

Cycle B – The Year of Mark

The First Sunday of Advent is the beginning of a new liturgical year. *Liturgical Year* is the way our Church *celebrates, relives, and makes present* to us Christ and the main events in his life. It is the way that our Church keeps placing before us the story of Jesus.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us: “*We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus’ life and his mysteries.*” So, through the ebb and flow of each liturgical year, we seek, with the guidance of our Church, to live and internalize the events of Christ’s life.

When it comes to the Sunday Scripture readings, we have the *three cycles* A, B and C. These are sometimes called the Year of Matthew (Cycle A), the Year of Mark (Cycle B), and the Year of Luke (Cycle C). Today, we begin the Year of Mark. Throughout the Sundays in Ordinary Time—with a few exceptions—we will listen to excerpts from Mark’s Gospel which presents the Marcan Jesus. Like the other three Gospels, Mark has some unique features.

- ❖ Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels to be written (around 70 AD). Many of the stories in Matthew and Luke are taken almost verbatim from Mark.
- ❖ Without losing sight of the divine nature of Jesus, Mark very much presents us with the human side of Jesus. He says that Jesus is a carpenter (6:3) with human emotions: anger (6:3), grief (3:50), pity (6:34), indignation (10:14), fondness of children (10:16).
- ❖ It is generally believed that Mark’s Gospel was written for a *persecuted* church. Hence, there is a great deal of emphasis on the suffering and death of Christ. Chapters 1-10 lead us to the passion of Christ, and Chapters 11-16 (one-third of the Gospel) deal with Jesus’ last week before his death. Mark emphasizes the importance of the disciples taking up their cross and following Jesus.
- ❖ Mark’s Gospel shows his concern with the *identity of Jesus*. During his trial, Jewish authorities ask: “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” (15:2). The truth concerning Jesus’ identity is only finally revealed when the Roman centurion at the foot of the Cross finally exclaims: “*Truly, this man was the Son of God*” (15:39).

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT B

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 light and love, thank you for gathering us together as we begin the holy season of waiting and watching for your coming. Rouse us from spiritual drowsiness and open our hearts to receive the Word you place before us. Increase our longing for your Son, Jesus. May we be flexible clay in your hands as you seek to transform us into the likeness of your Son. 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: The First Reading is a communal lament as the exiles return to a very difficult situation. They long for God's intervention. The Second Reading and Gospel make reference to Jesus's second coming, something the early Christians believed to be imminent.

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 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2b-7

The 66 chapters of the Book of Isaiah contain the work of three prophets who lived at different times. Today's reading is from "Third Isaiah" and deals with a very difficult time in Israel's history: their return from the Babylonian exile. When the exiles return, they find their land has been pillaged, and Jerusalem, including the Temple, has been destroyed.

They blame God for allowing them to wander from his ways. They long for a new entrance of God into their lives ("Return for the sake of your servants....") They are clay and entreat God the Potter to refashion them again into the people he wants them to be.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 80

These verses connect well with the First Reading. The author pleads with God to come and help his hurting people.

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 1:3-9

After the usual greeting, Paul gives thanks to God for the way he has blessed this church family with many gifts. As they wait for Christ's second coming, Paul feels confident that God will keep them steadfast in bearing witness to him.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Mark 13:33-37

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: Mark 13:33-37

As stated above, the early Christians expected Jesus' return during their lifetime. In these verses, Mark is encouraging his readers to do two things:

a) to be watchful or vigilant for the Lord's coming
b) to be good and faithful disciples. For us, living in between Jesus' first coming and second coming, we should be alert for the Lord's comings into our daily lives and we should be found faithfully fulfilling our responsibilities and always ready and willing to witness to Jesus and his values.

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, the Israelite exiles are returning to a broken and ravaged land. Have you had any experience like that? If not, what do you think it must be like?
3. In the second reading, Paul says we are not lacking in any "spiritual gift." Have you recently become aware of a particular spiritual gift God has given you?
4. At this time in your life, are you waiting for anything in particular? Is there a waiting experience that you can especially recall?
5. What can help us during this Advent Season to be more alert for the comings of Jesus in our lives?
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: *Lord, millions of our brothers and sisters are displaced from their homeland. I pray that our political leaders can be more attentive to this global issue.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Pray often for displaced persons and those trying daily to help them. Be alert for God's visitations in your daily life.

CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are you grateful for? For what and for whom do you wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (Together)

*God, you are the Potter,
we are clay in your hands.
Hold us gently and firmly.
Mold us into your image and likeness.
Help us to be more aware
of your presence in our midst.
This we pray through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT B

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, Giver of Life, you sent John the Baptist to prepare people for the coming of Jesus, our Savior. Open our minds and hearts so that we will be ready for his coming. Help us to identify whatever it is that might be blocking us from recognizing Jesus' presence and activity in our midst. 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: In the First Reading and Gospel, people are called 'to prepare a way for the Lord' – a call to repentance. In the Second Reading, Peter also calls his community to repentance as a way to prepare for the Lord's return.

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 40:1-5, 9-11

Last week's First Reading was from "Third Isaiah." This week's reading is from "Second Isaiah" (chs. 40-55) by the prophet who preached to the Israelites during their time in exile in Babylon. While in exile, the people most likely believed that God had forgotten them. They may have lost hope in God. The role of the prophet is to restore hope by announcing that their time of punishment is coming to an end.

*Comfort, give comfort to my people
says the Lord . . .
her service is at an end
her guilt is expiated . . .*

Using the imagery of the Exodus, the prophet paints a glorious picture of God's intervention to save his people from slavery. The people will return in a glorious procession.

In the second half of the Reading, the scene moves to Jerusalem, a city broken and depleted. Jerusalem is told to announce to the other cities of Judah the glorious event that is about to happen. The words "make straight a highway for the Lord" will be reiterated by John the Baptist to call his people to repentance.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 85

Just as in the First Reading, God announces his salvation. God and his goodness are about to revisit his people.

SECOND READING: 2Peter 3:8-14

This Reading underlines the importance of a Christian's moral rectitude as the proper disposition while they await the Lord's coming.

The awaited second coming of Jesus seems to be on hold. Why? Because, according to Peter, the Lord wants to give people more time to repent and prepare their lives for their ultimate encounter with God. Using apocalyptic imagery, the author describes the demise of the old order and the creation of a new one. The redemption gained by Jesus impacts not only people, but all of creation. Finally, Peter urges his fellow believers to live righteous and blameless lives.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Mark 1:1-8

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: Mark 1:1-8

Every year on the Second and Third Sundays of Advent, we encounter John the Baptist calling people to prepare for the Messiah by repentance. John is seen as the messenger whom Isaiah spoke about in the First Reading. As the people respond to John's call to repentance, they are baptized with water—an outward sign of an interior cleansing occurring in their soul. Then John speaks of his subordinate role: *“One mightier than me is about to come, One who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit.”* John's diet of locusts (grasshoppers) and honey would have reminded his audience of the two traditional symbols of *judgment* and *comfort*. *Locusts* are considered as instruments of divine judgment because of their fierce punishing power (Ex.10:4), whereas *honey* signifies peace, plenty and blessing. For those who open their hearts to John, his message will bring the 'honey' of peace and joy. On the other hand, those who refuse to receive the truth of his message will experience the devouring 'locust' of divine judgment.

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 of God removing Israel's guilt for her sins. Often we feel guilty about things that we shouldn't feel guilty about (false guilt), and sometimes we *don't* feel guilty about things we should feel guilty about (true guilt). Why is this? What might help us to distinguish true or appropriate guilt from false or inappropriate guilt?
3. *“Comfort, give comfort to my people.”* Who in your life needs to hear words of comfort?

4. Who has been a John the Baptist figure in your life, someone who pointed you to Jesus?
5. What does 'preparing a way for the Lord' mean for you during this Advent Season?
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: *Comfort, give comfort to my people. Lord, I thank you for the multitude of times you have comforted me. Help me during this season of Advent to make a straight path for you to enter more fully into my life.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Ponder who may need a word of comfort in your life and offer it to them.

**CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF
THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND
INTERCESSION**

Facilitator: What are you grateful for? For what and for whom do you wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (Together)

*Caring and loving God,
you sent Isaiah to comfort
a people who had lost hope.
Help us to be signs of hope
for all we meet this week.
This we pray through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT B

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 and Time, you promised a Savior who brings good news, freedom, and joy to the humble of heart. Give us a humble spirit to listen attentively to your voice, to discern your truth in all situations, and to be an instrument to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. We pray through your Holy Spirit who guides us and teaches us your ways. 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 coming weekend is Gaudete ("Let us rejoice!") Sunday. We will light the rose candle on our Advent wreath. There is a clear theme of joy in the First and Second Readings and in the Psalm. In the Gospel, John wants his readers to be very clear that he is not the Messiah, but the one preparing people to receive the Messiah.

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 61:1-2a, 10-11

Our First Reading is from Third Isaiah (chs 56-66) in which he preaches to exiles who have *returned* from Babylon to a devastated land.

He begins by speaking of his call "*The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me.*" Then he describes his mission:

*"God has sent me to bring
glad tidings to the poor
and to heal the brokenhearted...."*

These are the words Jesus uses to describe his mission (Lk 4:14-21).

The "I" in "*I rejoice heartily*" seems to be a reference to Jerusalem, who is full of joy that God has come to forgive her sins and to restore her to righteousness. The prophet uses *spousal imagery* to describe Israel's covenantal relationship with God ("*...like a bride bedecked with her jewels*").

RESPONSORIAL PSALM:

Luke 1:46-50, 53-54

The Psalm is taken from Mary's Magnificat. Mary's joy at God's goodness to her echoes the joy of Jerusalem and points to the joy of all who will open their hearts to Christ.

SECOND READING: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Paul concludes this letter to the people of Thessalonica with a note of *joy*. Just as they accept God's Word with joy (which is one of the fruits of the Spirit), so must their lives continue to be marked by joy even in the midst of their afflictions. Paul emphasizes the importance of a grateful heart and openness to the Holy Spirit ("*Do not quench the Spirit.*"). But they should not embrace every new fad ("*Test everything; retain what is good.*"). Paul concludes with a prayer for his people: "*May the God of peace make you perfectly holy.*"

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Last Sunday, Luke introduced us to John the Baptist. This Sunday, John the Evangelist *contrasts* the role of John the Baptist with the mission of Jesus. John the Evangelist is writing to a community, *some* of whom still believe that John the Baptist is the Messiah. John the Evangelist wants his people to be very clear that John the Baptist's ministry is *temporary* and *subordinate* to that of Christ's. John is a *witness* to the Light. Jesus is *the* Light. Three times John says: "*I am not the Light.*" When asked who he is, John replies: "*I am a voice pointing people to Jesus who is the Light.*" The "Jerusalem Jews" (some Pharisees who came in delegations to question Jesus) are the ones who constantly prefer the darkness to the light. They do not recognize Christ in their midst.

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 gives you joy? What steals your joy? What can help you live a more joyful life?
3. Paul exhorts us to 'give thanks in all circumstances' and to 'not quench the spirit.' Would you consider yourself a grateful person? What are some ways we can quench the movement of the spirit in our lives?
4. Did God give you any opportunities to share your faith this past week? If so, were you able to use them?

5. How is your Advent Season coming?

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.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Practice gratitude and joyfulness this week.

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: *Lord, you have given us your Holy Spirit to guide and direct us. May we learn how to notice the Spirit's promptings in our daily lives. Amen.*

**CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF
THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND
INTERCESSION**

Facilitator: What are you grateful for? For what and for whom do you wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (Together)

*God of joy,
fill our hearts with joy.
Help us to be grateful in
all circumstances.
Help us to bring your light
to the world.
Amen.*

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT B

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: *Lord God, Spring of Joy, come and be with us as we gather to listen to your Word. Mary our Mother, pray for us and help us to follow your example by saying 'yes' to what God asks of 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: In the First Reading, David wishes to build a house for God but God has other plans. He intends to house himself in Mary and manifest himself in the flesh (Gospel). The Second Reading speaks about the mystery of salvation about to be revealed.

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: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-16

This reading is regarded as one of the most important passages in the Old Testament because it sets off Israel's messianic hope, the beginning of words about a Messiah who would come from the House of David.

At this time in David's career, he has defeated all his enemies and is living in a nice palace. Seeing that God (symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant) is living in a tent, he wants to build a Temple for God. He reveals his thoughts and plans to Nathan, a prophet. But God has other plans which he reveals to Nathan.

God tells Nathan, "Go tell my servant David that instead of him building a house for me (something his son Solomon will do), I will build a 'house' for him"—a reference to the dynasty of David from which Jesus will come. (Luke tells us in today's Gospel that Joseph is from the house of David.)

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 89

This Psalm echoes the sentiments of the First Reading by focusing on God's fidelity to his promise to be with his people forever.

SECOND READING: Romans 16:25-27

This reading contains the three concluding verses to a long doctrinal epistle. They appear to have been selected for their reference to the "mystery" which was hidden for all ages but which is now made manifest. The "mystery" is God's plan for the salvation of all people without distinction. Jesus is at the center of this plan.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Luke 1:26-38

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 1:26-38

Only in Luke's Gospel do we read the Annunciation story. Neither Mark nor John has

stories about Jesus' birth. In Matthew, the Annunciation story features Joseph, not Mary.

At the beginning of the Gospel story, we are told that Joseph, Mary's future husband, is of the house of David. So the promise God made to David will be brought to fruition in Mary's child. He will be given the throne of David and will rule forever.

Mary's initial response to Angel Gabriel's appearance and greeting is fear, a pretty common reaction. Sensing Mary's fear, the angel speaks one of the most common phrases in Scripture: "*Do not be afraid.*"

The angel proceeds to tell Mary about her "miraculous conception." While remaining a virgin, she will conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. Unlike any other child before or after him, this child will be both *human* (born of Mary) and *divine* (born of the Spirit).

In the Annunciation story, the name 'Jesus' is significant. The name means 'savior.' His purpose and mission will be to bring salvation to his people.

To help Mary grow in her understanding of God's mysterious ways, the angel informs her of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy. Though advanced in years, she too is with child for "nothing is impossible with God."

The Gospel story concludes with Mary's 'fiat' ("*Let it be done to me.*")—Mary's 'yes.' Her 'yes' to the angel makes her a model disciple. It expresses her openness and receptivity to God's call.

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, God says to David: "I have been with you wherever you went." To what extent has this been your experience?
3. Mary received her call to ministry at a young age. When and how did you receive your call?

4. Can you name a time when it was very hard for you to say 'yes' to God?

5. What is your relationship to Mary? What has helped it to develop?

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: *Mary, your 'yes' to the Angel makes you a model disciple for us. Help us to say 'yes' to God even when we do not want to.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Try to be aware whenever you say 'yes' and 'no' to God. Pray for opportunities to share your faith this Christmas Season.

CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: For what and for whom shall we pray? Remember to pray for all for whom Christmas is a difficult and painful time.

CLOSING PRAYER (Together)

*Come and dwell among us, O Lord,
as we wait to celebrate the moment
when your Word became flesh.
Help us to sense your presence this Christmas
and to witness to it
when we get the opportunity.
Amen.*

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY B

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, help us to live as the Holy Family, united in faith, respect and love. Bring us to the joy and peace of your eternal home. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever 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: In the first reading, Abram is wondering when God is going to fulfill his promise to give him an heir. The second reading stresses the great faith in God which Abraham and Sarah had. The Gospel is the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple – the fourth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary.

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: Genesis 15:1-6, 21:1-3

When God calls Abraham, he promises that he will be the father of a great nation (Gen. 12:1-4). In today's reading, Abraham is wondering when God is going to fulfill his promise. In the midst of his doubt, God comes and reassures Abraham that he will be faithful to his promise. Then the reading jumps forward six chapters (Ch.21) where we read about God fulfilling his promise to Abraham and Sarah.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 105

The author is full of gratitude to God for his faithfulness to his covenant with the descendants of Abraham.

SECOND READING: Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19

Abraham is held up as a man of outstanding faith, ready for adventure. God's call to Abraham means he has to leave family, home and business—and he does. It means he has to let go of the known and face the unknown—and he does.

The faith of Abraham's wife, Sarah, is also praised. Both she and her husband believe in what is

humanly impossible: that they will conceive a child in their old age.

Verses 17-19 speak of Abraham's biggest test: God calls him to sacrifice his son. The story exhorts us to be ready to sacrifice what is dearest to us out of loyalty to God. It has been said that when Abraham was going up the hill, Isaac belonged to him. But after he showed his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac belonged to God.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Luke 2:22-40

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 2:22-40

Luke seeks to portray Jesus and his family as very faithful Jews, fulfilling two requirements of the

law: purification of the mother after childbirth (Lev.12:1-8) and dedication of the first son to God (Ex.13:2, 12-16). The purification rite calls for a sacrifice. Mary and Joseph bring two pigeons, an offering of the poor. Within the presentation story, we encounter two older and very faithful Jews, Simeon and Anna, who testify to the true nature of the child. The aged saints represent the faithful *remnant* of Israel at her best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer and led by the Spirit at home and in the Temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises. They are the portrait of the Israel who *accepted* Jesus—in contrast to the Pharisees and Scribes who symbolize the Israel who *rejected* Jesus.

Also, for Luke, this story enables him to speak of the “*continuation theme*” between Judaism and Christianity. Simeon and Anna, two faithful Jews, recognize and welcome the new Messiah, the One who will be a revealing light to the Gentiles and the glory of their people, Israel. Simeon poetically speaks of the painful part of Jesus' arrival on the scene. Jesus and his life will be a ‘sword of sorrow’ for Mary and a sign that many will reject. Thus, as Simeon and Anna recognize the good news of Jesus' arrival, they also make the reader aware of the *cost* of accepting the Messiah. Simeon's prophetic words about Jesus is confirmed by the elderly Anna. She gives thanks to God and witnesses about the child to all who have kept alive hope “for the deliverance of 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 Gospel, Simeon says to Mary that a ‘sword of sorrow’ would pierce her heart because of Jesus. Can you name a ‘sword of sorrow’ that you have had to deal with, and what helped you carry that cross?

3. Who are the Simeons and Annas in your life, the prophetic speakers of God's word and the prayer warriors?

4. As you look back to the family you grew up in, what was the faith atmosphere like?

5. What one word of wisdom can you offer to families today?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says so 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, teach me how to nurture in my life and family the great love you had for each other. Mary, help me to deal with my own 'sword of sorrows' and to be a support to others who are experiencing a 'sword of sorrow.'*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: If you have one or more family members to whom you are not speaking, pray for what you can do to bring about reconciliation. If some members of your family have disconnected from God and/or Church, pray often that God will turn their hearts back to him. If you know someone who is experiencing ‘a sword of sorrow,’ reach out to that person.

CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are you grateful for? For what and for whom do you wish to pray?

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.

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 share 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: The focus of Epiphany Sunday is God's universal plan to save *all* people. In the first reading, the Prophet Isaiah seeks to give a message of hope to the exiles who return to Jerusalem which is in ruins. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that Gentiles are also included in God's plan of salvation. In the Gospel, the Magi represent the 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 is 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 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. 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?
3. Who or what has been a "star" in your life that has led you to see or know Jesus? How?
4. Was there a time in your life that you had to take a different route to achieve your goal?
5. Who or what are the Herod's in your life that you have had to deal with? What helped you to deal with them?
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 GOD'S 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 Jesus' desire to use you to be a light to others.

CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: Let us now conclude with prayers of thanksgiving, petition and intercession. What are we grateful for? What are you grateful for? For what and for whom do you wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (Together)

*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

In some liturgical years, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord is not celebrated on a Sunday. The Commentary is included here for those years in which it does.

BAPTISM OF THE LORD B

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: *Thank you, Jesus, for gathering us together as we prepare to celebrate your baptism and the beginning of your public ministry. Open our eyes to the meaning of our baptism. Fill us with your Spirit and help us never to be afraid to be public about our commitment to you. 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: The Baptism of the Lord marks the end of the Christmas season and the transition to Ordinary Time (It is the First Sunday in Ordinary Time). It also marks the beginning of Jesus' Public Ministry. The First Reading is a poetic invitation to seek the Lord and receive his blessings. In the Second Reading, John states, among other things, that true love of God is shown by faithfulness to his commandments. In the Gospel, we listen to Mark's account of Jesus' baptism.

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 55:1-11

The exhortation "to seek the Lord while he may be found" does not mean that God is about to relocate or hide ☺. God is always present to us. But we may not always have a desire to seek him. The reading also reminds us that "God's ways and thoughts are not our ways and thoughts." God is a God of surprises. A part of developing a strong faith life is noticing 'God's surprises' whether they are good or painful.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM: Isaiah 12:2-5

With God as our Savior, we need not be afraid.

SECOND READING: 1John 5:1-9

This reading is a testimony to Trinitarian faith. It describes God the Father as the One who begets (the Son); it identifies Jesus as the Son of God; and it credits the Spirit as the One who testifies to the triumph of Jesus' death and Resurrection. It also shows the way believers participate in this Trinitarian reality.

Faith in Jesus makes us children of God. The commandments to be observed are not burdensome. The reference to 'blood and water' points to Jesus' baptism and sacrifice on the Cross.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Mark: 1:7-11

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: Mark 1:7-11

The Gospel has two parts. In the first part, John unequivocally states that Jesus is much more powerful than he is that he is not even worthy to perform such menial task as loosening the strap of

Jesus' sandal. In saying this, John is not demeaning himself but rather glorifying Jesus.

In the second part of the Reading, John contrasts their respective baptisms. His is with water whilst Jesus' will be with the Holy Spirit.

No explanation is given as to why Jesus would submit to a sinner's baptism. Theologians usually interpret it as a symbol of Jesus' *solidarity* with sinful humanity.

The coming of the Spirit accompanied by the words: "*You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased*" is a beautiful act of divine affirmation on Jesus. The Spirit also is the one who will empower the human Jesus to do the works of God: preach with authority, heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead.

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, we are told to "seek the Lord." How much of your day do you spend seeking the Lord's presence in the little things? How often do you discover Him and are comforted?
3. Jesus' baptism was the beginning of his *public* ministry. For many Catholics, their faith is a *private* matter. If you are public about your faith, when did this begin to happen? What helped you to be public about your Catholic faith? If you tend to be very private about your faith, what do you think causes you to be so private?
4. What does it mean to you to be a baptized Catholic?
5. Do you think the Church should baptize children of non-churchgoing Catholics?
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: *Father, thank you for baptizing me into your beloved Son Jesus and giving me your Holy Spirit to help me to live like Jesus in my small part of your creation.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Meditate on the awesome truth that through Baptism, we are in Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be the arms, mouth, feet and heart of Christ to a hurting world.

CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are you grateful for? For what and for whom do you wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (Together)

*Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit,
that my thoughts may all be holy.*

*Act in me, O Holy Spirit,
that my work, too, may be holy.*

*Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit,
that I may love but what is holy.*

*Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit,
to defend all that is holy.*

*Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit,
that I always may be holy.*

Amen.

- St. Augustine