

# SHARING GOD'S WORD

## — THROUGH THE YEAR —

<1-DATE> • <1: 1st Sunday of Advent>

### GATHERING

During the four weeks of Advent, place an Advent wreath on a table in the center of the group. Begin by lighting the first candle.

If there are new members of the group, begin by having all the participants introduce themselves and share their reasons for joining the group.

### OPENING PRAYER

Sing several verses of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” or another Advent song as someone lights the first candle.

### Focus

Conventional wisdom says that it is important to be prepared: ready for that meeting, ready for that test, ready for that interview. What could be more important than being ready for Jesus Christ when he comes again? But the challenge here is that we do not know when he is coming. It is important to be prepared every day.

### THIS WEEK'S GOSPEL

Matthew 24:37-44

### HISTORICAL CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Spending a great deal of time fretting about the future was foreign to our ancestors in the faith. People in the Middle East were unable and unwilling to think about the future. It is only God who knew the future, so it was useless for humans to try to discover it. We remember that Jesus called his disciples to task for worrying about tomorrow, about what they would

eat, drink, or wear (Matt 6:25-34). He taught them to ask God only for today's bread (Matt 6:11). So why did Matthew's Jesus caution his listeners to “stay awake” and “be watchful?” Doesn't this have a future ring to it?

When Matthew compiled his Gospel around 80 to 85 CE, Jesus had been dead and risen nearly fifty years. About ten to fifteen years prior to Matthew's work, the failed revolt of the Judeans resulted in the total destruction of the Temple by Titus and his Roman legions (70 CE). The Son of Man (Jesus) had not yet returned and many of Jesus' original listeners had already died. Frustration, fear and impatience were widespread.

Furthermore, the taunting voices of the Judean opponents were shattering the confidence of Matthew's Christians. “Where is your ‘coming Son of Man?’ You keep saying ‘in *this* generation,’ but you are deceived. When will this promised coming find fulfillment?” After hearing this constant barrage of taunts, even the early Christians began to have their doubts regarding the Son of Man's return.

Matthew was aware that his community was embarrassed by the non-appearance of the Son of Man. So he borrows and redirects parables from Mark 13 to lift their spirits and remind them that the Son of Man gave his word. He definitely will return (v. 35).

Matthew reminds them that they should be ever watchful. No one can calculate the exact time of his coming. *Everyone*—good homeowner, thieves and vandals—must be prepared for the Lord's sudden return. It appears as if our present-oriented ancestors were forced to begin thinking (if only remotely) about future time, one that might be very far off.

### AN ILLUSTRATION

Karen knew all too well the need to be prepared.

For weeks, she had been soul-searching, clarifying and refining her goals, praying for direction, seeking

the help of a career counselor, and getting ready. Now she was in the middle of an intensive job search—her second in six years. Being prepared meant that she accepted more invitations than she usually did for social events. She dressed professionally wherever she went, had extra copies of her resume, and was willing to talk to people about her hopes and skills. Every person she met could be a potential employer or know of some opening for which she could apply. She also followed up on the leads that were given to her, setting up informational interviews with people she had been referred to by others. She knew that her next job was forthcoming, but she did not know where she would work.

Being prepared and vigilant served her well. After six weeks of searching, she met a manager who had some extra work and offered her a short-term internship. The internship opened other doors for her, and eventually she was hired by the organization.

## FAITH SHARING

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1. Do you ever think about Christ's return at the end of time? Why or why not?
2. If you think about it, does it scare you? Why? Why not?
3. What would you need to do before you would be ready to meet Christ today?

## RESPONSE IN ACTION SUGGESTIONS

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1. Begin an Advent calendar to count down the days until Christmas.
2. Do a personal inventory of the things that you would want to change in your life before Christ returns at the end of the world.
3. Look for ways that you could do something to help others in your parish or community enjoy Christmas better.

## CLOSING PRAYER

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Leader: Let us be watchful and ready during these days of Advent; God meets us in both friend and stranger.

**All: We will be alert to Christ's presence within us and in unexpected people and places.**

Leader: God loves us with an everlasting love; It knows no boundaries.

**All: Yes, we hear Christ calling us to love our neighbors.**

Leader: Jesus came to live among the poor and oppressed.

**All: We will be especially attentive to the needy among us.**

Leader: Then let us go in peace to discover Christ all around us.

**All: We go to live as children of peace.**

# SHARING GOD'S WORD

## — THROUGH THE YEAR —

<4-DATE> • <4: 2nd Sunday of Advent>

### GATHERING

Once again, place an Advent wreath on a table in the center of the group. This week light two candles.

Begin by taking a few minutes to review the last week and share any actions your members were able to take. Then invite members to share the ways that they are already preparing spiritually for Christmas.

### OPENING PRAYER

Leader: We are called to reform our lives.

**All: Repent, for God's reign is at hand.**

Leader: Prepare a way for the Lord.

**All: Repent, for God's reign is at hand.**

Leader: Clear a straight path for the Lord.

**All: Repent, for God's reign is at hand.**

Leader: Gentle God, our lives are cluttered with many things. Help us to focus today on what is really important. Bless our sharing and make us truly sorry for our failings. We ask this through Christ, our Lord.

**All: Amen.**

### Focus

Even though people try to live good Christians lives, they sometimes fail. Often it is because their lives are cluttered with misleading and confusing things, what some might call "dead wood." The call is to clear the dead wood, to change the way business is done, and set out on a straight path.

### THIS WEEK'S GOSPEL

Matthew 3:1-12

### HISTORICAL CULTURAL BACKGROUND

There is not a more towering figure in the Gospels than John the Baptist. He arrives on Matthew's scene without an introduction, is a major character in Luke's infancy narratives, and in Mark his ministry signals the beginning of the Good News.

John's preaching and Baptism were oriented to the coming of the Kingdom of God and to preparing the way of the Lord. By his appearance (wearing camel's hair and a leather belt), he emulated the prophet Elijah and even played the role of Elijah as the one who must come preaching repentance before the kingdom would appear.

We read that various "groups" came to John from Jerusalem, all Judea, and the Jordan region (v.5). In antiquity, traveling in groups was the safest mode. To travel with kin or fictive kin was the ideal way to get from one village to another.

In verse 7, Matthew identifies particular members of his audience. The Pharisees, whose name probably has some connection with the Hebrew word for "separate," developed traditions on how to live out the Torah in everyday life. They emphasized ritual purity, food tithes, and Sabbath observance. People admired the Pharisees, and at times they held social and even political power.

The Sadducees took their name from the high priestly family of Zadok, or possibly from a Hebrew word meaning "the just ones." They rivaled the Pharisees for power and influence, and are generally thought to have dominated the temple personnel, the wealthy, and the political elite. They differed from the Pharisees with regard to the latter's approach to tradition and with respect to their convictions about immortality and Divine Providence.

John's discourse begins with three warnings. The primary assumption is the closeness of the Day of the Lord, and that judgment will be part of that Day. John tells them 1) not to imagine that the ritual of Baptism alone will protect them; 2) not to think that biological ties (basis of honor) to Abraham will protect them; and 3) not to waste the little time that is left. What is paramount is not who one is but what one does ("bear good fruit").

Thus the horizon of John's message is the coming Kingdom of God and the judgment that accompanies it. He urges action that is appropriate to repentance, for the time is short.

## AN ILLUSTRATION

At the beginning of Advent, the pastor at Lori's parish invited all parishioners to take part in the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Advent. Lori made a mental note to go to Reconciliation in the coming weeks.

As the days of Advent passed, Lori was constantly mindful of an issue that she needed to talk about, receive forgiveness for, and change. She knew that her relationship with her mother was not what it could be, and that she was at least partly responsible for the distance between them. She spoke with her mother regularly, but did not share much with her beyond superficialities. She also failed to be loving sometimes, or to give her mother the respect and honor she deserved. She knew she was not loving as Christ would want her to love or in a way that would bring her peace.

Lori confessed this to her pastor; he encouraged her to take steps to improve the relationship, confession alone was not enough. Together, Lori and her pastor discussed some specific actions that Lori could take to show love and respect to her mother, despite how difficult this might be. During Christmas vacation, Lori was able to apologize to her mother and share herself in more loving ways.

## FAITH SHARING

1. With whom do you need to seek reconciliation?
2. Is there anything that keeps you from seeking this reconciliation?
3. What is your attitude toward the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

## RESPONSE IN ACTION SUGGESTIONS

1. Make a soul-searching list of people you may have offended.
2. Like Lori, seek out a person to whom you need to apologize.
3. Make time before Christmas to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Play a song about the need for forgiveness (e.g., "Mercy, Lord" by Michael Avolicino, or "Hosea" by Gregory Norbet).

Take a few moments to recall your own faults and failings. Ask for forgiveness in your heart.

Conclude by praying the "I confess..." (Confiteor) from the Penitential Rite of the Mass:

"I confess to almighty God  
and to you, my brothers and sisters,  
that I have greatly sinned,  
in my thoughts and in my words,  
in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,  
through my fault, through my fault,  
through my most grievous fault;  
therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin,  
all the Angels and Saints,  
and you, my brothers and sisters,  
to pray for me to the Lord our God."