

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 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: *Good and gracious God, you have called each of us by name from our mother's womb, consecrated us and commissioned us to be a light to the nations. Help us to become more deeply aware and responsive to your call. 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: Having completed the Advent/Christmas season, our Church year now moves to the Sundays in *Ordinary Time*. It is important that we do not look upon these Sundays as having lesser importance than the Sundays of the two great seasons of the year (Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter), since *every* Sunday celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus. *Ordinary Time* started last Monday, so this Sunday is the *Second Sunday* in Ordinary Time. This year, in this first section of Ordinary Time, we will have eight Sundays. This Sunday, all three readings speak about how we are *called, consecrated and commissioned* to do God's work.

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 49:3, 5, 6

When commenting on the Book of Isaiah, scholars speak of three Isaiahs. These verses are from second Isaiah (chs 40-55), a prophet during Israel's time in exile. In the reading, the prophet may have been speaking of his own call or the call of Israel to be a light to the nations. Assuming the prophet is writing about himself, he states that he was *chosen* before his birth. He will be glorious before God and have God's strength as his own. The message of the prophet will serve as a light to the nations. The last verse reminds us that God's desire is to save *all* people and not just the chosen people.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 40

The refrain to today's responsorial psalm, "*Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will,*" underlines the importance of obedience in the life of God's servants.

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 1:1-3

For the next seven weeks, the second reading will be from the first four chapters of Paul's First Letter to the church at Corinth. The mixed community of

Gentiles and Jews struggle greatly to integrate their new faith with their Greco-Roman surroundings. In these opening verses, Paul emphasizes how he and his readers and all the baptized have been *called* and *sanctified* by God to continue the work of Jesus.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: John 1:29-34

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 1:29-34

On the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time each year, the Gospel is from John.

Like the *servant* in the first reading and Paul in the second reading, John the Baptist is also *called, consecrated* and *commissioned* to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah.

In this passage, John the Evangelist is addressing the disciples of John the Baptist who continue to believe that John the Baptist is superior to Jesus as he came before Jesus, and because Jesus submitted to being baptized by him (a matter which John the Evangelist has kept silent about). To respond to the faithful disciples of John who maintain their belief in his superiority, John the Evangelist has John the Baptist point to the superiority of Jesus. He does this in several ways. First, John identifies Jesus as the “Lamb of God.” Second, John proclaims that Jesus existed before him: “*A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.*” Third, he states that it is Jesus on whom the Spirit comes, the same Spirit who tells John the Baptist that Jesus is the Chosen Son of God. In all of this, it is as if John the Evangelist is saying to the disciples of John the Baptist: “Look, it is John himself, your leader, who proclaims that Jesus is superior 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. “*Called, consecrated* and *commissioned* by God to do God’s work.” This is pretty awesome! What might help each of us have a greater sense of how we are *called, consecrated* and *commissioned* by God to do his work?
3. Can you relate to the first stanza of the Psalm? If so, in what way?
4. “*Ears open to obedience you gave me.*” What kind of spiritual practices might help us to develop inner ears to hear and respond to God’s Word?
5. In the gospel, John says the Spirit descent upon Jesus like a dove, what signs of the Spirit do you see in other people? What can you do to make the Spirit more evident in your 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, all too often, I look at others who are holier than me as the called, the consecrated and the commissioned by God. Help me to see myself as one called to be a light, your light in my environment.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: Go into the coming days and weeks with a greater sense that God has truly *called, consecrated* and *commissioned* you to do his work on earth.

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 a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the whole world.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Loving God,
You formed me in my mother’s womb,
and in Baptism anointed me to be your
servant. May I respond to your love each day
by the ways in which I seek your will
and then live it, even when that is difficult.
Amen.*

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 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 love, thank you for gathering us together to share your holy Word. Help us to listen to these readings with a fresh mind and heart. Anoint us with your Holy Spirit so that we may have the courage to share our lives with each other and to hear the message you want us to hear. 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.*

Sunday of the Word of God. In an Apostolic Letter issued this past September, Pope Francis declared that the *Third Sunday in Ordinary Time* is to be called **Sunday of the Word of God**. In paragraph 3 of the **Apostolic Letter, Aperuit Illis** (“He opened their minds” [Lk 24:45]), Francis writes: “I hereby declare that the *Third Sunday in Ordinary Time* is to be devoted to the celebration, study and dissemination of the Word of God...communities will find their own ways to mark this Sunday with a certain solemnity.”

[Pope Francis, The Apostolic Letter issued “Motu Proprio” “Aperuit Illis” Instituting the Sunday of the Word of God, The Holy See, Rome, September 30, 2019,

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190930_aperuit-illis.html.] The good news is that all people who gather together each week to study, reflect and pray around the upcoming Sunday readings *are already* doing what Pope Francis asks of all Catholic parishes.

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, Isaiah speaks about a new light that will shine on a land experiencing darkness and oppression. In the Gospel, Jesus presents himself as the fulfillment of the Isaian prophecy. In the second reading, Paul addresses a church family experiencing division.

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 8:23, 9:3

These words from Isaiah were written at a time when a weakened Israel was being overrun by its powerful neighbors. The territories held by the tribes of Zebulon and Naphtali (later known as Galilee) are the first to fall. Isaiah seeks to offer words of hope and consolation to a people experiencing the darkness of oppression. “A new light will shine on a people living in a land of gloom.” Isaiah hopes his prophecy of a new light will be fulfilled in the next King of Israel. In today's Gospel, Jesus sees himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus is the new Light shining on a land and people in darkness.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 27

The psalmist yearns for the light of the temple and that unique presence of God which lifts up the spirit and assures the spiritual and temporal well-being of the people.

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 1:10-13, 17

Paul addresses a community experiencing much divisiveness, which is a form of spiritual darkness. Four splinter groups are identified as having allegiance to Paul, Apollos, Cephas and Christ. They all get a slap on the wrist from Paul for being divisive. They have all been baptized into the same Christ, so there can be only one loyalty – loyalty to Christ. “Can Christ be divided?” Surely not. Christ is one; so must the various households of faith be one. Finally, Paul downgrades human wisdom

when compared to the wisdom of the Cross which is the source of our salvation.

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
Matt 4:12-23**

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 4:12-23

John's imprisonment may have been Jesus' signal to go public with his mission. Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the first reading. Jesus is a light for all to see and experience, including the Gentiles. To further emphasize this, Matthew locates Jesus' ministry in Galilee, a region mainly occupied by Gentiles.

Then we have Jesus' *call to repentance*, which is a call for a new mind and heart, a new hearing and a new radical response to God's Word. The call of the first four apostles is a concrete example of individuals hearing God's call and responding to it with total commitment. Jesus says that the new role of his apostles will be to "catch people."

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 a "new light" that will dispel the darkness. Name one concrete way you can bring God's light into a dark situation.
3. In the second reading, Paul addresses the issue of divisiveness in the Corinthian church. What are the causes of divisiveness in local parishes and in our larger church family? How should we respond to gossip, negativity and divisiveness?

4. What do you need to leave behind in order to become a more committed disciple of Christ?
5. What do you need to repent-change- to reflect the kingdom of heaven at hand?
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 see what I need to leave behind in order to become a more committed disciple of Christ.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Be a reconciling presence where there is divisiveness. Whenever and wherever you find someone living in darkness (loneliness, grief, weak faith, poverty, etc.), be a Christ light to them.

**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 world leaders that they may work towards unity and peace.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Generous God,
I want to believe that I will see
your bounty in the land of the living,
both in heaven and here on earth.
Give me courage
not only to see your light
but also to become your light
that brings rejoicing, peace,
and hope to our world.
Amen.*

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 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 One, you are a God who values the humble and lowly of this world. Give us humble and open hearts to allow your Word to find a home in 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: All three readings speak of attitudes that are central for anyone who wishes to cultivate a close relationship with God.

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: Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12-13

Zephaniah, writing seven centuries before Christ, was referring to a remnant people who remained faithful to God and were blessed with a spirit of total and deep devotion to him. Commenting on this reading, Patricia Sanchez writes:

"Only in a world turned upside down would the humble and lowly be held out as role models for others. Ordinarily, the ambitious, the self-assertive and the aggressive are regarded as earmarked for success, their sure confidence in themselves being their greatest asset. But Zephaniah was offering his contemporaries a different measurement of success and a different base of security that shifts its attention and energies from the standards of success set by the world in order to embrace those suggested by God. While the world would customarily line up behind the brightest, strongest and richest, Zephaniah calls his readers to throw in their lot with the lowly, the humble and the poor. Moreover, he calls them and us to emulate their attitudes and assimilate their virtues."

(Used with permission *The Word We Celebrate: Commentary on the Sunday Lectionary Years A, B, C*, by Patricia Sanchez, - Sheed & Ward publisher (9-1-89.)

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 146

The faithful *remnant* (those who kept faith in God in dark times) are the object of God's special concern, especially the blind, the oppressed, and the stranger.

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 1:26-31

Paul reminds his Corinthian Christian assembly that few of them are wise, influential or well born *in the eyes of the world*. But they are very important *in the eyes of God* because he has made them important through baptism into Christ, giving them a divine status. In God's eyes, intelligence, affluence and social status count for nothing. What counts is one's readiness to surrender his/her life to God.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 5:1-12

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 5:1-12

Matthew 5, 6 and 7 have become known as Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*—the very heart of what Jesus has come to teach. Matthew presents Jesus as the New Moses giving us a new law to live by. For the next several Sundays, we will be listening to excerpts from Jesus' great sermon.

Today, we listen to the first 12 verses of Chapter 5—the Beatitudes. Matthew has nine Beatitudes whereas Luke has four. The Beatitudes are a form of wisdom teaching. They ascribe blessings to the underprivileged and virtuous, and a corresponding reward in the next life. We will see that the behavior Jesus is advocating is very much at odds with society, especially with the powerful in society.

The *'poor in spirit'* know their need for God and trust that God will take care of them. The *'mourners'* grieve because they see evil as having the upper hand. The *'meek'* experience long-suffering and patience. The *'hungry'* long for the establishment of God's reign. The *'merciful'* forgive because *they* have experienced God's mercy. The *'pure in heart'* are the spiritually transparent. The *'peacemakers'* bring about healing among individuals and communities. The final two Beatitudes reflect the situation in the early church in which disciples were being persecuted for their faith.

All the Beatitudes are addressed to the disadvantaged to help them cope with their lot in this world. These people are called blessed because of their readiness to place their trust in God.

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 humble and lowly are acknowledged as the people of God. How does this challenge our cultures measure of success? How does it challenge you?
3. In the second reading, Paul speaks about weakness being turned into strength through the power of God. Has this ever happened to you?

4. Which of the Beatitudes appeal to you most and which one challenges you the most?

5. Create a beatitude based on your own life's experiences, e.g., "*Blessed are those who can forgive life's hurts and find it easy to say, 'I'm sorry, please forgive me.'*"—or "*Blessed are those who can place their trust in God during times of stress and worry.*"

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, help me to seek you even more and find you in my heart.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Choose a Beatitude that challenges you and pray for the grace to live it. If there is someone you need to show mercy to, pray for the grace to do so.

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 the grace to grow in humility, poverty of spirit, mercy, etc. Pray for the grace to know what spiritual exercise will help you to have a fruitful Lenten journey.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are they who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the land.
Blessed are they who hunger and thirst
for righteousness,
for they will be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the clean of heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are they who are persecuted for
the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when they insult you
and persecute you
and utter every kind of evil against you
falsely because of me.
Rejoice and be glad,
for your reward will be great in heaven."
Matthew 5:2-12

PRESENTATION 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: *All powerful Father, Christ your Son became man for us and was presented in the temple. May he free our hearts from sin and bring us into your presence. We ask 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: When solemnities, like the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, fall on a Sunday during Ordinary Time, they take precedence over that Sunday. The significance of this feast is brought out in the first reading which speaks of the Lord coming to occupy his Temple. In the Gospel, God comes to his Temple in the form of the Infant Jesus. In the second reading, Jesus is presented as the high priest who removes the sins of his people.

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: Malachi 3:1-4

Like many of his colleagues, the prophet Malachi has the difficult task of speaking an unwelcome message to the leaders and people of his time. In this post-exilic community, the liturgical and communal life of the people has deteriorated to such an extent that the prophet has to call to task the laxity of the clergy. In today's reading, the prophet speaks about a "messenger" who will come to prepare a way for the Lord, who will in turn cleanse his Temple of sinful practices so that worthy worship can once again be offered. Christians, in retrospect, saw the messenger as John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus and who in time would cleanse the Temple of beggars and sellers.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 24

This is a psalm of praise to the King of Glory.

SECOND READING: Hebrews 2:14-18

As a result of the "Fall," all human beings came under the power of Satan, especially when they sinned. They also lived in the shadow of "fear of death." When Jesus came, he totally shared our human condition even to the point of death. But when God raised Jesus up, he broke the power of death and the hold that Satan had on humanity. Through his saving work, Jesus becomes a *merciful* and *faithful*

high priest before God. Jesus' faithfulness should be a model to all who may be tempted to despair in a time of persecution.

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

Because Mary and Joseph are devout Jews, they are obedient to the laws of their religious tradition. So this holy family makes the journey to the Temple to fulfill three different religious rites all related to the birth of Jesus: *purification, redemption and presentation.*

Purification. In biblical religions, contact with blood made a person unclean and ineligible to enter the Temple for worship. Bringing to the Temple a "sin

offering”—a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons (the offering for a poor couple)—cleanses Mary and restores her to the worshipping community.

Redemption. According to Ex 13:1-2, every male child belongs to God and must be “brought back” (redeemed); a male child is redeemed at the end of one month for five sanctuary shekels (Nm 18:16). Luke mentions no payment for Jesus for he already belongs to God. Luke downplays the redemption ritual by saying that the purpose of the visit to Jerusalem is to present Jesus to the Lord as it is written in the law of the Lord (2:22-23).

Presentation. Technically, there is neither any biblical law nor any known custom pertaining to the presentation of a child in the Temple. Luke is using this language to allude to the story of Hannah presenting her child Samuel to Eli for service at the Sanctuary (1Sam 1:22-24). Luke’s purpose is to show that the Holy Family is obedient to the law of the Lord. This obedience to God in all things will characterize Jesus’ life and bring his mission to completion on the Cross.

This story also signals Jesus’ single-minded devotion to his Father and how that must transcend even his devotion to his earthly parents.

Finally, the story features two very devout Jews who have waited all their lives for this moment. *Simeon* means “God has heard.” He speaks an ominous word to Mary about “*a sword that will pierce her heart*”—an obvious reference to the sufferings Mary will endure because she is the mother of Jesus. A prophetess, *Anna*, whose name means “grace or favor,” is presented as the ideal Jewess. Being widowed, childless and old, she is totally dependent on God’s mercy and perfectly equipped to recognize it when it appears. She heralds the Child as the One who will redeem Jerusalem.

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. “*Lo! I am sending you as a messenger to prepare the way before you.*” How are you or how can you be a messenger of the Lord?

3. Paul tells us that Jesus through his own death and resurrection freed us from death and the fear of death. Still, people fear death. Discuss.

4. Who are the Anna’s and Simeon’s in your life and/or parish? What role do they play?

5. In the Gospel, Simeon says to Mary that because of her Child, her heart will be pierced with sorrow. What actions of children can pierce the heart of a parent? Do you have a personal experience you can share?

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, help us to be like Simeon and Anna, prophetic in our own way and prayerful. Help us to be your messenger in our world.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: Write a note of thanks to one of the Anna’s and Simeon’s in your life, thanking them for their ministry of care.

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 parents and teenagers who are experiencing difficulties in their relationships. Pray for homeless and runaway teens.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

God of glory

on this day of presentation,

we present ourselves to you.

Purify us to become more holy.

We see in others what beauty

a lifetime of grace can create.

We want to be like that.

Lead us in your everlasting way.

Amen.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 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: *Jesus, our Brother, you came among us to show us the way to live. You call us to be the salt of the earth and a light for people living in darkness. You call us to work not for our own glory but that our actions may lead others to praise you and follow your ways. May your Holy Spirit be with us now and open our hearts to hear 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: The Christian is called to be a light to others (Gospel), especially by reaching out to the person in need (first reading). In the second reading, Paul continues his discussion about divine and human wisdom.

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 58:7-10

This reading is from Third Isaiah (chps. 56-66), a post-exilic prophet. The people of Israel who had been taken into exile have just returned. Their land is devastated and their religious life is in chaos. To seek the Lord's favor, they begin a series of penitential fasts. But it seems their fasting is not the type that pleases the Lord. If they want to please God, they need to practice a religious piety that leads them "to share their bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and homeless, clothe the naked." They also need to "remove from their midst false accusations and malicious speech." If they do these things, their "light shall break forth like the dawn and their wound shall quickly be healed."

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 112

The theme of light and righteous living is echoed in this Psalm.

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 2:1-5

Corinth has many learned people who may have expected Paul to possess great oratorical skills. But Paul lets his audience know that he comes to them,

not with fancy verbal tricks, but with humility, fear and trembling. He trusts, not in his own preaching gifts, but in the power of the Holy Spirit to touch hearts. Preaching a crucified Christ may be a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who believe, it is the power of God.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 5:13-16

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 5:13-16

Commenting on this Gospel, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

Matthew has already introduced Jesus as the light of a darkened world (4:12-16). Now the function of enlightening and guiding a morally confused humanity is shared with his disciples.

Salt and light are powerful images. In the ancient world, salt was one of the most important necessities of life, especially for preserving and seasoning food. So too was light for obvious reasons. Both images are making the same point: Christians are called to bear witness to Christ before unbelievers through their good deeds. When the disciples stop witnessing through their deeds, they become as useless as salt that has lost its taste or a lamp that doesn't give light.

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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 about “sharing bread with the hungry and clothing the naked.” If there is a food pantry in your area, do you bring food for the needy? If there is a thrift store in your area, do you donate clothes and other stuff? If you do not support a local food pantry or thrift store, why not?
3. Paul went to the Corinthians “in weakness and in fear.” Have you ever had that experience of approaching someone in weakness and in fear? If so, how was that experience for you?
4. Who is a ‘salt of the earth’ type of person in your life? What does it mean to you concretely to be salt and light in your environment?
5. What light (gift) do you hesitate to share with others?
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 caring God, in your word today you call us to be light in the world by sharing our blessings with others. Help me to act on that word by word and deeds.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: Look in your closet and see what the Holy Spirit may lead you to take to the local thrift store.

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 who do not see themselves as salt of light, that they may become aware and accepting of their beauty before God.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Jesus, you call us to be salt and light to the world.
Help us to not lose our flavor
nor allow us to hide our light.
Help us daily to give glory
to your heavenly Father.
Amen.*

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 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: *Good and loving God, you created us out of love and you call us to live according to your way of love. Fill us with your heavenly wisdom as we gather together to share life and share your Word. 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, Sirach urges his readers to hold fast to God's law. In the Gospel, Jesus raises the observance of God's law to a new level. In the second reading, Paul continues his discussion on godly and human wisdom.

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 15:15-20

This book of Sirach is a collection of moral maxims compiled by a sage in Jerusalem in the early second century B.C. It is written for Greek-speaking Jews living outside their homeland. Sirach hopes to show the superiority of Israel's scriptures in a time of growing interest in Greek philosophy.

In today's verses, Sirach presents obedience to God's law as the road that leads to life, and rejection of his commandments as the way that leads to death. The choice is ours. Of course, when we come to the New Testament, we will learn that believers receive God's grace to enable them to live his way of love.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 119

These verses from the longest psalm in the Psalter celebrate the blessings of living one's life according to the law of God.

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 2:6-10

God's wisdom is contrasted with human wisdom. The mature believer knows and embraces God's wisdom which, in a way, is a mystery. It is private knowledge attained only through revelation and

faith. It is wisdom revealed to us through Jesus and available to us as we live in the Spirit.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt 5:17-27

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 5:17-27

Matthew, a Jewish convert to Christianity, is writing to a Christian community made up of mostly Jews and some Gentiles. He seeks to help his fellow Jews to see that Jesus came not to abolish the Law, but to bring it to fulfillment—to purify it and to offer an authentic interpretation of the Law.

Matthew presents Jesus as One who brings the Law to a new level. He shows Jesus *respecting* the Law but also going *beyond* the Law when he says time and again, “*You have heard it said...but I say to you....*” Jesus does to the Law what the “cleaners” have done to Michelangelo’s paintings in the Sistine Chapel—removing years of grime to reveal the true beauty and glory of the master’s work. Today’s Gospel gives us three instances where Jesus purifies the Law and seeks to raise it to a new level.

Murder, anger and reconciliation. Jesus says, “*You teach that murder is wrong. I agree. But have you forgotten that rage and anger, the root causes of murder, are also wrong?*” Jesus wants his listeners to reflect on what provokes the commission of murder. As someone once said, “Murder begins in the seething heart that is not cooled.” Then Jesus proceeds to condemn abusive language and name-calling which flow from an angry heart. This violation of the Law is so bad that it deserves hell. Jesus goes on to say that reconciliation is more important to God than sacrifice. Offering gifts to God is useless if we ignore wounded relationships with family members or friends. In our reconciliation efforts, we must leave no stone unturned.

Adultery and lust. A double standard existed in the Old Testament when it came to fidelity in marriage. In uncovering the true meaning of this commandment, Jesus goes to the heart of the matter by stating that adultery is much more than just physical. It is primarily a matter of the heart. Adultery originates with a lustful thought or look. “The thought is the father of the deed.” By condemning adulterous looks and thoughts towards a woman, Jesus elevates the woman’s status to that of her male counterpart. Neither man nor woman should be seen or treated as a sexual object. Jesus is inviting his disciples to view women in a whole new way.

Divorce. This is perhaps the most controversial of the issues addressed in today’s Gospel. Over the centuries, various denominations have interpreted Jesus’ teaching on divorce in different ways. The fact is that his condemnation of divorce is a monumental step forward since, prior to his time, a

husband could divorce his wife for little or no reason. Here, Jesus is saying that divorcing one’s spouse is wrong. By doing so, Jesus is giving women a whole new security, and he challenges the men of his day to have a whole new respect for women. Marriage until death is affirmed as the Gospel norm.

Oaths. Considering the ways of the world, it would seem that Jesus’ approach is totally impractical when it comes to telling the truth. He exhorts us to simply tell the truth, whatever the circumstance. “*Let your ‘yes’ mean ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ mean ‘no.’ Anything more is from the evil one.*” We are bound to tell the truth not only when we take an official oath to do so but as our life principle, i.e., consistently and without exception.

Commenting on today’s Gospel, William Byron, S. J., writes:

Let’s take these three goals—avoiding anger, abolishing lustful desire, and committing oneself to honest speech—and consider not only how much our personal morality would improve if we adopted them as personal objectives, but also how much better off our world would be if all its inhabitants made these goals their own. The commitment to anger avoidance would mean non-violence in our midst and hence an end to war. The commitment to purity of heart would mean an end to pornography, prostitution, sexual exploitation, and marital infidelity. The commitment to truth-telling would mean integrity in business, government, and all other areas of human interaction. What a social revolution that would be! What a better world we would have!

(Excerpt from *The Word Proclaimed, A Homily for Every Sunday of the Year; Year A* by William J. Byron, SJ, Copyright © 2013 by William J. Byron. Paulist Press, Inc., New York/Mahawah, NJ. Reprinted by permission of Paulist Press, Inc.)

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 are some characteristics of a truly wise person?

3. In your opinion, *why* do people use abusive language and name-calling in their conversation? How can this downward trend be avoided?

4. What are some keys to faithfulness in marriage? How does one remain chaste in mind, word and deed in a heavily sexualized culture?

5. What can help us to always speak the truth and avoid saying what we think others want to hear?

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: *God, you gave us the gift of speech to praise you and lift up others. Help me to say 'No' to all forms of malicious speech, and help me to be chaste in mind, word and deed.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: The temptation to misuse the lovely gift of speech that turns into impure words and deeds is very prevalent today. This week, ask Jesus to help you to say 'No' to all forms of temptation.

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 who do not yet know or follow the laws of God, that they may be converted and live fully.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Instruct us, O Lord, in your ways.

Free us to seek you,

even when you ask from us

more than we think we are able to give.

Help us to be an example

that invites others to you

rather than leads them away.

Amen.

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 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: *Good and holy God, in our Word today, you call us to be holy. As we prepare to listen to your Word, cleanse our being of all unholy thoughts and distractions. Teach us the way of holiness. 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 first reading calls us to live a life of holiness. One way to do this is to live a life of mercy towards all who offend us. In the second reading, Paul reminds the Corinthians that their body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He also tells them that destroying the unity and the harmony of the community defiles the very holiness of God.

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: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

The writer reminds his fellow Israelites of their call to live a holy life. He then tells us, his readers, that a life of holiness is manifested through acts of love, mercy and kindness, particularly towards those who have hurt us.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 103

This Psalm sings the praises of a God of mercy.

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 3:16-23

Paul is warning those who are endangering the unity of the community by their words and deeds that they will be severely punished for their divisive behavior. *"If anyone destroys God's Temple (i.e., the Body of Christ), God will destroy him."*

Paul goes on to debunk human wisdom which the Corinthians boast about. He tells his readers: *"The wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God."*

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt 5:38-48

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 5:38-48

This is a continuation of last week's Gospel in which Jesus changes the way the Jews should live the Torah, the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Two issues are addressed: retaliation and attitude toward enemies. He tells them how disciples should deal with personal offenses: *"You have heard it said: 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But what I say to you is this: offer no resistance to one who is evil."* In our efforts to be faithful to this command of the Lord, we should make a distinction between violent and non-violent resistance, the latter having been the tactic used very effectively by people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King. We can and should use every kind of non-violent resistance to those who mistreat us.

Commenting on these verses, Margaret Nutting Ralph writes: *This teaching of Jesus is not asking the disciples to do harm to themselves by remaining in an abusive situation. Nor is it suggesting that they stand by unmoved while a third party is*

mistreated. Jesus' words do not address either of those situations. Rather, it is teaching them that they must not adopt the methods of evildoers by acting in kind, nor may they relieve themselves of their responsibility to give witness to God's love in situations where the other person is failing to love them.

(Excerpt from *Breaking Open the Lectionary, Cycle A*, by Margaret Nutting Ralph copyright © 2007 by Margaret Nutting Ralph. Paulist Press, Inc., New York/Mahwah, NJ. Reprinted by permission of Paulist Press, Inc. www.paulistpress.com)

Jesus goes on to say that we must not only love our friends but also our enemies, for God's light shines on the good as well as the bad. As stated above, no matter how a person treats Jesus' followers, they must continue to treat every other person with love. While dying on the Cross, Jesus loved his enemies by forgiving them. With God's grace, we can do the same. (For more on this issue, see my book *How to Forgive Yourself and Others.*)

Today's Gospel ends with the words: "*Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Here Jesus is holding up God's love as a model for his disciples' love. It is a concluding statement to the words about God allowing his sun to shine on the good and the bad. In a similar way, disciples must seek to act on a godlike way with all people, loving the bad as well as the good.

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 is your definition of holiness? What are some traits of a holy person?
3. If we are very conscious that we and others are a temple of the Holy Spirit, how might that impact the way we relate to ourselves and to others?
4. What helps you to love those who hurt you? Concretely, what might it mean for you to offer non-violent resistance to people who mistreat you on a regular basis?

5. The final verse of the gospel is a big challenge. "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." What helps you to become "perfect"?

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

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Name one way you can put into action the messages of today's readings.

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, there's so much violence in our world and so much negative and divisive talk on television, and maybe in our lives. Help me to only speak words that build others up and to avoid words that cause division and hurt.*

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 who seek revenge or retaliation, that they may embrace the way of love.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Holy God,
You call us to be holy for you are holy.
Holiness means we live the way of Jesus.
This comforts us at times,
and challenges us deeply at other times.
Open my mind and heart to your Spirit within
so that my struggle to walk Jesus' talk
can make what seems impossible possible
and worth the effort.
Amen.*