

THE LITURGICAL YEAR

Cycle A – The Gospel of Matthew

The Liturgical Year

The Liturgical Year is the way Mother Church places before us the main events and teachings in the life of Jesus. When we remember the events and stories in the life of Jesus, we make them as real to us as they were to those who first experienced them. We bring past events into the now. Thus, the Liturgical Year is not an historical look at past events, but the way that our Church invites us to enter and experience Christ who continues to be present and active in the events of our lives in the here and now.

Cycle A –The Gospel of Matthew

Our liturgical calendar has three cycles: A, B, and C. A new cycle of readings begins each Advent. This year, we will be listening mainly to the Gospel according to Matthew. During the seven Sundays of the Easter season, we will be hearing the Good News according to John.

Each author of the four Gospels had a particular audience in mind, one with its own challenges and problems. Matthew's primary audience were fellow Jews who had become Christians. Also, after 70 A.D., when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, Jewish Christians were expelled from the synagogue and treated as enemies of the Jewish God. This was a source of huge suffering for Jews who continued to love their Jewish roots after they accepted Jesus as the Messiah. One of Matthew's objectives was to show that all or nearly all of the prophecies in the Old Testament were fulfilled in Jesus; hence, he must be seen and recognized as the Messiah. One recurring line that we find in Matthew's Gospel is: *"This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet."*

A second characteristic of Matthew's Gospel is its teaching style. We especially notice this aspect in his Gospel on the Sermon on the Mount (chps. 5, 6 & 7) in which Jesus is presented as the New Moses. Like Moses, he goes up on a mount where he presents the new law to his followers.

Thirdly, Matthew's writings are quintessentially the *Gospel of the Church*. Only Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as founding a church (16:13-23). Only Matthew speaks of disputes being settled by the church.

The Advent Season

We begin the Church's "Year of Grace" with the season of Advent, a time when the Church focuses first on the Lord's coming at the end of time, and then on his coming in history through his miraculous birth through the Virgin Mary. That mysterious birth unfolds during the Christmas season revealing its meaning for our salvation over the course of a series of feasts that include the Holy Family, Mary, Mother of God, Epiphany, and Baptism of the Lord. Each Sunday of Advent/Christmas, and each text on any given Sunday, is a doorway into the world of God's unbounded love revealed in the Word-made-flesh and remains present throughout all of history each and every time the Church proclaims, "The Word of the Lord!"

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God of history, present, past and future, be with us as we begin our Advent journey in this new liturgical year. Make us aware of your presence in one another and in all creation. Prepare us to celebrate your birth and to anticipate your coming at the end of time. Protect us from deeds of darkness and shed your light upon us. Help us to be spiritually awake to your comings in the events and encounters of daily life. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: This weekend we begin a new Liturgical Year with the Advent/Christmas season. Four weeks of *Advent* prepare us to celebrate the First Coming of Jesus in Bethlehem. But they also urge us to be ready for his Second Coming and for his comings into our daily lives. During the *Twelve Days of Christmas*, we celebrate the manifestation of Jesus to the Jewish and Gentile world.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 2:1-5

Isaiah lives at a time when Israel is divided into two kingdoms—both of which are being threatened by the powerful Assyrians.

Isaiah is a prophet in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. During his ministry, when there prevail either wars or rumors of war, the people and the Kings fail to listen to and follow the ways of God. But Isaiah seeks to rise above the gloom and doom, looking forward to a much brighter future when his people will listen to and follow God's word. Peace will reign in the land—not only that, but other nations will be drawn to Jerusalem and they too will realize that God's ways are the best ways. For all this to happen, the nation must change its ways.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 122

In this song of joy and praise, the pilgrim proclaims the centrality of Jerusalem in Israel's life.

SECOND READING: Romans 13:11-14

We detect a note of urgency here, as with Jesus in today's Gospel. Even though Paul is writing to a Christian community which has accepted Christ, their total conversion to his ways is far from complete. Hence, he urges them to "throw off deeds

of darkness"—naming six such deeds—and to put on "the armor of light."

During this season of Advent, the Church urges us to do the same. We too must look into our hearts and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, name those things in our lives that are preventing us from wholeheartedly committing to Jesus.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matthew 24:37-44

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 24:37-44

Jesus instructs his disciples on the importance of readiness for his *Second Coming*. To drive home his lesson, Jesus draws on what happened to the people who did not prepare for the Great Flood.

They knew it was coming but they were so consumed with the affairs of everyday life that they failed to prepare. One exception was Noah who did get ready and was saved.

Like Noah we, as followers of Jesus, should be prepared for his Second Coming. The reference to the “two men” and “two women” is one of contrast. Externally, they seem alike, but internally, one is prepared for God’s coming and the other is not. The clear message in this Gospel is: “Be ready!”

By selecting this reading for the first Sunday of Advent, the Church urges us to live our lives in *readiness* for the Lord’s coming at the end of time, whether that *end time* is the culminating event of our individual lives or of all of human history.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Sadly, ‘weapons of war’ are now being used on a regular basis in our nation to kill many innocent people. On this controversial subject, do you think it is time for our government to do whatever it takes to make sure no ordinary citizen can have access to weapons of war?
3. In the second reading, Paul names six “works of darkness.” Can you name one or two works of darkness that you sometimes, if not often, have to battle? What ‘armor of light’ helps you to fight the spiritual darkness?
4. What can cause you to miss God’s comings in daily life? What can help you to be alert to his comings?
5. Can you name a recent coming of God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit in the events and encounters of your daily life?
6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to*

Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: “*Jesus, help me to grow in vigilance for your presence in the events and encounters of our daily lives.*”

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestions: Get rid of all ‘weapons of war’ that hinder you from getting closer to Jesus and his ways e.g., jealousy, negative words and deeds. Fight with prayer—maybe with fasting and your own determination—one work of darkness that is operative in your life. Decide on one way you are going to include the poor in your Christmas budget.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray for all those for whom this season of preparing for Christ’s coming is a difficult one: those grieving the loss of a loved one; those in pain or sick and have difficulty finding joy; those who are marginalized or impoverished in any way.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Father in heaven,
our hearts desire the warmth of your love
and our minds are searching for the light
of your Word.
Increase our longing for Christ our Savior
and give us the strength to grow in love,
that the dawn of his coming
may find us rejoicing in his presence
and welcoming the light of his truth.
We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.
Amen.*

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Come, Emmanuel, to us and to our world. Where there is hatred and division, bring your peace and harmony. Where there is discouragement, bring your hope. Where there is deception and falsehood, bring your truth. Come open our hearts to your Spirit. Prepare our hearts and all the people of the world for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, who is peace. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: As the season unfolds, there is a shift in focus from the Second Coming of the Lord to his historical birth. Today's first reading blends the two, but reflects a growing emphasis on the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah's disillusionment with the kings of his own time leads him to dream about an ideal king who will rule the people with the mind and heart of God. In the Gospel, John the Baptist is preparing the people for the coming of the ideal or messianic King. In the second reading, Paul tells his readers that Christ is the fulfillment of God's promise to the Israelites.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 11:1-10

Disillusioned with King Ahaz, a contemporary of Isaiah, the prophet assures his people that God will raise up a faithful King who will rule his people with the mind and heart of God. This new King will come from the 'stump of Jesse' (David's father). 'Stump' implies that the house of Jesse and his descendants have been cut down and the monarchy defeated. But appearances are deceptive, for out of this seemingly defeated stump will sprout a shoot—a new plant upon which the Spirit of the Lord will rest. Even though Isaiah, most likely, has in mind the yet-to-be born King Hezekiah who will reign close to his time, Christians see Christ as the ideal King spoken of by Isaiah.

There are several divine gifts that will be bestowed on the future King to enable him to rule in a way that is pleasing to God. (We learn about these 'Isaian gifts' of the Spirit when preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation.)

Isaiah dreams or imagines a time when a wonderful peace will reign in the land of Israel. Enemies will live in harmony with each other. The King, springing from the stump of Jesse, will be so divinely inspired that even the Gentiles will seek him out.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 72

In this royal psalm, the psalmist asks God to bless the King, especially with justice so that he in turn can

bless his people and help them to experience justice and peace in their lives.

SECOND READING: Romans 15:4-9

Paul is writing to a community comprising both Jewish and Gentile Christians, with very dedicated followers of Christ and some not so dedicated. Paul strongly exhorts all members of the Roman Christian community to be patient with each other and to live together in "perfect harmony," accepting each other as Christ accepts them. Their unity and mutual respect glorify God.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matthew 3:1-12

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 3:1-12

Each year on the second Sunday of Advent, we meet John the Baptist out in the desert where he is preparing large crowds for the coming of Jesus. His

message is a call to repentance. The “repentance” John calls for does not concern attention to the externals of one’s religion, but rather a total change of mind and heart which would manifest itself in “good fruits” like prayerfulness and justice in one’s relationships with others. Such a change of heart and behavior would prepare people to welcome the Messiah and his message.

John shows little patience for the insincere Pharisees who step forward for his baptism. In his eyes, they do not manifest the “true fruits of repentance.” They are just going through the motions of conversion, perhaps to look good in the eyes of people who are so drawn to John’s message.

It would seem that when Matthew was writing his Gospel to a largely Jewish audience about 50 years after Jesus’ death, there may have been some competition between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus. Matthew wants to make it very clear that true disciples of John should also be disciples of Jesus, since John himself was a disciple of Jesus and regarded his ministry as inferior to that of Jesus.

Finally, references to ‘winnowing fan,’ ‘fire,’ and ‘ax’ speak of a coming judgment when the truly converted will be separated from the unconverted. We too are called to repent as a way of preparing our hearts for the coming of the Lord.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Both Isaiah and Paul dreamed of a world in which people lived in harmony with each other. What are some common ‘peace-breakers’ in homes and parish communities? What are some concrete things we can do to replace walls with bridges?
3. John the Baptist roundly condemns the Pharisees and Sadducees for their empty show of religion. What are some common ways we can falsely practice our faith?
4. John the Baptist tells us to “produce good fruit as evidence of repentance.” What are some concrete signs or fruits of life converted to Christ?

5. The fire of the Holy Spirit is the fire of God’s love. Discuss how this might change your understanding of the fire in this gospel.

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *“Jesus, as I continue to prepare to celebrate your coming into our world, help me see one thing that is stopping me from a more complete commitment to you.”*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestions: If there is some relationship in your life that needs to be restored to peace, make *sure* you are doing your bit to restore the peace. Name and practice one good fruit that shows you are working on ongoing conversion in your life.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray for those producing bad fruit, that God’s grace will heal them.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Father in heaven,
our hearts desire the warmth of your love
and our minds are searching for the light
of your Word.*

*Increase our longing for Christ our Savior
and give us the strength to grow in love,
that the dawn of his coming
may find us rejoicing in his presence
and welcoming the light of his truth.*

*We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.
Amen.*

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God of our Lord Jesus Christ, creation rejoices in the hope of the Savior's coming and looks forward with longing to his return at the end of time. Prepare our hearts for our Lord's coming and remove all the things that hinder us from feeling the joy and hope which his presence will bestow. Be with us now, Lord, as we gather to share our lives and your holy Word. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, Isaiah offers hope to the weak and frightened Israelites living in exile. In the second reading, James also offers hope to people awaiting the Second Coming of the Lord. In the Gospel, the imprisoned John the Baptist is confused about the identity of Jesus.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

The people of Israel are in exile because of their infidelity to their covenant with God. But God's prophet announces the good news that their time of exile is about to end. God is coming to *liberate* his broken-hearted people.

Just as Moses led their ancestors through the desert to the Promised Land, God will lead his people through the desert and back to the Promised Land. But this journey through the desert will not be rigorous and difficult like their first journey. Their way will be eased by the gracious hand of God. Nature will be transformed. Oases will spring up to refresh them and where once brambles and thorns had made travel difficult, now flowers and beautiful foliage will decorate their path. During their journey, the frightened will become bold, the feeble will gain strength, and the blind, the lame, and the deaf will experience liberation.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 146

This psalm expresses God's concern for the disenfranchised and poor.

SECOND READING: James 5:7-10

James counsels the Christian community to practice patience. (People are becoming impatient because Jesus' return or Second Coming is being delayed and because of conflicts in the community.) James

uses the image of a farmer to make his point. Just as a farmer is subject to the elements of nature and must cooperate with them, so must the Christian practice patience with God's timing and ways. James also urges his readers to take as models the prophets who suffered much as they spoke the Word of God.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matthew 11:2-11

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 11:2-11

Last week, we encountered John out in the desert; today, we meet him in prison (which must have been an awful experience for a man who loves the wilderness). He is in jail because he told Herod that it is wrong for him to marry his brother's wife.

The Gospel has two parts: the first speaks about John's faith crisis, and the second about his role in the plan of salvation, as established by Jesus.

It would seem that John's followers have been reporting to him about the ministry of Jesus: his healings and his befriending of sinners. John is confused because Jesus is not turning out to be the type of messiah that he foretold. John, it seems, is looking for one who possesses a more forceful and authoritative expression of power. Where are the axe, winnowing fan and fire spoken about in last Sunday's Gospel? John wonders if Jesus is the One who is to come—or should he look for another? Jesus' response is indirect. Contrary to popular expectations, Jesus will neither be the militaristic leader who would drive out the Romans nor the 'hellfire and damnation' messiah. Rather, Jesus is to fulfill the vision of the Messiah described by Isaiah in today's first reading: he will bring healing to the sick and mercy to sinners.

Reflecting on today's Gospel, Fr. George Smiga writes:

"In Matthew's story, John represents those of us who find ourselves at a point in life when it becomes clear that the vision to which we gave our lives is not emerging."

John's image of the Messiah is of a stern judge executing fiery judgement on sinners. When John hears of Jesus' attitude towards sinners, especially his eating with sinners, he begins to wonder if Jesus is really the long-awaited Messiah. He wonders if he should look elsewhere. This was a huge faith crisis for John.

Jesus seeks to dispel John's doubts by showing that he is doing the very things that the prophets said the Messiah would do, namely, restore sight to the blind, make the deaf hear, raise the dead, etc. (See today's first reading.)

Then Jesus says: *"Blest are the ones who take no offense at me"* (not scandalized). These words are intended to challenge John and his followers to correct their perception of the Messiah and to accept God's way of saving the world.

Jesus goes on to say that John is a super special guy precisely because he is the one chosen by God to prepare people's hearts to receive Jesus. Yet despite

his great role in the history of salvation, "the least in the kingdom of God is greater than him." How come, we may ask? Because John does not live to see and experience the New Age that Jesus comes to inaugurate, like, for example, the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit that takes place at Pentecost.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. The first reading speaks about 'frightened hearts.' At times, all of us feel scared and fragile. What can cause you to be fearful? What helps you deal with your fears?
3. James speaks about 'patient waiting.' Can you recall a time when you had to patiently wait for God or something else? How did you cope with that? Are you a patient person? What in us might cause us to be impatient?
4. John the Baptist is given the highest honor by Jesus "none greater." Discuss those traits that made him so and which ones you might try to emulate.
5. John was confused about Jesus' identity because of his miracles and works of mercy. Is there anything about God's ways that confuses you?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *"Good and patient God, help me to be patient with my own shortcomings. Help me to be patient with you and others."*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: If you know someone for whom this is an anxious or frightening time, contact them to let them know you are praying for them. Practice patience when tempted to be impatient.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Pray for all those who like John the Baptist may appear different and yet are following and doing God's call.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Father in heaven,
our hearts desire the warmth of your love
and our minds are searching for the light
of your Word.*

*Increase our longing for Christ our Savior
and give us the strength to grow in love,
that the dawn of his coming
may find us rejoicing in his presence
and welcoming the light of his truth.*

We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.

Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Father, all-powerful God, your eternal Word took flesh on earth when the Virgin Mary placed her life at the service of your plan. Lift our minds in watchful hope to hear the voice which announces his glory, and to open our minds to receive the Spirit who prepares us for his coming. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: All three readings point to the *identity* of Jesus as the sign of God's presence with his people (first reading), as true God and true man, (second reading), and as the Son of God who has come to save us (Gospel).

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 7:10-14

King Ahaz finds himself in a bad place. He is about to be attacked by neighboring armies. To defend his kingdom, he plans to enter into an alliance with pagan rulers. Isaiah, the local prophet, tells him that such an action shows distrust in God with whom his people have a covenant relationship.

Isaiah tells Ahaz to ask God for a sign so that God can show him that he is with him. Feigning humility, Ahaz says he will not tempt the Lord.

Even though Ahaz refuses to ask God for a sign, Isaiah says that God will give a sign: "The virgin will conceive a child and give him the name Emmanuel (God-with-us)." The birth of the child is very important because it means that the Davidic dynasty will continue and not be wiped out by hostile neighbors.

While Isaiah is most likely referring to the soon-to-be-born son of Ahaz (Hezekiah), early Christians see the Isaian prophecy as pointing to Jesus. In biblical interpretations, this is called the "deeper or fuller meaning" of a text, i.e., a meaning intended by God but not clearly envisaged by the human author and which, after further research and careful study, comes to light as revelation.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 24

This psalm is a hymn of praise to God, the Creator and Savior. There is a reference to cultic worthiness:

only the person with a clean heart and upright conscience can participate in the worship of the Lord.

SECOND READING: Romans 1:1-7

As Paul begins his letter to the Romans, he reminds them that Jesus is both *human* and *divine*. Jesus is "descended from David according to the flesh, but established as the Son of God in power according to the Spirit." Paul also reminds his readers of the 'obedient faith' or call to holiness to which all disciples of Jesus are summoned.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 1:18-24

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 1:18-24

In *Matthew's* infancy narrative, Joseph—not Mary—receives the limelight. This is because Matthew is writing for a *Jewish* audience and he wants to show them that Jesus is a true descendant of Abraham and

David. Joseph is Jesus' link to the house of David. While not ignoring Jesus' divine origin, Matthew wants to show that even though Jesus does not have a human father, he is the son of David. Jesus' divinity emanates from his virginal conception by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew wishes to portray Joseph as a 'righteous man,' a law-abiding person who blends submission to the law with compassion for others. He tells us that Joseph intended to divorce Mary, as not to do so would be to tolerate evil in their midst (the assumption here is, of course, that Mary had committed fornication). By being willing to divorce Mary, Joseph shows that he loves God more than Mary whom he also loves with all his heart. But Joseph plans to divorce Mary "quietly" so as not to humiliate her. If Joseph had gone public, Mary could have been stoned to death for her presumed infidelity (see Deut 22:21). This shows that Joseph's sense of justice is tempered with mercy.

But God intervenes. An angel tells Joseph in a dream to take Mary into his home because the baby has been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph obeys. (He practices what the Catechism calls "obedient faith" (art 144). The neighbors may be shocked. After all, they do not know the circumstances of Jesus' conception. Here again, Joseph shows himself to be a righteous man, obedient to God's revelation regardless of what others might think.

By giving Jesus two names, Matthew reveals Jesus' *identity* and *mission*. His name means "One who saves" and his mission is to bring salvation. Jesus is also called *Emmanuel*, i.e., "God is with us." In Jesus, God is with us in the flesh. For Matthew, the birth of Jesus is the fruition of God's promise through the ages to *be with* and to *save* his people.

In quoting the Isaian passage, Matthew is telling his audience that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. He comes from *God* and from *Israel*.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. In the first reading, Ahaz is in a difficult situation as he is accused of not trusting in God. Can you think of a time when you found it hard to trust God, to believe that a particular situation would turn out okay? What helped you to cope with such a situation?

3. In the second reading, Paul speaks about 'obedient faith' and our 'call to holiness.' What do these important phrases mean to you? What do they ask of you?

4. Joseph never speaks in the Bible. How does his silent witness speak to you?

5. In the Gospel, the angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary into his home. Is Marian devotion a part of your spirituality? If it is, how does it find expression in your life? If not, what makes you reluctant to take Mary into your heart?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *"Loving God, you placed before us the wonderful witness of St. Joseph, a man who listened to, discerned and acted on your Word to him. Help me to grow in my desire and ability to hear discernment and obey your Word."*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Think and pray about your call to trust God in all things, your call to a life of "obedient faith," and your call to live a holy life. Look for ways to be holy by reaching out to someone who is alone and lonely this season.

**CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF
THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND
INTERCESSION**

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Pray for all mothers who are pregnant right now that they may be cared for and free of anxiety. Pray for couples who long to have a child.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Emmanuel, you have come into our world
through people like Mary, Joseph, and Paul,
and have made God's presence known
through prophets like Isaiah.*

*Make my life a sign of the power of your love
that invites others to faith and trust that
God is with us still.*

Amen.

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD CHRISTMAS MASS AT MIDNIGHT

A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Almighty God and Father of light, a Child is born for us and a Son is given to us. Your eternal Word leaped down from heaven in the silent watches of the night, and now your Church is filled with wonder at the nearness of her God. Open our hearts to receive his life and increase our vision with the rising of dawn that our lives may be filled with his glory and his peace, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: There are four sets of readings offered to us on Christmas Eve and Day. Here we are reflecting on the readings for the midnight Mass. The first reading speaks of a new Light coming into the world to dispel the darkness. Jesus is this new Light, whose birth is announced in the Gospel. The second reading from Titus also speaks of this 'new appearance' of God in our midst.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 9:1-6

This is one of the so-called Emmanuel prophecies. It speaks of a future king who would liberate his people and rule them with justice. The prophecy looks to the liberation of the Israelite northern tribes from Assyrian rule. This liberation is looked upon as exodus from darkness to light.

Eventually, this prophecy looks to a future descendent of David, an ideal king who will have heavenly qualities. Early Christians saw the figure of Christ in this prophecy. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 96

This is an enthronement psalm sung on the coronation of a king. The idea of the Lord's arrival finds an appropriate setting in the Christmas liturgy.

SECOND READING: Titus 2:11-14

These verses speak of two "epiphanies" or manifestations of God, the first with the birth of Christ, the second with the return of Christ. Between these two comings, followers of Christ are involved in a form of training to help them reject godless and worldly ways and put on the ways of Christ.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Luke 2:1-14

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Luke 2:1-14

This beautiful and well-loved story of Jesus' birth has two parts to it: first, the description of Jesus' birth (vv 1-7) and, second, the angelic appearance to the shepherds.

To underscore the universal character of Jesus' birth, Luke places it on the stage of the Roman international world scene. He mentions the census to emphasize that Jesus comes from the house of David.

A dominant note in Luke's account is the poverty of the child's birth: 'born in a stable,' 'like an outcast,' 'no room in the Inn.'

The child's first visitors are not extended family members but lowly shepherds, a class of people considered unclean in their time. Luke is setting the stage to tell the story of God's special care for the poor, the overlooked and the forgotten members of society.

Even though the world takes no notice of Jesus' birth, God does. His birth is surrounded by celestial grandeur. An angel announces the wondrous event occurring in Bethlehem and then is joined by a multitude of other angels who fill the night with heavenly songs of praise. The indifference shown by the human community is outstripped by a display of heavenly exultation. This simple Christmas story has a very human, but also heavenly side to it. Such is the mystery of Jesus' birth.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. What strikes you most about the Christmas story? Have you noticed anything that you had not noticed before?
3. The second reading speaks of the grace of God saving training us. What worldly desire do you need God's grace to eradicate from your life?
4. What have you done this Advent Season to show God's concern for our less fortunate brothers and sisters?
5. How does our story connect with the Christmas story?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: Dear Jesus, teach me to welcome all as you should be welcomed; help me to see everyone as "God with us."

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Pray for answers to what Christmas story asks of us and what we must do to allow Jesus to live more fully in us?

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Especially pray for the poor, the homeless, the forgotten, and for all those good souls who are trying to help them. Pray for all those who work on Christmas Eve/Day to keep our streets safe and care for the sick in hospitals and nursing homes.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Heavenly Father,
today we celebrate the birth
your only son
Help me, to love your more
by bringing Jesus into a world
crying out for the joy and
peace and love that only Christ can give.
Amen*

HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH A

**When a Sunday does not occur between December 25 and January 1,
this feast is celebrated on December 30 with only one reading before the Gospel**

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Jesus, God and man, you were born into a human family to model for us the sanctity of family life. Teach us and empower us to love our families as you love them. Show us how to reverence and respect each other, especially the aged and vulnerable members of our family. Be with us now as we gather to break open your Word. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: On this feast of the Holy Family, the readings speak to us about relationships within families. Sirach stresses the Lord's command to "honor thy father and mother." Paul focuses on the need for children to be obedient to parents, and the responsibilities of parents towards children. Matthew highlights Joseph's obedience to God's commands pertaining to Jesus and his care for Jesus' mother.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14

This reading is a commentary on the fourth commandment: 'Honor your father and your mother.' Too often, we think of this commandment solely in terms of the obligation of younger children to obey their parents. That is part of it. But there is another part to it, i.e., the obligation of grown children to ensure that their aged parents are able to live out their final years in comfort and dignity. It is this second element that is the focus of the reading. Sirach lists the rewards that come with such respectful conduct: atonement for one's sins, gift of offspring, answer to prayers, and a long life.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 128

This psalm, which speaks about the fear of the Lord, makes reference to the blessing of a worthy wife who, in turn, is a blessing to the whole family.

SECOND READING: Colossians 3:12-21

In Baptism, Christians *clothe* themselves in Christ. Paul urges his readers to clothe themselves with the virtues that befit a follower of Christ: forgiveness, kindness, patience, love, etc. He exhorts them to be grateful, to sing, and to do everything for the glory of God.

In line with accepted traditional customs of the time, Paul counsels wives to be submissive to their husbands. This advice, without doubt, would be different if Paul were living today. He would most likely encourage spouses to be submissive to each other.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Commenting on this Gospel, Fr. Flor McCarthy SDB, writes:

In the Gospel we see exemplified the primary obligation of parents, which is to love and care for their children. Here we see what Mary and Joseph

did in order to ensure the safety of the Child Jesus. As soon as they learned that his life was in danger, they uprooted themselves and went into exile.

There is a tendency to see life for the holy family as all sweetness and light. This was far from being the case. Matthew casts the Holy Family as homeless refugees. As refugees, they shared the fate of the many uprooted and dispossessed families in our world today. But because of their deep faith in God, and love for one another, they stayed together and came through it.

When the danger passed, they uprooted themselves again and returned to their native country, settling in Nazareth. Nazareth became the place of family life, of prayer, work, and silent virtues, practiced with not witnesses other than God, and their friends and neighbours. Nazareth was the place where Jesus lived thirty years of his short life, and is where many people live their entire lives. There Mary and Joseph provided the kind of atmosphere in which he was able to grow 'in wisdom and in favour with God and people.'

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FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. The first reading speaks glowingly of the rewards that come to those who care for their parents, especially elderly parents. Living out this reading becomes a big challenge for those who have a poor relationship with their parents. Any suggestions for adult children in this situation?
3. In the second reading, Paul names several virtues that have the power to strengthen a marriage or a family. In your experience, what are the keys to a strong marriage and family (if single, a strong friendship)?
4. During their stay in Egypt, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were probably illegal aliens – not so much in legal implications as in their experience in a foreign land. How close have you been to the experience of people who have come to this country without legal status? What do you think that experience is like?
5. What one word of wisdom can you offer to families today?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I lift up the members of my family to you. I especially pray for those who become disconnected from you."

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: If the distance between you and a family member is mainly your decision, pray about one thing you can do to diminish the distance. Pray for undocumented families, especially those who live in fear of deportation.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Pray for the elderly who have been or perceive that they have been abandoned by their families in institutions, may they know Our Lord's presence and care.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Prayer for Family Unity

*Lord Jesus, with Mary and Joseph,
you lived in a family;*

*Teach me to appreciate the gift
of being part of a family.*

*Show me ever new ways of protecting
and comforting those closest to me;
and, each day, let me do something
that will say 'I love you'
without speaking those words.*

*Let me never part from any of my family in anger;
prompt me always to turn back without delay
to forgive and to be forgiven.*

*Let me see your image in my family,
in each of them, and in my larger family too,
knowing that, in your kingdom,
we will be truly one family,
united by your sacrifice on the cross.*

Amen.

Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God A B & C

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Father, source of light in every age, the Virgin conceived and bore your Son who is called Wonderful God, Prince of Peace. May her prayer, the gift of a mother's love, be your people's joy through all ages? May her response, born of a humble heart, draw your Spirit to rest on us your people. Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: Our first reading speaks of blessing, the second reading speaks of Jesus as our brother, and the Gospel speaks of the wondrous event of God becoming man.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Numbers 6:22-27

This reading from Numbers is known as the Priestly Blessing that the priests of Israel were to say over the people. The blessing outlines God's action toward the people.

He makes his face shine upon them. In response, the people were to make God's name known.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 67

This psalm is both a thanksgiving and a prayer of petition. For God to bless Israel is a witness to all nations of God's care.

SECOND READING: Galatians 4:4-7

This reading is often chosen for Marian feasts because of the phrase "born of a woman." We can assume that Paul was not thinking of Mary in a special way. His phrase "born of a woman" simply means that Jesus is fully human. Yet from early on, the Church saw that Mary had a special role in our salvation. Also, upon reflection, the Church came to believe certain things about Mary. One such belief is that Mary is the Mother of the whole Christ (human and divine). This means that she is the Mother of God, even if God is the one who created her. The reading also beautifully underlines our sonship in Christ. If Christ is our brother through

Mary, all of us are adopted children of God. Because of our adoption, we call God "Abba"—a very endearing title meaning "dada" or father.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Luke 2:16-21

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Luke 2:16-21

Three points are to be noted in this gospel.

First, the shepherds who were regarded as unclean and marginalized, obey the angels and go in haste to Bethlehem to visit the newborn child and his parents. Then they become the first messengers of the Good news about Jesus. All were astonished at what the shepherds told them.

Second, in this gospel, we find *Mary* “*treasuring all these things and reflecting upon them in her heart*”. Right from the beginning *Mary* is the model disciple pondering all that God is saying and doing in her life.

Third, as observant Jews, *Mary* and *Joseph* have their child circumcised – a ceremony which also involves the naming of the child

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. The first reading speaks of blessing. What is the blessing in your life that you most appreciate and value?

4. In the gospel, the shepherds “make known the message that had been told them about this child.” How easy or hard is it for you to share your faith and relationships with Jesus?

5. What are your hopes for the New Year? Name one resolution you would like to work on.

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: “*Thank you Jesus for giving us Mary, your mother as our mother. May I learn to love and treasure her more.*”

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestions: This week, take time to ponder the awesome reality that we are adopted children of God.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray in thanksgiving for all priests the blessings they bestow on all of us.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Prayer to Our Blessed Mother

**Mary, Mother of Jesus and Mother of Mercy,
since Jesus from the Cross gave you to me,
I take you as my own.
And since Jesus gave me to you,
take me as your own.**

**Make me docile like Jesus on the Cross, obedient
to the Father,
trusting in humility and in love.**

**Mary, my Mother,
in imitation of the Father who gave
his Son to you, I too give my all to you;
to you I entrust all that I am,
all that I have and all that I do.**

**Help me to surrender ever more
fully to the Spirit.
Lead me deeper into the Mystery of the Cross,
and the fullness of Church.**

**As you formed the heart of Jesus by the Spirit,
form my heart to be the throne of Jesus in his
glorious coming.**

Amen

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD ABC

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask Him to help us to hear the word He wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *O Light of Lights, you showed forth the light of God's love to all nations. In your coming, God's saving love is revealed from east to west. You have made us co-heirs and sharers in the promise of salvation. Illuminate our minds and hearts with your love. May we, like the Magi, always seek and search for you. Enlighten us as we contemplate your Word today. We pray in your light and in your love. Amen.*

Response to last week's word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: Epiphany means manifestation. On this Sunday, the Church invites us to celebrate God's universal plan to save *all* people – Jews as well as Gentiles.

Let us listen to God's word to hear what it is He wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 60:1-6

This reading is from Third Isaiah (chs 56-66). Our post-Babylonia exile prophet seeks to offer hope to the returned exiles who are dealing with a demolished land and city. He seeks to encourage them as they embark on rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and the Temple.

“Rise up Jerusalem! Your Light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you.”

The life of the returned exiles was extremely difficult.

“See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the people.”

God is still with his chosen people.

“Upon you the Lord shines and over you appears his glory.”

This light of God will draw nations to Jerusalem just as the Star drew the Magi to Bethlehem.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 72

“Lord, every nation on earth will adore you,” speaks of God's universal plan to save all people, thereby connecting this psalm to the overall theme of this Sunday's readings.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6

Paul's message about his special mission to bring the Good News to the Gentiles connects this reading with the general theme of the day. Jesus reveals to Paul and the Apostles that the total equality of Jews and Gentiles figures in God's plan of salvation.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 2:1-12

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 2:1-12

The Gospel is the fulfillment of the first reading, which speaks of all the nations streaming to Jerusalem bearing gifts for the new King. The Magi represent the non-Jewish world who are seekers of God in their own way. The Magi's *journey* to

Bethlehem in search of the new King is symbolic of the journey all seekers must take. Thus, Epiphany is not only a feast on which we celebrate God's manifestation of himself to the Gentile world, but also our movement toward God.

When Matthew is writing his Gospel in 80AD, his own people have almost totally *rejected* Jesus while large groups of Gentiles are *accepting* him. This rejection/ acceptance dynamic is present in today's Gospel. While Herod's plot to kill Jesus symbolizes Israel's *rejection* of Jesus, the Magi's *acceptance* of Jesus symbolizes the Gentiles' movement toward Jesus. This rejection/acceptance dynamic will be played out many times in Matthew's Gospel. While the Pharisees will close their hearts to Jesus, the Gentiles will open their hearts to him.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. In the first reading from the book of Isaiah, Jerusalem is praised as light to the world, reread this passage using your name in place of Jerusalem. Discuss.

3. The Magi symbolize our search for God and meaning in life. What gives meaning to your life? Has some recent discovery or new passion brought new meaning and depth to your life?

4. In the Epiphany, Jesus is manifested to the Magi and Gentile world. Can you name a recent epiphany experience in your life, a recent discovery?

5. What treasures and gifts do you bring to the Lord?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *"Thank you, Jesus, for revealing yourself to me. Help me in word and deed to be a revelation of your life and love to others."*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: This week, become more aware of how Jesus wants to use you to be a light to others.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray in thanksgiving for how God has been manifested in your life.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Lord Jesus, you continue to come into the world as light that pushes back the darkness. Continue to enlighten our minds and hearts, opening them to receive you in whatever way you come to us. Help us to find you in our daily lives by removing whatever prevents our seeing your light. Amen.

Reflection

*When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes are home
When shepherds are back with their flocks
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the captives
To rebuild nations
To bring peace among peoples
To make music in the heart.*

- Howard Thurman

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask Him to help us to hear the word He wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God our Creator, you offered your servant Jesus as Savior to all humankind. His coming among us opened our eyes to the light of justice, peace and salvation. By the River Jordan you anointed Jesus to carry out his mission. Anoint us now with your Holy Spirit so that we can hear the Word you are speaking to us. This we pray through Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: This feast celebrates Jesus as the anointed servant of God, the one who suffers (first reading) for all (second reading). It is a bridge between the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Ordinary Time.

Let us listen to God's word to hear what it is He wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

This reading is the first of four Isaian poems that speak of a mysterious suffering servant who will be God's instrument in bringing salvation and justice to our world. As Isaiah is writing these poems, he is not thinking about a future Messiah named Jesus. More likely, he imagines a transformed and purified Israel who will be God's instrument among the nations.

After the death and Resurrection of Jesus, the first Christians see in these poems a description of Jesus—the Suffering Servant par excellence—the one who through his suffering, death and Resurrection, has brought salvation and light to a dark world. Modest, gentle and compassionate, this Servant does not fit the popular image of a militaristic leader who would bring military victory to Israel over her aggressors. This gentle Servant will be empowered by God to carry out his mission.

Most significant in the description of the Servant is his endowment with God's spirit. The Servant will exercise justice, but not the harsh, exacting kind. In and through Baptism, each of us is called to imitate the Servant spoken about in this reading. We have in Jesus and many of the saints—especially those who were advocates for the poor—great models

whom we can seek to imitate through the help of the Holy Spirit.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 29

“The voice of the Lord over the waters” connects this psalm to the baptism of Jesus.

SECOND READING: Acts 10:34-38

Addressing the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion and Gentile, Peter tells Cornelius that because he has opened his heart to the message of Jesus, he is saved. The key point in this reading is that salvation is available to all who open their hearts to God. *“God shows no partiality.”*

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 3:13-17

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus comes to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. But John has a problem with Jesus' request because his baptism is for sinners – which Jesus is not. Yet Jesus insists that John baptize him “to fulfill all righteousness.” Remember that Matthew is writing mainly to a Jewish Christian community. He is anxious to show them that Jesus is the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. The ‘sky opening,’ the ‘Spirit of God descending,’ and ‘a voice from the heavens’ all resonate with messianic prophecies that are fulfilled in Jesus.

Many scholars believe that Jesus insisted on receiving a “sinner’s baptism” as a way to identify himself with sinful humanity. In his Incarnation, Jesus takes upon himself the sins of the world. Scholars also believe that it is during his baptism experience that Jesus becomes aware of the type of Messiah that he is to become, namely, a suffering Messiah like the one described in Isaiah 53 (from which the first reading on Good Friday is taken).

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Have you ever suffered for doing what was just and right? Or do you know someone who has? How was that experience for you?
3. The second reading states that our God is an all-inclusive God who shows no partiality. What are some forms of partiality we witness in our Church or society today?
4. Each of us has been “baptized with the spirit and fire.” What does this mean to you? What should it mean for the way we live our lives as baptized Christians?
5. Do you realize that you are a beloved son or daughter of God? How does that change the way you live and behave?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *“Jesus, in and through the Sacrament of Baptism, you filled me with your life and love. Help me to be more fully aware of this blessing in my daily life.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestions: Be more aware of your baptismal call to be the presence of Christ in our world and how you have received the power of the Holy Spirit to help you live out this call.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Pray for all those in the initiation process awaiting baptism.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*God of our Lord Jesus Christ,
you are the creator of all of us.*

We are your handiwork.

*Fill me with an awareness of your Holy Spirit
that I might see all people the way you do.
Empower me to follow the example of your Son
and servant, Jesus Christ.*

Amen.