear,” the author no doubt intended to play upon both senses: Jesus took away sin by bearing it himself. See the similar wordplay in Jn 1:29. Many is used in the Semitic meaning of “all” in the inclusive sense, as in Mk 14:24. To those who eagerly await him: Jesus will appear a second time at the parousia, as the high priest reappeared on the Day of Atonement, emerging from the Holy of Holies, which he had entered to take away sin. This dramatic scene is described in Sir 50:5–11.

Once again the sacred author returns to the imagery of Yorn Kippur, the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16), as a type of the death of Jesus. On this day, the high priest sacrificed a bull for his own sins and those of the people. Then he entered the Holy of Holies to incense the “mercy seat;” the place from which God dispensed mercy to his people, and to sprinkle it with blood from the bull. Next he slaughtered a goat for the sins of the people and sprinkled some of that on the mercy seat, too. The sacred author contrasts with this the sacrifice of Jesus: he died just once, which allowed him entry to the presence of God (which is what the mercy seat symbolized) in the sky. The blood of this sacrifice is not that of animals but of Jesus’ sacrifice of his life. The effect is Jesus took away sin, once and for all. At his second appearance he will bring salvation which has already been initiated to its final consummation. The judgment that follows death mentioned in v. 27 is probably a good link with today’s gospel (Mark 12:38-44) in which Jesus critiques the scribes for teaching the widow (and others) to impoverish herself, something even the culture did not approve of or tolerate. How fortunate to have the patronage of an effective High Priest whose sacrifice took away sin. How tragic to realize that sometimes even God’s representatives neglect this gift and mislead the people in their care.

**ALLELUIA (Mt 5:3)**
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**GOSPEL**

The Gospel reading marks the third reference to a widow in today’s readings. Can we suggest that in each situation (the widow who feeds Elijah, the widow who trusts in God for all her needs, and the widow who gives to God at the temple from her need) that the figure of the widow is employed to teach us something about the path of righteousness? The widow is portrayed in this Gospel passage as one who is neglected by the religious leaders (Mark 12:40), and yet shows us what true religion is all about by her small yet generous gift to the temple treasury. Throughout the Scriptures, the biblical authors portray God as caring for the poor. The widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and all who are in need are the concern of God and his people. In the psalms, the king, who is expected to be God’s representative on earth, bears the responsibility of caring for those in need (cf. Psalm 72:1-2, 4, 12-14). The Gospel shows Jesus in this same light, having a heart open to the needs of the poor, bringing them healing of body and consolation of spirit. The religious leaders fail to show or appreciate the kind of compassion expected of God’s ambassadors to the poor. Rather, their religious practice is for show and self-aggrandizement. They understand neither their calling nor their deepest responsibility. Earlier in this chapter of Mark’s account of the Gospel (12:28-34), Jesus teaches about the great commandment: love of God and neighbor. Does not the widow exemplify this teaching for all to see?
In the course of his teaching Jesus said to the crowds,
   “Beware of the scribes, who like to go around in long robes
   and accept greetings in the marketplaces,
   seats of honor in synagogues,
   and places of honor at banquets.
They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext
   recite lengthy prayers.
They will receive a very severe condemnation."
He sat down opposite the treasury
   and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury.
Many rich people put in large sums.
A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents.
Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them,
   “Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more
   than all the other contributors to the treasury.
For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth,
   but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had,
   her whole livelihood.”

* [12:35–37] Jesus questions the claim of the scribes about the Davidic descent of the Messiah, not to
deny it (Mt 1:1; Acts 2:20, 34; Rom 1:3; 2 Tm 2:8) but to imply that he is more than this. His superiority
derives from his transcendent origin, to which David himself attested when he spoke of the Messiah
with the name “Lord” (Ps 110:1). See also note on Mt 22:41–46.

SCRIBES
In a public scathing place and likely within earshot of his targets, Jesus hurls a scathing insult at the
scribes by urging the crowds to be wary of them. The scribes of Jesus’ time were experts in the Law of
Moses, scholars to whom people turned for proper understanding of God's development will as in
Scripture. They contributed to the development of rabbimism in the third century of the common era,
the forerunner of modern-day Judaism. Jesus publicly criticizes their behavior as a ceaseless grasping for
honor. The Talmud notes that when two people meet in the marketplace, the inferior in knowledge of
the Law should greet the other first. Since no one knew the Law as well as the Scribes, they sought out
and basked in this recognition.
In the Synagogue the scribes claimed the best seats which were those on platform facing the people.
People seated on these chairs rested their backs against the same wall that held the ark which contained
the Torah scrolls.
At banquets, the best seats reserved for people of importance like experts in the Law. Jesus concludes
his attack by accusing the scribes of “devouring widows’ houses.” No sooner had Jesus spoken than a
widow comes along and places two of the smallest coins in first-century Palestine into the coffers, thus
fulfilling her religious duty.

WIDOWS
Jesus' comment on the widow's donation is not a word of praise but rather a word of lament: "Truly I
say to you this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they
all contributed out of the1r abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had her
whole living” (Mark 12:43-44).
The word for "widow" in Hebrew carries the meaning of one who is silent, who is unable to speak. Recall that all of Mediterranean culture is divided along gender lines. Men belong in the public sphere; women remain secluded with the children deep within the home. Men play the public role, and women do not speak on their own behalf. A widow is already bereft of her husband, the male in whom she was embedded. If her eldest son was not yet married she was even more disadvantaged. And if she had no son at all, she might have to return to her family of origin (see Lev 22:13; Ruth 1:8) if that were still possible. As the Pastoral Epistles indicate, widows constituted a major concern in the early Christian community. Younger ones posed a special danger, and the author of those Epistles urged them to remarry (1 Tim 5:3-16, esp. v. 14). Because widows were not included in Hebrew inheritance laws, their constant concern was simply living from day to day. Any resources this widow had were meager at best. In the Mediterranean world, the cultural obligation upon everybody is to maintain one's status and do nothing to jeopardize or lessen it. If as Jesus observes, this woman has given to the Temple “all she has to live on,” the woman has acted very shamefully. She has deliberately worsened her status. Earlier in this Gospel Jesus said it is wrong to donate to the Temple while depriving one's parents of support (Mark 7:10-13 on the "qorban"). It would be doubly wrong for a needy person to donate to the Temple and plunge only deeper into poverty. Further, how could Jesus in good conscience praise this woman for donating "everything she had" to the Temple which in the very next verses Jesus predicts will be utterly destroyed? "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (13:2). Such perversity ill becomes a teacher who earned a reputation for compassion. Jesus does not praise but rather laments this woman's behavior. She has been taught "sacrificial giving" by her religious leaders, and that is the pity. These authorities promised to redistribute Temple collections to the needy. In actuality they spent the funds on conspicuous consumption instead; long robes and banquets. This is how they "devoured the estates of widows" (Mark 12:40). Occasional scandals in American churches suggest that little has changed over the centuries. Responsible stewardship is everyone's obligation.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Here we consider the various meanings of the word love as it relates to both God and neighbor. How important it is for us to understand that love of God and neighbor is truly one great command of Jesus" (DCE, 3, 10-11, 16-17).
- "Here we find a mandate for the Church and society to care for the needy and the poor as human resources increase. The work of charity calls for a pastoral sense of 'who is my neighbor' in the universal Catholic Church, and 'who are my brothers and sisters' in the human family" (GS, 9).
- "This apostolic exhortation of Pope Paul VI emphasizes that the evangelization of the Gospel, including deeds of love and mercy toward our neighbor, are essential for bringing the Gospel to life. We preach the Gospel by our deeds of mercy, compassion, and generous service" (EN, 31).
THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

Today's First Reading expresses the Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake" (v. 2). This belief developed late in Jewish history, largely as a result of the terrible persecution of Antiochus IV in 168 sc. Even when so many of Israel's best and most faithful believers were wantonly slaughtered in that horrible persecution, Jews refused to conclude that God was unfaithful. Since those who were martyred could not experience victory in this life, the belief arose that God would give them new life on the last day.

It is crucial to appreciate how such life was envisioned. The Jewish tradition did not settle for a spiritual afterlife. It asserted that God would raise the just up to a new bodily existence. God's gift would not be heaven but resurrection. Bodily resurrection flowed from the Jewish view of creation. Hellenistic culture devalued material realities in favor of the spiritual. The Jewish tradition was different. It saw all of creation as God's gift. It was confident that God would stand by the gift that was given. Therefore, material creation would certainly be a part of whatever future life God would offer. God had made the human body, and so God would raise up the just in a bodily manner. Jewish faith gave birth to bodily resurrection because it believed in a God who would never give up on creation. The good material world would always be a part of God's plan.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Daniel (12:1–3)

In those days, I Daniel,
heard this word of the Lord:
“At that time there shall arise
Michael, the great prince,
guardian of your people;
it shall be a time unsurpassed in distress
since nations began until that time.
At that time your people shall escape,
everyone who is found written in the book.
“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake;
some shall live forever,
others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace.
“But the wise shall shine brightly
like the splendor of the firmament,
and those who lead the many to justice
shall be like the stars forever.”

These verses of Daniel conclude the revelation presented in chapters 10 and 11. Having traced Israel's sufferings and tribulations, Daniel notes that it is about to encounter the worst suffering of all times. Daniel is writing these chapters (10-12) around the years 167 to 164 B.C.E., reflecting the period of Antiochus Epiphanes' persecution. There is no indication how long this distress is going to last. The good news is, "your people shall escape," something which will occur with the death of Antiochus. "Your
people" are very like the f.r.asidim, the "pious ones" with whom Daniel identifies him-self. It is very likely that Daniel is being very selective and re-ferring only to the observant IJ,asidim, those who shared his view of their contemporary experiences. (It is important not to confuse these IJ,asidim with medieval and modern Jewish groups carrying the same name. The IJ,asidim of Daniel's time Next we read the first and only unambiguous statement of belief in the resurrection of the dead in the entire Old Testa-ment. Note that he says "many" and not "all:' This probably reflects his conviction that it is only the observant members of his group, the IJ,asidim, who will be so rewarded. These are the ones who suffered under Antiochus. Some shall live for-ever ( or unto life everlasting, the first occurrence of this word in the Bible), but others to everlasting horror and disgrace. Scholars are not in agreement on the interpretation of this phrase. If it is an antonym to everlasting life, what would "everlasting death" mean? And why should the dead be raised only to experience everlasting death? It does, how-ever, fit the cultural pattern whereby people who feel that they are innocent but helpless are confident God will reward them. As for those who caused their problems, whom the in-nocent were unable to fend off while all were alive, well "you'll get yours, and God will give it to you!"

Finally, the wise (presumably Daniel and his fellow f:tasidim) will shine like the stars forever. The ancients believed that those who died took a place in the sky. Plato located them in the Milky Circle (= Way; The Republic 6.16, 29). Israelite tra-dition taught that the face of the elect would shine like the sun, and they would be like the light of the stars ( 4 Ezra 7 :97). The mother of her martyred Maccabee sons is assured that her sons are already stars ( 4 Mace 17 :4-5), having taken their place with the moon. As living beings, these celestial bodies (stars) continue to have impact upon human life. This is the reward for those who lead the many to justice.

Psalm 16 is a prayer of unshakable confidence in the Lord. That confidence is grounded early in the psalm in the relation-ship between the psalmist and God: "you are my Lord, I you are my only good" (16:2). Because of this relationship, the psalmist's whole being -heart, soul, and body - is secure. This trust remains firm even in the face of death. Commentators debate whether the psalmist's statement, "you will not abandon my soul to the netherworld" (v.10), is expressing a belief in an afterlife. It is possible that the psalmist is praying that God will forestall death until the end of a long earthly life. What is not debatable, however, is the source of the psalmist's hope: his closeness to the Lord. So intimate is the psalmist's connection to God, that he cannot imagine a future without God's presence. It is such intimate faith that in time leads to the belief in the Resurrection.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM  (Ps 16:5, 8, 9–10, 11)
O Lord, my allotted portion and my cup, you it is who hold fast my lot.
I set the L ORD ever before me;
      with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed.
Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices,
      my body, too, abides in confidence;
because you will not abandon my soul to the netherworld,
      nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption.
You will show me the path to life,
      fullness of joys in your presence,
      the delights at your right hand forever.

* [Psalm 16] In the first section, the psalmist rejects the futile worship of false gods (Ps 16:2–5), preferring Israel’s God (Ps 16:1), the giver of the land (Ps 16:6). The second section reflects on the wise and life-giving presence of God (Ps 16:7–11).
Nor let your devout one see the pit: Hebrew shahath means here the pit, a synonym for Sheol, the underworld. The Greek translation derives the word here and elsewhere from the verb shahath, “to be corrupt.” On the basis of the Greek, Acts 2:25–32; 13:35–37 apply the verse to Christ’s resurrection, “Nor will you suffer your holy one to see corruption.”

This lament is also a prayer of confidence by a Levite perhaps suffering from serious illness. The Levite expresses utmost confidence in God (his portion and his cup, cf. Jer 10:16; 51:19) who takes care of him. He keeps his attention focused completely on God. His heart (literally kidneys, the center of conscience and judgment), so long disquieted, will now rejoice. So too will his soul and entire body. As this psalm underwent development through frequent use in temple liturgies and by others, the sentiments also developed to reflect Israel’s growing conviction that there would be some kind of survival after death in the eternal presence of God. Those are the sentiments of the final verse selected for today’s response.

SECOND READING

The author of Hebrews continues to draw out the superiority of Jesus’ sacrifice. Yet although Jesus’ one sacrifice is perfect, it is not complete. Jesus must return to bring history to fulfillment. Although the author continues to present the work of Christ in Hellenistic categories, his belief in the end time indicates that he does not reject Jewish apocalyptic thought.

As Jesus sits at the right hand of God, "he waits until his enemies are made his footstool" (v. 13). His enemies are all the evils of the world: injustice, hatred, poverty, and disease. On the last day, Jesus will come again. On that day, all these evils will be made subject to his authority. At the Second Coming, the perfect sacrifice will attain the perfect ending.

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (10:11–14, 18)

Brothers and sisters:
Every priest stands daily at his ministry,
   offering frequently those same sacrifices
   that can never take away sins.
But this one offered one sacrifice for sins,
   and took his seat forever at the right hand of God;
   now he waits until his enemies are made his footstool.
For by one offering
   he has made perfect forever those who are being consecrated.
Where there is forgiveness of these,
   there is no longer offering for sin.

* [10:11–18] Whereas the Levitical priesthood offered daily sacrifices that were ineffectual in remitting sin (Heb 10:11), Jesus offered a single sacrifice that won him a permanent place at God’s right hand. There he has only to await the final outcome of his work (Heb 10:12–13; cf. Ps 110:1). Thus he has brought into being in his own person the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer 31:33–34) that has rendered meaningless all other offerings for sin (Heb 10:14–18).
* [10:13] Until his enemies are made his footstool: Ps 110:1 is again used; the reference here is to the period of time between the enthronement of Jesus and his second coming. The identity of the enemies is not specified; cf. 1 Cor 15:25–27.
These verses bring to a conclusion the presentation of Jesus' priestly act which began in Heb 8:1. It offers no new insight but rather repeats what has already become familiar in these readings. While all priests (the High Priest and all others) repeatedly offered sacrifices, they never removed sin. Jesus the High Priest offered one effective sacrifice and then took his rightful place at God's right hand, a place of honor and authority. The present tense (those who are being consecrated) designates an ongoing activity. Believers of all time continue to appropriate the eternal effects of Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus' work is ended; his followers have much to do. Yet, as the concluding verse indicates, those who have received forgiveness need no longer make offerings for sin. The gospel (Mark 13:24-32) offers the heartening news that when the Son of Man returns he will send out his messengers who will gather his elect, those who embraced the effects of his ever-effective sacrifice to be with him forever.

ALLELUIA (Lk 21:36)
Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to stand before the Son of Man.

GOSPEL

Chapter 13 of Mark's account of the Gospel is often called "The Little Apocalypse." It is a discourse by Jesus about the end of time, displaying many of the characteristics of apocalyptic literature. It is important, therefore, to read this kind of writing correctly. The upheaval in the sun, moon, and stars is not simply meant to indicate destruction. It is a way to illustrate the transformation of the present world into God's Kingdom. The text is not about demolition, but re-creation.

Christian faith sees the resurrection of the dead as part of God's re-creation of the world. This belief is an inheritance from Judaism. When God remakes all that is good according to God's good design, we too will be raised up bodily in God's presence. Because we believe that this is our future, it should increase our appreciation for the material world. Because we will be resurrected from the dead, we should never ignore or abuse our bodies. Because our world will be transformed, we should commit ourselves to be good stewards of God's creation. The material world was good when God made it, and it will retain that goodness in God's Kingdom. God will never abandon or discard the world around us. Neither should we. All that we see and touch is the handiwork of God. We must treasure it. It is the material of the new creation.

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to Mark (13:24–32)
Jesus said to his disciples:
"In those days after that tribulation
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from the sky,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
"And then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in the clouds’
with great power and glory,
and then he will send out the angels
and gather his elect from the four winds,
from the end of the earth to the end of the sky.
"Learn a lesson from the fig tree.
When its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves,
you know that summer is near.
In the same way, when you see these things happening,
know that he is near, at the gates.
Amen, I say to you, 
this generation will not pass away
until all these things have taken place.
Heaven and earth will pass away,
but my words will not pass away.
“But of that day or hour, no one knows,
neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

* [13:3–37] Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple (Mk 13:2) provoked questions that the four named disciples put to him in private regarding the time and the sign when all these things are about to come to an end (Mk 13:3–4). The response to their questions was Jesus’ eschatological discourse prior to his imminent death. It contained instruction and consolation exhorting the disciples and the church to faith and obedience through the trials that would confront them (Mk 13:5–13). The sign is the presence of the desolating abomination (Mk 13:14; see Dn 9:27), i.e., of the Roman power profaning the temple. Flight from Jerusalem is urged rather than defense of the city through misguided messianic hope (Mk 13:14–23). Intervention will occur only after destruction (Mk 13:24–27), which will happen before the end of the first Christian generation (Mk 13:28–31). No one but the Father knows the precise time, or that of the parousia (Mk 13:32); hence the necessity of constant vigilance (Mk 13:33–37). Luke sets the parousia at a later date, after “the time of the Gentiles” (Lk 21:24). See also notes on Mt 24:1–25:46.

* [13:26] Son of Man...with great power and glory: Jesus cites this text from Dn 7:13 in his response to the high priest, Are you the Messiah? (Mk 14:61). In Ex 34:5; Lv 16:2; and Nm 11:25 the clouds indicate the presence of the divinity. Thus in his role of Son of Man, Jesus is a heavenly being who will come in power and glory.

RELIGION OR POLITICS?
To place today's gospel reading in focus, it is important to re-member that in ancient Israel there were only two formal (i.e., free-standing) social institutions: kinship (family and family-like groups) and politics. The distinct social institutions recognized by modern Western culture as economics, education, and religion were embedded in those first two.

Thus, education took place within the family for the purpose of enculturating youngsters into proper ways of living and behaving as family members. Education also took place in the royal court to train individuals for roles in the palace: courtier, diplomat, etc.

Religion, too, was embedded in family and in politics. Family religion was rather private and focused on concern for ancestors and household gods (see Gen 31:34-35). Political religion was quite public and took place in the Temple through regular services, occasional pilgrimage feasts, and the like. That politics and religion were "identical" in ancient Israel is evident in the fact that the Hebrew language uses just one word for "palace" and "Temple!"

By predicting the imminent destruction of the Temple (Mark 13:1-2), Jesus announces the end of political Israel and the political institution in which it was embedded. Today’s verses which are carved from the totality of chapter 13 focus on God’s role in this event. The cosmic events (darkening of the sun and moon, stars falling from heaven, and shaking of the powers in the heavens) are entirely and exclusively under God’s control. No one else can manipulate these elements of creation (vv. 24-25). The next verses (26-27) echo descriptions of an official visit of an emperor, technically called a parousia in Greek. Roads are prepared for the entourage: potholes are filled in and chariot ruts are leveled (Isa 40:3-4, "every mountain and hill will be made low, and rough places a plain").
Messengers announce the coming of the emperor (Isa 52:7 "how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings") and gather the people to greet him (v.27). Great displays of power and honor are a very important part of the announcement.

WHEN IS THE END?

Mark's Jesus is absolutely convinced that everything he has announced will occur during the lifetime of his audience. We know Jesus died around 30 C.E., and the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. That Jesus survived birth and lived approximately to the age of thirty places him in a very select 10 percent of the population of his time and place. A large portion of Jesus' audience would have been considerably younger than he, severely disease-ridden, and facing ten or fewer years of life expectancy. In the light of this data from paleopathology (the study of ancient disease), it would seem Jesus expected the political end of Israel much sooner than it actually occurred.

He is so positive that he gives his word of honor: "Truly, I tell you" and "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will no pass away" (vv. 30-31). Secrecy, lying, and deception are so integral a part of safeguarding Mediterranean honor that people are at a loss to know when someone is telling the truth. To guarantee the truth of what one says, a person swears an oath: "By my life;" "As I live;" "Truly, Truly I say to you;" and the like.

Another way to guarantee the truth of one's statement is to say, "even if the impossible should happen, what I tell you is impossible not to happen. Heaven and earth are God's good creation and will last forever. Even if you can imagine the impossible (that they will disappear), my impossible sounding statement is definitely going to occur."

Westerners love to plan for the future. They invented future planning, believing they can estimate and cause events to take place within the next five to twenty-five years. Like the disciples, they too would like to know and try to calculate when “the end” will happen. Everyone needs to reread Jesus' final words: “No one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). And he’s not telling!

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us. Christ has risen, destroying death by His death; He has lavished life upon us so that, as sons in the Son, we can cry out in the Spirit: Abba, Father "g (GS, 22).
- "Just as bread that comes from the earth, after God's blessing has been invoked upon it, is no longer ordinary bread, but Eucharist, formed of two things, the one earthly and the other heavenly: so too our bodies, which partake of the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, but possess the hope of resurrection" (CCC, 1000).
- "Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection .... Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness" (CCC, 339).
DANIEL 7:13-14 Chapter 7 of the Book of Daniel presents the great dream vision of the prophet. It is the most important chapter of the book, both by its position and content. The vision deals with power. It seeks to establish who will rule the earth. Four terrible beasts representing the kingdoms of the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, and Greeks are all destroyed. This leads to the Lectionary passage in which the Ancient One (God) grants true and ultimate power to "one like a Son of man" (13).

The Son of Man has been understood as a heavenly figure similar to the archangel Michael, a human ruler on whom God bestows divine authority, or a collective person representing faithful Israel. All of these interpretations agree, however, that it is through the Son of Man that God will conform the world to the divine will. Justice will be established and evil will be destroyed. Daniel's vision was written for faithful Jews experiencing dreadful persecution under the Syrian king, Antiochus IV (168 -164 BC). By giving ultimate power to the Son of Man, Daniel is assuring his readers that the evil political rulers under whom they suffer will ultimately be defeated by God's power.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Daniel (7:13–14)

As the visions during the night continued, I saw one like a Son of man coming,
on the clouds of heaven;
when he reached the Ancient One
and was presented before him,
the one like a Son of man received dominion, glory, and kingship;
all peoples, nations, and languages serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not be taken away,
his kingship shall not be destroyed.

* [12:2] Many of those who sleep: Daniel does not envisage the universal resurrection as later developed. Two groups are distinguished, one that rises to eternal life, the other to reproach and disgrace. Then “those with insight” (11:33–35) are singled out for special honor.
* [12:3] Like the stars: like the heavenly host, or angels. Cf. Mt 22:30.

Daniel, like Ezekiel and John the Revealer, is an astral prophet in the Israelite tradition. This means that in ecstatic trance, an altered state of consciousness, these prophets analyze the constellations in the sky to discern God's will estab-lished there already at creation. The "one like a son of man" which Daniel sees is a constellation in human shape. The figure is not unlike the constellation that John the Revealer saw (Rev 1:13-16, quite likely Pleiades). Thus, a cosmic constella-tional son of man was quite familiar in the ancient Mediterranean world. Daniel then proceeds to interpret his vision.
Prior to this moment, he saw figures that resembled animals or beasts. Now he sees a human figure, a son of man. (It is not clear why the lectionary capitalizes "Son" in that phrase. The New American Bible translation does not capitalize that word.) Further, this human-like figure comes from God's realm, from the sky. Since the beasts represented pagan kingdoms, the human figure quite likely symbolizes a theocratic kingdom. To this figure, this kingdom, the Ancient of Days presents all the dominion previously possessed by the other kingdoms. Daniel, therefore, envisions the eventual appearance of a fifth monarchy. The son of man represents the saintly people of Israel.

Commentators correctly note that "kingdom" often seems to shift in Daniel into "king;' which is what one would expect in a culture characterized by collectivistic personality and collectivist selves. In general, a collectivist self places group goals and concerns above individual goals and concerns. Collectivist self draws identity from and identifies with the group. (This is not the same as the "corporate personality" notion proposed by exegetes in the previous century. That notion was considered to be synonymous with "primitive mentality;' something from which human beings would and should eventually evolve. Truth to tell, collectivistic personality characterizes 80 percent of the contemporary world population—including more than primitive peoples!) It was not difficult for later biblical tradition to shift the referent for the "son of man" from theocratic kingdom to an expected messianic king. It is at this point of our explanation that we can make an appropriate link to the gospel for today in which Jesus reflects upon kingdom and king (Mark 13:24-32).

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 93:1-2, 5

This is one of a series of psalms honoring YHWH as king and creator. The first two verses

PSALM 93:1, 1-2, 5 (1A) Psalm 93 is also about power - the power of God. Aware that God cannot be visualized, the psalmist robes the Almighty not with physical garments but with splendor. Strength is to God what rich vestments are to earthly kings. God's rule is connected to the act of creation. It was God who drove back the waters of chaos and established the inhabitable world. The act of creation established God as the King of creation, and God's continuing kingship is the guarantee that the world will endure. This is what the psalm means when it says God's "throne stands firm" (2). Yet God's authority is not limited to the material stuff of creation. It extends to the human heart. This is why the psalm ends praising God's decrees that guide the ordering of human society. Both the material world of earth, sea, and sky and the human world of justice, goodness, and peace flow from God's strength and glory.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 93:1, 1–2, 5)

The LORD is king, in splendor robed; robed is the LORD and girt about with strength.

And he has made the world firm,
not to be moved.
Your throne stands firm from of old;
from everlasting you are, O LORD.
Your decrees are worthy of trust indeed;
holiness befits your house,
O LORD, for length of days.

* [Psalm 93] A hymn celebrating the kingship of God, who created the world (Ps 93:1–2) by defeating the sea (Ps 93:3–4). In the ancient myth that is alluded to here, Sea completely covered the land, making it impossible for the human community to live. Sea, or Flood, roars in anger against God, who is personified in the storm. God's utterances or decrees are given authority by the victory over Sea (Ps 93:5).
* [93:1] The LORD is king: lit., “the LORD reigns.” This Psalm, and Ps 47; 96–99, are sometimes called enthronement Psalms. They may have been used in a special liturgy during which God’s ascent to the throne was ritually reenacted. They have also been interpreted eschatologically, pointing to the coming of God as king at the end-time.

* [93:3] The flood: the primordial sea was tamed by God in the act of creation. It is a figure of chaos and rebellion, cf. Ps 46:4.

This is one of a series of psalms honoring YHWH as king and creator. The first two verses establish the cosmic setting; the "throne" of God is a constellation. Since God created all of this at the very beginning, it is obviously "from of old;/ from everlasting." While this and other psalms were rooted in Canaanite mythology, Israel always "enculturated" what it borrowed. Verse 5 emphasizes obedience to God's covenant decrees. The result is that Israel will be holy because it com-plies with God's will. In this way, obedient and holy Israel will adorn the house of the Lord with holiness.

SECOND READING

REVELATION 1:5-8 Having considered the Son of Man and the Lord as King, we reflect on the role of Jesus Christ. This passage from the beginning of the Book of Revelation makes two astounding claims: Jesus is the first-born of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. The two claims are connected. It was through the victory of his Resurrection that God has be-stowed ultimate authority upon him. The profession that Jesus "is coming amid the clouds" (v. 7) is a reference to the Son of Man vision of Daniel 7. The author of Revelation sees Jesus as the Son of Man. As the Son of Man, Jesus is to destroy every force that is opposed to God's will. Through his Resurrection, God's authority is now exercised over all things. God's claim to be "the Alpha and the Omega" expresses the scope of the power. Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alpha-bet and omega is the last. Therefore, God's power, now active in Jesus, ex-tends from the beginning to the end of all things.

A reading from the Book of Revelation (1:5–8)

Jesus Christ is the faithful witness,
the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth.
To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,
who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father,
to him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.
Behold, he is coming amid the clouds,
and every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him.
All the peoples of the earth will lament him.
Yes. Amen.
"I am the Alpha and the Omega,“ says the Lord God,
“the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty.”

* [1:4–8] Although Revelation begins and ends (Rev 22:21) with Christian epistolary formulae, there is nothing between Rev 4; 22 resembling a letter. The author here employs the standard word order for greetings in Greek letter writing: "N. to N., greetings;"; see note on Rom 1:1.

* [1:5] Freed us: the majority of Greek manuscripts and several early versions read “washed us”; but “freed us” is supported by the best manuscripts and fits well with Old Testament imagery, e.g., Is 40:2.

* [1:8] The Alpha and the Omega: the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. In Rev 22:13 the same words occur together with the expressions “the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End”; cf. Rev 1:17
The book of Revelation is the record of John's experiences in altered states of consciousness. He is an astral seer who professes faith in the resurrected Jesus, but he also maintains that he belongs to the house of Israel. The visions took place over an extended period of time. Some preceded the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, while others were experienced after this date. Obviously, the final edition of this book was sometime after A.D. 70. The basic format of the book is a letter (1:4-3:22; 20:11-22:21) into which various visions have been inserted (4:1-11:19; 12:1-16:21; 17:1-20:10; 21:1-22:5). In vision, John experienced the cosmic Son of Man who gave edicts to the angels of seven Asian Jesus-groups while he was on the island of Patmos, off the coast of Ephesus (Western Turkey).

Today's verses are drawn from the opening of the letter (1:4-5, 7-8) and feature traditional elements. There is a greeting (4c-5a) and a thanksgiving directed to God (w. 5b-6). The greeting comes from Jesus Messiah introduced in kinship terms-firstborn of the dead-and in political terms-the first ruler of the earth. The blessing or thanksgiving that follows (vv. 5b-6) acknowledges what was done in the past (loved us, freed us from sins by his blood, made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father). It also sends wishes for good things in the immediate future (vv. 7-8). He is coming soon just as he went (Acts 1:9): by means of clouds. When he comes, all will mourn. Mourning refers to a ritual action intended to protest the presence of evil (e.g., see 1 Cor 5:2). Usually this is done by prayer, fasting, wearing sack-cloth and ashes, depriving oneself of sleep (usually called .. vigil). The fact that all will mourn indicates that Jesus' death was an evil act.

The final verse presents a divine pronouncement from the Lord God. He identifies himself as the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet. Since only 2 percent of the population at the time were literate, John's message is not for ordinary people. Few knew the alphabet, and fewer still knew how to manipulate the letters of the alphabet for purposes of divination. Thus the hidden meaning of these letters reveals something about God. God's name tells us who God really is, hence this is a full disclosure of God's essence. This is why it must remain hidden and mysterious, for if a person knew that name he would have power over God.

The gospel for this feast (Gohn 18:33b-37) recounts the scene in which Jesus is identified as King of Judeans. He concludes: "for this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth:' In Revelation, the risen and cosmic Jesus is going to testify to the truth for John the astral prophet. How blessed to have a friend like Jesus to lead us to truth.

**ALLELUIA (Mk 11:9, 10)**
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come!

**GOSPEL**

**JOHN 18:33B-37** On this Solemnity of Christ the King, the Gospel has obviously been chosen because it gives to Jesus the title, "King." As Jesus describes his kingdom to Pilate, though, it might appear that Jesus' reign differs from the earlier readings of this Sunday. Daniel, Psalm 93, and Revelation all refer to a kingship that destroys the evil of the world. But Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom does not belong to this world.

This incongruity disappears, however, when we examine Jesus' words more closely. When Jesus says his kingdom does not belong to this world, we should not suppose that Jesus intends to establish his kingdom in some heavenly realm. Jesus is not talking about location. He is talking about power. He does not intend to abandon this world but to transform it. His mission is to change the world by destroying every evil that is contrary to God's purpose. "[T]his world" will become something new - the Kingdom of God.
We who follow Christ the King are called to share in his mission. We are not to turn our backs to the world around us and yearn for a heavenly escape. We hasten God's Kingdom by our commitment to justice and peace. In this way, we will demonstrate our allegiance to Christ and help to extend his rule to every person and place.

+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (18:33b–37)

Pilate said to Jesus,

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus answered, “Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?”

Pilate answered, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?”

Jesus answered, “My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here.”

So Pilate said to him, “Then you are a king?”

Jesus answered, “You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

* [18:32] The Jewish punishment for blasphemy was stoning (Lv 24:16). In coming to the Romans to ensure that Jesus would be crucified, the Jewish authorities fulfilled his prophecy that he would be exalted (Jn 3:14; 12:32–33). There is some historical evidence, however, for Jews crucifying Jews.

* [18:37] You say I am a king: see Mt 26:64 for a similar response to the high priest. It is at best a reluctant affirmative.

**KINGSHIP AND POLITICS**

John 18:28-19:16 is the centerpiece of John’s passion narrative - It can be structured into seven scenes by attending to the shifts from outside (e.g., 18:28-32) to inside (e.g., 33-38a). In the central scene (19:1-3), the soldiers mock Jesus and call him derisively “King of the Judeans.” In John’s Gospel people who speak in irony frequently speak the truth. Jesus is indeed King! But what does this mean? John’s Jesus will explain.

In today’s verses, one cultural element that stands out is Jesus’ sarcastic responses to the procurator Pilate. When asked point-blank whether he is “King of the Judeans” Jesus asks Pilate whether he is personally interested or is simply replicating gossip. When Pilate attempts to conclude from Jesus’ explanation that he is indeed a king, Jesus again side steps by responding: “That is what you say!” Placing this dialogue in a cultural light shows Pilate to be somewhat restrained. Being of a higher status and different ethic background than Jesus, Pilate did not have to put up with wisecracks. Still, whether he liked this dialogue or not, Pilate had to determine whether Jesus posed any real threat to Rome. Weak-spined sycophant that he was, Pilate seems nevertheless to have been genuinely curious about Jesus.

Jesus separates his rightful status from the political realm into which it has been cast by his accusers. “My kingship is riot of this world” (v. 36). If Jesus had political aspirations, his subjects would have fought against his arrest. This is not the arena in which he consciously chooses to defend himself.
KINGSHIP AND TRUTH
Jesus prefers instead to be known as one who "bears witness to the truth!" In John's Gospel, Jesus doesn't preach the kingdom of God or of heaven as in the Synoptics. John rather presents Jesus as one who uniquely reveals and speaks the truth about God. Like the prophets of old, John's Jesus speaks the will of God for the here-and-now. Jesus' followers are not subjects in a kingdom but persons who hear the truth and respond to it. It is in this and not in a political sense that Jesus can be understood as king and possessing a kingdom. Jesus concludes his comment to Pilate with a veiled challenge: "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice!" The implicit challenge is clear to Pilate: "Will you listen to me and accept the truth, God's plan for salvation?" Pilate chooses to evade the challenge: "Truth, eh? What is that?"
This gospel makes a very appropriate conclusion to the Sundays of this cycle and their Scripture readings. Sunday after Sunday, believers have heard Jesus' witness to the truth in the gospels and learned the power of its cultural impact in these reflections and in the homily. Jesus' challenge to Pilate challenges modern believers as well: "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Have you heard and responded to the voice of Jesus?

KING BEFORE TIME
Celebrating this particular Sunday as the feast of Christ the King offers yet another challenge to believers, particularly those who live in a democracy. Since its founding as a republic, the United States vigorously rejected any effort to impose a king's rule over it. They would not accept King George of England, nor would they crown George Washington as king either. Jesus denied kingship in the political sense, too. The kingship celebrated today is a theological construct contributed to the Church in part by Franciscan theology. The Franciscans who helped develop this observance called it "the feast of the absolute predestination of Christ." Taking their cue from texts like Colossians 1:15, they reasoned that Christ was the firstborn of all creation. God who exists outside of time knows the existence of all creation at once. To create the first flesh-and-blood human in the divine image and likeness, God needed a flesh-and-blood model. Jesus incarnate was that model. This is how the Franciscans understood the kingship of Christ. Clearly, American believers cannot blindly imitate their Mediterranean ancestors in the faith. Only after grasping the cultural dimensions of their ancestors' beliefs can Americans begin to translate and incarnate those insights into their own distinctive culture, Sunday by Sunday.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION
• "The Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass. For every benefit which the People of God during its earthly pilgrimage can offer to the human family stems from the fact that the Church is 'the universal sacrament of salvation, simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God's love' (GS, 45).
• "But Jesus knows that God's kingdom is of a completely different kind; it is not built on arms and violence. The multiplication of the loaves itself becomes both the sign that he is the Messiah and a watershed in his activity: henceforth the path to the Cross becomes ever clearer; there, in the supreme act of love, the promised kingdom, the kingdom of God, will shine forth" (Benedict XVI, Homily, November 25, 2012).
• "We proclaim your Death, 0 Lord,/ and profess your Resurrection,/ until you come again" (Order of Mass, The Roman Missal.)
FEAST DAYS AND SOLEMNITIES
PRESENTATION OF THE LORD

FIRST READING

The Book of Malachi is very brief, only three chapters long. This short book covers a lot of ground, however. Malachi, whose name means "messenger," castigates the priests and Levites for their sins and for their transgressions of the laws of sacrifice. Then there are the sins of the people, which include adultery. Here in chapter 3, Malachi goes on to preach that evildoers must repent. They need to be purified and refined like gold and silver. Then, the distinction between the just and the wicked will become clear. The just are those who serve the Lord, and they will be treated with compassion. This early part of chapter 3 that we read today is a summary of the overall theme of the Book of Malachi: Prepare! Become repentant! Be compassionate! Prepare for the Lord's coming! This is the same message that is heard in the Temple in today's Gospel passage.

Mal 3:1–4
Now I am sending my messenger—he will prepare the way before me;* And the lord whom you seek will come suddenly to his temple; The messenger of the covenant whom you desire—see, he is coming! says the LORD of hosts.
But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand firm when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire, like fullers' lye. He will sit refining and purifying silver, and he will purify the Levites, refining them like gold or silver, that they may bring offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD, as in ancient days, as in years gone by.

[3:1] My messenger...before me: Mt 11:10 applies these words to John the Baptist; Mt 11:14 further identifies John as Elijah (see Mal 3:23). Some take God’s messenger in v. 1a to be a person distinct from “the lord” and “the messenger of the covenant” in v. 1b; others hold that they are one and the same person. Some consider “the lord” and “the messenger of the covenant” to be divine, while others hold that in the text’s literal sense he is a messianic earthly ruler.

The section (3:1–5) offers an entirely new focus on the “messenger” who will appear before the Lord’s judgment. Verses 1a and 5 are first-person oracles representing God, while verses 2–4 are a third-person narration of the prophet. God announces that “my messenger” will be sent to prepare “the way before me” (v. 1a), while the prophet proclaims the coming of this messenger (v. 1b). The identity of the messenger of the covenant is unclear. Verses 1b–4 are confusing. Did the editor of the book identify “my messenger” with the prophet Malachi (see p. 625)? Will the “messenger of the covenant” fulfill a Levitical role (see 2:4–8; compare Isa 40:3)? Are “my messenger” and the “messenger of the covenant” different individuals or the same individual? Does the description designate an angelic being? God? Or the imminent presence of God? The prophet probably envisioned “my messenger” as a Levitical figure. A later editor, however, identified him as Elijah (see 3:23 [4:5]). It is possible that the Levitical figure could also function as the
messenger of the covenant.” While commentators are divided about the identity of the messengers in Malachi, the messenger is unanimously identified in the Gospel traditions as John the Baptist (see Mark 1:2–8; Matt 3:1–11; Luke 3:2–16).

Verses 2–4 describe the coming of the Lord as judge in traditional metaphorical language. The double questions about the coming of the Lord refer to battle imagery (v. 2a; see 2 Kgs 10:4; Amos 2:15). “Like a refiner’s fire or like the fuller’s lye” are consistent images in prophecy (see Isa 1:25; Jer 6:29–30; Ezek 22:17–22). In Malachi the images signify that God will remove all impurities and cleanse the sons of Levi (vv. 2b–3; compare Zech 13:9).

In verse 4 the prophet compares future Levitical sacrifices on behalf of Judah and Jerusalem with the sacrifices that pleased the Lord in the past. The era of Moses is an appropriate identification for that period (see Jer 2:2; Isa 63:9; 11; compare Amos 5:25; Jer 7:22). The purification and acceptance of Levitical sacrifices (vv. 2–4) present a sharp contrast to the concluding verse of the section, which enumerates the evildoers who will be judged (v. 5; see 2:17c).

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 24 is a hymn of praise to the Creator in the form of a series of questions and answers: "Who is this king of glory? I The Lord of hosts; he is the king of glory" (v. 10). The portals or gates are to open so that he may come in. And these gates, like a council of elders, are bowed down and waiting for their king to come back from battle. How fitting that they are told to lift up their heads and proudly welcome the Lord. This same idea is presented in another way in today's Gospel, as this is what both Simeon and the prophetess Anna foretold about Jesus when he was presented in the Temple.

Responsorial Psalm 24:7, 8, 9, 10

Lift up your heads, O gates; be lifted, you ancient portals, that the king of glory may enter. Who is this king of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in war.

Lift up your heads, O gates; rise up, you ancient portals, that the king of glory may enter. Who is this king of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the king of glory.

* [Psalm 24] The Psalm apparently accompanied a ceremony of the entry of God (invisibly enthroned upon the ark), followed by the people, into the Temple. The Temple commemorated the creation of the world (Ps 24:1–2). The people had to affirm their fidelity before being admitted into the sanctuary (Ps 24:3–6; cf. Ps 15). A choir identifies the approaching God and invites the very Temple gates to bow down in obeisance (Ps 24:7–10).

* [24:4–5] Lit., “the one whose hands are clean.” The singular is used for the entire class of worshipers.

* [24:7, 9] Lift up your heads, O gates, you ancient portals: the literal meaning would involve disassembly of the gates, since the portcullis (a gate that moves up and down) was unknown in the ancient world. Extra-biblical parallels might also suggest a full personification of the circle of gate towers: they are like a council of elders, bowed down and anxious, awaiting the return of the army and the great warrior gone to battle.

Like Psalm 15, this psalm appears to have accompanied the ceremony of admittance to the temple on a solemn occasion (compare v. 3 with Ps 15:1, and vv. 4–6 with Ps 15:2–5). One had to affirm commitment to the covenant in order to appear before the Lord. Verses 1–2 and 7–10 reflect the ceremony. In the first verses the Lord’s sovereignty over the created world is celebrated. People of that time imagined that the earth was suspended over vast waters, supported by great pillars. Verses 7–10 describe the procession of the Lord approaching the temple in triumph. Two choirs, singing antiphonally, identify the
approaching Lord (perhaps represented by the ark carried by priests). The psalm invites worshipers to commit themselves anew to their Creator-Lord as they join in the triumphant procession.

SECOND READING

Jesus was truly human and truly divine. This reading from Hebrews helps us believe the part that is so difficult, his true humanity. He became like his brothers and sisters in every way. Still, it was up to Jesus to free them from the power of death. Death had been brought into the world by the devil (see Wisdom 1:1-3, 2:23-24). Death meant severing relations with God. But Jesus came to face death himself, having become human. In doing so, he would free the descendants of Abraham. Becoming human in every way meant that Jesus would be tested and tempted. He must have felt especially tempted to avoid his own suffering and Death. Undertaking this for us, though, he freed us from the fear of death.

Heb 2:14–18

Now since the children share in blood and flesh, he likewise shared in them, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life. Surely, he did not help angels but rather the descendants of Abraham; therefore, he had to become like his brothers in every way, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

The fear of death (Heb 2:15) is a religious fear based on the false conception that death marks the end of a person’s relations with God (cf. Ps 115:17–18; Is 38:18). Jesus deliberately allied himself with the descendants of Abraham (Heb 2:16) in order to be a merciful and faithful high priest. This is the first appearance of the central theme of Hebrews, Jesus the great high priest expiating the sins of the people (Heb 2:17), as one who experienced the same tests as they (Heb 2:18).

2:1–18 The humanity of Jesus. Chapter 2 begins with the first of the many exhortations of the preacher to his congregation. The danger they face is called that of “drifting away.” We are not yet told exactly what this means, but we shall see that it involves abandoning faith and especially hope, in effect ceasing to be true Christians. This exhortation draws the conclusion from the first chapter: since the Son is superior to the angels, the message of salvation he brought is even more to be obeyed than the law of Moses, which came through angels. Verse 3 clearly implies that Hebrews is being written in a second- or third-generation church, but one which has experienced miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit as evidence confirming the message (v. 4).

The author again takes up the argument that Christ is superior to the angels, but from a new angle. In chapter 1 Christ was superior as the Son of God; here he is superior because he is a human being. The argument again is based on Scripture as verses 6–8 quote Ps 8:5–7, but this time the author explicitly interprets the text he quotes. Two features of his interpretation are important. First, he understands the passage as referring not to humanity in general but to Jesus the man. And second, he reverses the meaning of the original psalm, which had said that God created human beings “a little lower than the angels.” For Hebrews, Jesus the man is superior to the angels but was made “for a little while lower” than them in that he suffered death (v. 9). The subjection of all things to Christ still belongs to the future, but the process has begun with Jesus’ exaltation to heaven after his death.
What is of most interest to the author in declaring the true humanity of Jesus is the fact that he shares that humanity with all human beings, who in verse 10 are called God’s “children.” In order that Jesus’ death might be for all a liberation from slavery to the power of death (vv. 14–15), Jesus had to share their human nature fully. Verses 12–13 quote Ps 22:23 and Isa 8:17–18 with the supposition that Christ is speaking the inspired words. He is a brother to human beings, and like them he praises and puts his trust in the Father. Jesus’ solidarity with humanity is also brought out in their common origin in the Father (v. 11), their sharing in flesh and blood (v. 14), and above all their sharing in death itself. The last verses of the chapter perform the typical Hebrews’ function of announcing new themes to be taken up. Jesus must share fully in humanity because he is to take on the role of high priest offering himself for the sins of his fellow human beings (v. 17). In particular he is a merciful and faithful high priest. His merciful character, suggested already in verse 18, will be spelled out further in chapter 5; his faithfulness is the subject of the next paragraph.

GOSPEL READING

The theological centerpiece of this part of the Gospel according to Luke is in verses 29-32, in which Simeon (whose name means "God has heard") proclaimed to God that he had seen the salvation of all peoples in this child. This is the familiar, touching, and dramatic story of Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the Temple as their firstborn son. They were following the tradition and law to consecrate him to the Lord and to offer their own gifts.

Simeon first praises and thanks God for allowing him this honor. Simeon knew that before his death he would see the Christ, and he recognized who Jesus was and who he was to become. Taking the child into his arms, Simeon told his parents of their son’s destiny, and that Mary herself would experience great anguish and pain. In his own way, Simeon was telling them to prepare for the Lord’s coming. The prophetess Anna, whose name means "grace" and "favor," is a symbol of those who long for the Redeemer. She waits patiently day after day in the Temple. Although Simeon is not a priest, both he and Anna embody service of God that is the heart of the Temple. The pairing of these two people corresponds to Zechariah and Elizabeth in chapter 1 of this Gospel. The Lord has come before us. We now wait to see him in our coming into heaven. While we wait we are to help others know that the Lord has come.

+ A Reading from the Gospel of Luke (2:22–40)

When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord,” and to offer the sacrifice of “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,” in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying: “Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.”
The child’s father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth. When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Their purification: syntactically, their must refer to Mary and Joseph, even though the Mosaic law never mentions the purification of the husband. Recognizing the problem, some Western scribes have altered the text to read “his purification,” understanding the presentation of Jesus in the temple as a form of purification; the Vulgate version has a Latin form that could be either “his” or “her.” According to the Mosaic law (Lv 12:2–8), the woman who gives birth to a boy is unable for forty days to touch anything sacred or to enter the temple area by reason of her legal impurity. At the end of this period she is required to offer a year-old lamb as a burnt offering and a turtledove or young pigeon as an expiation of sin. The woman who could not afford a lamb offered instead two turtledoves or two young pigeons, as Mary does here. They took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord: as the firstborn son (Lk 2:7) Jesus was consecrated to the Lord as the law required (Ex 13:2, 12), but there was no requirement that this be done at the temple. The concept of a presentation at the temple is probably derived from 1 Sm 1:24–28, where Hannah offers the child Samuel for sanctuary services. The law further stipulated (Nm 3:47–48) that the firstborn son should be redeemed by the parents through their payment of five shekels to a member of a priestly family. About this legal requirement Luke is silent.

Awaiting the consolation of Israel: Simeon here and later Anna who speak about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem represent the hopes and expectations of faithful and devout Jews who at this time were looking forward to the restoration of God’s rule in Israel. The birth of Jesus brings these hopes to fulfillment.

And you yourself a sword will pierce: Mary herself will not be untouched by the various reactions to the role of Jesus (Lk 2:34). Her blessedness as mother of the Lord will be challenged by her son who describes true blessedness as “hearing the word of God and observing it” (Lk 11:27–28 and Lk 8:20–21).
The emphasis is less on the purification of Mary than on the presentation of Jesus in the temple, where he will receive a more official recognition as the promised Savior of Israel. The temple symbolizes for Luke the continuity between Judaism and Christianity. The first announcement of the definitive act of salvation takes place in the temple (1:11), Jesus teaches in the temple (19:47), and the disciples continue to worship in the temple well into the new age (24:53; Acts 3:1).

Simeon and Anna are faithful, humble Israelites waiting in the temple for the revelation of God’s salvation. Just and pious (see 1:6), they are open to the Holy Spirit’s inspiration. Simeon recognizes Jesus as the Anointed of the Lord and in his Nunc Dimittis (2:29–32) further prophesies that Jesus will be a “light for revelation to the Gentiles.” In blessing the parents, he warns that this child will be a sign opposed and that Mary will be pierced with a sword. With these two utterances of Simeon, we are given a foreshadowing of the universal salvation that will be proclaimed in Jesus and of the necessity of suffering in the mission of this Messiah. The shadow of the cross falls across the Holy Family. The later followers of Jesus are not to be surprised that suffering is encountered in their pursuit of a gospel life. Even families and friendships will be broken up as “the thoughts of many hearts” are laid bare, because the peace Jesus brings will not be a counterfeit covering secret divisions (12:51–53).

2:41–52 Jesus in his Father’s house. Verse 40 sounds like a conclusion setting the stage for Jesus’ adult career. The story of Jesus’ origins seems to be complete with the family’s return to their hometown after his birth and the fulfillment of the law’s prescriptions. But a unique story has been added. It serves to illustrate the wisdom and grace with which this boy is said to be endowed and makes even more evident his special mission and destiny. Like many childhood stories of famous people, this one is recalled because it shows glimmers in Jesus’ boyhood of the qualities that will emerge in a superior way in his manhood.

Jesus and his parents journey to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. The next time Luke portrays Jesus on his way to Jerusalem it will be for the Passover again; it will be his final trip to Jerusalem, and the Jewish feast will coincide with his own Passover. Jesus is also “lost” then for three days before he reappears as the victorious risen Lord.

At his presentation, Jesus was unable to speak for himself; others interpreted his identity and mission for him. Now he proclaims the meaning of his life. He states the priority of God’s claim in his mission. His life has a meaning that transcends the relationships of his human family. Thus he confirms the sword prophecy of Simeon. The astonishment of Jesus’ parents is difficult to reconcile with the revelations surrounding their child’s birth. This is a sign that some of the infancy stories were originally passed along independently of one another. It also underlines the fact that the full understanding of Jesus’ identity and mission awaits the resurrection.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "Taken up to heaven and glorified after he had thus fully accomplished his mission, Christ dwells on earth in his Church" (CCC, 669).
- "Inasmuch as they are creatures, these perceptible realities can become means of expressing the action of God who sanctifies men, and the action of men who offer worship to God. The same is true of signs and symbols taken from the social life of man: washing and anointing, breaking bread and sharing the cup can express the sanctifying presence of God and man’s gratitude toward his Creator" (CCC, 1148).
- "Christ is always present in his church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass both in the person of his minister ... and most of all in the eucharistic species .... He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church. Lastly, he is present when the church prays and sings, for he has promised ‘where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them’1“ (SC, 7).
THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD A

FIRST READING

The Lectionary gives a series of four options for the First Reading for the Vigil Mass of Pentecost. These comments will focus on the reading from the Book of Genesis. One point of interest is that this is the first time since the Easter Vigil that we are hearing a text from the Old Testament. The Church’s liturgy during Easter focuses our attention on the unfolding story of the power of Christ’s Resurrection. As we come to the end of the Easter season, we are taken back in the readings to primeval salvation history. In Hebrew rhetoric, an author repeats a word or phrase for the sake of emphasis. Though it is not as clear in the English translation of this passage from Genesis, the Hebrew word for language or speech recurs five times, and of those, the words "the same language" appear twice (11:1, 6). Language, which had been the fundamental means of communication and communion, has become a source of confusion and disunity. This reading stands in direct contrast to the experience of Pentecost as described in Acts, when the different languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem are all understood by the Spirit filled Apostles (see 2:4-13).

A reading from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (1:1–11)

In the first book, Theophilus,
I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught
until the day he was taken up,
after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit
to the apostles whom he had chosen.
He presented himself alive to them
by many proofs after he had suffered,
appearing to them during forty days
and speaking about the kingdom of God.
While meeting with the them,
he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem,
but to wait for “the promise of the Father
about which you have heard me speak;
for John baptized with water,
but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”
When they had gathered together they asked him,
“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”
He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons
that the Father has established by his own authority.
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
throughout Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”
When he had said this, as they were looking on,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. 
While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, 
suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. 
They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? 
This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven 
will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”

* [1:1–26] This introductory material (Acts 1:1–2) connects Acts with the Gospel of Luke, shows that the apostles were instructed by the risen Jesus (Acts 1:3–5), points out that the parousia or second coming in glory of Jesus will occur as certainly as his ascension occurred (Acts 1:6–11), and lists the members of the Twelve, stressing their role as a body of divinely mandated witnesses to his life, teaching, and resurrection (Acts 1:12–26).
* [1:3] Appearing to them during forty days: Luke considered especially sacred the interval in which the appearances and instructions of the risen Jesus occurred and expressed it therefore in terms of the sacred number forty (cf. Dt 8:2). In his gospel, however, Luke connects the ascension of Jesus with the resurrection by describing the ascension on Easter Sunday evening (Lk 24:50–53). What should probably be understood as one event (resurrection, glorification, ascension, sending of the Spirit—the paschal mystery) has been historicized by Luke when he writes of a visible ascension of Jesus after forty days and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. For Luke, the ascension marks the end of the appearances of Jesus except for the extraordinary appearance to Paul. With regard to Luke’s understanding of salvation history, the ascension also marks the end of the time of Jesus (Lk 24:50–53) and signals the beginning of the time of the church.
* [1:4] The promise of the Father: the holy Spirit, as is clear from the next verse. This gift of the Spirit was first promised in Jesus’ final instructions to his chosen witnesses in Luke’s gospel (Lk 24:49) and formed part of the continuing instructions of the risen Jesus on the kingdom of God, of which Luke speaks in Acts 1:3.
* [1:6] The question of the disciples implies that in believing Jesus to be the Christ (see note on Lk 2:11) they had expected him to be a political leader who would restore self-rule to Israel during his historical ministry. When this had not taken place, they ask if it is to take place at this time, the period of the church.
* [1:7] This verse echoes the tradition that the precise time of the parousia is not revealed to human beings; cf. Mk 13:32; 1 Thes 5:1–3.
* [1:8] Just as Jerusalem was the city of destiny in the Gospel of Luke (the place where salvation was accomplished), so here at the beginning of Acts, Jerusalem occupies a central position. It is the starting point for the mission of the Christian disciples to “the ends of the earth,” the place where the apostles were situated and the doctrinal focal point in the early days of the community (Acts 15:2, 6). The ends of the earth: for Luke, this means Rome.

Luke alone among the New Testament authors (here and in his gospel for this day, 24:46-53) reports Jesus’ ascension as an actual visible event that took place near Bethany (Gospel) on the Mount of Olives (Acts) and was observed by "witnesses;" that is, the apostles. The event takes place in an altered state of consciousness; it is a trance experience. The Greek word in v. 10 (gazing intently at the sky) is the word Luke uses in Acts to identify a trance experience (see e.g., Acts 7:55, etc.). There are two kinds of trance experiences: individual and group. This is a group type of experience (recall 1 Cor 15:6 where Jesus appeared to more than five hundred at one time). According to anthropological and psychiatric studies, it is not uncommon for those who have lost loved ones in death to have vivid experiences of them for up to ten years after the event, and sometimes longer. While such experiences are especially common at the burial place, they can occur elsewhere, too.
Where do the deceased go at death? To use nontheological language, they go to alternate reality. All of reality consists of two parts: the one in which human beings presently live (called the world, ordinary reality, or culturally "normal" reality) and the one to which human beings go after they die to join God in God’s realm (called alternate reality, or in theological terms "heaven;" "with God;" "the world to come;" "the spirit world;" and the like). Cultures who hold this understanding of reality know that there is an entry way between the two parts of reality: ordinary and alternate. It is a hole, or an opening, or a crack,
or a door between the earth and sky which a person must find in order to go from one realm to the other. According to the sacred traditions of many cultures, that hole, or crack, or door, is located over the city in which is located the earthly abode of the deity. In Greek tradition, the hole was over Delphi. In the Israelite tradition, the hole is over Jerusalem. Thus, Jesus could not likely have ascended in Galilee (Matt 28:16), for the hole is not located there. Nor does Matthew say that. He says only that Jesus met the disciples there. Luke places the ascension at the most plausible place, where the passageway between this world and the sky is located in Israelite tradition, namely, in the environs of Jerusalem. The two men in white robes are typical of Luke and are typical representative beings from the realm of God, that is, alternate reality.

As one can expect in a trance experience, the apostles receive instruction from the risen Jesus just before he departs their company (stay in Jerusalem; wait for the Spirit; bear witness to the ends of the earth). The two messengers from the realm of God, alternate reality conclude the trance experience by promising them that Jesus will return.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 47:2–3, 6–7, 8–9)

Psalm 104 is a hymn of Creation, recounting both the wondrous works of God and the wisdom with which God has ordered the world in harmony and goodness. The opening phrase, "Bless the Lord, O my soul!" (104:1), is a powerful expression of praise. The Hebrew word for soul, netesh, refers to that part of the human person which sustains life and vitality, the life force within an individual. Here the psalmist is calling to his own Inner being, that which gives and sustains his life, to lift up praise to God. The opening three stanzas of the responsorial psalm give the psalmist's reasons for giving voice to this praise.

The last stanza twice employs the word spirit, in Hebrew, ruach. This word can variously refer to one's breath, the wind, or the spirit. In the Hebrew imagination, both human breath and the wind were mysterious things. In Genesis 1:2, a mighty "wind" swept over the chaotic waters. In Genesis 2:7, the Lord God blew "breath" into a mass of earth and it became a living being, Adam. Likewise, in this verse, when God sends forth "spirit," things are created and the face of the earth is renewed. Such images from the Old Testament serve as a prelude to the act of new creation by which Jesus sends his Spirit upon Mary and the Twelve, as well as those in Jerusalem at the Pentecost.

God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.
All you peoples, clap your hands, shout to God with cries of gladness,
for the Lord, the Most High, the awesome, is the great king over all the earth.
God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy; the Lord, amid trumpet blasts.
Sing praise to God, sing praise; sing praise to our king, sing praise.
For king of all the earth is God; sing hymns of praise.
God reigns over the nations, God sits upon his holy throne.

* [Psalm 47] A hymn calling on the nations to acknowledge the universal rule of Israel's God (Ps 47:2–5) who is enthroned as king over Israel and the nations (Ps 47:6–9).
* [47:6] God has gone up: Christian liturgical tradition has applied the verse to the Ascension of Christ.

This enthronement psalm was sung in the Temple annually at the New Year feast when the ark of the Lord was installed anew in its place. This symbolized the Lord's definitive enthronement and was met with shouts of joy and blasts on the shofar. Non-Israelites who witnessed this event recognized the superiority of Israel's God over others. Though originating in a limited nationalistic perspective, the
SECOND READING

St. Paul writes about the human condition: our fragility and weakness in the lifelong process of growth into Christ. Yet as Jesus promised, he has not left us orphans (John 14:18-26). He has given us the Holy Spirit as the pledge of his presence, as a helper in time of distress, and as a guide to live faithfully as his disciples. It is this same Holy Spirit that teaches us to pray, even when we feel our prayer to be inadequate. St. Paul speaks of the Spirit who "intercedes with inexpressible groanings" within us (8:26). St. Paul is here referring to that ache we experience in prayer when we cannot even find words to wrap around what we know we should pray for, yet the feeling stays within us, almost haunting us. That is the Spirit praying in us, leading us to intercession, to praise, to gratitude, and to whatever might draw us into that intimate communion with God that is true prayer. Such a gift is reason for great hope and comfort.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians (1:17–23)

Brothers and sisters:
May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him.
May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of his great might, which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come.
And he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

* [1:15–23] See note on Rom 1:8 for the thanksgiving form in a letter. Much of the content parallels thoughts in Col 1:3–20. The prayer moves from God and Christ (Eph 1:17, 20–21) to the Ephesians (Eph 1:17–19) and the church (Eph 1:22–23). Paul asks that the blessing imparted by God the Father (Eph 1:3) to the Ephesians will be strengthened in them through the message of the gospel (Eph 1:13, 17–19). Those blessings are seen in the context of God’s might in establishing the sovereignty of Christ over all other creatures (Eph 1:19–21) and in appointing him head of the church (Eph 1:22–23). For the allusion to angelic spirits in Eph 1:21, see Rom 8:38 and Col 1:16. Here, as in 1 Cor 15:24–25 and Col 2:15, every such principality and power is made subject to Christ.
* [1:15] Your faith...your love: some manuscripts omit the latter phrase, but cf. Col 1:4.
* [1:23] His body: the church (Eph 1:22); cf. note on Col 1:18. Only in Ephesians and Colossians is Christ the head of the body, in contrast to the view in 1 Cor 12 and Rom 12:4–8 where Christ is equated with the entire body or community. Fullness: see note on Col 1:19. Some take the one who fills as God, others as Christ (cf. Eph 4:10). If in Christ “dwells the fullness of the deity bodily” (Col 2:9), then, as God “fills” Christ, Christ in turn fills the church and the believer (Eph 3:19; 5:18). But the difficult phrases here may also allow the church to be viewed as the “complement” of Christ who is “being filled” as God’s plan for the universe is carried out through the church (cf. Eph 3:9–10).
These verses are an intercessory prayer on behalf of the letter recipients. The chief hope of the letter writer is that believers grow in knowledge of God, God's activity, and God's gifts. God raised Jesus from the dead and gave him a place of honor next to God in the sky. This makes Jesus a co-regent or ruler with God. In Jesus’ risen position he is exalted over angelic and cosmic forces which have such serious impact on the lives of ordinary human beings. Principalities, authorities, powers, and dominions are celestial personages, astral beings who are now subject to Christ. Further, Jesus is head over the church which is his body. In this letter, however, Paul's basic idea is further developed by the one who wrote in his name. Now, the church, Christ's body, benefits from God's all-embracing plan, and one of the benefits is to share in the dominion which the head, Jesus, has. Today's gospel (Matt 28:16-20) tells how at his return to the Father Jesus shared some of the power given to him with his disciples, assuring them of his presence always until the end of the age.

**ALLELUIA** (Mt 28:19a, 20b)

**℟.** **ALLELUIA**

Go and teach all nations, says the Lord; I am with you always, until the end of the world.

**GOSPEL**

This longer ending added to the Gospel according to Mark references similar events from accounts of the Gospel, or even earlier traditions. The Ascension links to the Gospel according to Luke, while Jesus’ great commission to his disciples references the ending of the Gospel according to Matthew. The Gospel according to Mark surfaces in the assertion that “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, and whoever does not believe will be condemned” (v.16). This longer ending was probably added after Mark’s original text was completed. Even though Mark’s original ended with Chapter 16:8, this later addition is still considered to be the inspired Word of God.

While the Ascension is the key focus of the First Reading from Acts, Mark’s account of the Gospel clearly mentions Jesus taking “his seat at the right hand of God” (v.19). Jesus is honored by God and given authority over all things. Mark speaks of the many signs that accompany the disciples, seeing them as a confirmation of the word they are proclaiming. They are to “go into the whole world and… to every creature” (v.15) proclaiming the Good News. Clear signs will witness to the validity of their testimony. These signs highlight the Spirit’s power to unite, heal, and establish harmony. Having received from the Spirit the ability to confront all sorts of dangers, the disciples are assured that they are not alone, that the “Lord worked with them” (v.20)

**+ A reading from the conclusion of the holy Gospel according to Mark (16:15–20)**

Jesus said to his disciples:

“Go into the whole world
and proclaim the gospel to every creature.
Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved;
whoever does not believe will be condemned.
These signs will accompany those who believe:
in my name they will drive out demons,
they will speak new languages.
They will pick up serpents with their hands,
and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them.
They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”
So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

* [28:1–20] Except for Mt 28:1–8 based on Mk 16:1–8, the material of this final chapter is peculiar to Matthew. Even where he follows Mark, Matthew has altered his source so greatly that a very different impression is given from that of the Marcan account. The two points that are common to the resurrection testimony of all the gospels are that the tomb of Jesus had been found empty and that the risen Jesus had appeared to certain persons, or, in the original form of Mark, that such an appearance was promised as soon to take place (see Mk 16:7). On this central and all-important basis, Matthew has constructed an account that interprets the resurrection as the turning of the ages (Mt 28:2–4), shows the Jewish opposition to Jesus as continuing to the present in the claim that the resurrection is a deception perpetrated by the disciples who stole his body from the tomb (Mt 28:11–15), and marks a new stage in the mission of the disciples once limited to Israel (Mt 10:5–6); now they are to make disciples of all nations. In this work they will be strengthened by the presence of the exalted Son of Man, who will be with them until the kingdom comes in fullness at the end of the age (Mt 28:16–20).

* [28:1] After the sabbath...dawning: since the sabbath ended at sunset, this could mean in the early evening, for dawning can refer to the appearance of the evening star; cf. Lk 23:54. However, it is probable that Matthew means the morning dawn of the day after the sabbath, as in the similar though slightly different text of Mark, “when the sun had risen” (Mk 16:2). Mary Magdalene and the other Mary: see notes on Mt 27:55–56; 57–61. To see the tomb: cf. Mk 16:1–2 where the purpose of the women’s visit is to anoint Jesus’ body.

* [28:16–20] This climactic scene has been called a “proleptic parousia,” for it gives a foretaste of the final glorious coming of the Son of Man (Mt 26:64). Then his triumph will be manifest to all; now it is revealed only to the disciples, who are commissioned to announce it to all nations and bring them to belief in Jesus and obedience to his commandments.

* [28:16] The eleven: the number recalls the tragic defection of Judas Iscariot. To the mountain...ordered them: since the message to the disciples was simply that they were to go to Galilee (Mt 28:10), some think that the mountain comes from a tradition of the message known to Matthew and alluded to here. For the significance of the mountain, see note on Mt 17:1.

* [28:17] But they doubted: the Greek can also be translated, “but some doubted.” The verb occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Mt 14:31 where it is associated with Peter’s being of “little faith.” For the meaning of that designation, see note on Mt 6:30.

* [28:18] All power...me: the Greek word here translated power is the same as that found in the LXX translation of Dn 7:13–14 where one “like a son of man” is given power and an everlasting kingdom by God. The risen Jesus here claims universal power, i.e., in heaven and on earth.

* [28:19] Therefore: since universal power belongs to the risen Jesus (Mt 28:18), he gives the eleven a mission that is universal. They are to make disciples of all nations. While all nations is understood by some scholars as referring only to all Gentiles, it is probable that it included the Jews as well. Baptizing them: baptism is the means of entrance into the community of the risen one, the Church. In the name of the Father...holy Spirit: this is perhaps the clearest expression in the New Testament of trinitarian belief. It may have been the baptismal formula of Matthew’s church, but primarily it designates the effect of baptism, the union of the one baptized with the Father, Son, and holy Spirit.
All that I have commanded you: the moral teaching found in this gospel, preeminently that of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7). The commandments of Jesus are the standard of Christian conduct, not the Mosaic law as such, even though some of the Mosaic commandments have now been invested with the authority of Jesus. Behold, I am with you always: the promise of Jesus’ real though invisible presence echoes the name Emmanuel given to him in the infancy narrative; see note on Mt 1:23. End of the age: see notes on Mt 13:39 and Mt 24:3.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "The Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that he might sanctify the Church continually and so that believers might have access to the Father through Christ in the one Spirit" (LG, 4).
- "On the day of Pentecost when the seven weeks of Easter had come to an end, Christ's Passover is fulfilled in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, manifested, given, and communicated .... Christ, the Lord, pours out the Spirit in abundance" (CCC, 731).
- "The word of God is thus expressed in human words thanks to the working of the Holy Spirit. The missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit are inseparable and constitute a single economy of salvation. The same Spirit who acts in the incarnation of the Word in the womb of the Virgin Mary is the Spirit who guides Jesus throughout his mission and is promised to the disciples" (VD, 15).
PENTECOST SUNDAY A, Mass during the Day

FIRST READING

This reading from Acts is an account of Pentecost. In the Old Testament, Pentecost, the "feast of Weeks," recalled the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, one of the pilgrim feasts when Jews would come to Jerusalem for the fiftieth day after Passover. The mention of "a noise like a strong driving wind" (2:2) draws our minds to the account of the giving of the Law in Exodus ("there were peals of thunder and lightning ... and a very loud trumpet blast" [19: 161). Luke draws a clear line of connection between the Book of Exodus with the experience of Pentecost in the new Christian dispensation.

When the text mentions "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (2:4), another resemblance to an earlier section of Luke’s account of the Gospel is evoked. At the baptism of Jesus, Luke tells us, "the Holy Spirit descended upon him" (Luke 3:22), and when he returns from the desert temptations, we are told, "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14), where in his hometown Nazareth he reads from the scroll of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Luke 4:17-18). Acts 2:1-11 asserts that the same Holy Spirit that descended upon Jesus has now come upon his followers who are to be baptized.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles (2:1–11)

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, “Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his native language? We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God.”

* [2:1–41] Luke’s pentecostal narrative consists of an introduction (Acts 2:1–13), a speech ascribed to Peter declaring the resurrection of Jesus and its messianic significance (Acts 2:14–36), and a favorable response from the audience (Acts 2:37–41). It is likely that the narrative telescopes events that took
place over a period of time and on a less dramatic scale. The Twelve were not originally in a position to proclaim publicly the messianic office of Jesus without incurring immediate reprisal from those religious authorities in Jerusalem who had brought about Jesus’ death precisely to stem the rising tide in his favor.

* [2:2] There came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind: wind and spirit are associated in Jn 3:8. The sound of a great rush of wind would herald a new action of God in the history of salvation.

* [2:3] Tongues as of fire: see Ex 19:18 where fire symbolizes the presence of God to initiate the covenant on Sinai. Here the holy Spirit acts upon the apostles, preparing them to proclaim the new covenant with its unique gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38).


Luke reports yet another group type trance experience in which each member of the group becomes aware of being filled by a holy spirit. Belief in spirits was common in the ancient world, and a variety was recognized: good, malevolent, and capricious. The members here recognize that they are encountering a good or holy spirit. Luke mentions two elements of the trance: what is seen (visual) and what is heard (sound). The sound, a "noise like a strong driving wind:' comes from the sky. This means it has another-than-human source. The Israelite tradition considered thunder to be the sound of God's voice (Ps 29; Mark 1:11), though people could differ in their interpretation of the sounds they heard John 12:29). Since the word for wind can also mean spirit, the sound indeed is of a strong wind or spirit filling the entire home. The visual element, what everyone saw in this group trance, was "tongues as of fire:' This would plausibly be a red color perhaps tinged with yellow. In trance, colors identify the level of the trance, from light to deep. These colors indicate a deeper trance. The tongue shape of the fire quite likely relates to the result to which the vision plausibly contributes, namely, speaking in tongues (glossolalia). But the shape of a tongue also reminds one of a slit or opening between ordinary reality and alternate reality. If this is true, then the gathered community is at stage one of the trance (seeing geometric patterns) and Luke's report may already be anticipating what the community learned in stage two (searching for meaning in what is seen) or stage three (often arriving at totally unexpected insight).

Contemporary scholars familiar with the extensive research on glossolalia note that either Luke or his source misunderstood and therefore misinterpreted the phenomenon. In glossolalia, speech becomes musical sound. It is lexically noncommunicative, that is, this is not the informative or communicative side of discourse. Messages or insights are very rare. The musicality of glossolalia is a regular series of pulses of accented and unaccented syllables, and it is learned. One can imitate what one hears even at the first instance (see 2 Sam 10:5-12), though sometimes it occurs without a model to imitate. It is also possible that Luke deliberately speaks of foreign languages in his report (Acts 2:4, 8-11) in order to present this event as a reversal of the Babel experience of the confusion of languages (Gen 11).

Notice that the devout Judeans were divided in their assessment of the event. Some thought the speakers were drunk (see v. 13), while others believed that it was of God because they were speaking of "the mighty acts of God:' As with all trance experiences, interpretation is key. In this report, the audience interprets what they hear, the speakers do not interpret what they are saying. Even in the speech he makes, Peter does not interpret what was said. He identifies the experience as an authentic trance, induced by the Spirit, and then he takes the occasion to preach about Jesus.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 104:1, 24, 29–30, 31, 34)
Psalm 104 is a hymn of Creation, recounting both the wondrous works of God and the wisdom with which God has ordered the world in harmony and goodness. The opening phrase, “Bless the Lord, O my soul!” (104:1), is a powerful expression of praise. The Hebrew word for soul, nefesh, refers to that part of the human person which sustains life and vitality, the life force within an individual. Here the psalmist is calling to his own inner being, that which gives and sustains his life, to lift up praise to God. The opening three stanzas of the responsorial psalm give the psalmist's reasons for giving voice to this praise.

The last stanza twice employs the word spirit, in Hebrew, ruach. This word can variously refer to one's breath, the wind, or the spirit. In the Hebrew imagination, both human breath and the wind were mysterious things. In Genesis 1:2, a mighty "wind" swept over the chaotic waters. In Genesis 2:7, the Lord God blew "breath" into a mass of earth and it became a living being, Adam. Likewise in this verse, when God sends forth "spirit," things are created and the face of the earth is renewed. Such images from the Old Testament serve as a prelude to the act of new creation by which Jesus sends his Spirit upon Mary and the Twelve, as well as those in Jerusalem at the Pentecost.

℟. (cf. 30) Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
Bless the Lord, O my soul!
O Lord, my God, you are great indeed!
How manifold are your works, O Lord! the earth is full of your creatures;
If you take away their breath, they perish and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.
May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord be glad in his works!
Pleasing to him be my theme; I will be glad in the Lord.

* [Psalm 104] A hymn praising God who easily and skillfully made rampaging waters and primordial night into a world vibrant with life. The psalmist describes God's splendor in the heavens (Ps 104:1–4), how the chaotic waters were tamed to fertilize and feed the world (Ps 104:5–18), and how primordial night was made into a gentle time of refreshment (Ps 104:19–23). The picture is like Gn 1:1–2: a dark and watery chaos is made dry and lighted so that creatures might live. The psalmist reacts to the beauty of creation with awe (Ps 104:24–34). May sin not deface God's work (Ps 104:35)!
* [104:29–30] On one level, the spirit (or wind) of God is the fall and winter rains that provide food for all creatures. On another, it is the breath (or spirit) of God that makes beings live.

Some different verses are selected from the same psalm used on the Vigil of Pentecost. Again, the refrain highlights the key idea: God's spirit is an agent of renewal. It is worthwhile to ask God to send forth the Spirit to renew all creation.

SECOND READING

This passage explodes with a message of hope that must be understood on two levels: the historical church of St. Paul, and our own circumstances as Christians today. First, St. Paul saw the factions within the Corinthian community as a threat to their intended unity created by Christ's Resurrection. By their Baptism, the Christians of Corinth had become the Body of Christ, his visible image on earth. While that is a great challenge to living Jesus' new law of love, Christians are given the profound gift of the Spirit to lead, guide, strengthen, and inspire them. In this Sunday's passage from 1 Corinthians 12, Paul chides
these people to live in accord with what they have been given: the Spirit. Second, this passage stands as a weighty reminder of both what we have been given, and how we are to use this precious gift within us. Our Baptism, our incorporation into Christ, bestows on us the very gifts of the Spirit which Paul lists in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, self-control (5:22-23). Through these gifts of the Spirit, the mission of Jesus continues to be established in our world today. Could we ever preach this message of St. Paul strongly enough? It is not merely our duty to act in this way; rather, our Baptism marks us in an organic way, showing us our deepest nature in Jesus Christ. We preach it persuasively when we live it!

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (12:3b–7, 12–13)
Brothers and sisters:
No one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

* [12:1–14:40] Ecstatic and charismatic activity were common in early Christian experience, as they were in other ancient religions. But the Corinthians seem to have developed a disproportionate esteem for certain phenomena, especially tongues, to the detriment of order in the liturgy. Paul’s response to this development provides us with the fullest exposition we have of his theology of the charisms.
* [12:2–3] There is an experience of the Spirit and an understanding of ecstatic phenomena that are specifically Christian and that differ, despite apparent similarities, from those of the pagans. It is necessary to discern which spirit is leading one; ecstatic phenomena must be judged by their effect (1 Cor 12:2). 1 Cor 12:3 illustrates this by an example: power to confess Jesus as Lord can come only from the Spirit, and it is inconceivable that the Spirit would move anyone to curse the Lord.
* [12:4–6] There are some features common to all charisms, despite their diversity: all are gifts (charismata), grace from outside ourselves; all are forms of service (diakoniai), an expression of their purpose and effect; and all are workings (energēmata), in which God is at work. Paul associates each of these aspects with what later theology will call one of the persons of the Trinity, an early example of “appropriation.”
* [12:12–26] The image of a body is introduced to explain Christ’s relationship with believers (1 Cor 12:12). 1 Cor 12:13 applies this model to the church: by baptism all, despite diversity of ethnic or social origins, are integrated into one organism. 1 Cor 12:14–26 then develop the need for diversity of function among the parts of a body without threat to its unity.

Even a cursory reading of these verses indicates that Paul is insisting on unity. The Corinthian community was so tom by competing party loyalties and dissension that Paul repeatedly exhorts to unity at every opportunity in this letter. The "spirit-people" in Corinth were viewed as the cause of disunity, in part because they were vaunting the Spirit, themselves, and their gifts from the Spirit above others who did not possess such gifts. It is very difficult for Western individualists to appreciate the harm done by competition in a culture whose core value is honor. By birth, all people in such a culture have ascribed honor. It is shameful and wrong to attempt to improve that status. The cultural obligation is to maintain and preserve all Cooperation, harmony, and unity are the preferred and honorable values in a collectivistic society.
The combination of verses selected as today's reading highlights two powerful arguments that Paul mounts against such divisive competition. One argument is based on how three heavenly figures relate to each other. After admitting that the Spirit does indeed grant various gifts, forms of service, and workings, Paul notes-in an apparent hierarchic ordering that the Spirit, the Lord, and God live in harmony and not in rivalry or competition. God, of course, is sovereign and holds the highest place on the honor map (see 1 Cor 11:3; 15:27-28). And the authentic spirit acknowledges that Jesus has a special position: "Jesus is Lord;’ Thus, after God, Jesus enjoys the next maximum status, and the Spirit holds third place as servant of the Lord Jesus. The three are not equal in role or status, yet they live harmoniously in heaven. The Spirit and the Spirit's gifts, therefore, should not disrupt the order God has willed for the world. The second argument is based on the human body which consists of different parts, all of which must work together harmoniously lest damage occur to the body. This exaggerated sense of self-esteem and exalted status among the "spirit people" amounts to a denial of authority. Their understanding of the freedom bestowed upon them by the Spirit calls into question God's will for specific patterns of roles, statuses, and orderly relationships on earth and in heaven. Paul argues that the pattern existing in heaven ought to be mirrored on earth. In the concluding verses (12-13), Paul declares that not only is the diversity of gifts among human beings unified in the same Spirit, but the diversity of ethnic groups (Israelites and non-Israelites) and roles (slaves or free persons) is similarly unified in the "one" Spirit. The gospel John 20:19-23, or John 15:26-27; 16:12-15) describes yet other gifts of the Spirit (power to forgive and retain sins; guidance to all truth) intended to maintain unity in the community.

**ALLELUIA**

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.

**GOSPEL**

In contrast to St. Luke, the evangelist John describes the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Eleven happening on Easter Sunday evening, not fifty days later. The powerful depiction of the gift of the Spirit is portrayed in relation to forgiveness. After the words of commission ("As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (20:21)), Jesus breathes on them, passing onto them his Spirit. They now possess the Spirit, and what will they do with it? Exactly what the Risen Christ has first done to them: offering them "peace," wholeness by means of forgiveness, and then authorizing them to offer that same forgiveness to others. How wounded the Apostles must have been, having betrayed the One who had loved them so completely, even with all their weaknesses. Jesus, risen from the dead, comes among them and with that single word, "peace," he pushes aside their sinfulness and offers them what they need most, forgiveness. On that first Easter night, the Risen Christ comes to those who have betrayed him, offering them forgiveness, the fruit of his saving Passion and Death. The Spirit enables us to be instruments of Jesus' own forgiveness and reconciliation.

**A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (20:19–23)**

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”
And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

* [20:19] The disciples: by implication from Jn 20:24 this means ten of the Twelve, presumably in Jerusalem. Peace be with you: although this could be an ordinary greeting, John intends here to echo Jn 14:27. The theme of rejoicing in Jn 20:20 echoes Jn 16:22.


* [20:21] By means of this sending, the Eleven were made apostles, that is, “those sent” (cf. Jn 17:18), though John does not use the noun in reference to them (see note on Jn 13:16). A solemn mission or “sending” is also the subject of the post-resurrection appearances to the Eleven in Mt 28:19; Lk 24:47; Mk 16:15.

* [20:22] This action recalls Gn 2:7, where God breathed on the first man and gave him life; just as Adam’s life came from God, so now the disciples’ new spiritual life comes from Jesus. Cf. also the revivification of the dry bones in Ez 37. This is the author’s version of Pentecost. Cf. also the note on Jn 19:30.

* [20:23] The Council of Trent defined that this power to forgive sins is exercised in the sacrament of penance. See Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18.

The change from "Holy Ghost" to "Holy Spirit" in the English translations of sacred texts was literally correct and long overdue. (Other languages always translated the original Hebrew and Greek words with "spirit:’) Middle Eastern culture sheds significant light on the evolution of the meaning of these Hebrew and Latin words.

**WIND AND POWER**

The Hebrew word ruah, the Greek pneuma, and the Latin spiritus all basically mean "air in motion:' "breath:' or "wind:' The root meaning is power. Apart from human and animal power, wind was the main observable energy source in the ancient world. Sometimes it was experienced as a cool, refreshing breeze (Gen 3:8), other times as a strong wind (Exod 10:13, 19), and sometimes it had hurricane or tornado force (1 Kgs 19:11).

Poetic texts in ancient literature frequently preserve archaic expressions. Thus, Psalm 18:15 (also 2 Sam 22:16) describes the wind as God's breath. "Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, 0 Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils" (see also Exod 15:8; 2 Sam 22:16; Hos 13:15; Isa 30:28; Job 4:9). Thus, the primitive understanding of wind in the Bible is as the breath of a very powerful being.

**WIND AS LIQUID**

Also interesting is the ancient understanding of wind (and water and fire) as possessing what we now consider to be the properties of liquids. This explains why the ancients believed that the wind or spirit could be "poured out": "And I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God" (Ezek 39:29; see also Isa 32:15; Joel 3:1ff.).

**WIND, GOD'S BREATH**

Since human beings tend to perceive and understand God from a human perspective, our ancestors in the faith spoke anthropomorphically of God's arm (Isa 40:15), hand (Deut 2:15), face (Gen 33:10), mouth (Ps 33:6), and breath Job 32:9; 33:4), which they understood to be God's vital power or spirit.

The Old Testament never presents the spirit of God as a person but rather as the power by which God acts in human life. This power is no more distinct or separate from God than a hand or mouth. Even so, God's power or breath acts outside of God and can be "sent" (Isa 48:16), "placed" (Isa 63:11), or "poured?'

**THE HOLY WIND, BREATH, SPIRIT**
Later Judaism (Sirach, Daniel, Testament of Levi, Henoch, Esdras, Ascension of Moses, Sibylline Oracles) also generally refers to "the holy spirit" as divine power and not as a distinct person. It is first in the New Testament that the concept begins to become personified, even though Old Testament understandings still continue.

Thus, on the day of Pentecost, those gathered in the upper room heard a sound "like the rush of a violent wind" that filled the house (Acts 2:1-4). Luke describes the appearance of this wind as "divided tongues, as of fire:' because the empowerment bestowed by this wind was the ability to "speak in other languages?" Of course, God is the force or power behind this phenomenon attributed to his Spirit or breath.

This background helps a modern believer to appreciate what the apostles and Jesus understood to be taking place in today's gospel. Jesus announces that he is sending the apostles just as the Father sent him. Then he "breathes" on the Eleven (v. 22), imitating the moment of creation when God "blew" in the nostrils of Adam and brought him to life (Gen 2:7). risen Jesus re-creates these human beings as children of God.

Receive a holy spirit:' continues Jesus as he empowers the apostles to forgive and hold sins. The Greek word for "sin" here (hamartia) portrays it as an "evil power or force." (twenty-five of the thirty-one occurrences of this word in John are in the singular!) Thus, Jesus gives the apostles a holy power to fight against an evil power, a mighty force to do combat with an evil force. John's viewpoint challenges modern believers to look beyond. "lists of sins" and "new sins" and to view sin as an evil force. Toe good news is that Christ gives the spirit (or force) to all Christians to do battle against this evil force.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "When the Father sends his Word, he always sends his Breath. In their joint mission, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct but inseparable. To be sure, it is the Christ who is seen, the visible image of the invisible God, but it is the Spirit who reveals him" (CCC, 689).
- "To evangelize is first of all to bear witness, in a simple and direct way, to God revealed by Jesus Christ, In the Holy Spirit, to bear witness that in his Son God has loved the world-that in his Incarnate Word he has given being to all things and has called (all people) to eternal life" (EN, 6).
- "The Church, however, which is so full of youthful vigor and is constantly renewed by the breath of the Holy Spirit, is willing, at all times, to recognize, welcome, and even assimilate anything that redounds to the honor of the human mind and heart, ... which, from the beginning of time, had been destined by God’s Providence to be the cradle of the Church" (PP, 19).
THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

FIRST READING

This reading ostensibly comes from a sermon of Moses and can be considered a summary of the whole book of Deuteronomy. Moses is presented as a preacher who wants to both instruct and persuade his people. His homily begins with the invitation to look at everything that has happened since the creation. He asks his people what has ever happened that could possibly compare with what their God has done for them.

Moses reminds them that God has spoken directly to them. Beyond that, they have been formed as a nation that belongs to God and God alone. God has rescued them from their enemies, proving to them that this God who enters their history is the one true God in heaven and on earth. The only fitting response to this is to keep the commandments and to enjoy the benefits of belonging to such a God.

A reading from the Book of Deuteronomy (4:32–34, 39–40)

Moses said to the people:
“Ask now of the days of old, before your time, ever since God created man upon the earth; ask from one end of the sky to the other: Did anything so great ever happen before? Was it ever heard of? Did a people ever hear the voice of God speaking from the midst of fire, as you did, and live? Or did any god venture to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, with strong hand and outstretched arm, and by great terrors, all of which the L ORD, your God, did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? This is why you must now know, and fix in your heart, that the L ORD is God in the heavens above and on earth below, and that there is no other. You must keep his statutes and commandments that I enjoin on you today, that you and your children after you may prosper, and that you may have long life on the land which the L ORD, your God, is giving you forever.”

Peasant populations are typically focused on the present because the pressures of survival leave no leisure to imagine a future. When problems occur, the solution is always to be found in the past. Thus, this reflection on the unique vocation of Israel encourages them to seek guidance from the past ("the
days of old, before your time") and from creation which bears the traces of God's will for it. Verse 34 reflects Exodus language and strengthens the bond between the uniqueness of YHWH and the unique position of Israel among all the nations of the earth. As a result of this, Israel must never forget there is but one God and must keep God's statutes and commandments. Thus, the law that Moses is about to promulgate has as its purpose to present a challenging level of moral performance that would be compatible with the self-revelation of Israel's God and Israel's high calling. Only by keeping God's covenant and obeying God's law will Israel find prosperity and long life in its land which God gives forever. No doubt the significance of pairing this reading with the gospel for today's feast (Matt 28:16-20) is to remind believers that God is one, and Trinity means not three gods but three persons in one God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Dn 3:52, 53, 54, 55, 56)

In response to Moses' teaching, we cry out, "Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own." As we pray the psalm, we begin with praise of God's dependability, fairness, and kindness. We then marvel at the power of God's Word and works: the visible extensions of God's very being. Finally, recalling what it means to be God's own People, we sing in joy for the God who takes note of our hope and preserves our life. We promise to wait for the Lord and discern the everyday signs of God's kindness.

Responsorial Psalm PS 33:4-5, 6, 9, 18-19, 20, 22

R. (12b) Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.
Upright is the word of the LORD, and all his works are trustworthy. He loves justice and right; of the kindness of the Lord the earth is full. By the word of the LORD the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their host. For he spoke, and it was made; he commanded, and it stood forth. See, the eyes of the LORD are upon those who fear him, upon those who hope for his kindness, To deliver them from death and preserve them in spite of famine. Our soul waits for the LORD, who is our help and our shield. May your kindness, O LORD, be upon us who have put our hope in you.

These verses are drawn from the hymn sung by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the furnace. The entire hymn was inserted between Daniel 3:23 and 3:24 and emphasized that heroes must be pious individuals whose wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord. Today's verses exhort all creatures on earth to praise God throughout the universe. The hymn was influenced by Psalm 148 which it resembles.

SECOND READING

In this reading, Paul adds to what Moses proclaimed to the Israelites in the desert. Moses recalled God's historical activity; Paul reminds his listeners of God's activity within them. All that the people can do in response is allow themselves to be led by that Spirit who makes them heirs, not of a land or a tradition, but of God, the Father of Jesus. Here we may well be reminded of Jesus' prayer: "And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one" (John 17:22-23). Finally, unlike
Moses who promised the security of a "long life on the land," Paul reminds his fellow believers that if they are led by the Spirit of God, they will share in Jesus' fate.

A Reading from the Letter of Paul to the Romans ROM (8:14-17)

Brothers and sisters: For those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a Spirit of adoption, through whom we cry, "Abba, Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

* [8:14–17] Christians, by reason of the Spirit’s presence within them, enjoy not only new life but also a new relationship to God, that of adopted children and heirs through Christ, whose sufferings and glory they share.


A very important result of being led (or perhaps better, shaped) by the Spirit is that one becomes a true child of God. Though this is the first time this concept appears in this letter, it would not catch Paul's audience by surprise. It was a widely accepted notion in the ancient world even outside Judaism. In his speech to the Athenians (Acts 17:28), Paul quotes Aratus of Soli, a third-century B.C. poet from Cilicia: "For we too are his offspring." In Judaism, Israel was understood as God's child or son (Exod 4:22-23; Isa 1:2-4; Hos 1:10; etc). The Spirit or force we have received, however, is not one that would cast us back into fear, even a reverential fear. Rather, this Spirit says we are God’s very own adopted children.

While adoption was a wide-spread legal practice in the Greco-Roman world, it was not a common practice in Israel. Some scholars would say this option didn’t exist. For this reason, Paul is quite likely not drawing on this legal practice which would be mystifying to his letter recipients. It is more plausible that he is drawing on the notion that grew and developed out of Hos 1:10 (Heb 2:1): once God said to them "you are not my people;' but later it will be said to them: you are "sons of the living God;' Earlier in this letter, Paul lists adoption as one of Israel's privileges (Rom 9:4).

Whatever the case, the idea is startling. Kinship was the focal social institution of the ancient Mediterranean world. Kin marked one's primary in-group. All others are the out-group. Thus to become part of God's very own in-group is quite amazing. Further, not only does the Spirit make this kinship relationship with God possible, the same Spirit gives the ability to recognize and be aware of it. Such people can say with confidence and conviction: "Abba, Father." Though suffering and tribulation might shake this confidence, the Spirit strengthens that conviction.

The good news gets even better, for children can also inherit. Earlier (Rom 4:13ff.) Paul noted that Abraham "would inherit the world" because he became right with God on the basis of faith rather than "through [works of] the law." In this way even non-Israelites can share in that inheritance, as joint heirs with the Messiah, the primary heir (see Rom 8:29). Inheritance, however, entails an obligation to share in death and resurrection of Jesus too, for these were an integral part of his life. Paul uses two compound verbs in Greek that believers must suffer with the Messiah in order to be glorified with him. The gospel (Matt 28:16-20) offers an interesting contrast. Some scholars point out that since Jesus' concern through the gospel is with "the lost sheep of the House of Israel" and shows no interest in the Gentile world ("go nowhere among the Gentiles;' Matt 10:5), this final injunction should probably be interpreted in this way: "Go therefore and make disciples of [all the members of the house of Israel scattered in] all na-tions." If this is acceptable, then Paul and his generation of believers took a significant step forward by including Gentiles. What steps forward can modern believers take?
alleluia (cf. Rev 1:8)
Glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; to God who is, who was, and who is to come.

Gospel

These last four verses of Matthew's account of the Gospel are filled with symbolic meaning. They summarize the entire Gospel in the moment when Jesus definitively hands over his mission to the disciples. The fact that Jesus meets the disciples on a mountain recalls other mountain events, including Jesus' third temptation, the Sermon on the Mount, the Transfiguration, and Jesus' arrest. As it was in the Old Testament, the mountain was an important meeting spot between God and humanity.

Earlier in the Gospel, when Jesus had sent out the disciples, they were to go only to the people of Israel (10:5). Now they are being sent throughout the whole world. This implies a new understanding of Jesus. As they accompanied him through the ministry, the disciples struggled to understand him as Israel's promised Messiah, even though his vision and realization of salvation was different from their hopes and expectations. Now they are called to understand him as universal; they are to proclaim his message to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

Matthew's description of Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit is unique in the New Testament. Doing something "in the name of" implies solidarity, or identity with the one named. In calling for a Trinitarian Baptism as the expression of discipleship, Matthew summarizes his teaching about Jesus as the Son of the Father and the one through whom God's Spirit was at work. Finally, that Baptism is a sign of commitment to "do everything I have commanded you," implying that belief is not an intellectual assertion, but an entire way of life. Taken together, these readings remind us of God's ongoing presence to us and our responsibility to proclaim the Gospel by the way we allow the Spirit to lead us in action.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew (28:16–20)
The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. When they all saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted. Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."
Except for Mt 28:1–8 based on Mk 16:1–8, the material of this final chapter is peculiar to Matthew. Even where he follows Mark, Matthew has altered his source so greatly that a very different impression is given from that of the Marcan account. The two points that are common to the resurrection testimony of all the gospels are that the tomb of Jesus had been found empty and that the risen Jesus had appeared to certain persons, or, in the original form of Mark, that such an appearance was promised as soon to take place (see Mk 16:7). On this central and all-important basis, Matthew has constructed an account that interprets the resurrection as the turning of the ages (Mt 28:2–4), shows the Jewish opposition to Jesus as continuing to the present in the claim that the resurrection is a deception perpetrated by the disciples who stole his body from the tomb (Mt 28:11–15), and marks a new stage in the mission of the disciples once limited to Israel (Mt 10:5–6); now they are to make disciples of all nations. In this work they will be strengthened by the presence of the exalted Son of Man, who will be with them until the kingdom comes in fullness at the end of the age (Mt 28:16–20).

* [28:16] The eleven: the number recalls the tragic defection of Judas Iscariot. To the mountain...ordered them: since the message to the disciples was simply that they were to go to Galilee (Mt 28:10), some think that the mountain comes from a tradition of the message known to Matthew and alluded to here. For the significance of the mountain, see note on Mt 17:1.

* [28:17] But they doubted: the Greek can also be translated, “but some doubted.” The verb occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Mt 14:31 where it is associated with Peter’s being of “little faith.” For the meaning of that designation, see note on Mt 6:30.

* [28:18] All power...me: the Greek word here translated power is the same as that found in the LXX translation of Dn 7:13–14 where one “like a son of man” is given power and an everlasting kingdom by God. The risen Jesus here claims universal power, i.e., in heaven and on earth.

* [28:19] Therefore: since universal power belongs to the risen Jesus (Mt 28:18), he gives the eleven a mission that is universal. They are to make disciples of all nations. While all nations is understood by some scholars as referring only to all Gentiles, it is probable that it included the Jews as well. Baptizing them: baptism is the means of entrance into the community of the risen one, the Church. In the name of the Father...holy Spirit: this is perhaps the clearest expression in the New Testament of trinitarian belief. It may have been the baptismal formula of Matthew’s church, but primarily it designates the effect of baptism, the union of the one baptized with the Father, Son, and holy Spirit.

* [28:20] All that I have commanded you: the moral teaching found in this gospel, preeminently that of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7). The commandments of Jesus are the standard of Christian conduct, not the Mosaic law as such, even though some of the Mosaic commandments have now been invested with the authority of Jesus. Behold, I am with you always: the promise of Jesus’ real though invisible presence echoes the name Emmanuel given to him in the infancy narrative; see note on Mt 1:23. End of the age: see notes on Mt 13:39 and Mt 24:3.

Increasingly, scholarly biblical research makes headlines. In recent years, articles in Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, The Wall Street Journal, and other purely secular periodicals have given more publicity to scholarly conclusions than these scholars might ever have dreamed of from the technical journals and books in which their conclusions first appeared. Yet very often, the conclusions have been known and accepted for a long time in the scholarly community before they became known to the wider public.

What do scholars say about today’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel? As Bishop Descamps noted long ago, as far as substance goes, the Gospels present various versions of the same appearance to the Twelve. Each Gospel singles out an all important appearance of Jesus to the disciples in which they are commissioned for a task.

**Jesus’ Edict**

Today’s scene is found only in Matthew, and careful study of the vocabulary and style indicates that Matthew creatively composed this passage. The language echoes that of Daniel 7:14 (Septuagint), but
other influences may well have been Exodus 19-20, the familiar blessing in Numbers 6:22-27, various prophetic comments, and the royal decree of Cyrus in 2 Chronicles 36:23.

Just as an "edict" of Cyrus concludes 2 Chronicles, the last book in the Hebrew Bible, so does an "edict" by the risen Jesus conclude the Book of Matthew. Cyrus, the Persian king, proclaimed: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up."

Jesus' edict has three parts: a command (v. 16: go to the mountain), a response (v. 17: when the apostles saw him, some worshipped but some doubted), and another command (v. 18-20: make disciples of all the Gentiles; baptize and teach them).

Jesus' edict is a startling challenge to Matthew's community. Earlier during his ministry, Jesus sent the disciples on mission only to the Judeans: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5-6).

This attitude is typical of group-centered societies. They tend to be exclusivistic and divide the world into two camps: them and us, the good and those who aren't. Cultural specialists readily admit that this often spills over into a prejudice, that is, a negative evaluation, based on race (biology) or ethnicity (behavior), and rooted in an organized predis-position toward negative evaluations.

As Matthew has composed it in 80-85 C.E., the message of the risen Lord challenges a largely Judean-Christian group to seek new members from among non-Judeans. Yet this should not have been entirely unexpected. There were hints in this direction throughout the Gospel (2:1-12; 4:15, 16, 23-25; 8:5-13; 10:18; 15:21-28; 22:1-10; 24:14; 24:32; 26:13).

Perhaps the community had already attracted as many Judeans as it could hope to in Matthew's time, and thus there was a need to open a new mission field. Clearly, a major separation between Church and synagogue is well on its way.

As a summary of Matthew's Gospel, today's passage highlights key themes: It is the Father who has given Jesus ultimate and universal authority. Jesus in turn directs his followers to move beyond their in-group to the entire world, particularly to those who do not share the same ethnic roots. Difficult as this may be, Jesus assures his followers of his abiding presence until the reign of God is established in all its fullness.

TRINITY

Biblical scholars agree that the theological notion of the Trinity is a later development with roots in Scripture. Theologians trace the development through the various disputes in the first thousand years of the Church's existence. Liturgists credit Benedictine monasteries of the ninth and eleventh centuries with being instrumental in promoting liturgical prominence for the Trinity. The Franciscan Pope John XXII decreed that the Divine Office of the Blessed Trinity should be observed by the entire Church (1334).

A sense of history is a valuable tool for the origin and development of basic Christian beliefs.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "The Church has an obligation to proclaim the faith and salvation which comes from Christ.... Since this mission continues.... in the course of his- tory .... the church .... must walk the road Christ himself walked, a way of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice even to death" (AG, 5).
- "The church is called to a deep and profound rethinking of its mission.... What is required is confirming, renewing, and revitalizing the newness of the Gospel rooted in our history" (Aparecida, 11).
"We must do all we can to overcome suffering, but to banish it from the world altogether is not in our power. Only God is able to do this: only a God who personally enters history by making himself man and suffering within history. We know that this God exists, and hence that this power to 'take away the sin of the world' is present in the world. Through faith...hope for the world's healing has emerged in history" (SS, 36).
THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

FIRST READING

Deuteronomy presents Moses' farewell discourse to the people as they are about to enter the Promised Land. In this passage, Moses counsels the people to remember the mighty deeds that God has done on their behalf during their desert sojourn. God promised to be with the people and was faithful to that promise by providing everything they needed. The testing in the desert was God's way of seeing how faithful the people were to their part of the covenant promises. Hunger was one of the desert afflictions that God satisfied by miraculously providing manna. This was God's way of stressing trust and dependence upon the one who satisfies all hungers. Moses repeats his advice that they are not to forget that in their nothingness, God provides for all their needs. Like them, we must seek God rather than material wealth, trusting that God will provide us with everything that we need.

A Reading from the Book of Exodus (24:3-8)

When Moses came to the people and related all the words and ordinances of the LORD, they all answered with one voice, "We will do everything that the LORD has told us." Moses then wrote down all the words of the LORD and, rising early the next day, he erected at the foot of the mountain an altar and twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. Then, having sent certain young men of the Israelites to offer holocausts and sacrifice young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD, Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the other half he splashed on the altar. Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered, "All that the LORD has said, we will heed and do." Then he took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words of his."

* [24:4] Sacred stones: stone shafts or slabs, erected as symbols of the fact that each of the twelve tribes had entered into this covenant with God; see 23:24; Gn 28:18.

God's ratification of the covenant with the people is described in dramatic terms. There is first a ritual of word, then a ritual of blood. What Moses related to the people were the Ten Commandments, otherwise known as the ten words (d'barim), and the Covenant Code (mishpatim, cf. Exod 21:1), which consists mainly of case law. These were the laws that generally governed Isra-el’s life. After hearing the laws read aloud, the people answered in one voice: "We will do everything." The spoken word is then made physical and permanent. This was probably done not out of fear that the people might forget them (oral cultures have techniques that enhance retention) but in order to preserve a record of the covenant for later liturgical use.

In preparation for the sacrifice that would seal the covenant Moses erected symbols that presented the partners of the covenant: an altar, which generally connoted the presence of the deity; and twelve pillars, which stood for the totality of the people. He then chose young men, not priests or Levites, to offer the sacrifices (The gender bias is obvious.). Perhaps these were youths who were on the brink of
manhood who had neither taken part in war nor entered into marriage. They would be apt symbols of a nation that was about to enter into a lifelong relationship.

Two different sacrifices were offered, the holocaust and the peace offering. Holocausts were burnt offerings in which the whole animal was consumed by fire on the altar. It signified the worshiper’s total self-offering to God. Peace offerings either established peace by the very offering, or they celebrated a peace that had already been made. The latter was probably the case here. Since blood is the life force, to shed blood—even in sacrifice—is to exercise control over that life force. Here the blood signifies the life that binds the covenant partners. Through it they make two pledges: to lay down life itself if need be for the sake of the other; to surrender life to the partner if one is unfaithful to the covenant.

Finally, the pouring of the blood, which is the most solemn and the most binding part of the sacrifice, seals the covenant. Since it was God who initiated the covenant, and since God is the principal partner in the relationship, the altar is splashed first. Once again the people hear the law; this time it is read to them. It is almost as if Moses wants the people to be very sure about what they are doing. They have a second opportunity to say, "We will!" With that the blood is sprinkled on them, and their relationship with God is sealed.

The last pronouncement of Moses makes clear the relationship between the words of the covenant and the blood. He maintains that the blood ritual ratifies the covenant, which the words both describe and fashion. The inter-play between word and action is quite clear. Each element has its part to play in the ritual. Neither can adequately perform its role alone.

**RESPONSORIAL PSALM** *(Ps 147:12–13, 14–15, 19–20)*

Psalm 147 personifies Jerusalem as a mother gathering her children to her. All are summoned to praise the Lord in thanksgiving for his Word, which brings life and abundance. God's Word has blessed Jerusalem, strengthened her gates and walls, granted peace, and brought fertility to the fields. God has done this for no other nation. Only Israel has been so blessed, and thus is summoned to praise the Lord. The psalm stresses that God's Word brings forth all blessings. God, who gives totally and completely to satisfy all hungers, is the source of these blessings. God's Word is a dynamic reality that goes forth from God throughout the earth, accomplishing all that God commands. For this reason, all of Israel is called to praise the Lord, as we are, for the rich blessings of our lives.

**Responsorial Psalm PS 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18**

R. (13) I will take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.

How shall I make a return to the LORD for all the good he has done for me? The cup of salvation I will take up, and I will call upon the name of the LORD. Precious in the eyes of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones. I am your servant, the son of your handmaid; you have loosed my bonds. To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the LORD. My vows to the LORD I will pay in the presence of all his people.

* [Psalm 147] The hymn is divided into three sections by the calls to praise in Ps 147:1, 7, 12. The first section praises the powerful creator who restores exiled Judah (Ps 147:1–6); the second section, the creator who provides food to animals and human beings; the third and climactic section exhorts the holy city to recognize it has been re-created and made the place of disclosure for God’s word, a word as life-giving as water.

This psalm is an example of a temple service of thanksgiving. In it someone who made an appeal to God and promised to perform some act of devotion when the request was granted now comes to the temple and, before God and the assembly of believers, gives thanks for the favor granted and fulfills the vow. Most vows were promises to offer some form of sacrifice (cf. Ps 56:13); holocaust (cf. Ps 66:13; Lev 22:18-20); peace offerings (cf. Ps 50:14; Lev 7:16; 22:21-22); or cereal offerings and libations (cf. Num 15:3, 8).

The psalm response opens with an acknowledgment that there is nothing the psalmist can do and no gift that can be offered that will even begin to compare with the favors that have been received from God. Inadequate as it is, the psalmist still renders what can be offered, expressing devotion by offering a cup of salvation. It is not clear exactly what the cup of salvation is. It might be a libation offered in thanksgiving. Or it could be a festive drink, the wine that was shared at a sacred meal, a symbol of the joy God's graciousness has produced. Whatever its identity, it serves as a cup of joy for having been saved.

Along with the offering of this wine is the proclamation of the name of God. Since God's name holds part of the divine essence, to proclaim that name is to recognize and praise God's greatness and, in this case, the graciousness of God's saving action. The cup is taken up, and God's name is proclaimed. The psalmist insists that, contrary to any appearances, God is concerned with the fate of the righteous. The psalmist's own situation is an example of this. The psalmist may have suffered, but ultimately God did intervene. Mention of the righteous (hasfdim), indirectly identifies the psalmist as one of this group. The psalmist could be making another point here: virtue and misfortune are not incompatible; good people do in fact suffer. Still, the point of this psalm is not the sufferings the psalmist had to endure but the deliverance that came from God and the psalmist's response to divine graciousness.

The relationship between the psalmist and God is strikingly characterized in the metaphors "servant" and its parallel, "son of your handmaid." Although the first image has taken on a profound theological connotation (servant of God), the second clearly identifies both images as classifications within a structured household. A slave born into a household had neither a justified claim to, nor any guaranteed likelihood of, emancipation. By using these legal metaphors to characterize his relationship with God, the psalmist is dramatizing his own situation. Like a slave who has no hope of release, the psalmist was bound to a life of great difficulty. However, God looked kindly upon him and loosed him from his servitude.

The last verses (vv. 17-18) clearly identify the ceremony that will take place as a public ritual. A sacrifice of thanksgiving will be offered (cf. Lev 7:11-18), the name of the Lord will be proclaimed, and vows will be paid in the presence of the people of God. The psalmist, who once faced the prospect of death, now stands in the midst of the assembly, humble and grateful to God.

SECOND READING

The details of Mark's account of the Last Supper communicate some surprising things. First of all, the disciples asked Jesus where they should prepare the Passover "for you" rather than "for us." He sent them off to ask their mysterious host where to find the room where Jesus would eat with his disciples. Because this meal is going to summarize the life of Jesus and the meaning of discipleship, Mark makes it a point to show that the disciples who have resisted understanding Jesus' impending suffering (8:31, 9:32, 10:32) still resist the idea of participating in his Passover.

Mark explains that Jesus took the bread and blessed it and broke it. The blessing Jesus pronounced would have included prayers thanking God for key events in the course of salvation history. Jesus' identification of his body with the bread made a tremendous and potentially shocking theological statement; he was inserting his life into the traditional history of salvific events.
Finally, he gave them the cup and interpreted it as the sacrifice of his own blood in a New Covenant. But as Mark tells it, Jesus invited them to take the cup, they all drank, and only then did he explain what it meant. Just as he had asked them earlier if they could drink his cup (10:38), now he shared it with them both as gift and call to communion with his self-giving. All that he had done with them led to what this moment symbolized: as ignorant as they were willing, they were being ushered into the New Covenant.

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Hebrews (9:11–15)
Brothers and sisters: When Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer’s ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God. For this reason he is mediator of a new covenant: since a death has taken place for deliverance from transgressions under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.

* [9:11] The good things that have come to be: the majority of later manuscripts here read “the good things to come”; cf. Heb 10:1.
* [9:13] A heifer’s ashes: ashes from a red heifer that had been burned were mixed with water and used for the cleansing of those who had become ritually defiled by touching a corpse; see Nm 19:9, 14–21.
* [9:14] Through the eternal spirit: this expression does not refer either to the holy Spirit or to the divine nature of Jesus but to the life of the risen Christ, “a life that cannot be destroyed” (Heb 7:16).
* [9:15–22] Jesus’ role as mediator of the new covenant is based upon his sacrificial death (cf. Heb 8:6). His death has effected deliverance from transgressions, i.e., deliverance from sins committed under the old covenant, which the Mosaic sacrifices were incapable of effacing. Until this happened, the eternal inheritance promised by God could not be obtained (Heb 9:15). This effect of his work follows the human pattern by which a last will and testament becomes effective only with the death of the testator (Heb 9:16–17). The Mosaic covenant was also associated with death, for Moses made use of blood to seal the pact between God and the people (Heb 9:18–21). In Old Testament tradition, guilt could normally not be remitted without the use of blood (Heb 9:22; cf. Lv 17:11).

Several features of the ritual performed during the Day of Atonement serve as a model for discussing the high priesthood of Christ. The author does this, however, not to show the similarities between the early Israelite ceremony and the atoning action of Christ but to show the differences. It is the author’s intent to compare the heavenly with the earthly. Christ is said to have entered the holy of holies once, just as the high priest did yearly on that solemn occasion in order to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. Both ritual acts were mediative, and both were expiatory. The fundamental similarities end there. At the outset, the eschatological character of Christ’s sacrifice is stated. The good things that had been promised in the past have now come to be. There is an eschatological finality to what Christ does; he does it once and for all. The new covenant promised by the prophet (cf. Jer 31:31) has been established, and Christ is its mediator. The inheritance of the reign of God can now unfold. The tabernacle within which the high priest performed his duties was made by human hands and it belonged to earth; Christ passed through a greater and more perfect tabernacle, the heavenly or spiritual archetype of all other sacred tents or temples. The ritual of the Day of Atonement included the sacrifice of goats, offered for the sins of the people, and calves, offered for the sins of the priests. The atoning blood that Christ brings is his own, and his sacrifice secures eternal redemption.
The a fortiori argument the author uses is not meant to repudiate the sacrifices of the past. The comparison "how much more" implies that they did achieve the purposes for which they were intended; they removed ceremonial defilement. This was particularly true of the ashes of the heifer (cf. Num 19:9). However, the external cleansing they could effect cannot be compared with the cleansing of consciences that the blood of Christ brings about. His is a more valuable sacrifice; it is the sacrifice of his very self. Therefore what it accomplishes is much more significant than the effects of former ceremonies.

Although there is no trinitarian theology developed here, there are references to God and to the eternal Spirit through whom Christ offered himself. The real focus of this reading is the sacrifice of Christ and its atoning effects in our lives. Our consciences, not merely our bodies, are purified, and we are made acceptable for a manner of worship that is no longer temporary or provisional.

In the final verse of this reading, the author continues the a fortiori argument, insisting that as noble as the first covenant may have been, it was not able to accomplish the deliverance from sin that Christ's sacrifice achieved. The connection between sacrifice and covenant is then underscored. Since some kind of sacrifice is the foundation of any covenant, the action of Christ not only atones for sin but also inaugurates a new covenant, one that promises an eternal inheritance. Through Christ, those who have been called have been richly blessed.

**ALLELUIA** (Jn 6:51)

I am the living bread that came down from heaven, says the Lord; whoever eats this bread will live forever.

**GOSPEL**

The context for these verses on Jesus as "the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51) is the Eucharistic celebration of the early Christian communities. The Eucharist of the early communities was always aligned with the total saving event of Christ, who gave his Body and shed his Blood for our sakes. John connects the two realities when he has Jesus state that "the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (John 6:51).

For John, God the Father, the source of all life, shares with Jesus the fullness of that life. Jesus, the living bread that came down from heaven, gives of his life for all. The phrase "flesh and blood" expresses the fullness of the life of Jesus. Those who believe, who accept and partake of the whole Jesus, the living bread, will live forever.

God's gift to Israel of the manna and of the law as true nourishment is now fulfilled in Jesus, the living bread. Those who eat of that flesh and drink of that blood abide with Jesus, and he abides with them. The manna is given new meaning in the life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, the manna of God, feeds us eternally with his very self.

**+ A reading from the GOSPEL according to Mark (14:12-16, 22-26)**

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" He sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. Follow him. Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"' Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there." The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover. While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, gave it to them, and
said, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many. Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

* [14:12] The first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread...the Passover lamb: a less precise designation of the day for sacrificing the Passover lamb as evidenced by some rabbinical literature. For a more exact designation, see note on Mk 14:1. It was actually Nisan 14.
* [14:13] A man...carrying a jar of water: perhaps a prearranged signal, for only women ordinarily carried water in jars. The Greek word used here, however, implies simply a person and not necessarily a male.
* [14:22–24] The actions and words of Jesus express within the framework of the Passover meal and the transition to a new covenant the sacrifice of himself through the offering of his body and blood in anticipation of his passion and death. His blood of the covenant both alludes to the ancient rite of Ex 24:4–8 and indicates the new community that the sacrifice of Jesus will bring into being (Mt 26:26–28; Lk 22:19–20; 1 Cor 11:23–25).
* [14:24] Which will be shed: see note on Mt 26:27–28. For many: the Greek preposition hyper is a different one from that at Mt 26:28 but the same as that found at Lk 22:19, 20 and 1 Cor 11:24. The sense of both words is vicarious, and it is difficult in Hellenistic Greek to distinguish between them. For many in the sense of “all,” see note on Mt 20:28.
* [14:26] After singing a hymn: Ps 114–118, thanksgiving songs concluding the Passover meal.

Reading this familiar passage from a first century, Middle Eastern Cultural perspective adds fresh insight to a cherished event in Jesus’ life.

PASSOVER CEREMONY

Scholars agree that John’s report is historically more probable than the Synoptic report. The meal Jesus shared with his disciples was not a Passover meal (see John 13:1-2). Jesus was crucified just as Passover was beginning (John 18:28; 19:31). Mark and the other synoptics have given the meal a Passover interpretation in part because they wanted to demonstrate that Jesus faithfully observed traditional customs. Notice also, quite in accord with the culture, that the meal was prepared by the males, “You shall observe this rite as an ordinance for you and your sons forever” (Exod 12:3,4,24). Women prepared ordinary meals. One, usually a widow, served the men who ate first together with the boys past the age of puberty. Women, girls, and boys under the age of puberty ate separately and later.

In Jerusalem, Jesus had a disciple upon whom he could rely to provide a place for himself and the Twelve to celebrate this ceremony. A man carrying a water jar would be very easy to spot. Drawing and carrying water was a woman’s task. (Gen 24:11), and any man present at the well or spring would be a challenge to the honor of all the fathers, brothers, and husbands with whom the women gathered were associated.

If a man did carry water, it was more often in a skin than a jar. Women carry water in a jar balanced upon their heads. Men carry it in a skin slung over the shoulder or under the arm. A man carrying a water jar (Mark 14:13) is a cultural anomaly, easy to spot.

COMMON MEAL

Anthropologists identify meals in antiquity as ceremonies rather than rituals. A ritual (like baptism) effects a change in status, but a ceremony is a regular and predictable occurrence which confirms and legitimates people's roles and status in a community.

Eating together implies that people also share common ideas and values, and often common social status as well (see Mark 2:15-17 for the implications of Jesus’ choice of meal partners). People in antiquity paid close attention to who ate with whom, who sat where (Luke 14:7-11), what people ate and drank (Luke 7:33-34) and where (Mark 6:35-36), how the food was prepared (John 21:9), which utensils were used (Mark 7:4), when the meal took place (Passover, Mark 14:12; before Passover, Johri 13:1-2), what was discussed at table.
In Mark the Pharisees and some scribes from Jerusalem, the big city, notice that Jesus and his peasant associates did not wash their hands according to Pharisaic tradition before eating (7:3-5). On another occasion (Mark 2:23-28), the Pharisees pounced on Jesus because his disciples (who) were eating grain (what) as they walked through some else's grain-fields (where). On yet another occasion (Mark 14:3-9), the chief priests and scribes lament the waste of costly perfume.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MEAL**

As a ceremony, this final meal of Jesus with his disciples cements their mutual relationship. At this meal, Judas definitively separates himself from the group. Jesus transforms the bread and wine into symbols of himself and the rescue he is about to effect for his friends and followers. The apostles would recognize that Jesus is performing what modern scholars call a "prophetic symbolic action," that is, an actual initiation of the event he is describing, namely, his redemptive death. Nevertheless, the disciples would not understand the complete meaning of the action until after the resurrection.

By interpreting Jesus' final meal as a Passover ceremony, the Synoptic evangelists added the dimension of "remembrance" to the event. A remembrance is a ceremony whose repetition would make present an event that occurred in the past. Each celebration of the Passover ceremony "makes present that salvific deed of God for the current generation. The same would be true for the subsequent generations of Christians who repeat and celebrate the Lord's Supper. Knowing the meaning of a meal enhances its observance.

The passage for today consists of two parts: a description of the preparation for the Passover meal; and an account of the institution of the Eucharist, which took place during the meal itself. The first part sets the stage for the second, not only from a literary point of view but from a theological perspective as well. Reference to the sacrifice of the Passover lamb on the first day of the feast of the Unleavened Bread has raised many questions, because customarily that was not the day when the lamb was sacrificed. Various explanations of this discrepancy have been advanced. It is obvious that what is a problem for contemporary interpreters was not one for the author of the Gospel. This is probably because the details of the chronology are not pivotal to the argument, but the identification of the feast is.

It is obvious at the outset that Jesus is in charge. He initiates the preparations, he directs the disciples, he gives orders to the master of the house, and he claims the guest room as his own. Jesus' words set everything in motion and bring everything to pass as he describes. We do not know why the man was carrying water in a jar, when men usually carried it in skins. Nor do we know why he unquestioningly volunteered a large furnished room. He must have been some kind of a follower, because he responded positively to the requests of Jesus, who has been identified as Teacher.

One final note of interest. Jesus tells the disciples to make preparations for him to eat the Passover. They in turn tell the man that Jesus was to eat the Passover with his disciples. The disciples probably saw this as a Passover meal like other Passover meals. On the other hand, Jesus knew he would not participate in this meal as he had previously.

The economy of the words and actions of Jesus during this memorable meal is striking. It begins as most celebratory meals begin, with the breaking of bread. He blesses it in the Jewish manner of giving thanks: "Blessed are you, O LORD our God, King of the universe, who bring forth bread from the earth." He blesses the cup also, and it is probably traditional: "Blessed are you, O LORD our God, King of the universe, who created the fruit of the vine." Though they may not have understood fully, the disciples must have realized that there was profound meaning in the words and actions of Jesus, for they did not object to

(Luke 22:24-39, part of which was reported on the way to the garden in Matt 26:30-35 and Mark 14:26-32), etc.
what would otherwise have been offensive, even scandalous, commands. "Take it; this is my body . . . this is my blood of the covenant . . ."

The symbolism in this ceremony both recalls the covenant of old and reinterprets it. Eating bread was a common ritual expression of companionship; the reference to the blood of the covenant recalls the ratification of the earlier covenant through the blood of the sacrifice (cf. Exod 24:6-8). When Jesus says that he will not eat again, he may be referring to his death. More likely the author is alluding to the messianic banquet of the future, the banquet which is symbolized by the body and blood of the Lord and which will be enjoyed by all when the reign of God is brought to fulfillment.

Christ's Atoning Action
This is the feast that celebrates the incomparable love Christ has for us. It provides us with two portraits of this self-sacrificing Savior. In the first we see him offering himself as the victim to be sacrificed for the expiation of our sins. Having done that, he brings his own blood into the heavenly tabernacle to give constant witness, before the face of God, to his atoning action. In the second portrait, he spreads a banquet table for us at which we are able to eat the bread of companionship and share the blood of the new covenant. This banquet, which we have been given, is really the eschatological banquet, the meal on which we will dine for all eternity. How blessed we are that we have been called to share it! How blessed we are that we can approach it so frequently! The atoning action of Christ is really a magnanimous gesture of love.

A Life of Eucharist
How shall I make a return to the Lord for all the good that I have received? The only appropriate response to God's graciousness is thanksgiving (euca-rist(a)). We have been chosen; we have been delivered; we have a witness in heaven; and now we have been given the bread of eternal life and the blood of salvation. What return can we give? A life of gratitude lived in the presence of God; a life of union with all those who eat the same bread and drink from the

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- "In Israel, God is called 'Father' ... because of the covenant and the gift of the law to Israel 'his first-born son'"1 (CCC, 238).
- "We bless God for the dignity of the human person We bless Him for the gift of faith that enables us to live in covenant with Him until we share eternal life. We bless him for making us his daughters and sons in Christ, for having redeemed us with the price of his blood and for the permanent relationship that he establishes with us" (Aparecida, 104).
- "By its union with Christ, the People of the New Covenant, far from closing in upon itself, becomes a 'sacrament' for humanity,2 a sign and instrument of the salvation achieved by Christ ... for the redemption of all. The Church's mission stands in continuity with the mission of Christ: 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you'"3 _4 (EE, 22).
Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist

John the Baptist was the great prophet and herald of Jesus the Messiah. He prepared the way of the Lord and revealed Jesus to others as both the Messiah and the Lamb of God. St. John exemplifies the Christian life as one who proclaims the Gospel message of healing and repentance while he points out Christ to others and shows them the way to become united with God. This is an ancient solemnity, reaching back to the fourth century, though the date of the celebration varied in East and West. In the East, the birth of the forerunner was celebrated on the day after Epiphany, January 7, because of the association of that feast with the Baptism of the Lord. In the West, it was celebrated on June 24, in keeping with Luke 1:36, which notes that Elizabeth was six months pregnant at the time of the Annunciation of the Lord.

FIRST READING

The First Reading is the second “servant song” from Second Isaiah. Some scripture scholars suggest the image refers to Israel and how she is called to act in response to her covenant. Others suggest that they refer to an individual, such as an ideal king who is anointed by God and acts as God would to The poor and lowly Prophets, too, were alluded to as servants of God. The images are also referenced as a prediction of the Messiah who would be the true one to witness in God’s name. In any case, the reading suggests that the servant is called by name even before birth to act in God’s name. This servant will trust in God completely, despite difficulty or even death, for “my reward is with the Lord, / my recompense is with my God” (v. 4). In placing this reading on the feast of John the Baptist, the Church recognizes both John’s legacy of calling people to return to God and also his willingness to point toward the coming Messiah who would fulfill all the hope of Israel for a king who would act with righteousness and justice. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah announce John’s name in the Gospel, the name given to him by God before his birth.

A Reading from the Book of Isaiah (49:1-6)

Hear me, O coastlands, listen, O distant peoples. The LORD called me from birth, from my mother’s womb he gave me my name. He made of me a sharp-edged sword and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me. You are my servant, he said to me, Israel, through whom I show my glory. Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength, yet my reward is with the LORD, my recompense is with my God. For now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him; and I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength! It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.
The second of the four “servant of the Lord” oracles (cf. note on 42:1–4).

Gave me my name: designated me for a special task or mission (cf. Jer 1:5).

Israel: the servant is identified with the people of Israel as their ideal representative; however, vv. 5–6 seem to distinguish the servant from Israel.

The servant’s vocation extends beyond the restoration of Israel in order to bring the knowledge of Israel’s God to the rest of the earth; cf. Lk 2:32.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 139:1B-3;13-14AB, 14C-15 The psalm used for today’s celebration of the birth of John the Baptist speaks of God’s intimate knowledge of us from the time we were made in our mother’s womb. The psalmist says that God so lovingly and tenderly probes, knows, and understands us that it is as if our very being was formed by God, knit together and wonderfully made. The final verses of the psalm, which we do not hear on this feast, speak of how fiercely we must be willing to do what God requires. “Do I not hate, Lord, those who hate you? / Those who rise against you, do I not loathe? / With fierce hatred I hate them, / enemies I count as my own” (Psalm 139:2–22). Our response to being so lovingly made is to defend our God with all the power we have within us. John the Baptist did just that with his preaching, witness, and eventual death at the hands of the enemies of God’s word and God’s Son.

R. (14) I praise you, for I am wonderfully made.

O LORD, you have probed me, you know me: you know when I sit and when I stand; you understand my thoughts from afar.

My journeys and my rest you scrutinize, with all my ways you are familiar.

Truly you have formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb.

I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are your works.

My soul also you knew full well; nor was my frame unknown to you

When I was made in secret, when I was fashioned in the depths of the earth.

[Psalm 139] A hymnic meditation on God’s omnipresence and omniscience. The psalmist is keenly aware of God’s all-knowing gaze (Ps 139:1–6), of God’s presence in every part of the universe (Ps 139:7–12), and of God’s control over the psalmist’s very self (Ps 139:13–16). Summing up Ps 139:1–16, 17–18 express wonder. There is only one place hostile to God’s rule—wicked people. The psalmist prays to be removed from their company (Ps 139:19–24).

[139:15] The depths of the earth: figurative language for the womb, stressing the hidden and mysterious operations that occur there.

SECOND READING

John is mentioned in the reading from Acts as the prophet who heralded the coming Messiah and who in humility declared his own unworthiness to fasten the sandals of Jesus. John had been called by name from birth by God. and he was aware of his identity as a servant of the lord, but not as the Messiah. He knew that the one coming after him was the true Messiah who would be the salvation of the world.

John is the precursor, the preparer, the herald. the servant of the Lord. He points the way. We, too, are
called by name to do the same by living lives of witness and proclamation to the coming reign of God. We are called to serve God as faithfully as John did.

A Reading from ACTS 13:22-26

In those days, Paul said: “God raised up David as king; of him God testified,
I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will carry out my every wish.
From this man’s descendants God, according to his promise, has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus. John heralded his coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel; and as John was completing his course, he would say, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.’ “My brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those others among you who are God-fearing, to us this word of salvation has been sent.”

ALLELUIA

You, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

GOSPEL

Though this Gospel story from Luke is all about the wonders and miracles at the birth and naming of John the Baptist. it leads directly to the action of God. “All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, 'What, then. will this child be?' For surely the hand of the Lord was with him’ (v. 66). John the Baptist was certainly of God. The readings on this solemnity emphasize how a servant of God is formed in the womb and called by God. Despite hardship or suffering, a servant is confident in God’s presence and clear about his mission. John was clear. He was to call attention to the one who was to come after him. In the First Reading, the passage from Isaiah says this about the suffering servant “I will make you a light to the nations, I that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). John knows this truth and his proclamation about the coming Messiah is a message to the entire world that the light that has come is the Christ. John’s eventual martyrdom happens because he chose to continue in his role, announcing the coming of Christ and to point to the Lord as the salvation of the world. God called John before he was born and sent him on a mission to proclaim the coming of the Lord. John is a faithful witness to present-day disciples who are also called to testify to the light of the world now. John’s testimony was strong and clear. As ours must be as well.

A Reading from the Gospel of Luke (1:57 66,80)

When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her. When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said in reply, “No. He will be called John.” But they answered her, “There is no one among your relatives who has this name.” So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called. He asked for a tablet and wrote, “John is his name,” and all were amazed.
Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God. Then fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed.

* [1:57–66] The birth and circumcision of John above all emphasize John’s incorporation into the people of Israel by the sign of the covenant (Gn 17:1–12). The narrative of John’s circumcision also prepares the way for the subsequent description of the circumcision of Jesus in Lk 2:21. At the beginning of his two-volume work Luke shows those who play crucial roles in the inauguration of Christianity to be wholly a part of the people of Israel. At the end of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 21:20; 22:3; 23:6–9; 24:14–16; 26:2–8, 22–23) he will argue that Christianity is the direct descendant of Pharisaic Judaism.

* [1:59] The practice of Palestinian Judaism at this time was to name the child at birth; moreover, though naming a male child after the father is not completely unknown, the usual practice was to name the child after the grandfather (see Lk 1:61). The naming of the child John and Zechariah’s recovery from his loss of speech should be understood as fulfilling the angel’s announcement to Zechariah in Lk 1:13, 20.
We commemorate Sts. Peter and Paul, martyred around the year 64 during Nero’s persecution following the Great Fire of Rome. Tradition says that Peter fled Rome to avoid arrest and saw Jesus on the road. “Where are you going, Lord?” Peter asked. Jesus replied, “I am going to Rome to be crucified again.” Peter turned back and was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to meet his death the same way as Christ. Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and was sent to Rome, where he was placed under house arrest. He was slain by beheading, because as a Roman citizen he could not be subjected to the indignity of crucifixion.

A CTS 12:1-11 The story of Peter’s Release from prison reads like a supernatural play. The whole escape has an unreal, dream-like quality: shining light, oblivious guards, dropping chains, and opening gates. The threat that the Jesus movement represented is underscored by the size of the contingent assigned to guard Peter. The one who stands to benefit from Peter’s death is King Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great. No doubt his persecution of followers of Jesus endeared him to the Pharisees who feared the “heretic sect” that followed Jesus.

The solemn celebration of Passover precludes Herod from immediately presenting Peter to the people for trial and certain death. Like Jesus, Peter faced death at Passover, the feast that commemorates liberation from Pharaoh. Like Jesus, Peter is saved by God. Peter’s rescue parallels both Christ’s Resurrection and the Exodus. To the early Christians, who thought the return of Christ was at hand, this Passover rescue of Peter is a hopeful sign.

In those days, King Herod laid hands upon some members of the Church to harm them. He had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword, and when he saw that this was pleasing to the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. –It was the feast of Unleavened Bread.— He had him taken into custody and put in prison under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. He intended to bring him before the people after Passover. Peter thus was being kept in prison, but prayer by the Church was fervently being made to God on his behalf. On the very night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter, secured by double chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while outside the door guards kept watch on the prison. Suddenly the angel of the Lord stood by him and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and awakened him, saying, “Get up quickly.” The chains fell from his wrists. The angel said to him, “Put on your belt and your sandals.” He did so. Then he said to him, “Put on your cloak and follow me.” So he followed him out, not realizing that what was happening through the angel was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first guard, then the second, and came to the iron gate leading out to the city, which opened for them by itself. They emerged and made their way down an alley, and suddenly the angel left him.
Then Peter recovered his senses and said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people had been expecting.”

* [12:1–19] Herod Agrippa ruled Judea A.D. 41–44. While Luke does not assign a motive for his execution of James and his intended execution of Peter, the broad background lies in Herod’s support of Pharisaic Judaism. The Jewish Christians had lost the popularity they had had in Jerusalem (Acts 2:47), perhaps because of suspicions against them traceable to the teaching of Stephen.
* [12:2] James, the brother of John: this James, the son of Zebedee, was beheaded by Herod Agrippa ca. A.D. 44.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 34 :2-3 , 4- 5, 6- 7, &- 9 (5) Th is psalm is an alphabetic psalm, with each line beginning with a successive letter of the alphabet, and it is attributed to David. It addresses the just and encourages them to join the psalmist in praising the God who rescues them. The initial verses exhort the hearer to glorify the Lord (vv. 1-4). Then the psalmist expresses gratitude to the Lord for being rescued from danger. The psalmist has called out and the Lord has heard. Echoing the Acts reading, the psalmist acknowledges the “angel of the Lord (who) encamps around those who fear him and delivers them” (v. 7). The psalmist calls upon the hearer to taste and see,” that is, experience the goodness of the Lord.

R. (5) The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him.
I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the LORD; lowly will hear me and be glad.
Glorify the LORD with me, let us together extol his name.
I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.
Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame.
When the poor one called out, the LORD heard, and from all his distress he saved him.
The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.
Taste and see how good the LORD is; blessed the man who takes refuge in him.

* [Psalm 34] A thanksgiving in acrostic form, each line beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In this Psalm one letter is missing and two are in reverse order. The psalmist, fresh from the experience of being rescued (Ps 34:5, 7), can teach the “poor,” those who are defenseless, to trust in God alone (Ps 34:4, 12). God will make them powerful (Ps 34:5–11) and give them protection (Ps 34:12–22).
* [34:1] Abimelech: a scribal error for Achish. In 1 Sm 21:13–16, David feigned madness before Achish, not Abimelech.
* [34:12] Children: the customary term for students in wisdom literature.

SECOND READING

The excerpt from 2 Timothy speaks of Paul’s imminent death. The metaphor of libation refers to the Hellenistic ritual by which meals were concluded with the sacrifice of a cup of wine poured out in respect to the gods. Clearly, Paul sees his death as a sacrifice, a fitting end to a life of service to God. In
talking about his death, the author uses the word *analusis*, a term which can mean either "the unyoking of an animal from its harness" or the loosening of the mooring ropes on a ship." The image emphasizes Paul's vision of death as liberating him to enjoy eternal life. The crown he refers to in verse 8 may be a crown of victory or even a symbol of immortality as depicted in Roman and Greek funeral art. The later verses remind the reader that while others deserted Paul, the Lord rescued him that he might fulfill his message to the Gentiles. Paul reemphasizes his belief that God rescued him from every evil and now prepares a place for him in eternity.

**A Reading from the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy (4:6-8, 17-18)**

I, Paul, am already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance. The Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the proclamation might be completed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was rescued from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat and will bring me safe to his heavenly Kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

* [4:6] The apostle recognizes his death through martyrdom to be imminent. He regards it as an act of worship in which his blood will be poured out in sacrifice; cf. Ex 29:38–40; Phil 2:17.
* [4:7] At the close of his life Paul could testify to the accomplishment of what Christ himself foretold concerning him at the time of his conversion, “I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16).
* [4:8] When the world is judged at the parousia, all who have eagerly looked for the Lord’s appearing and have sought to live according to his teachings will be rewarded. The crown is a reference to the laurel wreath placed on the heads of victorious athletes and conquerors in war; cf. 2 Tm 2:5; 1 Cor 9:25.
* [4:14–18] Alexander: an opponent of Paul’s preaching (2 Tm 4:14–15), perhaps the one who is mentioned in 1 Tm 1:20. Despite Paul’s abandonment by his friends in the province of Asia (cf. 2 Tm 1:15–16), the divine assistance brought this first trial to a successful issue, even to the point of making the gospel message known to those who participated in or witnessed the trial (2 Tm 4:16–17).

**Alleluia**
You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.

**GOSPEL READING**

his reading focuses directly on the essence of Jesus’ identity and the church. Jesus asks his followers who people say he is (v. 13). It is a question Matthew’s church must answer as well. The responses Jesus receives all reflect the respect the people have for Jesus. The answers also reveal that the people have not recognized Jesus as their Messiah. With Peter’s inspired proclamation, Matthew refers to the “Son of the living God,” a title which shifts the image of the Messiah from a nationalistic and military one to a familial relationship a new idea to the expectant Jews.
Many scholars believe that Peter’s revelation is actually post-resurrection in context. This passage serves as a foundation story for the post-Easter church and the line of authority. Just as Peter named Jesus, Jesus named Peter. Jesus assumes what hitherto had been God's role - changing someone's name, Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah, for example. Abram was the foundation of the people of Israel and the rock from whom the people were carved (Isaiah 51:1-2). Peter the rock is the foundation stone of the church, the new people of God.

Peter is given authority to determine what is permissible as a follower of Jesus and who is part of the community. "Binding and loosing" is a Semitic expression for rendering a decision that either imposes or releases an obligation. The Church is the ultimate witness to God’s vision revealed through Jesus, the "Son of the living God."

+ A Reading from the Gospel of Matthew (16:13-19)

When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter said in reply, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

* [16:13–20] The Marcan confession of Jesus as Messiah, made by Peter as spokesman for the other disciples (Mk 8:27–29; cf. also Lk 9:18–20), is modified significantly here. The confession is of Jesus both as Messiah and as Son of the living God (Mt 16:16). Jesus’ response, drawn principally from material peculiar to Matthew, attributes the confession to a divine revelation granted to Peter alone (Mt 16:17) and makes him the rock on which Jesus will build his church (Mt 16:18) and the disciple whose authority in the church on earth will be confirmed in heaven, i.e., by God (Mt 16:19).

* [16:13] Caesarea Philippi: situated about twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee in the territory ruled by Philip, a son of Herod the Great, tetrarch from 4 B.C. until his death in A.D. 34 (see note on Mt 14:1). He rebuilt the town of Paneas, naming it Caesarea in honor of the emperor, and Philippi (“of Philip”) to distinguish it from the seaport in Samaria that was also called Caesarea. Who do people say that the Son of Man is?: although the question differs from the Marcan parallel (Mk 8:27: “Who…that I am?”), the meaning is the same, for Jesus here refers to himself as the Son of Man (cf. Mt 16:15).


* [16:16] The Son of the living God: see Mt 2:15; 3:17. The addition of this exalted title to the Marcan confession eliminates whatever ambiguity was attached to the title Messiah. This, among other things, supports the view proposed by many scholars that Matthew has here combined his source’s confession with a post-resurrectional confession of faith in Jesus as Son of the living God that belonged to the appearance of the risen Jesus to Peter; cf. 1 Cor 15:5; Lk 24:34.

* [16:17] Flesh and blood: a Semitic expression for human beings, especially in their weakness. Has not revealed this...but my heavenly Father: that Peter’s faith is spoken of as coming not through human means but through a revelation from God is similar to Paul’s description of his recognition of who Jesus was; see Gal 1:15–16, “...when he [God]...was pleased to reveal his Son to me....”
* [16:18] You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church: the Aramaic word kēpā' meaning rock and transliterated into Greek as Kēphas is the name by which Peter is called in the Pauline letters (1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:4; Gal 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14) except in Gal 2:7–8 (“Peter”). It is translated as Petros (“Peter”) in Jn 1:42. The presumed original Aramaic of Jesus’ statement would have been, in English, “You are the Rock (Kēpā’) and upon this rock (kēpā’) I will build my church.” The Greek text probably means the same, for the difference in gender between the masculine noun petros, the disciple’s new name, and the feminine noun petra (rock) may be due simply to the unsuitability of using a feminine noun as the proper name of a male. Although the two words were generally used with slightly different nuances, they were also used interchangeably with the same meaning, “rock.” Church: this word (Greek ekklēsia) occurs in the gospels only here and in Mt 18:17(twice). There are several possibilities for an Aramaic original. Jesus’ church means the community that he will gather and that, like a building, will have Peter as its solid foundation. That function of Peter consists in his being witness to Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it: the netherworld (Greek Hadēs, the abode of the dead) is conceived of as a walled city whose gates will not close in upon the church of Jesus, i.e., it will not be overcome by the power of death.

* [16:19] The keys to the kingdom of heaven: the image of the keys is probably drawn from Is 22:15–25 where Eliakim, who succeeds Shebna as master of the palace, is given “the key of the House of David,” which he authoritatively “opens” and “shuts” (Is 22:22). Whatever you bind...loosed in heaven: there are many instances in rabbinic literature of the binding-loosing imagery. Of the several meanings given there to the metaphor, two are of special importance here: the giving of authoritative teaching, and the lifting or imposing of the ban of excommunication. It is disputed whether the image of the keys and that of binding and losing are different metaphors meaning the same thing. In any case, the promise of the keys is given to Peter alone. In Mt 18:18 all the disciples are given the power of binding and losing, but the context of that verse suggests that there the power of excommunication alone is intended. That the keys are those to the kingdom of heaven and that Peter’s exercise of authority in the church on earth will be confirmed in heaven show an intimate connection between, but not an identification of, the church and the kingdom of heaven.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- "A first essential setting for learning hope is prayer. When no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me . . . he can help me" (SS, 32).
- "During thirteen years in jail, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that [Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan] could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope - to that great hope which does not wane even in the nights of solitude" (SS, 32).
- "Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice. Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them" (LG, 10).
- "Moved by the grace of the Holy Spirit and drawn by the Father, we believe in Jesus and confess: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. On the rock of this faith confessed by St. Peter Christ built his Church" (CCC, 424).
Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord

Jesus’ Transfiguration impels us to transform the world by letting our faces shine like the Son and by shining the Light of Christ on others.

FIRST READING

At about the time that Daniel was written, the Jewish people lived under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus wanted to impose Greek culture and religion on his Jew-ish subjects. The dreams and visions described in chapters seven through twelve are addressed to persecuted people, particularly those persecuted by Antiochus. In the verses that precede the reading, four mythical beasts emerge from an abyss. These beasts can be identified as empires that ruled over the people of Israel: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. These beasts terrorize and destroy people (7:5). Amid this destruction comes “an Ancient One• (v. 9), taking his throne of fiery flames. God appears and judges the beasts. in particular a beast's horn that represented Antiochus.

The horn is destroyed (v.11), and on the horizon a new vision arises. A being in human form appears before the Ancient One and receives authority over the world for eternity (w. 13- 14). For the people undergoing persecution, this vision promises that God, not human rulers, reigns over the world and throughout history.

The Book of Daniel promises that faith will triumph: the good and righteous will be saved and the wicked destroyed. Later Chris- tians interpreted the one given authority to be Jesus Christ. Whose power comes from God and whose rule is eternal.

A Reading from the Book of Daniel (7:9- 10, 13- 14)

As I watched: Thrones were set up and the Ancient One took his throne. His clothing was bright as snow, and the hair on his head as white as wool; his throne was flames of fire, with wheels of burning fire. A surging stream of fire flowed out from where he sat; Thousands upon thousands were ministering to him, and myriads upon myriads attended him. The court was convened and the books were opened.

As the visions during the night continued, I saw: One like a Son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven; When he reached the Ancient One and was presented before him, The one like a Son of man received dominion, glory, and kingship; all peoples, nations, and languages serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed.

* [7:9–10] A vision of the heavenly throne of God (the Ancient of Days), who sits in judgment over the nations. Some of the details of the vision, depicting the divine majesty and omnipotence, are to be found in Ezekiel 1. Others are paralleled in 1 Enoch, a contemporary Jewish apocalypse.

* [7:13–14] One like a son of man: In contrast to the worldly kingdoms opposed to God, which are represented as grotesque beasts, the coming Kingdom of God is represented by a human figure. Scholars disagree as to whether this figure should be taken as a collective symbol for the people of God (cf. 7:27) or identified as a particular individual, e.g., the archangel Michael (cf. 12:1) or the messiah. The
phrase “Son of Man” becomes a title for Jesus in the gospels, especially in passages dealing with the Second Coming (Mk 13 and parallels).

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 97 celebrates the reign of God over Israel. The people experience God as a mysterious force, like "clouds and thick darkness" (v. 2). God's reign is founded on justice (v. 2), and God's power is overwhelming. The highest points on earth dissolve in the presence of the mighty one (v. 5). The psalm proclaims that no god is ever greater than the God of Israel (v. 9).

R. The Lord is king, the Most High over all the earth.
The LORD is king; let the earth rejoice; let the many islands be glad.
Clouds and darkness are round about him, justice and judgment are the foundation of his throne.
The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the LORD of all the earth.
The heavens proclaim his justice, and all peoples see his glory.
Because you, O LORD, are the Most High over all the earth, exalted far above all gods.

* [Psalm 97] The hymn begins with God appearing in a storm, a traditional picture of some ancient Near Eastern gods (Ps 97:1–6); cf. Ps 18:8–16; Mi 3:3–4; Heb 3:3–15. Israel rejoices in the overthrowing of idol worshipers and their gods (Ps 97:7–9) and the rewarding of the faithful righteous (Ps 97:10–12).

SECOND READING

2 PETER 1:16-19 The early Christians, who once believed that Christ would return soon, became confused as the years progressed. Some people began to teach that belief in Christ's return was one of several "cleverly devised myths" (1:16). The Second Letter of Peter addresses these false teachers. The passage defends belief in Christ's return with an appeal to the Apostles' experience of the Transfiguration. According to the author, the experience of Jesus' transformation and the words spoken from heaven revealed him to be the one from God. The Transfiguration is like a window offering a view into the reality to come. Present time is compared to darkness, but Christ's reappearance will mark the dawn of a new day. Until then, believers must stand firm in their faith founded on the Apostles' witness.

A Reading from the Second Letter of Peter (1:16-19)

Beloved:
We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that unique declaration came to him from the majestic glory, “This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain. Moreover, we possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable. You will do well to be attentive to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.
Coming: in Greek parousia, used at 2 Pt 3:4, 12 of the second coming of Christ. The word was used in the extrabiblical writings for the visitation of someone in authority; in Greek cult and Hellenistic Judaism it was used for the manifestation of the divine presence. That the apostles made known has been interpreted to refer to Jesus’ transfiguration (2 Pt 1:17) or to his entire first coming or to his future coming in power (2 Pt 3).

The author assures the readers of the reliability of the apostolic message (including Jesus’ power, glory, and coming; cf. note on 2 Pt 1:16) by appeal to the transfiguration of Jesus in glory (cf. Mt 17:1–8 and parallels) and by appeal to the prophetic message (2 Pt 1:19; perhaps Nm 24:17). Here, as elsewhere, the New Testament insists on continued reminders as necessary to preserve the historical facts about Jesus and the truths of the faith; cf. 2 Pt 3:1–2; 1 Cor 11:2; 15:1–3. My Son, my beloved: or, “my beloved Son.”

We: at Jesus’ transfiguration, referring to Peter, James, and John (Mt 17:1).

Alleluia
This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.

GOSPEL READING

The Transfiguration is a mysterious event that revealed Jesus’ divine nature and the glory that would be his after the Resurrection and Ascension into heaven. Peter, James, and John, the same disciples who will accompany Jesus to the garden at Gethsemane, are led to a mountain to see Jesus transform into a being of light. Two great leaders, Elijah and Moses, also appear. Moses and Elijah both experienced the glory of the Lord on a high mountain: Moses received the Law (Exodus 19-34) and Elijah heard the voice of God (1 Kings 19:8-14). They may represent the Law and the words of the prophets that Jesus has fulfilled.

In all three Gospel accounts, the Transfiguration immediately follows Jesus telling his followers that discipleship involves denying oneself and taking up the cross (Mark 8:34-38). The Gospels teach that if the disciples persevere through suffering and trial, they will also share a glorious encounter with God.

MARK 9:2-10 The Transfiguration is a mysterious event that revealed Jesus’ divine nature and the glory that would be his after the Resurrection and Ascension into heaven. Peter, James, and John, the same disciples who will accompany Jesus to the garden at Gethsemane, are led to a mountain to see Jesus transform into a being of light. Two great leaders, Elijah and Moses, also appear. Moses and Isaiah both experienced the glory of the Lord on a high mountain: Moses received the Law (Exodus 19-34) and Elijah heard the voice of God (1 Kings 19:8-14). They may represent the Law and the words of the prophets that Jesus has fulfilled.

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A Reading from the Gospel of Mark
After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.
Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them;* then from the cloud came a voice, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.” Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them. As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.

* [9:1] There are some standing...come in power: understood by some to refer to the establishment by God’s power of his kingdom on earth in and through the church; more likely, as understood by others, a reference to the imminent parousia.
* [9:2–8] Mark and Mt 17:1 place the transfiguration of Jesus six days after the first prediction of his passion and death and his instruction to the disciples on the doctrine of the cross; Lk 9:28 has “about eight days.” Thus the transfiguration counterbalances the prediction of the passion by affording certain of the disciples insight into the divine glory that Jesus possessed. His glory will overcome his death and that of his disciples; cf. 2 Cor 3:18; 2 Pt 1:16–19. The heavenly voice (Mk 9:7) prepares the disciples to understand that in the divine plan Jesus must die ignominiously before his messianic glory is made manifest; cf. Lk 24:25–27. See further the note on Mt 17:1–8.
* [9:5] Moses and Elijah represent, respectively, law and prophecy in the Old Testament and are linked to Mount Sinai; cf. Ex 19:16–20:17; 1 Kgs 19:2, 8–14. They now appear with Jesus as witnesses to the fulfillment of the law and the prophets taking place in the person of Jesus as he appears in glory.
* [9:7] A cloud came, casting a shadow over them: even the disciples enter into the mystery of his glorification. In the Old Testament the cloud covered the meeting tent, indicating the Lord’s presence in the midst of his people (Ex 40:34–35) and came to rest upon the temple in Jerusalem at the time of its dedication (1 Kgs 8:10).
* [9:9–13] At the transfiguration of Jesus his disciples had seen Elijah. They were perplexed because, according to the rabbinical interpretation of Mal 3:23–24, Elijah was to come first. Jesus’ response shows that Elijah has come, in the person of John the Baptist, to prepare for the day of the Lord. Jesus must suffer greatly and be treated with contempt (Mk 9:12) like the Baptist (Mk 9:13); cf. Mk 6:17–29.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

- In the Transfiguration Jesus’ real nature is revealed to his followers and to us (CCC, 464-469, 480-482).
- Face-to-face with the mystery of Christ’s dual nature, the apostles respond in wonder (CCC, 554-556, 568).
- The Transfiguration is a preview of God’s glory, visible only with the eyes of faith (CCC, 2809).
Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was proclaimed in 1950, but this observance has been celebrated on this day from the middle of the fifth century. On this solemnity, we profess our belief that Mary has gone before us, body and soul, into heaven. For her, the resurrection of the dead has taken place already. And thus the Assumption is technically an “Easter feast.” God invites us to eternal life, to enjoy the glorious new creation of his Son in body, soul, and spirit. Our final hope is the resurrection of our own bodies at the end of time to exist forever in this new order of creation. The Solemnity of the Assumption is our great celebration of this final hope. Mary is a pioneer for us in faith. She was the first among us to accept Jesus Christ into her life. In her bodily assumption, she is also the first fully to enjoy eternal life at the side of her Risen Son in the glory of heaven. Where she has gone, we hope to follow. We rejoice in the fulfillment of God's promise in her as we turn to her to guide us to the side of her Risen Son who reigns in heaven.

FIRST READING

John sees a vision of the Temple opened and of the Ark of the Covenant fully displayed. The ark of the covenant was in the Holy of Holies, which the high priest could enter only on the Day of Atonement. The ark was a reminder of God's faithfulness to the covenant with Israel, whatever terror yet to come. John sees another vision, with details drawn from many sources. The Babylonians frequently depicted their goddesses as crowned with the twelve signs of the zodiac. The woman's twelve-star crown also represents the twelve tribes of Israel of the Old Covenant and the Twelve Apostles of the New Covenant. She is the mother of the Church and the mother of the Messiah. She is in labor about to bear a child who is destined to "rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (12:5. see Psalm 2:9. a messianic psalm). When the child is born, he is rescued from the attack of the dragon, an ancient image for Satan, by being taken up to the throne of God in heaven, a reference to Christ's Ascension. The woman, too, escapes the attack of the dragon by being taken into the desert (a biblical place of refuge, see Jesus' instructions to his disciples, Mark 13:14). The reference to "one thousand two hundred sixty days" (Revelation 12:6b) is roughly the length of persecution of Israel by Antiochus Epiphanes IV (also forty-two months. three and one-half years. see 11:2). A voice from heaven proclaims Christ's victory over Satan: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah" (v. 10a).

A Reading from the Book of Revelation (11:19A; 12: 1-6 A, 10AB)

God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple. A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth.
She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod.
Her child was caught up to God and his throne.
The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God.
Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have salvation and power come, and the Kingdom of our God and the authority of his Anointed One.”

* [12:1–14:20] This central section of Revelation portrays the power of evil, represented by a dragon, in opposition to God and his people. First, the dragon pursues the woman about to give birth, but her son is saved and “caught up to God and his throne” (Rev 12:5). Then Michael and his angels cast the dragon and his angels out of heaven (Rev 12:7–9). After this, the dragon tries to attack the boy indirectly by attacking members of his church (Rev 12:13–17). A beast, symbolizing the Roman empire, then becomes the dragon’s agent, mortally wounded but restored to life and worshiped by all the world (Rev 13:1–10). A second beast arises from the land, symbolizing the antichrist, which leads people astray by its prodigies to idolize the first beast (Rev 13:11–18). This is followed by a vision of the Lamb and his faithful ones, and the proclamation of imminent judgment upon the world in terms of the wine of God’s wrath (Rev 14:1–20).

* [12:1–6] The woman adorned with the sun, the moon, and the stars (images taken from Gn 37:9–10) symbolizes God’s people in the Old and the New Testament. The Israel of old gave birth to the Messiah (Rev 12:5) and then became the new Israel, the church, which suffers persecution by the dragon (Rev 12:6, 13–17); cf. Is 50:1; 66:7; Jer 50:12. This corresponds to a widespread myth throughout the ancient world that a goddess pregnant with a savior was pursued by a horrible monster; by miraculous intervention, she bore a son who then killed the monster.


* [12:3] Huge red dragon: the Devil or Satan (cf. Rev 12:9; 20:2), symbol of the forces of evil, a mythical monster known also as Leviathan (Ps 74:13–14) or Rahab (Jb 26:12–13; Ps 89:11). Seven diadems: these are symbolic of the fullness of the dragon’s sovereignty over the kingdoms of this world; cf. Christ with many diadems (Rev 19:12).


* [12:6] God protects the persecuted church in the desert, the traditional Old Testament place of refuge for the afflicted, according to the typology of the Exodus; see note on Rev 11:2.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 45 was originally written to celebrate the marriage of the king of Israel. The king’s pursuit "for the cause of truth and to defend the right" (Psalm 45:4) is recalled and celebrated. Later traditions have seen another level of meaning in the psalm. Jews understand it as the relationship between the royal Messiah and his people Israel. Christians see it as celebrating the union of Christ and the church (often portrayed as a marriage, see Ephesians 5:21–23). The psalmist delights in the wedding procession as they are led in with glad and joyous acclaim; they enter the palace of the king (Ps 45:15).

R. The queen stands at your right hand, arrayed in gold.
The queen takes her place at your right hand in gold of Ophir.
Hear, O daughter, and see; turn your ear, forget your people and your father’s house.
So shall the king desire your beauty; for he is your lord.
They are borne in with gladness and joy; they enter the palace of the king.
[Psalm 45] A song for the Davidic king’s marriage to a foreign princess from Tyre in Phoenicia. The court poet sings (Ps 45:2, 18) of God’s choice of the king (Ps 45:3, 8), of his role in establishing divine rule (Ps 45:4–8), and of his splendor as he waits for his bride (Ps 45:9–10). The woman is to forget her own house when she becomes wife to the king (Ps 45:11–13). Her majestic beauty today is a sign of the future prosperity of the royal house (Ps 45:14–17). The Psalm was retained in the collection when there was no reigning king, and came to be applied to the king who was to come, the messiah.


* [45:11] Forget your people and your father’s house: the bride should no longer consider herself a daughter of her father’s house, but the wife of the king— the queen.

**SECOND READING**

1 CORINTHIANS The Feast of the Passover had more than one meaning. It commemorated the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, but it also was a harvest festival. The law required that the first fruits of the harvest be brought to the priest as an offering to the Lord (Leviticus 23:10-11). For Paul, the first fruits were a sign of the Resurrection of Jesus and a sign of the resurrection of all believers. At Christ’s final coming, he will return to the Father like a conqueror returning home. Christ will hand over the kingdom to God, and put all his enemies under his feet (1 Corinthians 15:24, 25: it was the custom of a king to place his foot on the back of his vanquished enemy, see Psalm 110:1). Death will be the last enemy to defeat. Then there will be nothing outside God’s redeeming power and love.

A Reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians (15:20-27)

Brothers and sisters:

Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through man, the resurrection of the dead came also through man. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life, but each one in proper order: Christ the first fruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ; then comes the end, when he hands over the Kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death, for “he subjected everything under his feet.”

* [15:1–58] Some consider this chapter an earlier Pauline composition inserted into the present letter. The problem that Paul treats is clear to a degree: some of the Corinthians are denying the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:12), apparently because of their inability to imagine how any kind of bodily existence could be possible after death (1 Cor 15:35). It is plausibly supposed that their attitude stems from Greek anthropology, which looks with contempt upon matter and would be content with the survival of the soul, and perhaps also from an overrealized eschatology of gnostic coloration, such as that reflected in 2 Tm 2:18, which considers the resurrection a purely spiritual experience already achieved in baptism and in the forgiveness of sins. Paul, on the other hand, will affirm both the essential corporeity of the resurrection and its futurity. His response moves through three steps: a recall of the basic kerygma about Jesus’ resurrection (1 Cor 15:1–11), an assertion of the logical inconsistencies involved in denial of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:12–34), and an attempt to perceive theologically what the properties of the resurrected body must be (1 Cor 15:35–58).
* [15:20] The firstfruits: the portion of the harvest offered in thanksgiving to God implies the consecration of the entire harvest to come. Christ’s resurrection is not an end in itself; its finality lies in the whole harvest, ourselves.

* [15:21–22] Our human existence, both natural and supernatural, is corporate, involves solidarity. In Adam…in Christ: the Hebrew word 'ādām in Genesis is both a common noun for mankind and a proper noun for the first man. Paul here presents Adam as at least a literary type of Christ; the parallelism and contrast between them will be developed further in 1 Cor 15:45–49 and in Rom 5:12–21.

* [15:24–28] Paul’s perspective expands to cosmic dimensions, as he describes the climax of history, the end. His viewpoint is still christological, as in 1 Cor 15:20–23. 1 Cor 15:24, 28 describe Christ’s final relations to his enemies and his Father in language that is both royal and military; 1 Cor 15:25–28 inserts a proof from scripture (Ps 110:1; 8:6) into this description. But the viewpoint is also theological, for God is the ultimate agent and end, and likewise soteriological, for we are the beneficiaries of all the action.

* [15:26] The last enemy...is death: a parenthesis that specifies the final fulfillment of the two Old Testament texts just referred to, Ps 110:1 and Ps 8:7. Death is not just one cosmic power among many, but the ultimate effect of sin in the universe (cf. 1 Cor 15:56; Rom 5:12). Christ defeats death where it prevails, in our bodies. The destruction of the last enemy is concretely the “coming to life” (1 Cor 15:22) of “those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor 15:23).

* [15:27b–28] The one who subjected everything to him: the Father is the ultimate agent in the drama, and the final end of the process, to whom the Son and everything else is ordered (24, 28). That God may be all in all: his reign is a dynamic exercise of creative power, an outpouring of life and energy through the universe, with no further resistance. This is the supremely positive meaning of “subjection”: that God may fully be God.

**ALLELUIA**
Mary is taken up to heaven; a chorus of angels exults.

**GOSPEL READING**

As a sign to Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah, the angel Gabriel tells her that her kinswoman Elizabeth conceived a son in her old age. Mary is the obedient servant of the Lord who travels four days to the hill country of Judah to assist her cousin. On hearing Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s unborn child leaps for joy in her womb, recalling David’s dance before the Lord when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:9,14). Elizabeth expresses her unworthiness of being visited by Mary, the Ark bearing the New Covenant her divine son Jesus. Elizabeth rejoices in Mary’s privileged role. Mary is "blessed . . . among women" (Luke 1:42) for believing that God’s promises to her would be fulfilled. In an exultant hymn of praise, Mary rejoices in God’s saving promises. (see the canticle of Hannah, 1 Samuel 2:1-10). God casts down the powerful and raises up the poor. Mary recognizes her own lowliness before her mighty God. She is God’s humble handmaid, "servant Israel" (Luke 1:54). Obedient to the Lord’s command. All Christians hope to be "lifted up" (v. 52) by God one day to join Mary and her son in heaven.

+ **A Reading from the Gospel of Luke (1:39-56)**
Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

And Mary said: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his Name. He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm, and has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel for he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children forever.”

Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

* [1:43] Even before his birth, Jesus is identified in Luke as the Lord.
* [1:45] Blessed are you who believed: Luke portrays Mary as a believer whose faith stands in contrast to the disbelief of Zechariah (Lk 1:20). Mary’s role as believer in the infancy narrative should be seen in connection with the explicit mention of her presence among “those who believed” after the resurrection at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:14).
* [1:46–55] Although Mary is praised for being the mother of the Lord and because of her belief, she reacts as the servant in a psalm of praise, the Magnificat. Because there is no specific connection of the canticle to the context of Mary’s pregnancy and her visit to Elizabeth, the Magnificat (with the possible exception of v. 48) may have been a Jewish Christian hymn that Luke found appropriate at this point in his story. Even if not composed by Luke, it fits in well with themes found elsewhere in Luke: joy and exultation in the Lord; the lowly being singled out for God’s favor; the reversal of human fortunes; the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. The loose connection between the hymn and the context is further seen in the fact that a few Old Latin manuscripts identify the speaker of the hymn as Elizabeth, even though the overwhelming textual evidence makes Mary the speaker.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

"Mary's role in the church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it" (CCC, 964). "In her, the Church is already the 'all holy,' " (CCC, 829).

The Mother of God is a type of the church in the order of faith, Charity and perfect union with Christ (LG, 63).

"When the course of her earthly life was finished, [Mary] was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians" (CCC. 966).

"By her complete obedience to the Father’s will, to his Son’s redemptive work, and to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary is the Church’s model of fait hand charity... the ‘preeminent and . . . , and wholly unique member of the Church’"2 (CCC, 967).
Revelation is a New Testament book that is described as "apocalyptic," from the Greek word that means "revelation." The author of this book, a Jewish Christian prophet named John, describes visions of future events as he issues warnings about current behaviors. Revelation is a richly symbolic book that was never intended to be taken literally, but it does reveal certain truths.

In today's reading, there are two visions. The first is a brief message from an angel of God to protect the land until a huge group of people representing all the tribes of Israel is sealed as God's servant. The second is a vision of an even greater multitude of "every nation, race, people and tongue" that has been saved by the blood of the Lamb. The people of this multitude carry palm branches as a sign of the victory and don white robes to symbolize the new life won by this ultimate sacrifice. As the early Christian community is suffering persecution by Roman authorities, Revelation's author focuses on a message of hope. The suffering of the present time was indeed great, but it was not an end. There is hope, for Christ the Lamb has won salvation and eternal life.

**Rv 7: 2-4. 9-14**

Then I saw another angel come up from the East, holding the seal of the living God. He cried out in a loud voice to the four angels who were given power to damage the land and the sea, “Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees until we put the seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” I heard the number of those who had been marked with the seal, one hundred and forty-four thousand marked from every tribe of the Israelites: twelve thousand were marked from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand from the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand from the tribe of Gad, twelve thousand from the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand from the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand from the tribe of Manasseh, twelve thousand from the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand from the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand from the tribe of Issachar, twelve thousand from the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand from the tribe of Joseph, and twelve thousand were marked from the tribe of Benjamin.

After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb.” All the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They prostrated themselves before the throne, worshiped God, and exclaimed: “Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.” Then one of the elders spoke up and said to me, “Who are these wearing white robes, and where did they come from?” I said to him, “My lord, you are the one who knows.” He said to
me, “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

* [7:1–17] An interlude of two visions precedes the breaking of the seventh seal, just as two more will separate the sixth and seventh trumpets (Rev 10). In the first vision (Rev 7:1–8), the elect receive the seal of the living God as protection against the coming cataclysm; cf. Rev 14:1; Ez 9:4–6; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13; 4:30. The second vision (Rev 7:9–17) portrays the faithful Christians before God’s throne to encourage those on earth to persevere to the end, even to death.

* [7:2] East: literally, “rising of the sun.” The east was considered the source of light and the place of paradise (Gn 2:8). Seal: whatever was marked by the impression of one’s signet ring belonged to that person and was under his protection.

* [7:4–9] One hundred and forty-four thousand: the square of twelve (the number of Israel’s tribes) multiplied by a thousand, symbolic of the new Israel (cf. Rev 14:1–5; Gal 6:16; Jas 1:1) that embraces people from every nation, race, people, and tongue (Rev 7:9).


* [7:10] Salvation comes from: literally, “(let) salvation (be ascribed) to.” A similar hymn of praise is found at the fall of the dragon (Rev 12:10) and of Babylon (Rev 19:1).


7:1–8 Seal the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel. Normally, the announcement of the terrible day of judgment would be followed by the vision of the divine theophany, God coming forth in judgment. Revelation breaks into that pattern to answer the question of who can withstand by describing the sealing of two groups. Interpreters are divided over the identity of the 144,000. Some think that they represent the righteous of Israel. Others argue that they represent Christians, who could also speak of themselves as the “twelve tribes” (as in Jas 1:1). Such a Jewish Christian tradition may underlie this passage in Revelation.

Several passages in the Old Testament use the imagery of sealing to indicate that a person belongs to the people of God. Exod 28:11, 21 associates that sign with deliverance from the disaster of the final plague. The Egyptian plagues will appear later in the visions. Isa 44:5 describes a sealing of the Lord’s chosen ones as writing the names “I am the Lord’s,” “Jacob,” and “the Lord’s” on the hand. We have seen that in the letters Revelation promises the victorious that they will be given a new name which is that of God, of the new Jerusalem, and of Jesus’ own “new name” (3:12). Ezek 9:4 instructs one of those who are to scourge the city of idolaters to pass through first and mark the foreheads of all those who lament the abominations being practiced there with an “X” so that they will not be touched in the coming disasters. In addition to all of these Old Testament examples of sealing and salvation, the Christian audience would also remember their own tradition, which spoke of baptism as “sealing.”

God is holding back the four angels who are about to let loose the divine storm winds. They will come from the four corners of the earth as signs of divine wrath (see 1 Kgs 19:11; Jer 49:36; Ezek 37:9; Zech 6:5).

7:9–12 The elect praise the Lamb. On the basis of the Ezekiel parallel, we might expect the new vision of doom to follow immediately. Remember we are still waiting for the seventh seal to bring this first vision cycle to a conclusion. However, Revelation is not simply a prediction of disaster. It also shows the heavenly basis of salvation and Christian hope. Consequently, we are shown a new vision. Just as in the previous vision of cosmic praise, the angle of vision widens until we see multitudes from all the earth praising the Lamb. All of the elect are singing praises and waving palms, a sign of victory (1 Macc 13:37, 51; John 12:13). As in the earlier glimpse of the heavenly liturgy, the hymn is antiphonal. The praises of
the elect are answered by heavenly beings who say “Amen” and then offer their own song to God and to the Lamb.

7:13–17 Interpretation of the vision. Interpretation of the seer’s vision by an angel is common in apocalypses (compare Ezek 37:3). This passage combines allusions to Ezekiel and Daniel. The tribulation through which these people have passed may be that of the judgment (Dan 12:1), which has just been announced. Verses 15–17 are somewhat problematic, since they seem to narrow the focus of the vision from all the elect to just those who have died for their faith. However, the author may be thinking of all as having a share in martyrdom, since they have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

Several images of salvation from the Old Testament describe what awaits the elect. The righteous will not hunger and thirst ( Isa 49:10; Ps 121:6). The sheep will have their shepherd ( Ezek 34:23; Ps 23). God will wipe away the tears of the elect ( Isa 25:8). Now that we have seen the salvation won for all the elect by the death of Jesus, we are ready for the opening of the final seal.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

This psalm of praise was sung by the Hebrew people in celebration of God’s creation of the earth. For out of chaos, God "founded it upon the seas/ and established it upon the rivers." With abundant praise, the psalmist celebrates the awesome power of God and simultaneously encourages all believers who yearn to be counted among God’s faithful to follow these instructions: remain clean of heart, hold to what is right, and thus "receive a blessing from the Lord."

Ps 24: 1b-2. 3-4ab. 5-6
The earth is the LORD’s and all it holds, the world and those who dwell in it. For he founded it on the seas, established it over the rivers. Who may go up the mountain of the LORD? Who can stand in his holy place? “The clean of hand and pure of heart, who has not given his soul to useless things, what is vain. He will receive blessings from the LORD, and justice from his saving God. Such is the generation that seeks him, that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.”

* [Psalm 24] The Psalm apparently accompanied a ceremony of the entry of God (invisibly enthroned upon the ark), followed by the people, into the Temple. The Temple commemorated the creation of the world (Ps 24:1–2). The people had to affirm their fidelity before being admitted into the sanctuary (Ps 24:3–6; cf. Ps 15). A choir identifies the approaching God and invites the very Temple gates to bow down in obeisance (Ps 24:7–10).
* [24:4–5] Lit., “the one whose hands are clean.” The singular is used for the entire class of worshipers.

Like Psalm 15, this psalm appears to have accompanied the ceremony of admittance to the temple on a solemn occasion (compare v. 3 with Ps 15:1, and vv. 4–6 with Ps 15:2–5). One had to affirm commitment to the covenant in order to appear before the Lord. Verses 1–2 and 7–10 reflect the ceremony. In the
first verses the Lord's sovereignty over the created world is celebrated. People of that time imagined that the earth was suspended over vast waters, supported by great pillars. Verses 7–10 describe the procession of the Lord approaching the temple in triumph. Two choirs, singing antiphonally, identify the approaching Lord (perhaps represented by the ark carried by priests). The psalm invites worshipers to commit themselves anew to their Creator-Lord as they join in the triumphant procession.

SECOND READING

When the First Letter of John was written around the end of the first century, the author had two purposes in mind. One purpose was theological in nature, responding to challenges in the early community about the nature of Jesus' humanity and divinity. What we now accept as the language of doctrine was in the process of being formulated in those early times. The writer of this First Letter of John was intent on making it clear that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. The second purpose of the letter is to be an instruction on love. Its significant wisdom is "love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). John writes that this great and generous love has made all people children of God, bound together as one family. Immersed in divine love, the children of God find their guidelines for all of life. Though the mystery of God's great love will never be fully understood on this side of life, if love guides and shapes each day, the promise will be fulfilled when "we see him as he is."

1 Jn 3: 1-3
See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed* we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself pure, as he is pure.

* [3:1–3] The greatest sign of God's love is the gift of his Son (Jn 3:16) that has made Christians true children of God. This relationship is a present reality and also part of the life to come; true knowledge of God will ultimately be gained, and Christians prepare themselves now by virtuous lives in imitation of the Son.

* [3:2] When it is revealed: or “when he is revealed” (the subject of the verb could be Christ).

The repeated reference to the “children of God” (vv. 1, 2, 10) employs the language and distinction of the Gospel. Christians are God's children, the tekna Theou; only Jesus is God's Son, the huios Theou. As our author describes the “begotten by God” (v. 9), he slips into strongly figurative language. The Greek of verse 9 speaks of God's seed remaining in his children. John 3:1 has already insisted that this is what we really are — God's children!

The imagery of verse 2 is fascinating. Looking at God as though into a mirror, our own visage is reflected, but with divine configuration. As God's children we will, says the author, bear an amazing family likeness.

Verse 3 is ambiguous. Are we to keep ourselves pure as God is pure or as Jesus is pure? Probably the latter, since in subsequent verses it is Christ who is sinless (v. 5) and the Son who is holy (v. 7).
On the solemnity of All Saints, we remember all those who have gone before us in faith and who we trust now live forever in God’s heavenly love. It is also a feast of recommitment for those of us who, inspired by their lives, are encouraged to imitate them. Though most of us will never be officially recognized by the Church as saints, our baptismal call to this goal is no less ours. Today’s passage from the Gospel, Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount, provides guidelines for attaining that goal.

In the passage, Jesus walks among a great crowd and finds a place to sit where he delivers intentional teachings, not an offhand set of remarks. These teachings are at the core of his ministry and the life of those who choose to follow him. The eight “blessed” statements are no less a challenge to us today than they were then. Perhaps that is why Jesus sat down, as if to say, "Pay attention to these directions; they will lead to eternal life.”

Faithfulness and justice are the central themes of these blessed statements. The “poor in spirit” are those who consider wealth unimportant because they live simply, either by choice or situation. They are blessed not because they are morally better than others, but because God has a special care for them. Blessed are the meek, not because they are quiet souls who fade into the woodwork, but because they are gentle and avoid revenge. Blessed are the merciful because they imitate God’s great capacity to forgive without giving up. The clean of heart are those who have a great love of justice. Similarly, the peacemakers are those who stand for righteousness. These are challenging words; nonetheless, they are the guidelines for faithful living.

A Reading from the Gospel of Matthew (5: 1-12a)

When he saw the crowds,* he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He began to teach them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,* for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.  
Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.  
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.  
Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.
The first of the five discourses that are a central part of the structure of this gospel. It is the discourse section of the first book and contains sayings of Jesus derived from Q and from M. The Lucan parallel is in that gospel’s “Sermon on the Plain” (Lk 6:20–49), although some of the sayings in Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” have their parallels in other parts of Luke. The careful topical arrangement of the sermon is probably not due only to Matthew’s editing; he seems to have had a structured discourse of Jesus as one of his sources. The form of that source may have been as follows: four beatitudes (Mt 5:3–4, 6, 11–12), a section on the new righteousness with illustrations (Mt 5:17, 20–24, 27–28, 33–48), a section on good works (Mt 6:1–6, 16–18), and three warnings (Mt 7:1–2, 15–21, 24–27).

Unlike Luke’s sermon, this is addressed not only to the disciples but to the crowds (see Mt 7:28).

The form Blessed are (is) occurs frequently in the Old Testament in the Wisdom literature and in the psalms. Although modified by Matthew, the first, second, fourth, and ninth beatitudes have Lucan parallels (Mt 5:3 // Lk 6:20; Mt 5:4 // Lk 6:21b; Mt 5:6 // Lk 6:21a; Mt 5:11–12 // Lk 5:22–23). The others were added by the evangelist and are probably his own composition. A few manuscripts, Western and Alexandrian, and many versions and patristic quotations give the second and third beatitudes in inverted order.

The poor in spirit: in the Old Testament, the poor (‘anāwîm) are those who are without material possessions and whose confidence is in God (see Is 61:1; Zep 2:3; in the NAB the word is translated lowly and humble, respectively, in those texts). Matthew added in spirit in order either to indicate that only the devout poor were meant or to extend the beatitude to all, of whatever social rank, who recognized their complete dependence on God. The same phrase poor in spirit is found in the Qumran literature (1QM 14:7).

Cf. Is 61:2, “(The Lord has sent me)...to comfort all who mourn.” They will be comforted: here the passive is a “theological passive” equivalent to the active “God will comfort them”; so also in Mt 5:6, 7.

Cf. Ps 37:11, “...the meek shall possess the land.” In the psalm “the land” means the land of Palestine; here it means the kingdom.

For righteousness: a Matthean addition. For the meaning of righteousness here, see note on Mt 3:14–15.

Cf. Ps 24:4. Only one “whose heart is clean” can take part in the temple worship. To be with God in the temple is described in Ps 42:3 as “beholding his face,” but here the promise to the clean of heart is that they will see God not in the temple but in the coming kingdom.

Righteousness here, as usually in Matthew, means conduct in conformity with God’s will.

The prophets who were before you: the disciples of Jesus stand in the line of the persecuted prophets of Israel. Some would see the expression as indicating also that Matthew considered all Christian disciples as prophets.

The setting. The site for the Sermon is a mountainside, presumably in Galilee. In the Bible and in other religious literatures, the mountain is frequently a privileged place for revelations of or from God. The fact that Jesus’ first extensive block of teaching is set on a mountainside gives it special importance. The audience for the Sermon has already been introduced. It certainly contains the disciples chosen by Jesus (4:18–22). It also includes some of the crowd (4:23–25), as both the beginning (5:1) and the end (7:28) of the Sermon indicate. The Sermon is intended for a wider audience than the inner circle of Jesus’ followers.

The beatitudes (see Luke 6:20–23). The beatitudes declare “blessed” or “happy” some surprising people. The beatitude is a literary form common in the Old Testament book of Psalms. There persons or groups are declared to be blessed or happy (see Pss 1:1; 32:1–2; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4–5; 106:3; 112:1;
128:1), and sometimes the reason for the declaration is supplied. The Matthean beatitudes differ from the Old Testament models in their references to the coming kingdom of God and to the reversal of human values that accompanies it. The four beatitudes in Luke 6:20–23 are commonly thought to reflect the form (“Blessed are you ...”) and the content (blessings on the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the persecuted) of Jesus’ preaching more closely than the Matthean beatitudes do. Matthew’s version tends to spiritualize (“poor in spirit” ... “hunger and thirst for righteousness”) and contains further beatitudes that do not add appreciably to the content of Luke’s version.
The first set of beatitudes (vv. 3–6) proclaims as happy the poor in spirit (those whose condition demands total trust in God), the sorrowing (see Isa 61:2–3), the meek (see Ps 37:11), and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (those whose central task in life is the fulfillment of God’s will). Their happiness is largely future, but it also extends into the present time. By living out the values of the kingdom of heaven here and now, they anticipate and share the happiness that a fuller form of life with God will bring. God is the source of all their happiness.
The second set of beatitudes (vv. 7–10) also climaxes with a reference to righteousness, just as the first set did (see v. 6). Here a blessing is pronounced upon the merciful, the honest (see Ps 24:3–4), the agents of peace, and those who suffer on account of their search for righteousness. They too are promised future happiness from God. The final beatitude in verses 11–12 (see Luke 6:22–23) develops the theme of persecution for the sake of Jesus and relates this to the persecution suffered by certain Old Testament prophets.

CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION

■ “The followers of Christ, called by God ... must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that holiness which they have received from God. They are told by the apostle to live 'as is fitting among saints' (Ephesians 5:3)” (LG, 40).
■ "The teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelizing mission .... It [this doctrine) consequently gives rise to a 'commitment to justice,' according to each individual's role, vocation and circumstances" (SRS, 41).
■ "Lay people share in Christ's priesthood ... and so fulfill the call to holiness addressed to all the baptized" (CCC, 941).
■ "The social order requires constant improvement: it must be founded in truth, built on justice, and enlivened by love" (GS, 26).
First Reading

Genesis 3:9-15, 20. An old Christmas carol proclaimed, "Nova! Nova! Ave fit ex Eva." The Latin word nova morphed into the French noel. It means "good news." but it has come to mean Christmas itself. The rest of that carol’s title is a play on words in Latin: Ave comes from Eva. In Latin, the name of the first woman in the Book of Genesis, Eve, is Eva. When you twist those letters backward, you get in Latin the word that the angel Gabriel used to greet the symbolic first woman of Luke’s account of the Gospel: Ave or "Hail, full of grace." Today’s readings have in mind this contrast between Eve and Mary. Unfair as it is to pin the blame for all sin upon Eve, the point is that Mary became an instrument in God’s plan of salvation. Eve foreshadows Mary, who became the mother of the Living One. Where our first parents said no, Mary said yes.

A Reading from the Book of Genesis (3:9-15, 20)

After the man, Adam, had eaten of the tree, the LORD God called to the man and asked him, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself." Then he asked, "Who told you that you were naked? You have eaten, then, from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat!"

The man replied, "The woman whom you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, and so I ate it." The LORD God then asked the woman, "Why did you do such a thing?" The woman answered, "The serpent tricked me into it, so I ate it."

Then the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, you shall be banned from all the animals and from all the wild creatures; on your belly shall you crawl, and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel."

The man called his wife Eve, because she became the mother of all the living.

* [3:14] Each of the three punishments (the snake, the woman, the man) has a double aspect, one affecting the individual and the other affecting a basic relationship. The snake previously stood upright, enjoyed a reputation for being shrewder than other creatures, and could converse with human beings as in vv. 1–5. It must now move on its belly, is more cursed than any creature, and inspires revulsion in human beings (v. 15).

* [3:15] They will strike...at their heel: the antecedent for “they” and “their” is the collective noun “offspring,” i.e., all the descendants of the woman. Christian tradition has seen in this passage, however, more than unending hostility between snakes and human beings. The snake was identified with the devil (Wis 2:24; Jn 8:44; Rev 12:9; 20:2), whose eventual defeat seemed implied in the verse. Because “the Son of God was revealed to destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn 3:8), the passage was understood as the first promise of a redeemer for fallen humankind, the protoevangelium. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. A.D. 130–200), in his Against Heresies 5.21.1, followed by several other Fathers of the Church, interpreted the verse as referring to Christ, and cited Gal 3:19 and 4:4 to support the reference. Another interpretive translation is ipsa, “she,” and is reflected in Jerome’s Vulgate. “She” was thought to refer to Mary, the mother of the Messiah. In Christian art Mary is sometimes depicted with her foot on the head of the serpent.
[3:20] The man gives his wife a more specific name than “woman” (2:23). The Hebrew name hawwa (“Eve”) is related to the Hebrew word hay (“living”); “mother of all the living” points forward to the next episode involving her sons Cain and Abel.

**PSALM 98:1, 2-3, 3-4 (1 A)** The psalmist praises God for possessing and exercising power. God’s power is matched by his kindness and faithfulness. The psalmist personally and Israel collectively have benefited from God’s might. Not everyone likes to sing new songs. Most people like the old ones. But sometimes something so wonderful happens that it requires new notes and a new voice. The old songs do not always fit new circumstances. We have to change our tune.

In the Immaculate Conception, God has worked something tremendously powerful and totally new: creating a human being conceived with sin. God had the power to do this, and God exercised this power not just on Mary’s behalf, but for the sake of us all. Only a new song can hope to tell the wondrous deeds of God.

**Responsorial Psalm:** *Ps 98:1, 2-3ab, 3cd-4*

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done wondrous deeds; His right hand has won victory for him, his holy arm.
The LORD has made his salvation known: in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice.
He has remembered his kindness and his faithfulness toward the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God.
Sing joyfully to the LORD, all you lands; break into song; sing praise.

* [Psalm 98] A hymn, similar to *Ps 96*, extolling God for Israel’s victory (*Ps 98:1–3*). All nations (*Ps 98:4–6*) and even inanimate nature (*Ps 98:7–8*) are summoned to welcome God’s coming to rule over the world (*Ps 98:9*).

* [98:1] Marvelous deeds, victory: the conquest of all threats to the peaceful existence of Israel, depicted in the Psalms variously as a cosmic force such as sea, or nations bent on Israel’s destruction, or evildoers seemingly triumphant. His right hand and holy arm: God is pictured as a powerful warrior.

**SECOND READING**

**EPHESIANS 1:3-6, 11-12** God chose Abraham, his wife, and their descendants to be a special people for a historic covenant. So. God has chosen the followers of Jesus Christ to be a special people for an eternal covenant. This mystery of God’s choice is the subject of an early Christian hymn preserved in the Letter to the Ephesians. We may not feel worthy of this relationship with God, and we are not however, God makes us worthy. God chose us to be holy and without blemish.
The first covenant was made to an extended family. But in Christ. God has willed to extend the boundaries of this family through a spiritual adoption. This reading especially fits the celebration of the Immaculate Conception because of our belief that God chose Mary for a special ministry in the history of salvation.

God preserved her from sin, making her holy and without blemish for all time. Still, all of us have been chosen “in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will.” We do not perform the same role that Mary did. but we each play a part in the great drama of God’s good plan for the salvation of the world.
A Reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians (Eph 1:3-6, 11-12)

Brothers and sisters:
Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens,
as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world,
to be holy and without blemish before him.

In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ,
in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace
that he granted us in the beloved.

In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One
who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will,
so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ.

* [1:1–2] For the epistolary form used at the beginning of letters, see note on Rom 1:1–7. Twenty-two of
the thirty Greek words in Eph 1:1–2 also occur in Col 1:1–2.
* [1:1] [In Ephesus]: the phrase is lacking in important early witnesses such as P46 (3rd cent.), and
Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (4th cent.), appearing in the latter two as a fifth-century addition. Basil and
Origen mention its absence from manuscripts. See Introduction. Without the phrase, the Greek can be
rendered, as in Col 1:2, “to the holy ones and faithful brothers in Christ.”
* [1:3–14] While a Pauline letter usually continues after the greeting with a prayer of thanksgiving, as
in Eph 1:15–23 below, Ephesians first inserts a blessing of God for the blessings Christians have
experienced, as in 2 Cor 1:3–4 and 1 Pt 1:3–12. The blessing here, akin to a Jewish berakah, is rich in
images almost certainly drawn from hymns and liturgy. Many ideas here are also found in Col 1:3–23.
Certain phrases are frequently repeated, such as in Christ (Eph 1:3, 10, 12) or in him (Eph
1:4, 7, 9, 11, 13) or in the beloved (Eph 1:6) and (for) the praise of (his) glory (Eph 1:6, 12, 14). Some
terms like chose (Eph 1:4) and destined (Eph 1:5) reflect Old Testament theology (Dt 7:7; 9:4–6; 23:5) or
Pauline themes (redemption, Eph 1:7, 14; grace, Eph 1:6, 7) or specific emphases in Colossians
(forgiveness, Col 1:14). A triadic structure is discernible in Eph 1:3–14: God the Father (Eph 1:3–
6, 8, 11), Christ (Eph 1:3, 5, 7–10, 12), and the Spirit(Eph 1:13–14). The spiritual blessings Christians have
received through Christ (Eph 1:3) are gratefully enumerated: the call to holiness (Eph 1:4; cf. Col 1:22);
the gift of divine adoption establishing a unique spiritual relationship with God the Father through Christ
(Eph 1:5; cf. Gal 4:5); liberation from sin through Christ’s sacrificial death (Eph 1:7); revelation of God’s
plan of salvation in Christ (Eph 1:9; cf. Eph 3:3–4; Rom 16:25); the gift of election and faith in Christ
bestowed upon Jewish Christians (see note on Eph 1:12, we who first hoped in Christ); and finally,
the same gift granted to Gentiles (Eph 1:13, you also). In the Christ-centered faith and existence of the
Christian communities the apostle sees the predetermined plan of God to bring all creation under the
final rule of Christ (Eph 1:4–5, 9–10) being made known (Eph 1:9) and carried through, to God’s glory
(Eph 1:6, 12, 14).
* [1:3] In the heavens: literally, “in the heavenlies” or “in the heavenly places,” a term in Ephesians for
the divine realm.
* [1:9] Mystery: as in Rom 16:25; Col 1:26, 27 and elsewhere, a secret of God now revealed in
the plan to save and sum up all things in Christ (Eph 1:10); cf. Eph 3:3–6.
* [1:12] We who first hoped: probably Jewish Christians (contrast Eph 1:13, you, the Gentiles); possibly
the people of Israel, “we who already enjoyed the hope of Christ,” or perhaps present hope in contrast
to future redemption (cf. Eph 1:14).

Alleluia
Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women.
God's miraculous powers are evident in the announcement Gabriel makes to Mary. She who is full of grace will become the mother of God's Son, and her elderly kinswoman has also conceived. Miracle upon miracle appears. Today's solemnity concerns the earliest miracle of the series: the immaculate conception of Mary. From the moment her parents conceived her, Mary was preserved from all sin. We believe this in part because of the way Gabriel greets her: "full of grace." Gabriel announces that Mary, though a virgin, will become a mother. We commonly call this second miracle of the series the virgin birth of Christ. The words Immaculate Conception refer to Mary, not to Jesus. The miracle of Jesus' virginal conception was preceded by the miracle of Mary's Immaculate Conception.

As if that were not enough, Gabriel announces yet another miracle. Elizabeth, Mary's relative, a woman advanced in years, has also conceived a son. One reason for this miracle was to re-assure Mary that "nothing will be impossible for God." Mary first found the angel's announcement preposterous. How can a virgin conceive? But she had to rethink the news in the light of another miracle. How can an elderly woman conceive? Nothing is impossible for God.

This solemnity celebrates the triumph of God's power. It consoles us in our weakness and sin, in our misfortune and mis-judgment. God is more powerful than we are, and God has proven it throughout the course of time, miracle upon miracle.

*A Reading from the Gospel according to Luke (1:26-38)*

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end."

But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"

And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God."

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

* [1:5–2:52] Like the Gospel according to Matthew, this gospel opens with an infancy narrative, a collection of stories about the birth and childhood of Jesus. The narrative uses early Christian traditions about the birth of Jesus, traditions about the birth and circumcision of John the Baptist, and canticles such as the Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55) and Benedictus (Lk 1:67–79), composed of phrases drawn from the Greek Old Testament. It is largely, however, the composition of Luke who writes in imitation of Old Testament birth stories, combining historical and legendary details, literary ornamentation and interpretation of scripture, to answer in advance the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” The focus of the narrative, therefore, is primarily christological. In this section Luke announces many of the themes that will become prominent in the rest of the gospel: the centrality of Jerusalem and the temple, the journey
motif, the universality of salvation, joy and peace, concern for the lowly, the importance of women, the presentation of Jesus as savior, Spirit-guided revelation and prophecy, and the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. The account presents parallel scenes (diptychs) of angelic announcements of the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus, and of the birth, circumcision, and presentation of John and Jesus. In this parallelism, the ascendency of Jesus over John is stressed: John is prophet of the Most High (Lk 1:76); Jesus is Son of the Most High (Lk 1:32). John is great in the sight of the Lord (Lk 1:15); Jesus will be Great (a LXX attribute, used absolutely, of God) (Lk 1:32). John will go before the Lord (Lk 1:16–17); Jesus will be Lord (Lk 1:43; 2:11).

* [1:26–38] The announcement to Mary of the birth of Jesus is parallel to the announcement to Zechariah of the birth of John. In both the angel Gabriel appears to the parent who is troubled by the vision (Lk 1:11–12, 26–29) and then told by the angel not to fear (Lk 1:13, 30). After the announcement is made (Lk 1:14–17, 31–33) the parent objects (Lk 1:18, 34) and a sign is given to confirm the announcement (Lk 1:20, 36). The particular focus of the announcement of the birth of Jesus is on his identity as Son of David (Lk 1:32–33) and Son of God (Lk 1:32, 35).


* [1:34] Mary’s questioning response is a denial of sexual relations and is used by Luke to lead to the angel’s declaration about the Spirit’s role in the conception of this child (Lk 1:35). According to Luke, the virginal conception of Jesus takes place through the holy Spirit, the power of God, and therefore Jesus has a unique relationship to Yahweh: he is Son of God.

* [1:36–37] The sign given to Mary in confirmation of the angel’s announcement to her is the pregnancy of her aged relative Elizabeth. If a woman past the childbearing age could become pregnant, why, the angel implies, should there be doubt about Mary’s pregnancy, for nothing will be impossible for God.

**CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

- Mary was conceived without sin. She is known by the title, “the Immaculate Conception” (CCC, 490-493).
- God intends to redeem the human race. Although human beings are guilty of sin, God stands ready to forgive and heal (CCC, 410-412).
- God’s eternal plan is good. This plan was already in the mind of God at the creation, and it extends to redemption at the end of time (CCC, Glossary, “Economy of Salvation”).