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Youth Engaging Scripture

Diving into the Sunday Gospels
Includes Cycles A, B, and C



Dennis Kurtz



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Dedication

I dedicate this book to all young people thirsting to know more about the word of God . . . that in seeking you will invite God's word to be the light on your pathway of life. May God open your ears so you are able to hear God's word anew and in profound ways. I pray that the word of God is always a sweetness in your mouth: "How sweet are your words to my taste, / sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalm 119:103).

The publishing team included Laurie Delgatto, development editor; Lorraine Kilmartin, reviewer; prepress and manufacturing coordinated by the production departments of Saint Mary's Press.

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Introduction

Research has shown that Catholic teens do not frequently read the Bible. A Gallup study in the early 1990s showed that only 20 percent of Catholic youth, compared with 60 percent of Christian youth from other denominations, claimed to have ever read the Bible on their own (*The Religious Life of Young Americans* 1992, page 46).

Then in 1996, a study from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reported that 75 percent of Catholic youth who completed their survey responded that they never or very infrequently participate in a Bible-study group. Fifty-seven percent of the youth surveyed said they never or very infrequently read the Bible (Bryan Froehle, *New Directions in Catholic Youth Ministry*, page 6).

The 2005 book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* reports that only 17 percent of Catholic youth said they have been a part of a Scripture study group (Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, page 48).

These studies clearly frame the challenge regarding Bible literacy with Catholic youth. The CARA report put forth the following challenge: “Catholic youth ministry needs to be more persuasive in helping participants understand that reading the Bible is important for growing in their faith” (*New Directions in Catholic Youth Ministry*, page 5).

The Origin and Purpose of the Reflections in this Book

The reflections in this book were originally published in weekly e-newsletters that were sent to teen peer leaders of small Bible-sharing groups that were a part of the YES! Youth Engaging Scripture Initiative. This initiative had its genesis in the commitment of Saint Mary’s Press to bolster Bible literacy and the practice of Bible reading among Catholic youth. Both the youth and the adult mentors of the YES! project found the weekly e-newsletters extremely helpful in providing good background for the Sunday Gospel readings. These reflections are now available to you in this resource. *Youth Engaging Scripture: Diving into the Sunday Gospels* is a collection of reflections on the Sunday Gospel readings for years A, B, and C of the lectionary, as well as on various feast days and solemnities often celebrated on Sundays. The reflections help teens immerse themselves in the Scriptures and learn how God’s word is relevant in their everyday lives.

Who Is This Book For and How Can It Be Used?

This resource seeks to help parish youth ministers, catechetical leaders, high school teachers, campus ministers, and parents assist youth in diving deeper into the Sunday Gospel readings on a weekly basis. The desired result is to form within Catholic youth a practice of praying the Bible, studying the Bible, and living the Bible. This book serves not only as a resource for peer leaders of YES! groups but also as a resource for the many opportunities when catechetical and liturgical leaders, in both schools and parishes, are looking to help teens dive deeper into the Sunday Gospel readings. Teens can use this resource individually or for group Bible sharing.

Each two-page reflection explores the scriptural context of the Gospel, using these three reference points:

- The *Context Connection* sets forth the context of the particular Gospel reading, providing information to assist the individual in understanding the cultural and historical background of the Gospel reading.
- The *Tradition Connection* provides information to highlight Catholic teachings connected with the particular Gospel reading, thus creating a connection for the reader between the Scriptures and Catholic Tradition.
- The *Wisdom Connection* gives the individual insights into what the Gospel reading meant for the original Christian community it was written for and what it might have to say to the Christian community today.

Lectio Divina: A Method for Diving into the Scriptures

Using a modified process of *lectio divina* is helpful to maximize these reflections on the Sunday Gospels. *Lectio divina*, an ancient practice of reading and reflecting on the word of God, helps us come into union with God. It is in the Scriptures that we can come to listen to and hear the voice of God in our lives today. The process of *lectio divina* is very different from the speed reading we apply to newspapers and books. *Lectio divina* employs a style of reverential reading and listening. We gently listen to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for us today.

Pope John Paul II asked youth to give particular attention in their lives to reading and studying the Sacred Scriptures when he said:

In your groups, dear young people, multiply the occasions for hearing and studying the word of the Lord, especially through the *lectio divina*. You will discover the secrets of the Heart of God and will derive profit for discerning situations and transforming reality. Guided by the Holy Scripture, you will be able to recognize the Lord's presence in your daily life. ("Message of the Holy

Father to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the XII World Youth Day," number 6)

In preparation for reading the Sunday Gospel, use this process:

1. Read the Scripture passage, initially listening with the ears of your heart for a particular word or phrase that speaks to you.
2. Read the Scripture passage a second time. This time ask yourself how the Scripture passage is touching your life or connecting with what is happening in your world.
3. Read the Scripture passage a third time. This time reflect on what this Scripture passage is calling you to do or be today. These questions may be helpful: How is God challenging me? Is there a good thing God is calling me to do? Is there a harmful thing God wants me to stop doing? What is the next step I need to take?
4. In closing, offer a prayer, praying for the issues and concerns that surfaced during your reflection on the Scripture passage and ending with the Lord's Prayer.

This modification of *lectio divina* provides a process that is faithful to the traditional *lectio divina* process but is appropriate for teens today.

Some Closing Thoughts

Youth Engaging Scripture: Diving into the Sunday Gospels is a tool to assist in the ongoing desire of having Catholic youth fall in love more deeply with the word of God. Having teens dive in and explore the Sunday Gospels by using the reflections in this book will lead them to a more profound appreciation of the depth and breadth of the Scriptures. Because the Gospels tell the story of Jesus Christ, reflecting on them can help young people think like Christ.

CYCLE A





First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:37–44

Context Connection

The Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent speaks about being prepared for the Second Coming of the Son of Man: “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Matthew 24:44). A commonly held belief of the early Christian community was that the Second Coming of Jesus would happen in their lifetime. When Matthew was writing his Gospel, around AD 85, many of the original disciples had died, and the next generation was wondering when this event was going to happen. Matthew uses various examples to show the importance of always being prepared, stressing that Jesus will come in God’s time and that he will return in the ordinary events of life. In the days of Noah, Noah listened to God and was prepared, while others were simply engaged in the ordinary things of life: “They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage . . . so too will be the coming of the Son of Man” (24:38–39). People will be doing ordinary things—men will be working in the fields, and women will be preparing grain for baking bread. One will be prepared spiritually to greet the Son of Man and another will not know him. Matthew gives these words of advice: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (24:42). The emphasis here is to be spiritually ready—to be spiritually awake—so that you will recognize the Lord when he comes. Matthew further stresses this point using the example of a thief in the night, saying that if you knew when a thief was coming to rob your house, you would be awake and ready. However, we do not normally know when a thief is coming, and we have no way of knowing when the Lord will come again. Therefore, the only way to guarantee that we will recognize Jesus is to always be spiritually ready—because he is coming again.

This Sunday’s Gospel invites today’s Christian community to wait patiently for the return of Jesus, just as the Jewish people waited patiently for the coming of the Messiah. The season of Advent prepares us for Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus—the coming of the Messiah. As Christians, we are reminded that we are also engaged in a new Advent—waiting patiently for Jesus to come again. Therefore, the proper attitude is one of watchful patience and vigilance. The Second Coming of the Son of Man is a mystery known only by God the Father, the

one who truly knows the future. This call to be prepared requires that we live fully in the moment, treating every moment as if it were the last moment.

Tradition Connection

During Mass, after the words of consecration, the celebrant invites us to proclaim the mystery of faith. The assembly responds in unison that Christ has died, is risen, and will come again. When we pray the Nicene Creed, we also say that we believe Jesus will come again in glory.

Our prayers express longing for the time when Jesus will come again, because we live in an in-between time. It is a time of waiting and preparation, but it is also a time to give witness to our faith through our actions (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], number 672).

Through the centuries, the Church has pondered when Jesus will return. The response has always been the same: only God knows for sure. That has not stopped humans, at various times throughout history, from trying to predict the date of Christ's return. As Catholics, we believe that trying to predict the precise day and hour of the coming of Christ is really missing the point. The point of the Gospel is that we should live every moment of every day like it could be our last.

The early Christians did not fear the return of Jesus but, rather, joyfully awaited it. The return of Jesus will be the advent of a time of great and sudden upheaval for good. It is a time we wait for with hearts filled with elated longing.

Wisdom Connection

Matthew wants his audience to know that when Jesus comes again, he will come in the midst of our ordinary daily activity—whether at work, at play, or at celebration. If we recognize Jesus's presence in daily life now, then we will recognize him when he comes again.

The Second Coming of Jesus will usher in a new era, a time of good. The prophets write of this era as a time when nations will lay down their weapons of war and bitter fighting will end. Poor and oppressed people will be free of their burdens, and gentle, peace-loving people will inhabit the earth. This drastic change for good is attributed solely to God's actions. No human being will be able to do this alone. However, we can model Jesus's example of how to live by loving God completely and by loving our neighbors as ourselves. The Scriptures call us to prepare by living God's goodness now—to live as if Jesus has already returned.



Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3:1–12

Context Connection

In the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent, Matthew introduces us to John the Baptist, a preacher who calls the Jews to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:1). Matthew tells us that John preached in the desert or wilderness of Judea. This area is located east of Jerusalem and slopes down to the Dead Sea. Matthew draws attention to John by connecting him with what the prophet Isaiah speaks of when he says, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (3:3). Matthew also makes connections between John and other Old Testament characters: “Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist” (3:4). This would have recalled for the Jews similar references to Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8), as well as Samson and Samuel. These individuals represent the Old Testament tradition of the revolutionary mode of renewing society through resistance to injustice. John’s message is one of radical conversion of the whole person to the will of God. This is symbolized by a baptism of total submersion in the waters of the Jordan River.

Matthew furthers his point by introducing us to the Pharisees and Sadducees. Matthew holds a lot of contempt for the Pharisees and Sadducees throughout his Gospel. He calls them a brood of vipers. Vipers are a genus of snakes, often used in the Scriptures to represent evil. In comparing this group of Pharisees and Sadducees to vipers, Matthew wants his audience to always be on guard—not allowing their deception to deliver a fatal blow. By calling them a brood of vipers, Matthew is also calling into question the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ honor. In Jewish society, honor is associated with birthright. But how could these individuals have honor if their paternity is associated with snakes? Matthew’s Gospel has more to say about the Pharisees and Sadducees, none of which is flattering. John talks of his baptism as one of repentance that produces good fruit. The true sign of conversion is in a person’s actions, not in her or his heritage. Even those who claim to be children of Abraham will not be counted among the saved if they are not repentant and if their actions do not demonstrate sincerity of heart and a total turning toward God. For John, baptism is a symbolic action signifying that a conversion of heart has taken place. God’s power surpasses the laws of natural lineage. John stresses that baptism speaks of an interior change that bears its witness through good actions: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance” (3:8).

This Sunday's Gospel ends with Matthew's showing clearly that even this great preacher, John the Baptist, is subordinate to Jesus. The one who is to come, Jesus, will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Baptism that Jesus offers will have consequences for the Final Judgment.

Tradition Connection

When we pray the Nicene Creed, we acknowledge that Jesus will judge the living and the dead when he comes in glory. This is called the Final Judgment, or the Last Judgment. It will occur when Jesus Christ comes again. The Last Judgment will be a judgment of the whole human race. The image of the Final Judgment that Matthew uses in this Sunday's Gospel is the farmer's winnowing the grain to separate the chaff from the kernels, or fruit of the grain. Later on, Matthew uses profound scriptural images to define in greater detail the Final Judgment (see 25:31–36). Every person will be held accountable for his or her actions. Those who live as Jesus lived—performing the corporal works of mercy—will be welcomed into God's eternal Kingdom. Those who do not follow Jesus's example will be sent into eternal punishment.

The Final Judgment will come at the end of the world; however, as Catholics, we believe that each person, at the moment of death, has a particular judgment (see CCC, numbers 1021–1022).

Wisdom Connection

Matthew's Gospel calls Christians to embrace the radical conversion that was preached by John the Baptist and Jesus. This conversion is made manifest through the fruit of one's good deeds. John the Baptist is held up as a great prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. However, his greatness is secondary to that of Jesus the Christ. Christians who have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and allow their Baptism to be made evident in the world through good deeds will be like the grain at harvest. Just as the grain, the good fruit of the harvest, is gathered into barns after it is winnowed, so the faithful followers of Jesus will be gathered to Christ at the Final Judgment.



Third Sunday of Advent

Matthew 11:2–11

Context Connection

John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus because he is unable to go himself. John has been arrested by Herod Antipas and imprisoned in the fortress at Machaerus. We are first informed of John's arrest in chapter 4 of Matthew (verse 12). John instructs his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (11:3). John wants to know if Jesus really is the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus gives an interesting response: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (11:4–5). These acts of healing, which Jesus performs, are recorded in chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew and foretold in Isaiah 29:19, 35:5–6, and 61:1. Jesus gives this answer to John's disciples, and they take it back to John in prison.

Then Jesus addresses the crowd that is gathered around him—many who may have been followers of John but since John's imprisonment now follow Jesus. Jesus asks them, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?" (11:7). He suggests that they did not go out to see a reed blowing in the wind nor a person dressed in fine clothes, but that the crowd went out into the wilderness to see a great prophet, John the Baptist. John is an unbending prophet, no reed blowing in the wind. He is a person who clearly understands the call for repentance and for living a life of values consistent with the law of God. John dresses as a prophet. His clothes are basic and without refinement—in contrast to the fine garments of the members of the court of Herod Antipas.

Jesus affirms the crowd for going into the wilderness to see the prophet: "Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you'" (11:9–10). This quote evokes the writings of the prophet Malachi (3:1, 4:5). It compares John to the great prophet Elijah, who is to return to earth as a sign of the coming of the Lord, the Messiah. Jesus acknowledges that John is the greatest of all the prophets, but adds that it is the Son of Man who is the fulfillment of John's message. Jesus is the one who will usher in a new era in salvation history and establish God's Kingdom on earth.

Tradition Connection

The *Catechism* speaks of John the Baptist as a forerunner of the Lord, whose role is to complete the work of preparing the people (see number 718). For Catholics, John is the last of the great prophets of the Old Testament. He is the one who points directly to Jesus and helps us recognize Jesus as the Messiah. John comes from a long line of prophets, beginning with Elijah. He is the last prophet through whom the Holy Spirit will speak. Matthew helps us recognize Jesus as the Messiah by pointing out Jesus's power to heal. These healings are signs that the prophets, especially Isaiah, say will help us recognize the Messiah when he comes (see CCC, number 549). We believe that Jesus's death on the cross and his Resurrection from the dead are final proof that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God the Father. Jesus's death on the cross firmly established the Kingdom of God (see CCC, number 550).

Wisdom Connection

Matthew wants Jesus's followers to understand the true identities of John the Baptist and Jesus. John is the one the Old Testament, particularly through the prophet Malachi, speaks of as the messenger who will prepare the way before the Lord, the Messiah. John is the last of the great prophets of the Old Testament. He is the one who, through his preaching and baptism, makes ready the people of Israel for the coming of the Messiah.

As for Jesus, Jesus is the Christ—the Messiah. When John's disciples ask Jesus if he is the Messiah, they do not receive a direct answer; rather, Jesus tells them to examine what they see and hear about Jesus and then draw their own conclusions. Jesus points John's disciples to Isaiah's vision of a healed and redeemed humanity (35:5–6). This passage, from the first reading for the Third Sunday of Advent, serves as proof that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

The Messiah comes as a Savior who empowers and strengthens the weak, making them strong so they can live new lives of redemption in God. The Savior comes and brings healing to a world sick with sin.



Fourth Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1:18–24

Context Connection

The Gospel of Matthew gives us most of the information we have about Joseph, the adopted earthly father of Jesus. In the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Joseph is described as *righteous* (1:19), a term sometimes translated as “just.” Matthew wants us to understand that Joseph is a religious man steeped in Judaism and that he is also a descendant of King David (see 1:1–17).

Matthew’s story of Jesus’s birth is told through the experience of Joseph rather than of Mary, as in Luke’s account. Matthew tells us that Joseph and Mary are betrothed, and not yet married, when Mary becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

The Jewish custom of marriage then was very different from marriage customs in the United States today. Marriages were arranged by the elders in the family. The betrothal, where two individuals are set apart for each other, was the first step in the marriage process. The young man and young woman were considered husband and wife from the time of betrothal, even though they each remained living in their parents’ homes. The wedding ceremony was complete when the groom took the bride into his home or that of his parents.

During this in-between time, Joseph becomes aware that Mary is “found to be with child” (1:18). Because the marriage has not been consummated, Mary is presumed guilty of adultery. Joseph has a couple options, according to Mosaic Law. He can publicly expose Mary’s infidelity by returning her to her father, where she will be stoned to death, according to Deuteronomy 22:23–24. Joseph’s second option, the one he plans to execute, is to quietly dismiss Mary through a formal divorce; however, before the divorce takes place, Joseph has a dream in which an angel appears and says, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (1:20). Luke uses these same words of assurance to tell of the angel who appears to Mary to announce that she will conceive a child: “Do not be afraid” (Luke 1:30). In the dream, Joseph is told to name the child Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). This is a Greek form of the Hebrew name Yeshua or Yeshu, meaning “God saves.” Yeshua originates from the name Joshua, which means “Yahweh helps.”

Joseph’s dream puts to rest his fears by revealing that this child is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph completes the marriage ritual by taking Mary into his

home: “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife” (1:24). In all his decisions, Joseph acts as a noble and honorable person.

Tradition Connection

Saint Joseph models for all of us, but in particular for all men, how to live a life of honor and faithfulness to God. For Catholics, Joseph is a patron of virtuous living. Although God is Jesus’s true father, Joseph fulfills that role in daily life. He loves Jesus and treats him as his own son (see Luke 4:22). He provides for the safety of his family (see Matthew 2:13–14) and teaches Jesus his trade (see Mark 6:3). There are no more references to Joseph in the New Testament after the family’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem (see Luke 2:41–52), so he may have died before Jesus began his public ministry. Joseph is known as the patron saint of fathers and workers and as the patron of a happy death (see CCC, number 1014). Dying in the loving arms of Jesus and Mary would indeed be a happy death.

Wisdom Connection

For Matthew, the story of Jesus’s birth concludes the genealogy listed in chapter 1, verses 1–17. It is definitive proof that Jesus is a member of the Davidic line through his earthly father, Joseph. From the opening verse of his Gospel, Matthew declares Jesus as the Messiah: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way” (1:18). By the using the word *the*, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the one true Messiah that has been long awaited. Matthew concretizes this further by giving proof of Jesus’s ancestry—as a Son of David through Joseph.

We believe God breaks into the human experience to make God’s will known. Jesus is a living sign and gives witness to this when he takes on human form. What does it mean that God became human? It tells us that God found goodness in a world that is sometimes steeped in despair. It means that God does not look down on the human body as something weak but rather as a means for salvation to enter the world.

Matthew also holds up Joseph as a noble person—a model of a just person—one who is willing to place his trust in God even when everything around him points in a different direction. For Joseph and for all Christians, the key words to remember are, “Do not be afraid” (1:20).



Sunday Within the Octave of Christmas

The Feast of the Holy Family

Matthew 2:13–15,19–23

Context Connection

Matthew continues to use in chapter two of his Gospel the pattern he established in chapter one: an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, the angel gives Joseph a command and explains why he should obey, Joseph carries out the command, and the narrative closes with a quote from the Old Testament.

The angel commands Joseph, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him” (2:13). Joseph does as the angel tells him, fleeing by night to Egypt with Jesus and Mary. Matthew concludes by saying, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘out of Egypt I have called my son’” (3:15). This quotation from the prophet can be found in Hosea 11:1. This Sunday’s Gospel does not include verses 16–18, the account of Herod’s massacre of boys two years old and younger. At this time in history, Egypt was a place of exile for many individuals from Israel. Most of them were waiting for the death of Herod so they could return to Israel. As a carpenter, Joseph would have been able to find work quite easily in Egypt.

The time of the Holy Family’s exile in Egypt is short—just a couple years, until Herod dies. Once again, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream to let him know that Herod has died and that Joseph and his family can return to Israel. Upon the death of Herod, the Romans split Herod’s kingdom among his three sons. Herod Antipas, whom Jesus later refers to as “the fox,” is given Galilee and Perea. When Joseph “heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee” (2:22). Archelaus’s reputation was similar to his father’s—he is cruel and quick to suppress any challenge to his throne. After only a short time as king, Archelaus is dethroned by the Romans and the Romans replace the role of king with that of governor, one of the most famous being Pontius Pilate.

The Holy Family settles in Nazareth, a small town in the Galilee area: “There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean’” (2:23). This is why

Jesus is associated with Nazareth and why he begins his public ministry in Galilee.

Tradition Connection

Jesus shows us the importance of family by choosing to be born into the family of Joseph and Mary. The Catholic Church, in recent writings, places emphasis on the importance of family by referring to it as the domestic church. The family is considered a sacred community where parents, by word and example, are the first evangelizers of their children. Their vocation, as parents, is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus's love to their children through their words and deeds.

The Christian family has an important place in the Church and in society. In the family, we learn moral values and we begin to honor God (see CCC, number 2207). It is in the family that we come to know how to care for others, to be other-oriented. This understanding of self-giving, one that Jesus models in the Gospels, should be the cornerstone of family life (see CCC, number 2208). Authentic family life naturally spills over its own boundaries and impacts everyone that comes into contact with it.

In choosing to be an active member of the family of Joseph and Mary, Jesus heightens the dignity of family life.

Wisdom Connection

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the new Moses. Early on, Matthew wants his readers to understand that the future promise of the People of God rests with Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, who has been called from Egypt to live, work, and die in the land of God's own people. God is acting through Jesus, as God did through Moses, but in a new way, to bring about the salvation of all people.

Through the genealogy listed in chapter one, Matthew demonstrates continuity between Jesus and the Jewish tradition. Then in chapter two, Matthew directs our attention to how Joseph's actions, guided by the angel, fulfill what the prophets had spoken. The history of Jesus and Christianity is grounded in the Old Testament. The New Testament does not make the promises of God to the Israelites obsolete.



The Epiphany of the Lord

Matthew 2:1–12

Context Connection

This passage from Matthew is familiar to many of us, but a closer look is important because many traditions have embellished the story over the years. Matthew tells of “wise men from the East” (2:1). In the New American Bible, the word *magi* is used instead of *wise men*. Matthew does not give us the number or the nationalities of those wise men. They are not kings but people educated in astronomy and astrology.

Through their careful observance of the nightly sky, the wise men (the magi) have discovered a new star, which they interpret as a sign of the birth of a new king or a significant leader. They begin to follow this star, but they lose sight of it, so they ask King Herod, appointed as King of the Jews by Rome, to help them locate the newborn King of the Jews. The king’s advisors say the answer is in the Sacred Scriptures of the Hebrew people—probably in Micah 5:1–5. These educated Gentile men from the East have to rely on the sacred word of God to guide them to Jesus, the King of the Jews. King Herod, a Jew himself, does not accompany the men from the East to worship the newborn King of the Jews. One wonders if this is Matthew’s attempt to show the readiness of many Gentiles to accept Jesus as the Messiah and the reluctance on the part of many Jews. Nonetheless, the faith of the Gentile wise men from the East stands in contrast to the cynical cunning of Herod.

A short distance from Jerusalem (Bethlehem is only five miles to the south), the star reappears, showing where the child is. When the wise men see this, “they were overwhelmed with joy” (2:10). They pay homage to the new king and present gifts to accent the greatness of the child and his future good works. Both frankincense and myrrh have medicinal qualities—fine gifts for the healer Jesus is to become. And as for gold: are we willing to give the best of our personal treasures to develop Jesus’s Kingdom on earth?

King Herod is an Idumean whose ancestors were forcibly converted to Judaism around 134 BC. Therefore, Herod’s Judaism is suspect by orthodox Jews. Herod naturally fears all Jewish messianic movements as threats to his political power. After learning in a dream that Herod intends to harm the child, the wise men return home without giving Herod information about the exact location of the child.

Tradition Connection

This Sunday we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany of the Lord. The *Catechism* defines *Epiphany* as “the feast which celebrates the manifestation to the world of the newborn Christ as Messiah, Son of God, and Savior of the world” (page 876). Epiphany is about the world coming to know the true identity of Jesus.

The story of the Epiphany has been embellished over the centuries. In the fifth century, the three kinds of gifts that were given gave birth to the tradition of three wise men. By the eighth century, each wise man had a name: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. In some parts of the Christian world, Epiphany is celebrated on its traditional date of January 6, and people exchange gifts then rather than on Christmas Day. In other places, house blessings include writing on the door lintel the first letters of the wise men’s names in the middle of the current year. So, for example, the blessing for the year 2007 would look like 20+C+M+B+07. The letters also stand for the expression *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which is Latin for “Christ, bless this home.”

It is important to realize that Jesus continues to reveal his true identity as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of the world.

Wisdom Connection

Matthew gives us a couple wonderful insights in this passage. He shows that for the wise men, and for us, knowledge is important, but the wisdom found in the Scriptures is essential in coming to know and experience God.

This Sunday’s Gospel also shows that there are different paths to faith. Let’s compare the wise men with the shepherds in the Gospel of Luke. The wise men dedicate their entire lives to acquiring knowledge so that when the star appears, they know to follow this significant sign, even though the journey is hard. Near their journey’s end, they have to seek further knowledge to finally find Jesus. On the other hand, the shepherds are not educated, but they know what their senses tell them, in the way people close to the earth know. So when the angels appear to them, the shepherds accept what they hear and go to see for themselves.

For some people, coming to faith in Jesus is a process that includes studying and taking a long, challenging journey. For others, the journey is short and direct. Both paths are valid ways to come to know and believe in Jesus the Christ.



The Baptism of the Lord

Matthew 3:13–17

Context Connection

For Matthew, Jesus's baptism is an event, witnessed by many, where God publicly claims Jesus as his Son, further clarifying the identity of Jesus. In the first two chapters, Matthew lists Jesus's genealogy, connecting Jesus to the honorable lineage of Abraham and David as well as recognizing him as the new Moses. Matthew also points out Jesus's sacred origin—his conception by the Holy Spirit—citing yet another piece of evidence that Jesus is the Son of God.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus's first act of his public life is to seek out John the Baptist and be baptized. We know from chapter 3, verse 11, that John's baptism was in repentance for sin. Jesus, however, is not in need of this baptism because Jesus is without sin. John, recognizing that Jesus does not need his baptism, is reluctant to baptize Jesus. "John would have prevented [Jesus], saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" (3:14). Jesus convinces John that this act of baptism is the will of the Father. "Jesus answered [John], 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented" (3:15). This dialogue between John and Jesus appears only in Matthew and may refer to John's call that those who are baptized live lives that produce good fruit. By submitting to the baptism of John, Jesus pledges, in a public way, to act in accord with the call to righteousness that was fundamental to the baptism of John. This is Matthew's explanation of how Jesus, the sinless one, could have received a baptism of repentance.

Next in Matthew's account, Jesus's rising from the waters of the Jordan River is accompanied by extraordinary phenomena. The heavens, which had previously been closed by the sin of Adam, are opened. This symbolizes that a new way of communicating with God has dawned. The Holy Spirit descends "like a dove" and comes to rest on Jesus (3:16). This is similar to the image of the Spirit hovering over the waters in the Creation story (see Genesis 1:2 in the New Jerusalem Bible). Then a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17). The climax of Matthew's account of Jesus's baptism is that Jesus is identified as the Son of God in the presence of many onlookers. For Matthew, the public acknowledgment of Jesus as the Son of God, which happens at the beginning of Jesus's public life, gives legitimacy to Jesus's ministry.

Tradition Connection

Redemption of the world is possible because God the Son was willing to become human. We call this the Incarnation. The *Catechism* states that the Incarnation fulfills the promise that God made to Abraham and his descendants—and far exceeds it (see number 422). Because of God’s lavish love for humans, God sends the very best, Jesus, the Son of God, to save humankind.

Jesus’s very name, revealed by the angel at the annunciation, means “God saves.” This is the essence of Jesus’s identity. Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the Son of God, brings about redemption through the selfless act of taking on human form. No one but God is capable of doing this. Jesus’s name shows that the purpose of the Incarnation is to redeem humanity from sin, and because he unites himself to all of humanity by becoming a man, everyone can call on his name and be saved (see CCC, number 432).

Wisdom Connection

God uses the event of Jesus’s baptism to give public witness to the true identity of Jesus. The proclamation in Matthew 3:17 is the foundation of Jesus’s true identity. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus’s identity, in turn, gives significance to everything Jesus does in his ministry. His ministry is the ministry of God’s own beloved Son. God so loved the world that God sent his beloved Son to live among us and help us understand God’s great love for us. Jesus’s ministry ushers in a new age that is under the power of God’s love. Through Jesus, all the good that God had intended for humankind will be fulfilled.



First Sunday of Lent

Matthew 4:1–11

Context Connection

This Sunday's passage directly follows the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, in Matthew 3:13–17. In the story of Jesus's baptism, we discover that Jesus was the Father's beloved Son with whom God was well pleased. Following his baptism, Jesus retreats into the desert for "forty days and forty nights" (4:2), where he prays and fasts. This solitary excursion into the desert allows Jesus to engage in an honest struggle to understand himself before entering into his public ministry. While in the desert, at the end of forty days and nights, Jesus is confronted with the three fundamental temptations of human beings—materialism (turning stone into bread), influence and power (throwing himself from the top of the Temple and testing God's power to save), and false glory and idolatry (worshiping the tempter to achieve greatness). The first two times, the tempter prefaces his remarks with, "If you are the Son of God . . ." (4:3). Jesus has just become aware of this reality in a profound way at his baptism in the Jordan. Now the tempter is trying to use this self-knowledge to trick Jesus; however, Jesus chooses to obey an inner truth that he knows to be God's truth through his relationship with God the Father. Jesus does not allow the attraction of the temptations to control him.

If we look closely at the passage from Matthew, we can see that it is based on, and carefully crafted after, the story of the Israelites' temptations in the desert. In the Exodus story, the Israelites complain about not having any food in the desert, and God responds by sending them manna in the morning and quail in the evening. Next, they complain that they have no water: "Moses said to them [Israelites], 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?'" (Exodus 17:2). God responds by giving them water. Then the Israelites sculpt a golden calf from their jewelry and worship the idol. The contrast between the Israelites in the desert and Jesus in the desert is striking. Where ancient Israel failed, Jesus remains faithful and thus triumphs because he places his trust in God.

Jesus resists each temptation by countering the tempter with a passage from the Scriptures. In response to the first temptation, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). In the second temptation, the devil says that if Jesus throws himself off the Temple's highest point to test God, God will come to his aid. The

tempter cunningly quotes Psalm 91:11–12, but Jesus counters by saying, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matthew 4:7). This is taken from Deuteronomy 6:16. And finally, in response to the third temptation, Jesus counters with a response based on Deuteronomy 6:13, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (4:10). When faced with temptation, Jesus remembers who God is and the words spoken by God. The tempter has no other choice but to leave when faced with such confidence in the word of God.

Tradition Connection

Lent is a time of preparation for the celebration of the Easter mysteries, the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of this preparation that lasts forty days (six weeks) and ends with Easter. Sundays are not counted in the forty days because each Sunday is a celebration of the Resurrection. The forty days of Lent recall the forty days and forty nights Jesus spent in the desert praying and fasting in preparation for his public ministry. As Catholics, we are invited to use the Lenten season as a time to pray, fast, and give alms. These activities should always be an integral part of a Christian’s lifestyle, but during Lent, special emphasis and renewed focus are given to these three elements of Christian life.

Wisdom Connection

Jesus serves the early Christian community and the present Christian community by modeling obedience to God in the face of temptation, no matter how great. Because Jesus remains faithful to God when he is tempted, God graces him with honor throughout his life. This is the consequence of faithful, unflinching obedience to God. Jesus is an example for all Christians of how to persevere in the face of temptation.

God’s grace is free and, in the economy of salvation, does not come with strings attached. Sometimes we feel we owe God something for this generous gift of love, but there is nothing we can do to earn it. We cannot acquire bonus points or frequent-user points. God’s grace, and the freedom that it bestows on us, has been paid for in full by the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus shows us the way to place our trust in the word of God. Printed on United States currency is the phrase “In God We Trust.” Do we really believe that?



Second Sunday of Lent

Matthew 17:1–9

Context Connection

The focus of this Sunday's Gospel is the Transfiguration of Jesus. This account can also be found in the Gospels of Mark (see 9:2–13) and Luke (see 9:28–36). In all three accounts, Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah on the top of a mountain; he is witnessed by the inner circle of disciples—Peter, James, and John.

Matthew opens his account, “Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves” (17:1). In the Scriptures, the mountain symbolizes a privileged place of divine revelation. Matthew wants us to be aware that something very important about Jesus is going to be revealed on this mountain—that he is the Son of God. Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (17:2). Matthew's emphasis on the appearance of Jesus's face directly relates to Moses, whose face shone as the sun when he descended from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 34:29–30). In this way, Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses. Then “suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with [Jesus]” (17:3). Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the prophets of the Old Testament. In the context of Matthew's Gospel, the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus shows that Jesus has come to fulfill the Law and the prophets. The story presents the three figures existing in perfect harmony.

Matthew captures for us the disciples' reaction to this most unusual occurrence. Peter wants to hold on to the moment as long as possible, to remain in this glorified state by erecting three structures to contain the experience. Then God speaks: “A bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (17:5). We have already heard these words spoken by God at Jesus's baptism in the Jordan (see Matthew 3:17). Here Matthew adds “listen to him.” The voice frightens the disciples and “they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear” (17:6). Again Matthew draws a parallel between Jesus and Moses. In Exodus 16:10, 19:9, 24:15–16, and 33:9, God reveals his presence through a cloud.

Jesus responds by touching his disciples and telling them to get up, to not be afraid. Jesus becomes their comforter. The Transfiguration ends abruptly: “When [the disciples] looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone” (17:8). Then,

on their trip down the mountain, Jesus instructs the three disciples not to share what has happened until after he has been raised from the dead.

Tradition Connection

All baptized persons are called to holiness (see CCC, number 2013). A dimension of holiness is charity—the way we love others. During Lent, we are asked to be particularly mindful of almsgiving—that is, sharing our wealth with those who are in need. This should be a common practice for any Christian throughout the year, but during Lent, we are asked to reassess this aspect of our lives and be more attentive to perfecting this Christian practice on a regular basis.

Holiness can be obtained only by embracing the cross of Jesus (see CCC, number 2015). Jesus showed us that the way to holiness and unification with God the Father in the Resurrection is through the cross. Easter Sunday could never have happened without the experience of Good Friday. Through our Baptism, we die with Christ. The Transfiguration gives us a foretaste of the day we will be raised, and transformed, by Christ.

As Christians, we can only strive for holiness. Holiness happens when the Holy Spirit moves us interiorly to love God totally—with all our soul, heart, and mind. Loving God completely inspires us to love others because they have been fashioned in the image and likeness of God. To love another human being is to love God.

Wisdom Connection

Matthew wants his readers to notice the harmony that exists among Jesus, Moses, and Elijah at the Transfiguration. Harmony exists between the Law and the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus and his teachings. Fulfilling the laws and prophecy of the Old Testament does not mean replacing or discarding them, but rather bringing them to fullness—expanding them even further with new insights of the Gospel.

A second point Matthew makes is through the voice from the cloud: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (17:5). God the Father acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God, whose activities are pleasing to God. God invites the disciples, and us, to trust in Jesus, to trust in his way of life. God asks us to take a risk, to listen to Jesus’s words and put them into action.



Third Sunday of Lent

John 4:5–42*

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel helps us understand the process of conversion and what it means to come to a deeper faith in Jesus. Through the experience of the Samaritan woman, we are able to follow her process of coming to faith—from her initial encounter with Jesus, to her conversion and freedom from sin, to her witnessing the Good News.

To fully appreciate this story, we must take into consideration the cultural backdrop. First, in the Mediterranean world of Jesus's time, life is divided according to gender. Women have their places to meet and carry out their responsibilities and men have theirs. Men and women use the well at different times—women in the morning and evening, men during the day but never at the same time as the women. In this passage from John, the Samaritan woman comes to the well at noon, a time for men to use it. Experiencing isolation from her community because of her lifestyle, she comes alone to the well during the heat of the day, when she thought no one else would be there. Second, in Jesus's day, men do not speak to unchaperoned women, and women do not speak to strange men in public. In addition, the Jews do not associate with Samaritans at all. Third, women are not permitted to enter the marketplace when men are present, yet when the Samaritan woman has an encounter with Jesus and comes to understand the true identity of Jesus as the Messiah, she rushes to the marketplace to tell the men. The Samaritan woman is truly an evangelist telling the Good News of Jesus to her village.

Jesus does not allow his healing care and concern to be restricted by discrimination or social norms that divide. When Jesus reveals his knowledge of the secrets of the Samaritan woman's intimate life, a transformation happens within her. It becomes a turning point. Even though Jesus knows these things about her, Jesus still loves her. Renewed by Jesus's healing words, the natural response of the Samaritan woman is to share this new understanding of Jesus with others in her village. Jesus's words of compassion move this woman from her isolation to faith and then to mission.

Tradition Connection

In parishes with an RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) program, starting on the third Sunday of Lent and extending into the fourth and fifth Sundays, those entering the Catholic Church, catechumens who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil, experience the Scrutinies. The Scrutinies are rites of self-searching and repentance. These rites are meant to be the concluding process of conversion for those preparing for Baptism. The story of the Samaritan woman's conversion parallels the conversion process of the catechumen.

In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet at the well of Jacob, which was dug by Jacob and his sons. For many years, it provided water that supported life of every kind. Jesus promises that he will give life-giving water that will surpass the water of Jacob's well. Jesus is referring to the waters of eternal life we receive through Baptism.

As the Samaritan woman's faith in Jesus develops, she continues to seek out more information about Jesus so she can deepen her faith. It is the nature of faith, prompted by God's grace, to want to know more, to understand more fully (see CCC, numbers 155 and 158). This is all part of the conversion process—the process of Jesus's coming to know us intimately and our coming to know Jesus.

Wisdom Connection

John emphasizes that coming to believe in Jesus Christ is open to everyone. This must have been a hard reality for Jews to accept in light of their long-standing discrimination against the Samaritans. It may be possible that the Christian community addressed in John's Gospel had difficulty accepting Samaritans as equals and as full members of the Body of Christ.

John may also be confirming the new role of women in the community, that they too are called to be evangelizers. The messenger of the salvation of Jesus to this particular community was a woman, and, in this case, a woman who was isolated within her own community because of the way she conducted her life. Are there people in our own society whom we believe God could not possibly use for bringing others to Jesus?

* Focus on John 4:13–19,25–26 as a core text for the purposes of *lectio divina*.



Fourth Sunday of Lent

John 9:1–41*

Context Connection

The initial question the disciples ask Jesus about the man born blind is about the origin of the man's blindness. During the time of Jesus, people believed that an individual's sin was the cause of illness and disabilities. The Jewish people also believed that sin could be transferred from parents to their children. But Jesus wants his followers to understand that God does not send illness, disabilities, or suffering to us as a punishment for something we have done.

Before Jesus heals the man born blind, he shares with his disciples that he is "the light of the world" (9:5). As the light of the world, Jesus will give sight to the man born blind—a person who has never seen light. John wants to show that just as Jesus heals the physical blindness of the man born blind, he also offers spiritual healing and light. After anointing the blind man's eyes, Jesus commands him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (9:7). John adds a note indicating that *Siloam* means "sent." The author intentionally makes this connection to illustrate that the blind man is cured by the one sent by God because he faithfully followed the words of Jesus. John puts this forth as an example for all believers.

In the story, a dispute arises about the blind man's identity, followed by another dispute about who Jesus is. Some Pharisees believe that Jesus's making mud and spreading it on the eyes of the blind man is a violation of the regulations governing the Sabbath, so they say, "This man [Jesus] is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath" (9:16). Other Pharisees argue, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" (9:16). When the man born blind comes before the Pharisees a second time, he refuses to take part in their argument: "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (9:25). When the Pharisees continue to question Jesus's origins, the man born blind gives a profound witness saying that what Jesus has done proves who he is: "We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (9:31–33).

Finally, Jesus seeks out the man born blind and reveals to him his own true identity as the Son of Man. The man, who now sees, worships Jesus. Then Jesus

proclaims, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind” (9:39). Some of the Pharisees who overhear Jesus confront him, saying, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” (9:40). Jesus responds, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains” (9:41). Once again, Jesus states that sin does not cause physical blindness, but it does cause spiritual blindness.

Tradition Connection

The man born blind gives witness to the truth about Jesus, which he has come to know through his encounter with Jesus. The man born blind stands tall and declares that Jesus is indeed the one who gave him sight despite the disbelief of his neighbors, his peers, and the Pharisees. The man could have taken the easy way out and agreed with the crowd. He could have denied who he was and said he was the brother of the man born blind. But as the man born blind gives witness to what he knows to be true about Jesus, his insight into Jesus’s true identity grows. When the Pharisees ask the man who Jesus is, he says, “[Jesus] is a prophet” (9:17). At the end of the account, the man born blind is rewarded by Jesus when Jesus discloses his own identity, saying he is “the Son of Man” (9:35).

As Catholic Christians in the world today, we are faced with similar challenges of giving witness to our faith in Jesus Christ. The *Catechism* says that it is our duty to act as witnesses of the Gospel (see number 2472). How do we respond?

Wisdom Connection

Jesus’s touch brings the man born blind from a world of darkness into a world of light. One wonders how the man can trust his eyes, because having never seen before, the man has nothing to compare this experience to. Throughout the story, the man puts his trust in the saving actions of Jesus in his life. He chooses to believe in his encounter with Jesus and gives witness to that relationship even if it causes him to be thrown out of the Temple. In John’s community, if an individual publicly professes his or her belief in Jesus the Christ, he or she is expelled from the Temple. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ comes at a cost. Are we willing to profess our belief in Jesus Christ today even though we might be criticized?

* Focus on John 9:5–17 as a core text for the purposes of *lectio divina*.



Fifth Sunday of Lent

John 11:1–45*

Context Connection

The Sunday Gospels for the past two weeks have been about individuals who have encountered Jesus for the first time and, because of their encounters, have undergone a spiritual conversion. In the Gospel for this Sunday, the story focuses on close friends of Jesus's, who already understand that he is the one sent by God. Therefore, the Gospel holds Good News for all of us who already believe in Jesus the Christ. It is a story of how believers have their faith strengthened through challenging events in their lives, even the death of a loved one.

We are immediately struck that when Jesus is informed of Lazarus's illness, Jesus remains where he is for two days before traveling to Bethany. The rationale Jesus gives for not hurrying to Lazarus is that "this illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (11:4).

When Jesus finally arrives, the two sisters of Lazarus each react differently. Martha goes to meet him, while Mary stays at home with the mourners. Martha's words to Jesus are a witness to her knowledge of Jesus's compassionate healing, as well as to her faith in the actions of Jesus. Jesus assures Martha that her brother will rise again, and he takes this opportunity to reveal his identity even further: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (11:25–26). Martha replies, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God" (11:27). However, Martha's faith is limited by her previous experience, and she does not see the new dimension of Jesus's identity.

Mary, when she does come to meet Jesus, says through her tears, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:32). These are the same words Martha used, but Mary's words are filled with the emotion and pain of losing a loved one. The Gospel shows us how deeply Jesus experiences these same human emotions: "[Jesus] was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (11:33). Upon reaching the tomb, Jesus weeps. Jesus commands that the stone be rolled away, but Martha again reveals her limited faith, saying, "Lord, already there is a stench because [Lazarus] has been dead four days" (11:39). Jesus challenges her faith: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

(11:40). The stone is taken away, and Jesus proclaims a public prayer of thanks to God the Father. Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb, and the crowd is instructed by Jesus to unbind Lazarus. John ends the account by explaining that some came to believe in Jesus that day while others began to plot his demise.

Tradition Connection

As Catholic Christians, we believe that just as Jesus rose from the dead, we also will experience resurrection. The resurrection of the dead is an essential Christian belief. In First Corinthians, Paul expresses it this way: “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (15:12–14).

Jesus has redeemed humankind through his death on the cross and through his Resurrection. In faith, we proclaim at Mass that Christ has died, is risen, and will come again.

In the Gospel for this Sunday, Jesus reveals that he is the Resurrection and the life. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, that which was corruptible and broken because of death through sin is now made incorruptible and restored to eternal life through the grace of God.

Wisdom Connection

John’s theological focus in chapter 11 is that Jesus is both the Resurrection and the life for all who believe in him. Those who have faith in Jesus, the Messiah, will have eternal life even though they will die. Just as Martha and Mary’s faith gradually deepens because of their experience of the death and resurrection of their brother, our Christian faith will deepen only when we realize that Jesus gives true life from death. The two sisters hope for the simple healing of their brother by Jesus. The idea that Jesus has divine power to bring Lazarus back from the dead is beyond their comprehension and faith. Jesus stretches our faith and encourages us to go beyond our simple understanding of faith to put our belief in that which cannot be seen. Jesus refuses to be limited by our human eyes of faith and helps us see beyond our human limitations to the saving action of God.

* Focus on John 11:28–44 as a core text for the purposes of *lectio divina*.



Passion (Palm) Sunday

Matthew 26:14—27:66

Context Connection

The Passion of Jesus is one of the oldest Christian traditions preserved for us in Paul's writings. Paul writes that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose on the third day. Paul's account does not include many details about the actual suffering and death of Jesus. In fact, Paul's emphasis is on the Resurrection appearances of Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 15:3–8).

Paul's audience—first-generation Christians—would have known the story of Jesus's suffering and death firsthand. However, by the time the Gospels were written, the Christian community had a great desire to know more about the succession of events that led up to the Resurrection, beginning with the Last Supper and ending with the burial of Jesus. Christians today must remember that the Resurrection was the central and primary focus for the first followers of Christ. Overemphasizing and dwelling on the Passion of Jesus distorts the truth that the early disciples discovered in the Resurrection.

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew sees Jesus and the events in Jesus's life as fulfilling the Mosaic Covenant. This is evident in Matthew's Passion narrative. Judas's fee of thirty pieces of silver, the scattering of the Apostles, the mockery heaped on Jesus, the division of Jesus's garment, the wine mixed with gall, the darkness at noon—all these things fulfill verses from the Psalms and prophets. Jesus's last words are taken from Psalm 22, a psalm that is a plea for deliverance from suffering: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (verse 1). The psalmist expresses not only intense feelings of abandonment but also total trust in the faithfulness of God: "For [God] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him" (verse 24).

The Gospel of Matthew also provides some additional information not found elsewhere: Matthew's Gospel alone mentions Pilate's wife's dream, and Pilate's gesture of releasing a prisoner at the time of this festival is not found in any other historical document.

Matthew's Gospel stresses that Jesus really did die to emphasize the great miracle of the Resurrection (see Matthew 27:57–66.) For example, Joseph from Arimathea asks for the body of Jesus: Pilate would not have released the corpse, and Joseph would not have prepared the body and placed the corpse in a tomb unless

Jesus was really dead. Matthew also provides details to show that the women did not go to the wrong tomb on Easter morning and that the disciples would not have been able to steal the corpse and proclaim that Jesus had risen. Matthew's account affirms that Jesus really had died, that the tomb was guarded, and that the location of the tomb was known by many people.

Tradition Connection

Matthew's account of Jesus's praying in the garden at Gethsemane presents Jesus as the obedient Son of God, who accepts God's will that he must suffer and die. Out of complete love for the Father, Jesus is able to do God's will and accept death on the cross—gaining salvation for all humankind (see CCC, number 571).

The work of redemption through Jesus is possible because Jesus freely accepts God's plan for redemption, although, initially, the dialogue between Jesus and God the Father in the garden indicates that Jesus would rather see this cup pass him by. Ultimately, Jesus realizes he is in the world to do the will of the Father: "Yet not what I want but what you want" (26:39).

Jesus's death on the cross ushered in the New Covenant between God and humankind—a covenant born out of love and sacrifice (see CCC, number 613).

Wisdom Connection

When it comes time for Peter to prove himself, he denies Jesus three times. Peter's cowardice under pressure stands in sharp contrast with Jesus's faithfulness to God the Father under death. Peter's denial also stands in contrast to two other Lenten readings—the woman at the well and the man born blind. Both of these individuals grow from having no knowledge of Jesus to proclaiming him as the Messiah. Early Christian communities were faced with persecution and death. When individual members were confronted about their faith in Jesus, even the strongest ones did the same thing as Peter: they tried to distance themselves from Jesus. Matthew wants these people to know they can ask forgiveness and be reconciled just as Peter was. Peter's remorse is in contrast to Judas, who feels he cannot be forgiven for betraying Jesus and thus commits suicide: "Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly" (26:75).

Are there situations today where you deny knowing Jesus because it is safer?



Easter Sunday

John 20:1–9

Context Connection

The Easter Sunday morning Gospel focuses on the empty tomb and the reaction of three followers: Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the beloved disciple. The Gospel says this all occurred on the “first day of the week” (20:1), perhaps to express the beginning of something new. Mary Magdalene is alone when she discovers the stone has been removed from Jesus’s tomb. She does not go closer to examine what happened; rather, she runs to tell “Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” (20:2). When she finds them, she proclaims to the two disciples, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (20:2). Mary makes this assumption based on what she sees and her lack of understanding of the Resurrection Jesus spoke about.

Peter and the other disciple run to Jesus’s tomb. The other disciple arrives first but waits for Peter before entering. They must have expected to see the tomb in disarray, based on Mary’s assumption that robbers had come and stolen Jesus’s body. When Peter arrives, he goes directly into the tomb. He and the other disciple encounter something very different from what they expected. The burial cloths are lying in the tomb, but the cloth that wrapped Jesus’s head is rolled up and lying apart from the other cloths. If someone has stolen the body, why would they have taken the burial cloths off? Why would they have left them carefully rolled up in two different parts of the tomb?

John does not tell us Peter’s thoughts or feelings, but he does share with us the impact this event has on the other disciple: “Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed” (20:8). The Gospel also speaks about the disciples’ progression of faith in the Resurrection, showing that it is not yet complete: “For as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (20:9). Today we look back on this event and understand that Jesus actively participated with the Father and the Holy Spirit in his Resurrection and that the empty tomb is the starting point for belief in the resurrected Christ. Mary Magdalene sees the empty tomb and concludes that it has been robbed. Peter enters the empty tomb, sees the burial clothes, and seeks to understand all the events of the past three days. The beloved disciple sees the burial cloths and believes.

Tradition Connection

Easter is the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus the Christ. In the Gospel reading from John, we see that its significance is not immediately understood by everyone. Finding the empty tomb doesn't prove that Jesus has been raised from the dead, but it is a first step toward understanding the fact of the Resurrection (see CCC, number 640).

The beloved disciple has the first insight as to the significance of the empty tomb. Throughout the Easter season, we will hear more appearance stories of the risen Christ and revelations that Jesus is truly the Messiah. Through these revelations, the Resurrection takes its place as the central truth upon which Christianity is built. The *Catechism* calls the Resurrection “the crowning truth of our faith in Christ” (number 638).

The Easter season begins with Easter Sunday and continues for fifty days, until the feast of Pentecost. During this time, the Sunday readings focus on the various appearances of the risen Jesus. These fifty days are a time of hope and celebration because, through Jesus the Christ, death has been overcome and we are given the hope of eternal life with God.

Wisdom Connection

Of the three individuals who are at the empty tomb on the first Easter morning, only one gains a clear insight into what this all meant. This revelation presents itself only after the beloved disciple enters the tomb. We will hear other stories throughout the Easter season of disciples' confirming their faith in Jesus only after they see and encounter the risen Christ. But for the beloved disciple, he believes without seeing.

The beloved disciple serves as an example for future generations who come to faith in Jesus Christ without seeing Jesus. For us who live between the time of Jesus's Ascension and his Second Coming, the beloved disciple serves as a model for faith in Jesus.



Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19–31

Context Connection

Last Sunday, we heard the Gospel story of the empty tomb. This Sunday's Gospel takes place later on the same day. In the verses between these two stories is an account of Jesus's appearing to Mary Magdalene (see 20:11–18). After conversing with Mary Magdalene, Jesus instructs her to go and tell the disciples of their encounter: "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'" (20:18). In today's Gospel, the disciples are locked in a house because they fear the Jews. Despite the locked door, Jesus stands among them and greets them with the same greeting used during our liturgical celebrations: "Peace be with you" (20:19). Immediately Jesus shows the disciples his wounds from the Crucifixion. This is all it takes to restore these disciples' hope in Jesus. Jesus then commissions them to continue his work in the world by breathing on them as God the Creator did at the Creation of the world in Genesis 2:7.

The following week, Jesus again appears to all the disciples, including Thomas. Although the disciples had told Thomas about the earlier appearance of Jesus, Thomas sets conditions on his belief that the crucified Jesus now has risen, saying that he will not believe unless he sees Jesus's wounds (see 20:25). When Jesus appears, he offers to meet Thomas's conditions by inviting Thomas to put his finger, even his hand, into Jesus's wounds. In Greek, the passage uses the word *balo*, which carries the action of thrusting. Such a vivid and forceful action definitely proves that the risen Jesus and the crucified Jesus are the same person. Jesus challenges Thomas to reach beyond his conditional faith, and Thomas answers with a profound statement of faith: "My Lord and my God!" (20:28).

John concludes chapter 20 by talking about his purpose for writing this Gospel. He wants to make clear to his reader the true identity of Jesus, "that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God" (20:31), and that fullness of life comes through believing in Jesus the Christ.

Tradition Connection

Jesus's Resurrection is significant because it confirms that Jesus is the Son of God; all his teachings are true, and new life comes forth from death. Because we now know there is life after death, the suffering and pain we endure in this life are toler-

able because something far better is yet to come. Peter writes: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

Jesus’s Resurrection was not a return to an earthly existence; rather, it was a transformation to a reality that no longer held human limitations. It was not the same as the raisings from the dead that Jesus had performed before Easter. He restored to life Jairus’s daughter, the young man of Naim, and Lazarus, but unlike them, Jesus will not die again later. Instead, he passes from death to another life beyond time and space (see CCC, number 646).

Jesus’s Resurrection is a mystery we come to believe in because of the empty tomb and the witness of the disciples who encounter the risen Jesus. The mystery of the Resurrection of Jesus continues to be the source of hope for the Christian community today.

Wisdom Connection

Jesus’s appearance in the midst of the disciples on that first Easter Sunday renews their hope. Just three days earlier, their hopes were shattered when Jesus died on the cross. Now, in seeing the wounds in Jesus’s hands and side, they know the risen Jesus is the same person as the crucified Jesus. Seeing the risen Jesus strengthens their faith. Thomas, however, wants tangible proof.

John gives us a second model of coming to believe in Christ. Last Sunday, the beloved disciple, John, experienced the empty tomb and believed. This Sunday, Thomas seeks empirical evidence so he can believe. How one comes to believe in Jesus is not important; what Jesus stresses is, “Do not doubt but believe” (20:27). Jesus challenges us not to persist in our unbelief but to simply believe! John concludes with a statement that sounds like a beatitude: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29).

The early Christian community to whom John is writing, and indeed all Christian communities, is called to proclaim their belief in Jesus as the Messiah based on the faith tradition of the Church. We have not encountered the risen Jesus as the disciples did, but we are all called to believe because of their witness. Are we able to make the same profession of faith as Thomas in recognizing the true identity of Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28)?



Third Sunday of Easter

Luke 24:13–35

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel continues to recount the events of the first Easter Sunday. Luke preserves the account of two disciples who are returning to Emmaus from Jerusalem after celebrating the Passover feast. Before they leave Jerusalem, they hear that the women have discovered the open tomb and that Peter reported the tomb was empty. As they talk about the things that have happened over the past three days, Jesus draws near to them, but they do not recognize him. When Jesus asks, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" (24:17), they can only stand there looking sad. Finally Cleopas, one of the disciples, says to Jesus, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" (24:18). Jesus responds as if he has no knowledge of the events: "What things?" (24:19). Then the disciples share with the stranger, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him" (24:19–20). The two disciples share their hope that this Jesus would have been a political messiah that would have freed Israel. They also mention the morning's discovery that the body of Jesus was not in the tomb where it was buried on Friday. The three of them continue walking and talking. The stranger helps the two disciples understand how the Old Testament foretells of the suffering and death of the Messiah.

When they draw near to Emmaus, Jesus continues to walk, but the two disciples invite him to join them for the night. At the dinner table, in the blessing and breaking of the bread, they come to understand the true identity of the stranger: "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight" (24:31). They immediately reflect on their encounter with the risen Jesus: "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (24:32). They begin to realize that it was the risen Jesus they experienced and that he caused their hearts to burn within them. Luke wants his readers to know that the disciples' experience of the risen Jesus is available to everyone in the Church through the Eucharist and the reading of the Scriptures.

The two disciples return to Jerusalem. This group shares with the two disciples that "the Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" (24:34). In turn,

the two disciples share that they experienced the risen Jesus “in the breaking of the bread” (24:35).

Tradition Connection

“Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (24:25–27). Jesus helps us understand the importance of the Old Testament in the plan of salvation set forth by God the Father. It is the Old Testament that points to Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah that brings salvation to the world. The New Testament helps us live in keeping with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christians value the Old Testament just as Jesus valued it (see CCC, number 121). He used it to instruct the two disciples on the way to Emmaus and to give them a perspective on his Passion and death. The New Testament is a continuation of the record of God’s direct intervention into salvation history. Therefore Christians revere the whole of Scripture. Within liturgy, we give testimony to the Old Testament’s importance by using readings from it. We recognize that the Old Testament offers valuable wisdom about God and about human life as well as a treasury of beautiful prayers (see CCC, number 122).

Wisdom Connection

For the two disciples, the experience of the risen Lord cannot be contained within themselves. They need to share it and proclaim what they have come to know as the truth about Jesus of Nazareth. By the time they return to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples about their encounter, the Good News is already known. The unique part of the two disciples’ account is their recognition of Jesus “in the breaking of the bread” (24:35). Luke emphasizes this point because it is the way future generations will come to know Jesus. Jesus will be known in the Church’s celebration of the Eucharist. The two parts of our Eucharistic celebration are the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. In the Eucharistic liturgy, Jesus makes himself known through both the Scriptures and the sacrament of the Eucharist. It is in the Eucharist that we experience the real and wholesome presence of Jesus Christ.



Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:1–10

Context Connection

John's most forceful line for this Sunday's Gospel is: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10). The access to this abundant life is through Jesus: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (10:9). The metaphor John uses is that of a shepherd, an image well known in the Old Testament. God is often spoken of as the shepherd of the Jewish people, as are leaders, especially kings. During the exile in Babylon, the Jewish prophets spoke of God as the future shepherd of the people. They also hoped for a future Davidic leader who would shepherd the people of Israel (see Jeremiah 3:15, Micah 5:4, Micah 5:3 [NAB], or Zechariah). Ezekiel describes this future shepherd as a good shepherd, one who cares for his flock (see 34:11–16).

John interjects something new. When he says that "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11), he presents a key insight that says Jesus is the Davidic good shepherd, the hope of the Jews since the Babylonian captivity. Jesus is the good shepherd because of his freely chosen sacrifice on the cross. It is Jesus's act of self-giving that brings about the salvation of all.

Psalm 23 is the responsorial psalm for this Sunday. It is familiar to us. After the Passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, Christians read into this psalm the importance of being nurtured through the Eucharist as sheep in the pasture. To find pasture is to find life. Those who seek pasture through Jesus find life in abundance. As the good shepherd, Jesus leads us to green pastures and refreshing water, an abundance of life. It is here that Jesus restores our souls, our broken spirits, and gives us direction toward righteousness in our lives. Even in times that challenge us, we believe Jesus is there to guide us and comfort us. Through the sacraments, Jesus continues to strengthen us for the journey of life. Our heads are anointed with oil to show how precious we are in the eyes of God. The Eucharistic banquet is prepared to nurture us. Our God is a generous God and thus our cup overflows. Because Jesus came to give us life, and to give it in abundance, we are called to share it with others: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Psalm 23:6).

Tradition Connection

The image of the good shepherd in the Old Testament depicts the qualities of both a good king and God. That image serves as an example for leaders at all levels in the Catholic Church. On Holy Thursday, the start of the Triduum, the ritual the Church uses is the washing of the feet to remember Jesus's example and words to his disciples. After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus tells them that they ought to wash one another's feet, just as he has done for them (see John 13:14–15). Washing the feet of guests is relegated to the slave. But Jesus's act of washing his disciples' feet gives them an example of leadership for the new community he has formed: to be the servant to the servants.

We give the title pastor to those priests who lead parishes. The origin of the word *pastor* is a Latin word meaning “shepherd.” A pastor is the ordained servant-leader of a parish. The concept of servant-leader is even reflected in one of the titles for the Pope: Servant of the Servants of God (*Servus Servorum Dei*).

The term *good shepherd* is an apt metaphor for this kind of pastoral leadership. A good shepherd wants what is good for his flock. The good shepherd gives guidance and care to those for whom he is responsible. He provides not only for their physical needs but also for their spiritual needs. Ministry in the Church is characterized by service (see CCC, number 876). Just as Jesus came to give us life and to give it abundantly, those who follow Jesus as leaders in the Church are asked by Jesus to make sacrifices so that those they serve will have life and have it abundantly.

Wisdom Connection

John sets forth in his Gospel the image of the good shepherd's serving the Christian community as a way to assess the present leadership. The example for leadership given to us by Jesus is one of servant leadership, placing the good of another before our own personal gain. A servant-leader washes the feet of all members of the community. A servant-leader provides pastoral care for each member of the Christian community, even if it means seeking out the lost and restoring them to the community. The model of leadership John presents in the image of the good shepherd and in the washing of the feet in chapter 13 clearly shows that leadership in the Christian community should be based on service to others and not on power over others.



Fifth Sunday of Easter

John 14:1–12

Context Connection

In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus reminds his disciples that even though he is going away—back to the Father—they need to continue his mission. Jesus also tells his disciples that believing in God and in himself will give them strong hearts and the conviction to do the works of Jesus.

Jesus promises his disciples that he will not only prepare a place for them but also come again to take them with him to dwell with God the Father (see 14:3). We continue to believe that Jesus will come again at the end of the world.

Thomas expresses the insecurity of all the disciples: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5). Jesus's response to Thomas's question is poignant and serves as a teaching for all disciples: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). The "way" of Jesus is a loving way, a way of total self-giving, even to the point of death. It must also become the way of all his followers.

For three years, the disciples have traveled with Jesus and spent time in conversation with him so they can come to know him. Jesus now wants his disciples to understand that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. This is the start of the comprehension of the mystery of the Holy Trinity: if you know Jesus, you know the Father, because they are one. Jesus's response clarifies that Christian hope is not found in a method or in a procedure but in a person—Jesus—the means of encounter with God.

When Philip expresses the continued confusion of the disciples, Jesus becomes exasperated with them for not recognizing the Father in him over the past three years. To believe is crucial. Jesus encourages the disciples to look back over the many miracles he has worked and understand that they are the manifestation of the Father's work in and through him.

The Gospel closes with instruction for all disciples of Jesus, including us. Jesus links belief with doing good works. The Letter of James says we are to be not only hearers of the word of Jesus but also doers of his word; we must put those words into action. Jesus tells his disciples that by placing their belief in him, they will do even greater things than he. The increased greatness of the works lies in acting in Jesus's name after he has ascended to the Father. The Acts of the Apostles records many of these great works of the Apostles.

Tradition Connection

Jesus speaks about his returning to the Father from whom he came. As Jesus approached the time when he would ascend to the Father, he wanted to prepare the disciples for his departure. There is a strong link between the Ascension of Jesus and the Incarnation: Jesus can return to the Father because he “came from the Father”¹ (CCC, number 661).

Jesus shares with the disciples that his whole reason for coming into the world is so humankind can come to know God the Father in a definitive way. Christ’s whole life on earth is Revelation of the Father (see CCC, number 516).

We, the disciples of Jesus, are invited to step out in faith to trust the mystery of God: the unity of the Father and the Son. It is through Jesus that we come to dwell with God the Father in heaven. In First Corinthians, Paul writes, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (2:9).

Wisdom Connection

Just as the disciples are troubled about Jesus’s departure, so is John’s community. So John writes to help them gain perspective on Jesus’s return. Jesus tells the disciples he will come back to take them with him to the Father. The early Christian community hopes this will happen in their lifetime. John’s Gospel is written near the end of the first century, and Jesus has not yet come again. Rather than focus on the timing of the Second Coming, John has his community focus on what needs to happen in the in-between time. Jesus does not leave without giving the disciples an understanding of how to get to the Father. The original disciples are told they must continue the good works of Jesus the Christ through faith in Jesus the Christ. Through his life, teachings, and actions, Jesus presents a way of life to his disciples. If individuals, as well as a whole community, would live as Jesus did, they would definitely encounter God, who is love. For John it is a matter of believing in Jesus as the Christ and modeling one’s life after his. “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (14:12).

Jesus’s departure should not be a cause of sorrow and despair; rather, it is a cause of hope and comfort because he is preparing a permanent dwelling place for those who are in communion with God the Father. On earth, the glory of God, once seen in the works of Jesus, can now be seen in the works of the believing disciples.



Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 14:15–21

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel is a continuation of last Sunday's Gospel. Jesus is still responding to Philip's request: "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (14:8). Remember that Jesus told his disciples they already know the Father because they know him: "I [Jesus] am in the Father and the Father is in me" (14:11). So when Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (14:15), he speaks of the love the disciples should have for him and the Father. The love of God is the reason for keeping God's Commandments. We learn that Jesus and the Father will not abandon the disciples because of their love for the disciples. In fact, Jesus promises this: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever" (14:16). In 1 John 2:1, John refers to Jesus as the disciples' first advocate with the Father. Jesus wants his disciples to know that when the time comes for him to return to the Father, they—Jesus and the Father—will send another Advocate to be among them. This Advocate, this mediator, this Paraclete, is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity.

Jesus's departure does not result in God's absence; rather, it is a continuation of his presence through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the first mediator, but through the Holy Spirit, Jesus will come back as promised and remain. The disciples who love Jesus will be loved in return by the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (14:21). Jesus continues to reveal himself through his love relationship with his followers who keep the Commandments. In the future, after Jesus returns to the Father, this will be mediated by the Holy Spirit. All disciples can hope to dwell with Jesus in the future. He will remain with them through the Holy Spirit's dwelling in each disciple. The Spirit among us is a source of hope.

Obedience to Jesus is the way the disciples show their love for Jesus. This Sunday's Gospel begins and closes with an urging to keep Jesus's Commandments. Obeying Jesus is both the proof of love and the condition necessary for receiving the Holy Spirit. The word *obedience* comes from two Latin words: *ob* meaning "toward" and *audire* meaning "to hear." Obedience is turning one's ear toward the Commandments of Jesus to hear them clearly and to allow them to set the direc-

tion for one's life. Jesus prepares the disciples for the time when he will no longer be among them in a physical body. He desperately wants them to understand that he has not abandoned them, even though he is gone: "I will not leave you orphaned" (14:18). The physical absence of Jesus will be overcome by the never-ending presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus's going away will usher in a new era marked by the gifts of the Holy Spirit present among the believing community. This new era will be made manifest through love—the keeping of Jesus's Commandments—and the hope that God the Father and God the Son will abide forever with the faithful disciples, as he promised.

Tradition Connection

The Old Testament prophets announce that the Spirit of God will rest upon the Messiah that they hope for. A sign of the Messiah is that God's Spirit resides with him. The Spirit of the Lord rests upon Jesus from his very moment of conception.

This Spirit of God that Jesus experiences is not a gift from God that he keeps for himself; rather, he shares it with all who keep his Commandments. This outpouring of the Father's love without measure is now passed on to Jesus's disciples.

The Spirit of God through Jesus continues to be poured out upon those who love Jesus and keep his Commandments.

Wisdom Connection

Jesus's promise to the disciples that he will not leave them orphans and that he will send the Holy Spirit as his presence among his followers is a promise for disciples of every generation. The physical absence of Jesus is overcome by the never-ending presence of the Holy Spirit. Even though the never-ending presence of God is made manifest through the Holy Spirit, we believe that in worship, especially in the Eucharistic experience, the absent one, Jesus, is present. He is present in the bread and wine that are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus.



The Ascension of the Lord

Matthew 28:16–20

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel, in observance of the feast of the Ascension of Jesus, concludes the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew's account of the Resurrection (which is the Gospel reading for the Easter Vigil), Jesus rises from the dead on Easter morning and greets the women who have come to see the tomb (see 28:1–10). Jesus instructs the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, to the predetermined place on a mountain. The disciples leave Jerusalem immediately and travel to Galilee. Matthew's account also differs from the one found in the Acts of the Apostles, which states that Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after the Resurrection (see Acts of the Apostles 1:3) from Mount Olivet (see Acts of the Apostles 1:12), near Jerusalem.

The conclusion of Matthew's Gospel makes three profound statements about the authority of Jesus, the commission of the disciples, and the promise of Jesus's abiding presence. The encounter of Jesus on the mountain in Galilee, according to Matthew, is the disciples' first experience of the risen Jesus. In this instance, it is Jesus who comes to the disciples, whereas in other parts of Matthew, it is the disciples who come to Jesus. Jesus shares with the disciples a profound truth about himself: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (28:18). The risen Jesus has been given supreme authority over the universe, all power in heaven and on earth, by his heavenly Father because of his obedience—even unto death.

Based on his universal power, Jesus then commissions the disciples to carry on his work here on earth. Everyone, not just the Jews, is invited to be disciples of Jesus Christ. The words Jesus uses when he commissions the disciples and tells them to baptize all nations are the same words used in Baptism today.

Finally, Jesus promises he will always be with his followers. Jesus's promise to be continuously present to the disciples in every generation brings to fulfillment Jesus's name, Emmanuel, which means "God is always with us." The Spirit of God will guide and protect the Church at all times.

Tradition Connection

The feast of the Ascension of the Lord celebrates what we are and will be as the Church. The focus is on Jesus's presence, through the Holy Spirit in the midst of

the Church, rather than on Jesus's departure and return to the Father. The risen Jesus is no longer limited by space or time. Jesus returns to the Father so he can be present through the Holy Spirit and in the sacraments.

The mandate of the Church, which is missionary in nature, is based on these words of Jesus: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). The *Catechism* explains that the mission of the Church is to ensure that all people share in the love that exists between the Father and the Son (see number 850).

It is the Holy Spirit that guides and directs the Church on its missionary path. This mission unfolds as each member of the Church gives witness to this mission through the witness of his or her life (see CCC, number 863). The purpose of the Christian vocation, affirmed in Baptism, is to assist God in the plan of salvation. God desires to save all people and will provide us with the strength and the enthusiasm to carry out God's plan.

Therefore, at the close of every Mass, the presider commissions those in attendance to go forth to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ in the world. The assembly responds in thanksgiving for the opportunity to do so.

Wisdom Connection

Matthew's community is most likely a group of Christian converts from Judaism. Perhaps some members of the community wish to be exclusive rather than inclusive, making it difficult for non-Jews to convert to Christianity and join their community. In a dynamic way, Matthew presents the risen Jesus as the true Messiah that has been given complete authority over heaven and earth. It is this glorified Jesus that declares that his salvation is for all people—Jew and Gentile alike. In fact, Jesus commands his disciples to go forth and make disciples of all nations. Jesus's discipleship is one of inclusion, not exclusion.

The Church is presented with the same challenge today. How can we spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to all peoples everywhere? We are called to be evangelizers by our Baptism. It is our Christian vocation to be focused outward and to share the salvation of Jesus Christ with all nations. We have such Good News that everyone deserves to hear it and to encounter Jesus the Christ.



Pentecost Sunday

John 20:19–23

Context Connection

The Gospel for Pentecost is the same one we heard on Easter Sunday. The disciples are gathered in a room behind locked doors, afraid their fate will be the same as Jesus's if they venture out. Then, suddenly, Jesus stands with them behind the locked doors. The crucified Jesus—now the resurrected Jesus—graces them with his presence. Jesus has been glorified through the cross and now presents himself to his disciples.

The Jesus that appears in their midst is not a resuscitated Jesus—someone did not perform CPR on Jesus—rather, God's love created Jesus anew. When Jesus first encountered the disciples after his Resurrection, "he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (20:22). Jesus breathes new life into this group of disciples who has allowed fear to suck the breath of life out of them. He offers them God's very spirit, the Holy Spirit, making them a new creation. This lost, uncertain, frightened group of disciples is, on the first Pentecost, ignited into a bold, brave, and powerfully dynamic Church that preaches with reckless abandon about the marvelous work of God.

New life comes to the disciples through the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism, we receive this same gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and become a new creation in God. Through Baptism, Jesus re-creates a people for God. Christianity is not an association, like being a member of a club; rather, it is a way of life that is infused by the Holy Spirit. Through Baptism, we are called to live the Gospel of Jesus in all aspects of our lives.

The word *breath* used in this passage takes on richer meaning when we look at various translations of the Scriptures. The Hebrews use the word *ruah*, which speaks of "the breath of life," or spirit, that God breathed into the nostrils of human beings when God created them (see Genesis 2:7). The Greek word for breath is *pneuma*, which means "soul" or "spirit." In Latin, the word used for breath is *spiritus*, which means "spirit," "breath," or "wind." For the Hebrews, *ruah* is the life force given to humans—the wind beneath one's wings. It speaks of a deep interrelationship between God's potent life-creating power and creation. God's creation is so completely dependent on God's life-giving power that it would be accurate to say that the very next breath we take is God's gift; all breath is God's breath. The Spirit

Jesus breathes upon his disciples is the wind of Pentecost that sends God's Spirit into the world to renew the face of the earth.

Tradition Connection

The gift of the Holy Spirit is given to the disciples so that now they are able to continue the mission of Jesus. The mission of Jesus becomes the mission of the Church (see CCC, number 730). Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus keeps his promise to be with his disciples to the end of the age.

On the feast of Pentecost, the Church celebrates Jesus's revealing the presence of the Holy Spirit to the disciples. Through this revelation, as Church, we move more deeply into the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Each Christian receives the gift of the Holy Spirit at Baptism, thus becoming a member of the mystical Body of Christ. The gift of God's presence in the world is meant to be shared with all (see CCC, number 1287).

After the Pentecost experience, the disciples understand that they now are part of the plan for the salvation of the world. This is the mission Jesus speaks about through his preaching. It is the mission of the Church today. As baptized members of the Church, we also share in the mission of bringing God's message of salvation to all people (see CCC, number 686).

Wisdom Connection

Pentecost is both a private and a public event. Jesus breathes the Spirit of God upon the disciples, which not only renews the lifeless spirits of the disciples but also causes them to go forth and renew the world—to breathe life into a spiritless world. The Acts of the Apostles records this in a dynamic way (see 2:1–11). The gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus gives to the disciples manifests itself by transforming a group of cowering individuals into a vital force that boldly proclaims the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. Emboldened and accompanied by the Spirit of God, the disciples preach the Good News to anyone who will listen, without allowing the consequences to diminish their zeal.

Like the disciples, we are sent out to preach, teach, heal, and prophesy—using all our gifts, strengthened by the Holy Spirit—to renew the world. We are to make God, who is love, apparent to the world through our words and deeds..



Most Holy Trinity

John 3:16–18

Context Connection

Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about the importance of being recreated through water and the Spirit, the Baptism that those who believe in Jesus will receive. Nicodemus only knows the baptism of water that John the Baptist gave to repentant sinners. The phrase Jesus uses is “being born from above” (3:3). The language Jesus uses could be interpreted two ways: it could mean “from above” or “again.” By Nicodemus’s response, we know that he interprets it as being born again—a second time—because he asks how it is possible for a grown person to re-enter his mother’s womb.

Nicodemus struggles to understand: “How can these things be?” (3:9). In response to Nicodemus’s questioning, Jesus tries to help him understand these heavenly things. Out of love for all creation, God sent his only Son to be the payment for eternal life for everyone. God desires that everyone be born from above, born of the Spirit. But because God gave human beings free will to choose, individuals are free to not believe in God’s redemption. Therefore condemnation comes from within a person. It is not superimposed from outside a person.

The Gospel passage the Church has chosen for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity is an interesting one. The passage does reveal the interconnectedness of God the Father, God’s only Son, and the Spirit. However, it is not a treatise on the mystery of the Blessed Trinity; rather, it is an explanation of the experience of the Triune God acting on behalf of humankind to bring about the salvation of everyone. Belief in the complex mystery of the Trinity should not be exclusively based in possessing a profound insight into this abstract concept, but rather based in a life that reflects the self-sacrificing love of God—the love that God the Father has expressed for humankind through the gift of God’s Son and the Holy Spirit.

Tradition Connection

This Sunday, we celebrate the feast of the Most Holy Trinity. It is a celebration of the mystery of our Triune God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in a community of love and are bound together as one; yet they remain distinct persons in their relationship to humankind. This mystery stands at the center of our faith as Catholic Christians, and it helps us understand all the other mysteries of our faith. God’s

saving work in the world is really the story of God revealing God's self as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see CCC, number 234).

The theological term we use to describe the nature of the Trinity is *consubstantial*, which means "having the exact same substance." The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are wholly and completely God. We don't believe there are three Gods, and we don't believe that each of the divine persons is one part of God.

Baptism into the Most Holy Trinity begins our lifelong journey toward understanding this mystery. Perhaps our understanding will become complete only in the next life, as the many mysteries of God are revealed to us.

This Sunday's Gospel points out that during the in-between time, we need to place our trust in the experience of the Triune God revealed by Jesus, who is intent on bringing salvation to all humankind.

Wisdom Connection

This short passage from John contains a key theological concept. The God that Jesus reveals, the God that John comes to know, and the God we believe in is a God motivated by love. The love of our God is so great that God gave his only Son as a gift to the world—to save the world, not condemn it. God's love is dynamic and ever present. All one has to do is believe in Jesus, the concrete example of God's selfless love. God sent Jesus into the world to save it. However, human actions play an important part in salvation. Belief in Jesus is manifested through the good deeds we do in God's name. On the other hand, when we choose not to believe in what Jesus has revealed, we bring condemnation upon ourselves.

Just as Moses invited God to dwell among the stiff-necked people of Israel, we have to invite and allow God to live among and within us. We are called to live a life that is an outgrowth of our experience of God's love, a self-sacrificing love revealed by Jesus. Jesus models for us the love of God and is the way to God the Father. Jesus's role is to point us to the Father. The Spirit's role is to transform us day by day, building us, the Church, into the mystical Body of Christ.



Body and Blood of Christ

John 6:51–58

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel is best understood within the whole context of chapter six and within the larger context of the Jewish understanding of Passover. Chapter six begins with Jesus's feeding a crowd of five thousand from the humble gift of five barley loaves and two fish offered by a boy. In essence, this chapter states John's theology on the Eucharist, as John's Gospel does not contain a story of the Last Supper. In John's Gospel, it is the day following the feeding of the five thousand when Jesus meets up with the crowd again in Capernaum and declares that he is the bread that has come down from heaven. This Sunday's Gospel is a portion of that "homily."

John tells us that all these things happen near the time of the celebration of Passover, a central feast for the Jews, similar to the way Easter is central for Christians. For Jews, Passover not only celebrates passage out of Egypt and freedom from Egyptian slavery but also recalls reception of the Ten Commandments at Sinai and the manna in the desert. After the Israelites are freed from slavery, Yahweh continues to sustain his people through the Law and manna. God does not abandon the Jewish people in the desert. Jews understand that both the Law and manna are life giving.

In the synagogue during Passover, Jesus announces there is now new bread from heaven that is greater than the bread from heaven that sustained the Israelites in the desert: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (6:51). Jesus speaks of this new bread of heaven as being greater than the manna given by Yahweh—the great "I AM"—and he also claims to be the "I AM." It is not surprising that the next verse says the Jews "disputed among themselves" (6:52). It was only after Jesus's death on the cross, his Resurrection, and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost that his disciples fully understood what Jesus was saying. The cross was the instrument God used to reveal a new, never-failing source of nourishment given through broken flesh and spilled blood. In the celebration of the Eucharist, we encounter the flesh and blood of Jesus the Christ.

Tradition Connection

Through the Eucharist, Jesus makes present to us today the Paschal mystery, his death and Resurrection. Through the offering of the bread and wine, and through the words of consecration, these simple gifts from the earth become the body and blood of Jesus. At Passover, the Israelites ate unleavened bread, as they do today, as a reminder of the hasty departure that liberated them from Egypt; bread reminds us of the manna in the desert and the belief that Israel lives by the bread of the Word of God; daily bread for the Israelites was a sign of God's faithfulness to his promises. The wine, too, has a special meaning: the Passover meal ends with a "cup of blessing" representing the joy of the messianic expectation of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Jesus gave a new meaning to the blessing of the bread and the cup. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we give thanks to God for God's superabundant blessings. The sacrament helps us recall that all we have is this gift, including life itself.

Wisdom Connection

John tries to help his first-century community come to a fuller understanding of the nature of the Eucharist. This new bread from heaven, a gift from God the Father, is given to sustain the community as the manna had done in the past. However, there is a difference. This new bread, which is the body—the flesh—of Jesus, has the ability to give Jesus's followers eternal life. For Catholics, Jesus gave of himself totally on the cross and continues to give of himself in the Eucharist. Each time the Eucharist is celebrated, Jesus sustains and nurtures the assembly through the gift of his body and blood.



Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 1:29–34

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel continues with the theme from last Sunday: Jesus is the Son of God. John the Baptist proclaims that Jesus is the one sent by God who ranks above all the prophets: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me'" (1:29–30). The Gospel of John often uses an old symbol, such as the lamb, and attaches new meaning to it. For the Jews, the Passover lamb was an offering that saved the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. The ritual of offering a sacrificial lamb was a rite of communion and reconciliation. It established anew the Jewish covenantal union with God and among the people of Israel. John calls Jesus the Lamb. However, Jesus is not an offering but is God. Jesus transcends the victim of the lamb of the Old Testament. In the person of Jesus, God enters directly into the human story and offers true reconciliation through the forgiveness of sins.

John the Baptist validates Jesus's true identity further: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit'" (1:32–33). John is emphatic that Jesus is the one sent by God, clearly stating what God had revealed to him at Jesus's baptism: "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (1:34). John gives witness to Jesus's true identity and the reason for Jesus's baptism: "that [Jesus] might be revealed to Israel" (1:31). Through a life of prayer, John comes to understand that his mission is to reveal to Israel the Messiah, the Son of God. For John, the baptism of Jesus is a profound religious experience because God revealed God's self to him.

Tradition Connection

The *Catechism* tells us the prophets created an expectation for salvation, especially among poor people (see number 64.) The prophets kept alive the hope of God's promise—to send a Messiah into the world to restore the relationship with God that was lost through the sin of Adam. Throughout Israel's history, it was the poor and the humble that were able to envision the time of right relationship with God.

John the Baptist was the last of the great Old Testament prophets sent to point out to Israel the Messiah in the person of Jesus. John, as the immediate precursor of Jesus, is the one sent by God the Father to prepare the way.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, we read that John had already begun to proclaim Jesus's greatness before he was even born! In describing the Visitation, Luke tells us that when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, meets her cousin Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps, causing Elizabeth to ask, "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (Luke 1:41–44). Elizabeth's unborn child is John the Baptist.

In this Sunday's reading, it is in obedience to the Father's will revealed through Jesus that John accepts his God-given role and offers Jesus his baptism. Through this event, God chooses to fully reveal to John that Jesus is the anointed one. By calling Jesus the Lamb of God, John identifies him as the suffering Servant, described by the prophet Isaiah: an innocent who will give his life to redeem the many.

Wisdom Connection

God entrusts John the Baptist with the task of making Jesus known to Israel. In a very true sense, John the Baptist is the Advent prophet who, in expectant hope, is confident that God will reveal to him the chosen one—the long-awaited Messiah. John understands that his mission is not to accrue a following of disciples and receive honor because of his preaching, but simply to point others to Jesus. To do this, John has to be willing to see in every person who comes to him to be baptized the potential that that person could be the Christ, the anointed one of God.

The Christian community can learn two important lessons from John the Baptist in this account. First, we must be willing to see in each person we meet the special purpose God has for that individual in the redemptive work of Jesus—to see Christ in each person. Second, we must take seriously, as did John, our call from God to point others to Jesus.



Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 4:12–23

Context Connection

After his baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus goes into the wilderness of Judea, which is southwest of Jerusalem, for forty days and forty nights (see Matthew 4:1–11). It is here that Jesus becomes aware of John the Baptist’s arrest. Hearing this, Jesus goes back home to Galilee and makes Capernaum the center from which to carry out his ministry. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus begins his public ministry only after John has been arrested. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is already preaching before John is arrested. Matthew’s Gospel gives us the final account of John’s execution by Herod Antipas in chapter 14, verses 1–12. For Matthew, John’s arrest and execution foreshadow Jesus’s arrest and Crucifixion.

In verse 14 of this Sunday’s Gospel, Matthew gives us the reason why Jesus moves to Capernaum—to fulfill the words of Isaiah. That Jesus came to fulfill the hopes of Israel is a recurring theme in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is now positioned to begin his public ministry: “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (4:17).

During the time of Jesus, it was usually the disciple who sought out the teacher; however, Jesus reverses this and, from the outset of his public ministry, personally calls each of his disciples. In verses 18–22, Matthew recounts for us how Jesus calls Peter and his brother Andrew, the sons of Jonah, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, to follow him. We discover later in the Gospel that Peter, James, and John become part of the inner circle of disciples that Jesus comes to trust in most. These four men leave behind their families and their work as fishermen to follow Jesus. Matthew expresses their actions in this way: “Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him” (4:22). These four men were integrally connected to the great fishing industry in Galilee, which was very profitable. It would be wrong to assume they were just country bumpkins; rather, they were a part of an established family business. They owned their own boats as well as nets and other fishing equipment. Interestingly enough, Jesus does not ask them to lay aside their skills as fishermen but, rather, to use those skills and talents for promoting the Kingdom of heaven: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (4:19).

In the final verse of Sunday's reading, we are told what Jesus's public ministry will consist of: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (4:23).

Tradition Connection

In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus personally calls the Apostles to follow him. Does Jesus continue to do the same today? Yes! Through Baptism, Jesus personally calls each of us to a life of holiness and Christian witness. This activity of Jesus in our life is called grace. God is the one who initiates the personal call to each of us through the Holy Spirit, and in response to that grace, we turn toward God, accepting forgiveness (see CCC, number 1989).

The first Apostles come to understand that they are called to a special relationship with Jesus, which results in a unique co-ministry with Jesus, as ministers of a new covenant (see 2 Corinthians 3:6), servants of God (see 2 Corinthians 6:4), and ambassadors for Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:20). Today Jesus continues to invite and help us to understand how we are being called to live out our Christian vocation, which began at Baptism, as ambassadors of Christ to the world.

Wisdom Connection

From the beginning of his public life, Jesus preaches a message of reform: repent and change one's life in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of heaven. Throughout this year, Matthew's Gospel will provide insights on how to bring about this kind of change in our lives. Jesus's call for change can be as dramatic today as it was for the first disciples. Peter and Andrew leave their nets, their means of livelihood, to follow Jesus. When James and John are called to follow Jesus, they leave their boat, a symbol of possessions, and their father, a symbol of security.

For Matthew, it is important to know not only what one is turning away from but also what one is turning toward. For Jesus, it is not good enough to simply turn away from sin. We must also turn toward God with 100 percent of our heart and soul. God asks us to be who we are, fully and authentically, thus serving as credible witnesses of God in the world.



Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5:1–12a

Context Connection

In this Sunday's Gospel, we have the account of Jesus's teaching the Beatitudes to the crowd. Because the Beatitudes are so familiar, sometimes we have a tendency to read this passage quickly and not reflect fully on the significance of Jesus's words.

Jesus proclaims the Beatitudes to the crowd, who represents everyone: Jesus's message is intended for more than just his small band of disciples. This passage is often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount because "[Jesus] went up the mountain" (5:1). In the Scriptures, the mountain is frequently depicted as a privileged place for God's Revelation. Matthew wants his readers to recognize that Jesus is the new Moses. Just as Moses brought the Ten Commandments down with him from the mountain of God, Jesus proclaims from the mountain the cornerstone commands of the New Testament. God's word comes directly to us from Jesus and not through a mediator, as with Moses. Jesus sits down with the crowd gathered around him on the ground; sitting was the position of all great teachers in the time of Jesus.

The literary structure of the Beatitudes is familiar to Jesus and can be found in the Book of Psalms. See the following Psalms: 1:1, 32:1–2, 41:1, 65:4, 84:4–5, 106:3, 112:1, and 128:1. Notice that the author of the Psalms uses the word *happy* rather than *blessed*. Sometimes these words are used interchangeably in the Bible. Matthew adds to this literary form by referring to a future time for its fulfillment—at the coming of the Kingdom of heaven.

A reference for each of the Beatitudes can be found in the Old Testament. Therefore the Beatitudes become a fulfillment of the Old Testament. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (5:3) and "Blessed are those who mourn" (5:4) can be found in Isaiah 61:1–3. "Blessed are the meek" (5:5) connects with Psalm 37:11. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5:6) has a corollary to Psalm 107:5,8–9. "Blessed are the merciful" (5:7) has its background in Proverbs 14:21 and 17:5. "Blessed are the pure in heart" (5:8) is grounded in Psalm 24:3–4. "Blessed are the peacemakers" (5:9) is rooted in the whole Old Testament concept of shalom. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (5:10) relates back to Psalm 107:5,8–9.

Tradition Connection

The Beatitudes form the foundation of the teaching of Jesus and are proclaimed as the way of redemption for all people. Matthew presents this early on in his Gospel in order to build upon the significance of the Beatitudes, which are at the heart of Jesus's preaching. The Beatitudes fulfill the promises made to Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants (see CCC, number 1716). At the core of the Beatitudes is Jesus's response to the deep human desire for happiness, a longing placed in our hearts by God, who is the only one who can fulfill it. (Jesus, in his teaching, continuously provides for us the understanding of true happiness that is gained only when one depends completely on God.) As our Creator, God has always wanted us to be happy. Through the Beatitudes, Jesus gives us advice about how to reach that goal in our lives. The Beatitudes are a way of life, or a vocation, that brings those who live in this way into the Kingdom of heaven.

Wisdom Connection

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, which are an announcement of a new order. In this new construct, God's love and justice are victorious over evil. Jesus wants his followers to know that God will make his presence known, and if they are Beatitude people, they will be Kingdom people. The Kingdom of God is coming to those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who have a hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful, those who are pure in heart, those who are peacemakers, and those who are persecuted because of Jesus's perspective of justice.

The second reading for this Sunday, from Zephaniah (2:3, 3:12–13), summarizes what Jesus is asking of his followers, then and now: to seek righteousness and humility. In the Beatitudes, Jesus explains concretely what it means to be righteous and humble. Matthew tells us that when God is at the center of our lives, happiness can come to anyone—even the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed. In the Kingdom of God, the characteristics that are held up as blessed are meekness, mourning, righteousness, showing mercy, and suffering in pursuit of justice.

As North Americans, we expect that happiness belongs to those who are successful in life. We often look for security in economic and social status, in a comfortable bank account, and in having the “right” friends. The Beatitudes are countercultural, for it is in what is weak and despised that redemption comes forth.



Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5:13–16

Context Connection

Two weeks ago, the Gospel reflection focused on the calling of the first disciples. Last week, Matthew presented us with the Beatitudes, which are the new commands for the disciples of Jesus. In this Sunday's passage, Matthew presents the demands of being a disciple of Jesus by comparing discipleship to salt and light. Matthew highlights the functions of salt and light. Salt gives food a pleasant taste, and light enables one to see clearly. Salt is used to add flavor, to clean or purify, and to preserve. Light has the ability to illuminate the pathway and helps us see the true colors in life.

The disciples' mission is not just to be salt and light for their families and neighbors but for the whole world. The Scriptures say we are to be "salt of the earth" (5:13) and "light of the world" (5:14). Matthew points out that it is God's grace dwelling in us that makes it possible for us to be salt and light for the world. As disciples, we are called to bring flavor into the lives of everyone we meet and to be a light that leads others to Jesus. In the Old Testament, Isaiah proclaims that Israel's vocation is to be "a light to the nations" (42:6, 49:6). Jesus affirms this vocation for the Christian disciple as well: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:16). Jesus has in mind good works such as feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, clothing the naked, providing for widows and orphans, visiting those in jail, comforting the sick, and consoling those who mourn. The object of doing good works is not to draw attention to ourselves but that through these works, people may come to praise God.

When we talk about someone being the salt of the earth, we acknowledge that he or she is solidly a good person. They know how to do the right thing. Their "saltiness" gives vitality to all the lives they touch. They are a light, or a witness, to others. This is the kind of disciple Jesus describes in the passage for this Sunday's Gospel.

Tradition Connection

Because of our Baptism, we are asked to live in a way that, through our actions, others are attracted to Jesus. In Baptism, Christ's disciples have clothed themselves

with a new self, “created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24).

In our Baptism, we receive a white garment symbolizing that we have put on Christ and, in doing so, have made a commitment to live in a way that is congruent with the Gospel. At Baptism, we receive a candle that is lit from the Easter candle to signify that the light of Christ has enlightened us, that we are the light of the world. Through Baptism, we become a part of the People of God.

The mission of the People of God, through their Baptism, is to be salt of the earth and light of the world, a source of hope, and salvation for all of humanity (see CCC, number 782): “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (5:14–15). By our Baptism, we are to give witness to the light of Christ that dwells within us by the good works we do. We often refer to these good works as works of mercy. Through these good works, we meet our neighbors’ spiritual and bodily needs (see CCC, number 2447). This kind of charity, extended to everyone, is the hallmark of a disciple of Jesus.

Wisdom Connection

Matthew wants the members of his community to be consciously aware of their roles as disciples of Jesus. A disciple of Jesus is called beyond simply expressing Jesus as Lord and Savior to putting that profession of faith into action. In comparing Jesus’s followers to salt, Matthew is saying that a disciple of Jesus needs to improve the quality of human existence and preserve it from destruction. In addition, Matthew challenges his community members to let their lights shine as a witness to their fidelity to Jesus in a time when one could be persecuted for the outward expression of faith.

Another property of salt is that it can be a catalyst in regard to fire. It makes the fire burn more brightly, thus giving off more light. In using this metaphor, we gain a new insight into discipleship. As catalysts, the disciples of Jesus are to give off light through their lifestyle—showing others the way to Jesus.

Jesus, as the salt of the earth, created light for others in darkness. This light gave sight to some, enabling them to understand who Jesus truly was—the Son of God. Others, experiencing this same light, got burned, and responded by putting him to death.

How do we respond to the light of Christ? How do we imitate Jesus, the salt of the earth, in our lives today?



Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5:17–37

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel is taken from the fifth chapter of Matthew, which opens with the Beatitudes. According to Jesus, those who will be called blessed are those who follow his teachings. The additional information we are given this Sunday is that Jesus did not come to abolish the Torah: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (5:17). Jesus stresses that there is continuity between the Torah and what he is teaching, therefore the commandments of the Torah are still in force. The reason for Jesus's coming into the world was to reveal the true meaning of the Old Testament, expanding on what Moses and the prophets had wished to say. Jesus is an observant Jew who is devoted to keeping the Law. As the Gospel unfolds, we learn that Jesus does not replace the Law, nor does he break the Law, but rather he brings it to its fulfillment, to its maturity, to its intended purpose. This is further emphasized by these words of Jesus: "Until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (5:18). There is no need to change even one iota of the Law, but Jesus does challenge the practice of the Law.

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). Jesus's followers would have to set their standards of righteousness or holiness higher than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Righteousness in the context of Matthew's Gospel speaks about proper and honorable relationships with other people and God. Jesus calls his followers to a more stringent observance of the law. He requires the rooting out of anger and lust in our lives, to actively make peace with those who have harmed us. These are Jesus's standards for holiness. In each instance, Jesus declares that the former understanding of the Law is inadequate, and he gives his followers a more stringent command.

Tradition Connection

The Catholic Church holds the Ten Commandments as foundations of a moral life in Jesus Christ. The Commandments assist Christians in their relationships with God and others. However, every believer is challenged to build upon this foundation a Christian life that implements Jesus's more stringent demands of a disciple.

The Ten Commandments express humankind's fundamental duties toward God and toward our neighbor. The Ten Commandments are engraved by God in the human heart (see CCC, number 2072).

Jesus came to fulfill the Torah and, through his teachings, create within human beings hearts of flesh that would embrace the ongoing conversion that makes steadfast the virtues of faith, hope, and love in all believers. The Gospel of Jesus Christ brings the Law to fulfillment, because it places before the Christian the goal to imitate God in God's wholeness of love.

In chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel, we learn that the Law finds fulfillment in Jesus's Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are the way of the Kingdom of heaven. In embracing the faith of Jesus Christ, the believer is open to deepen and broaden his or her understanding of the Commandments of God that are found in the Torah.

Wisdom Connection

Matthew is making it clear that the Torah remains in force in Matthew's community. Jesus does not replace it or destroy it, but rather he comes to fulfill it by taking it to the next step of observance in the religious practice of his followers. If one does not follow the commands of the Torah, there is a harsh consequence. "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (5:19). Jesus calls his followers to a higher standard of holiness. The Ten Commandments are the foundation of this righteousness, but Jesus gives it a new twist. The Christian is not to commit adultery but also should not hold lust in his or her heart. The Christian should not kill but also should not harbor hatred or anger in his or her heart.



The Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5:38–48

Context Connection

In this Sunday's Gospel, Matthew speaks of righteousness as being a proper and honorable relationship with other people and God. The focus is on retaliation and love of one's enemies. In the Torah, in several places, it is written that retaliation is permitted (see Exodus 21:23–24, Leviticus 24:19–20, and Deuteronomy 19:21). Jewish society places limits on retaliation, in an attempt to civilize the previous practice of individuals or a tribe determining what is appropriate when someone is treated unjustly. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'" (5:38). Jesus sees the present practice as insufficient, as it often leads to an escalating cycle of vengeance.

What Jesus presents is a strategy to break the cycles of violence: "But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer" (5:39). This is Jesus's instruction to his disciples on how to confront evil. "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (5:39). At the time of Jesus, striking another person with your hand is a way to insult them or to humiliate them. It usually is administered with the back of the right hand to the left cheek of the other person. To turn the other cheek is a way of robbing the aggressor of the power of humiliating and shaming the other person. Likewise, the other examples Jesus gives show how nonretaliation can break the cycles of violence in confrontation. Jesus shows his followers what the fulfillment of the Law looks like.

Jesus finally declares that to follow him means to love your enemy. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:43–44). Jesus makes it explicit that his disciples are to treat everyone the same, whether they are in the covenant community or not. Because God equally loves and cares for all people, that is the standard for the love Jesus models. Disciples of Jesus are called to love as God loves. In this case, love is not an emotion or feeling but rather a command that is reflected in deeds that are faithful to the covenant—praying for persecutors, welcoming the outsider. Loving only one's relatives or fellow country folk does not adequately fulfill the Law. In other words, there must be no limits to our love, to the goodness we do for others, because God's love has no bounds. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). Perfect in this setting

connotes not so much moral perfection as completeness or maturity. The process is gradual, allowing the spirit of God to perfect us.

Tradition Connection

According to the Vatican Council II documents, the Church, the People of God, is called to holiness. Holiness is no longer something that is relegated to priests and religious men and women but is understood as being a part of every Christian's vocation. Because the Church is a community of human beings on a spiritual pilgrimage, holiness is something to strive for. Perfect holiness may not be obtained here on earth, but it needs to be the goal to which we direct our energies.

A Christian vocation continuously works for integrating into itself perfect charity or love. Through this kind of awareness, disciples of Jesus Christ can more easily understand the Gospel message to love with God's love. This perfect love, which is Jesus's commandment to love your neighbor, does not have limits. We are commanded to love every human being because of the dignity they possess as people created by God in God's image and likeness. That includes even those who are very different from us.

Wisdom Connection

Matthew continues to give examples of how Jesus fulfilled the Torah and that the community was to live this way of fulfillment of the Law. Jesus continues to call his followers to a higher standard of holiness. There is another way, instead of violence, to actively confront injustice in the world. How can an individual create a provocative act that challenges a violent act that opens the opportunity for gestures of reconciliation? Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi are examples of individuals who broke the cycle of violence by creating situations to change the unjust actions of those who oppressed others. Jesus presents the ultimate challenge to his believers: We are called to love with God's love, thus abandoning our human perspective that would seem to prefer vengeance rather than nonviolence when injustice occurs.



Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 6:24–34

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel proposes a no-win situation: "No one can serve two masters" (6:24). At the time of Jesus, there may have been a situation when a father willed a slave to two of his sons. It would have created an impossible situation for the slave. How was he to equitably serve two different families? Jesus acknowledges this dilemma: "For a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other" (6:24). According to Jesus's wisdom, it is impossible to serve two masters. Then Jesus compares serving God and wealth as the same kind of dilemma: "You cannot serve God and wealth" (6:24). In the following verses, Jesus offers the believer freedom from the slavery of wealth that has its accompanying worries. When freed from the worry that comes with wealth, an individual is free to love completely, to have a grateful heart exclusively directed to God, and to devote time to values that are long lasting, the values of the Kingdom of heaven.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink" (6:25), for life is more than these things. Jesus asks his audience to consider the birds of the air and the flowers of the field and how God cares for them completely. Are not human beings in God's eye far more important than these and will God not care for you? Does worry accomplish anything? "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (6:27). Gentiles (unbelievers) preoccupy themselves by worrying about such things as what they will wear or what they will eat. Believers trust in God. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (6:33). God will never abandon you. With faith firmly rooted in God and the providence of God, the believer can be about being present in the now. Matthew ends chapter six with this wisdom for us: "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (6:34).

Tradition Connection

Only God the Father knows how to sustain creation, for it was fashioned out of the love of God. Isaiah tells us that God can never forget, for God has carved our name in the palm of his hand (see Isaiah 49:16). God will never abandon the creation created in love but will give existence and meaning to all things.

Jesus assures us that if we believe in the providence of God the Father, we have no reason to be anxious in this world. God the Father knows what is good for us and wants us to be well cared for. For Jesus, the best way is to first seek the Kingdom of heaven; then all other matters will follow.

Anxiety is neither helpful nor necessary. It robs us of faith and confidence in God's help, and it saps our energy for doing good. Jesus admonishes his followers to put away anxiety and preoccupation with material things and instead seek first the things of God—God's Kingdom and righteousness. Anxiety robs the heart of trust in the mercy and goodness of God and in God's loving care for us. God knows our needs even before we ask, and God gives generously to those who trust in him.

God's love embraces everyone, even those who have rejected God and decided to serve wealth. Jesus re-extends the invitation to everyone to be poor in spirit so they can inherit the Kingdom of heaven. Trust in God is the consolation for those who have chosen to serve God (see CCC, number 2547).

Wisdom Connection

For Matthew, the disciple of Jesus could achieve authentic righteousness only through a heart that has the correct priorities and that is exclusively directed toward God. There is no room to serve two masters, God and wealth. At some time, the individual will have to choose. Matthew sees the option of choosing God to be the only way to have true freedom. By choosing wealth, an individual may have many things and many worries that accompany it. Trusting in God completely is the way of freedom. God the Father in heaven knows all that we need, and God will provide. In the Lord's Prayer, we say: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread." In this prayer, we acknowledge our dependence on God.



Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 7:21–27

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel concludes a section in the Gospel of Matthew that pulls together the teachings of Jesus that are instructions on how to live a Christian life. It begins in chapter five with the Beatitudes, moves on in chapter six to how to pray by using the Lord's Prayer, and concludes in chapter seven with Jesus's pointing out that his followers have to choose the narrower, more challenging way. Matthew is expanding on the wisdom of the Book of Deuteronomy, which says, "Assemble the people—so that they may hear and learn the fear of the Lord your God and to observe diligently all the words of his law" (31:12). It is Matthew's hope that believers will come to understand that obeying Jesus's teachings involves listening intently and then earnestly putting that teaching into practice so one observes not only the letter of the law but also the spirit of the law. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (7:21). It is not enough to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. It is doing God's will, not just honoring God with words or reciting titles, that brings entry into the Kingdom. "But only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (7:21) will enter the Kingdom of heaven.

The focus is on the relationship between the teaching and putting the teaching into action. The firm foundation that is spoken about in verse 24 includes both the word and deeds. Jesus's followers are challenged to listen and hear his words and understand their meaning and then do what these teachings say. To do this is to build one's house on rock, on a strong foundation: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock" (7:24). The reward of putting Jesus's teachings into action is being welcomed into the Kingdom. Those who do not put his teachings into action will be sent away; in fact, Jesus will not even recognize them: "Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me'" (7:23).

Tradition Connection

The Law of the Old Testament, which was imperfect, was the precursor of the Law of the Gospel of Jesus Christ but a necessary preparation for the reception of the teachings of Jesus. Christian understanding of Law and God's Commandments builds on the Jewish understanding of Law, improving and perfecting it.

The work of Jesus Christ perfected the Law of the Old Testament, making it a covenant of love. Jesus instructed his followers to take the Law of the New Covenant to heart and internalize its commands so that it would become integrated and thus part of the action of Christians. Jesus desired that his followers would have hearts of flesh, not stone, where his new Commandments could be transformed from words only into loving acts of charity for all humankind.

The Christian finds new hope in the Law perfected in the New Testament, for it fulfills all the divine promises that have been revealed throughout history. The Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount are one of the best examples of this perfecting of the old Law.

Wisdom Connection

Matthew is preparing his community for the challenges that would face the Christian community from within and from without. This includes helping new Christians understand that more is expected of them than the mere observance of the letter of the Law. Rather, Jesus demands that they also observe the spirit of the Law and put it into action. Second, there is a time coming when forces from outside the Christian community will challenge their faith to its foundations. Matthew is anticipating the Roman persecution. The advice to survive the coming persecution is to have a faith life whose foundation is built on the rock of Jesus the Christ. No matter what happens, if their faith is firmly founded in the teachings and actions of Jesus, they will continue to persevere.

What is our faith today built on—the solid foundation of the teachings and actions of Jesus? Or is it built on the sandy soil of the most recent spiritual fad that is featured this month at the local bookstore? What will be our strong foundation in the times of struggle in our own lives?



Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 9:9–13

Context Connection

In this Sunday's Gospel story, Jesus calls Matthew, a tax collector, to be one of his disciples. The selection of Matthew as a disciple causes scandal among the Pharisees. They accuse Jesus of associating with public sinners and of disregarding societal norms that separate the social classes. Jesus encounters Matthew at his post, where he is collecting taxes on the goods that are being transported through the region of Galilee. The goods most likely consist of salted fish that is being sent to other areas to be sold. The system Rome established for collecting taxes was to contract with a local person to collect the tax, or toll. The tax collector would pay a Roman official up front for a set amount of tax for the year. Then the tax collector would earn the money back by collecting a tax as merchants passed through the area. Most tax collectors were probably fair and honest men just making a living. However, in the Gospels, the Pharisees often accused the tax collectors of overcharging in order to become rich. Tax collectors were considered traitors who were working for the Romans, who had invaded Palestine and now suppressed the Jewish people.

In Matthew's account, this particular tax collector is named Matthew. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, he is called Levi, the son of Alphaeus. Some scholars say the man in the story had two names—Levi and Matthew; others speculate that the writer is playing on the Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, because discipleship is a major theme in the Gospel of Matthew.

In this Sunday's Gospel, when Jesus calls Matthew to come and follow him, Matthew immediately stands up and follows Jesus. Then, along with other tax collectors and sinners, Matthew joins Jesus and the disciples for a meal. The Pharisees challenge Jesus for associating with sinners, which makes him unclean and not able to participate in Jewish rituals. Jesus responds, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (9:12). With this statement, Jesus defines part of his mission and the mission of those who follow him. Then Jesus clarifies for his listeners the meaning of his mission: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (9:13). The virtue of mercy that Jesus lives is modeled on God's mercy and is the distinguishing trait of those who follow him.

Tradition Connection

Throughout his public life, Jesus gives witness to God's mercy by forgiving sins and restoring sinners to the community. He invites sinners to eat with him as a sign of fellowship. It is an invitation to conversion—to know God more deeply and profess faith in God through prayer and deed. Jesus exemplifies, in action and word, the boundless mercy of God. Jesus's actions cause much criticism from various groups within the Jewish community. His actions are sometimes labeled as scandalous because they go against the social norms of the culture. The Gospel message is often countercultural, but, as followers of Jesus, we must be true to our baptismal call to reject sin and be the light of Christ in the world (see CCC, number 589).

The Church teaches that through our Baptism, we receive the grace of the Holy Spirit, who has the power to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate God's grace to us. Because Jesus died and rose from the dead for us, we are able to turn back toward God and away from sin. Each time we accept God's forgiveness, we are sanctified (made holy again) and renewed.

Wisdom Connection

From this Sunday's Gospel, we learn that Matthew's community emphasizes the importance of mercy in the life of Jesus's followers. Matthew's community understands God's mercy and models it in their communal life. This understanding makes the community a place where all are welcome, regardless of their past, and where everyone gathers in fellowship around the Eucharistic table. In ancient Israel, those who were sick were always separated from the community until their health returned. Jesus's healing ministry was about restoring individuals back to the community. In Jesus's response to the Pharisee as to why he dines with sinners, there seem to be three points Jesus wants the Christian community to understand. First, the spiritually sick are the ones who need Jesus most. Second, the community is now called to witness God's great mercy. Third, Jesus came to call sinners to conversion of heart, and his disciples are called to continue this mission. These understandings hold true for those who follow Jesus today.



Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 9:36—10:8

Context Connection

This Sunday's Gospel speaks of Jesus's sharing his mission with the Apostles and the need for this work to continue. Matthew's Gospel specifically addresses Jesus's mission to the Jewish people: "When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). Throughout the Old Testament, the Jewish people are often referred to as being like a flock of sheep. Jesus comments on the state of health of the flock of his day: "They were harassed and helpless" (9:36). Because the needs of the lost sheep are so great, Jesus prepares the disciples to understand that God's plan to restore the health of Israel includes them: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (9:37). The Lord of the harvest is God, and God is in need of collaborators. Jesus equips the disciples to do God's work by sharing his authority with them: "Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness" (10:1). Jesus commissions the Twelve to do the same work he has been doing—healing the physical and spiritual illnesses of the Jewish people. Matthew lists the names of the Apostles, grouping them in six sets of two each. (These are also listed in Mark 3:16–19, Luke 6:14–16, and the Acts of the Apostles 1:13.) The focus for the missionary work of the Apostles at this particular time in Jesus's ministry is the Jews. However, in Jesus's final commission of the disciples after his Resurrection, he expands that mission beyond Israel to include Samaria and even the ends of the earth: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19).

Jesus's instructions to the disciples are clear: "Proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (10:7–8). God freely gives them the authority to do these things, and they are to freely share these gifts with others. This leaves the disciples totally dependent on God rather than dependent on others to repay them.

Tradition Connection

Jesus calls the Apostles to help him in his missionary outreach—to invite everyone into the Kingdom of God. The baptized are called to extend this same invitation