

A LECTOR'S GUIDE & COMMENTARY

TO THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

YEAR A

J. TED BLAKLEY



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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

Isaiah 40:8

A LECTOR'S GUIDE AND COMMENTARY *to the Revised Common Lectionary* is a three-volume work (hereafter, LGC). Year A is the first volume in the series, but it is not the first volume in the series to be published. When I was first commissioned by St. Mark's Press to write the LGC, the plan had been to produce a single volume containing all three years of the lectionary cycle. This plan was abandoned a few months into the project when it became apparent that there would not be enough time to complete all three years before the publication deadline. Since the deadline was midway through lectionary Year B, it was agreed that Year C would be the first volume to be published.

It has been a very interesting and busy year since the release of Year C. I have had the opportunity to travel around the country to promote the Press and its publications. I took the Press to The General Convention of The Episcopal Church in Anaheim, California as well as to a number of diocesan conventions and councils in the Midwest. Because of the LGC, I was invited by St. Paul's Cathedral in Oklahoma City to conduct an all-day lectors training. I have enjoyed meeting and talking with so many wonderful, faithful people. Most of the people I meet are quite surprised to learn that St. Mark's Press is actually a parish-based ministry of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church and that it is located in Wichita, Kansas. For the past thirty-five years, the Press has been in the ministry of supporting Christian worship through the publication of lectionaries and other liturgical resources. And I am quite thankful to have this opportunity to contribute to what God is doing through the mission and ministry of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church and St. Mark's Press.

Though my scholarly training has been primarily in the area of New Testament, my ambition is to be a *biblical* scholar. That is, I do not simply want to be a New Testament or an Old Testament specialist, but a scholar who seeks to understand and convey how the Old and New Testaments relate to one another and function together as Holy Scripture, bearing witness to the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. To borrow from the words of Jesus, I want to be a "scribe who has been trained for the kingdom," who like the master of a household, "brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt 13:52). Achieving this ambition has become more and more difficult in a day and age of increasing specialization. I am sincerely grateful, therefore, to have been entrusted with a project that affords me the opportunity to research, study, and write about nearly every book in the Bible. Again let me offer my sincerest gratitude to St. Mark's Press and Good Shepherd Episcopal Church for their ongoing encouragement and support.

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Special thanks goes to Rebekah Blakley, Christine Seaton, and Charlotte Crandall for their willing and tireless editing and re-editing of the manuscript. Any errors or idiosyncrasies that remain are mine and mine alone.

Lastly, I wish to extend my sincerest love and thanks to my wife Rebekah and to our children: Emma (9), Thaddaeus (6), and Esther (1½). Thanks just does not quite cover the sacrifices you all have made, the long days, the long nights, and the inevitable stress that such an undertaking can have upon a family. I love you a whole sky full.

As I wrote in Year C, my hope and prayer is that *A Lector's Guide and Commentary* will contribute to what God is doing, specifically, to the recovery of our vocation as God's image-bearers in a world that desperately needs us. May we, as the Spirit-empowered Body of Christ, learn how to love God with all that we are and have and hope to be and learn to love our neighbors as ourselves, be they friend or foe.

Blessings.

J. Ted Blakley
Season after Pentecost, 2010

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INTRODUCTION

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:10–11

The Word that God speaks and the Word that God is is a dynamic, powerful and effective word. In Isaiah 55, the Word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD is characterized as life-producing and life-sustaining, qualities manifest throughout the biblical narrative. By his eternal Word, God spoke creation into being. Where before there had been nothing but the nothingness of chaos, God, through his Word, fashioned fertile and habitable spaces, where the life God created might take root and flourish. By his eternal Word made manifest in the Law, the LORD sustained his chosen people, Israel, that they might become a nation of priests, who would mediate the presence, knowledge, and forgiveness of God to all peoples everywhere. Then, in the fullness of time, God's eternal Word became a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, the one Israelite who perfectly and obediently fulfilled Israel's vocation to be the light of the world. Through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of his forever incarnate Word, God has redeemed the world and inaugurated the New Creation, to be consummated when the incarnate Word of God returns.

When, as Christians, we profess the Bible to be the Word of God, whatever else we might mean by this, we are claiming that the Bible possesses the qualities of God's eternal Word: it is dynamic, powerful, effectual, life-giving, and life-sustaining. In addition, we are claiming that the Story of the Word is of central importance for the whole world. This Story is the good news of how the God of creation became a creature so that the old creation, which had become subject to sin, violence, and death might give way to the New Creation, where human beings would finally fulfill their original calling to be faithful stewards and the bearers of God's image in the world.

From the very first days of the Church until now, Holy Scripture has played a vital role in the life and worship of Christian communities. In the Scriptures, we discover our true identity as God's chosen and beloved people. When we enter into the biblical Story, we are encountered by the God who created us and sustains us, the God who

loves, rescues, and restores us, and the God who equips and empowers us to participate in the New Creation, enabling us to love God, to love our neighbors, and even to love our enemies. Thus, the ongoing proclamation of the Word of God through preaching, teaching, *and* the public reading of Holy Scripture continues to be a central and vital ministry of the Church.

When the Bible is read aloud in a setting of communal worship, the Word of God is activated and sent forth. Therefore, those who read the Bible publicly are a principal means by which the Word of God accomplishes God's purposes. This is why the Church needs not only gifted preachers and teachers, but gifted lectors and lay readers. *A Lector's Guide and Commentary to the Revised Common Lectionary* is designed to equip and prepare those who are called and privileged with the responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God through the public reading of Holy Scripture. The Guide does this by providing a brief, reliable commentary for each lectionary reading, and then by offering suggestions for how the text can be delivered aloud so that the Story of the Word might have its full impact on the Christian community gathered for worship.

Although the Guide is designed first and foremost for lectors and lay readers, it has also been written with other groups and uses in mind. For example, the Guide can be used to trigger discussions in a Sunday school class or small group Bible study, or it could serve as a resource for personal study, reflection, and devotion. The Guide can assist lay Eucharistic ministers who deliver the Word and Sacrament to shut-ins, and even function as a first stop for preachers and teachers.

BASIC FEATURES OF THE GUIDE

A Lector's Guide and Commentary is for use by any Christian congregation or tradition that follows the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). It also includes the adaptations authorized for use in The Episcopal Church; these are described below. The following describes the basic features of the Guide.

Notes

Some of the lectionary readings include brief notes, which are of two kinds: Suggested Reading and Sequence.

Suggested Reading. According to the RCL, when it is appropriate, readings may be lengthened at discretion. The RCL includes suggested lengthenings, which are cited in parentheses. For example, the OT reading for Epiphany 5 is cited as Isaiah 58:1–9a, (9b–12). The person responsible for selecting the readings must decide whether Isaiah 58:1–9a or Isaiah 58:1–12 is to be read.

Occasionally, the Guide offers its own suggestion for lengthening a reading; these suggestions are found in the Notes. For example, in the RCL, the OT reading for Proper 22 is Exodus 20:1–4, 7–9, 12–20. But I think it important for the whole of the Ten Commandments to be read, and so I suggest that Exodus 20:1–20 be read in its entirety.

In most congregations, a pastor, priest, or preacher determines whether a reading will be lengthened. However, if you as a lector think that your assigned reading would

benefit from being lengthened, discuss this with the person responsible for making those decisions.

Sequence. One of the benefits of the RCL is that it provides many opportunities for continuous or semi-continuous reading of biblical texts. For example, in Year A, the Gospel of Matthew is read every Sunday in the Season after Pentecost, twenty-nine Propers in all. Since one of the chief goals of the Commentary portion is to situate a reading within its larger literary context, the Notes will indicate when a lectionary reading occurs in a sequence of readings from the same biblical book. With this information, a reader who wants to understand more about their assigned text has the opportunity to explore the Commentary for the previous and/or subsequent weeks' readings.

For example, on Epiphany 2, the Notes for Isaiah 49:1–7 reads: *Sequence.* 3 of 4. This indicates that Isaiah 49:1–7 is the third of four sequential OT readings from Isaiah. Consider also the Notes for Matthew 5:38–48 for Proper 2, which reads: *Sequence.* 2 of 29 (Sermon on the Mount, 2 of 4). This indicates that Matthew 5:38–48 is the second in a sequence of twenty-nine gospel readings from Matthew and that it is the second in a sequence of four readings from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Commentary

When we are unclear about the purpose and meaning of a biblical text, our uncertainty and confusion can be conveyed to our listeners in our reading of the text. The converse is equally true. Even when we possess just a basic understanding of a text, we are able to communicate that understanding to our listeners, often intuitively in subtle, yet very significant ways (for example, through our tone of voice, our tempo and pace, our overall demeanor, and so on). To assist lectors in communicating meaning, the Guide provides a Commentary for every lectionary reading (except for the Psalms and other scriptures that serve as The Response to the first reading).

The purpose of the Commentary is to help lectors gain a better understanding and feel for their assigned passage so that they can read it with confidence and understanding. To do this, the Commentary sometimes provides background information in order to situate a reading within its broader historical and cultural contexts. Sometimes references are made to other biblical events and passages of Scripture in order to locate a reading within the wider biblical context and to show what role it plays within the larger Christian Story. When this occurs, the other biblical passages are cited so that readers can consult them. If the cited passage happens to be a lectionary reading from Year A, then the day on which that reading occurs is also cited. For example, in the gospel reading for Epiphany 4, Jesus makes reference to Elijah's healing of a Gentile, so the Commentary offers the following parenthetical citation: *1 Kgs 17:8–24, Prop 5*. Armed with this information, a reader can look up the story in 1 Kings and consult its commentary in Proper 5.

Most of all, readings are interpreted within their own literary contexts. For example, when addressing a reading from one of the gospels, the Commentary generally includes comments about what has happened in the narrative prior to the assigned reading. In addition, if the reading exhibits any of the gospel writer's trademark motifs or themes, these are discussed as well. Here, the goal of the Commentary is to

help readers see that their assigned texts are not individual, isolated units that stand on their own, but that they belong to larger narratives, teachings, arguments, and stories. Inevitably, this broadening of the horizons will have a positive effect on one's understanding and delivery of Scripture.

Suggestions for Lectors

Understanding the meaning and purpose of a biblical text is just the first step in fulfilling our role as lectors and lay readers. The second step involves learning how to convey that understanding to our listeners through our reading of the text. To assist in this task, the Guide provides Suggestions for Lectors, which offers specific advice and practical suggestions, not absolute rules, for how the text can be delivered so that it might have its intended rhetorical impact upon its listeners.

As with the Commentary, the Suggestions for Lectors does not seek to be exhaustive; it does not comment on every aspect of a text but merely draws attention to its more prominent features. The Suggestions for Lectors does not presume to offer the only, or even the best, way to read a given text aloud. After all, biblical texts are not dead or inert, rather they are dynamic, alive, and rich with meaning. A single passage of Scripture often lends itself to multiple interpretations and thus to multiple ways of being read that are faithful to its meaning and intent. This is not to say that every interpretation of a text is a faithful interpretation; only that a single reading can never capture or convey everything within a given biblical text. One of the benefits of following a lectionary cycle of readings is that it gives us the opportunity to revisit the same text again and again. This allows texts to unfold and reveal more of their meaning over time. In short, the Suggestions for Lectors should be taken as just that, suggestions. They are not designed to replace, but to complement, a lector's own engagement with the biblical text and their own experience as a reader.

Pronunciation Guide

If a reading contains names or words that are potentially unfamiliar or difficult to pronounce, phonetic pronunciations are included in the Pronunciation Guide that immediately follows the Suggestions for Lectors. For names that occur frequently, pronunciations are not generally included with the reading; instead, these can be found in the Comprehensive Pronunciation Guide at the end of the book, which offers pronunciations for all the biblical names that occur in the Year A readings. There you will also find the Pronunciation Key.

† Adaptations to the RCL for use in The Episcopal Church

Recently, The Episcopal Church adopted the RCL as its official lectionary, albeit in a slightly adapted form. In the Guide, the adaptations for use in The Episcopal Church have been marked with the symbol, †. The following discussion provides a few more details regarding these adaptations.

In 2000, the 73rd General Convention of The Episcopal Church approved the continued trial use of the RCL, and at the same time, authorized a number of adaptations. Three years later, the 74th General Convention approved the continued trial use of the adapted RCL. Then, in 2006, the 75th General Convention directed that the RCL, along with the authorized adaptations, become the official lectionary of

The Episcopal Church beginning in Advent 2007.

Most of the adaptations are minor. For example, many concern the Response to the first reading, where a Cantic from the BCP replaces a Psalm or other biblical text serving as the Response. For example, for Easter Vigil, Cantic 9 replaces Isaiah 12:2–6 as the Response for Isaiah 55:1–11. This is certainly a minor change as Cantic 9 is the First Song of Isaiah (*Ecce, Deus*) and is taken directly from Isaiah 12:2–6. Other minor adaptations include the omission of certain alternative readings. So, for the gospel reading in Lent 2, the RCL permits reading either John 3:1–17 *or* Matthew 17:1–9, whereas the adaptations omit the Matthew reading altogether. In addition, the Episcopal adaptations include readings for days and services that the RCL makes no provision for, including weekday readings for Easter week and readings for the Vigil of Pentecost. The most significant adaptations occur in the Christmas season, where the readings authorized for Christmas 1 and 2 are entirely different than those provided in the RCL.

THE PUBLIC READING OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

As we have seen, the Suggestions for Lectors offers guidance for reading a given biblical text. What follows below is more general advice on the public reading of Holy Scripture, which applies to all biblical texts. No attempt has been made to be comprehensive; these are just a few things to keep in mind as you seek to develop and hone your skills as a lector. For more detailed guidance consult the following:

Clayton J. Schmit. *Public Reading of Scripture: A Handbook*. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2002.

Virginia Meagher and Paul Turner. *The Liturgical Ministry Series: Guide for Lectors*. Chicago, Ill.: Liturgy Training Publications, 2007.

Prepare! Prepare! Prepare!

As a lector charged with proclaiming the Word of God through the public reading of Holy Scripture, nothing is as important as spending quality time in preparation. Preachers, teachers, musicians, soloists, and choirs need preparation, and so do readers. So always *Prepare! Prepare! Prepare!* How much time one will need for preparation depends upon a variety of factors and will vary from person to person and from text to text. The goal of preparation is to become so familiar with your assigned passage and with your plan of delivery that you can read it before others with relative ease and confidence. Preparation includes the following basic elements.

Get to know your text. Getting to know your text involves reading it through multiple times until you no longer stumble over words or phrases or lose your place. Getting to know your text also involves understanding its meaning. Reading is an act of interpretation, so when you read a biblical text in worship, you are offering an interpretation of Scripture, *your* interpretation. So study the text, seeking to discern its meaning and purpose; the Commentary will assist you. In addition, make the text personal by identifying with someone or something in the text or by incorporating

the text into your devotional life in the week leading up to your reading.

Practice reading your text aloud. In the same way singers practice their songs aloud, it makes sense for readers to practice their readings aloud. As Clay Schmit notes, reading aloud helps you identify any potential problems with pronunciation, pauses, and pacing in a way that reading silently to yourself cannot. Look up any words whose pronunciations you are unsure about. Then read and re-read those words along with any other tricky phrases, sentences, or sections until you can read everything smoothly and easily. Vary the tempo and the stresses until the reading feels right to you. Rehearse your text aloud before others and elicit their feedback. Consider taping yourself and listening to your reading, even if only occasionally.

Loud and Clear

As you read, control the volume of your voice so that you can speak each word loudly and clearly. It is easy to read too quietly, but almost impossible to read too loudly. There is no need to shout, but simply read with more intensity, letting the strength of your voice come from your gut (your diaphragm) and not your throat.

Pace and Tempo

Pace and tempo has to do with the speed at which one reads a text. While it is possible to read too slowly, the more common problem is reading too quickly. Reading too quickly is often a symptom of nervousness, which can be addressed by adequate preparation and which will decrease with experience. So, force yourself to read at a slow and deliberate pace, never hurried.

Pauses

Knowing when to pause and for how long is perhaps the finest skill a reader can develop. Pauses in reading are like rests in music. A well-placed pause can transform a poor reading into a great reading. A slight pause after each sentence, and sometimes additional pauses within a sentence, helps the thought sink in and gives your listeners time to reflect on it, which enables them to follow the passage more intelligently. Pauses also mark major transitions—between scenes, between movements, etc.

Reading vs. Dramatic Reading

While it is important that lectors read with emotion and with variations of tone and mood in their voice, it is also important that their reading not become a dramatic reading. Remember that your listeners know that you are reading, so they do not expect you to employ hand gestures, facial expressions, or the expressiveness of voice associated with a dramatic reading or play.

In our capacity as lectors, we are readers not actors, so we only provide hints of the joy, anger, or frustration of the characters in the stories we read. This can be accomplished by putting ourselves in a particular frame of mind—awe, for instance—and then letting that awe express itself in and through our reading in subtle yet significant ways. As lectors, we allow the text to provide the primary emotional and tonal input, while we serve only to support the text through the subtle modifications of our voice.

Eye Contact

When it comes to making eye contact with your listeners, there are two schools of thought: one says that eye contact is absolutely essential, and the other says it is not necessary. I have witnessed both approaches and found them both to work equally well. In the end, the effectiveness of either depends primarily upon the personality, demeanor, and comfort level of the individual reader. My advice to lectors is that they experiment and decide upon an approach that works for them. If a lector possesses good reading skills, then eye contact or the lack thereof makes little difference.

That being said, if you are a reader who prefers not to look up or make eye contact with your listeners during your reading, then be sure to make eye contact before you begin reading and after you have finished. This helps create and maintain a connection with your listeners.

On the other hand, if you are a reader who likes to make eye contact with your listeners, avoid bobbing your head up and down. Looking up for the sake of looking up can be quite distracting. Instead, only look up to reinforce a message that is being conveyed at a particular point in the reading. Suggestions for when to look up are included in the Suggestions for Lectors.

Handling Mistakes Gracefully

While we certainly wish to avoid mistakes, as readers our focus and energy is not on producing a flawless reading free of all mistakes but on conveying a text's meaning to our listeners. No matter how well one prepares for a reading, mistakes can and will occur. Thus, you will want to think through how you intend to handle mistakes with poise and grace so as to minimize further distraction.

When we stumble over a word or phrase, our listeners' attention is momentarily drawn to our mistake, which may cause them to miss the next few seconds of the reading. If the mistake is minor, it is appropriate to continue without attempting to correct it. If, however, you think the meaning of the text has been compromised or lost, do not be afraid to pause, take a short breath, and start the whole sentence over; this will help your listeners get back into the flow of the reading. Do not attempt to make up for your mistake by simply repeating the missed word or phrase. Also, avoid the temptation to say *Excuse me* or *I'm sorry*, which only creates further distraction for your listeners.

If you make a number of errors within the opening sentences of your reading, instead of trying to continue on and plow through the reading as if nothing happened, simply stop and start over from the beginning. On this occasion, it would be appropriate to say something simple like, *Let's try this again*.

ABBREVIATIONS

OLD TESTAMENT

Gen	<i>Genesis</i>
Exod	<i>Exodus</i>
Lev	<i>Leviticus</i>
Num	<i>Numbers</i>
Deut	<i>Deuteronomy</i>
Josh	<i>Joshua</i>
Judg	<i>Judges</i>
Ruth	<i>Ruth</i>
1–2 Sam	<i>1–2 Samuel</i>
1–2 Kgs	<i>1–2 Kings</i>
1–2 Chr	<i>1–2 Chronicles</i>
Ezra	<i>Ezra</i>
Neh	<i>Nehemiah</i>
Esth	<i>Esther</i>
Job	<i>Job</i>
Ps, Pss	<i>Psalms, Psalms</i>
Prov	<i>Proverbs</i>
Eccl	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Song	<i>Song of Songs</i>
Isa	<i>Isaiah</i>
Jer	<i>Jeremiah</i>
Lam	<i>Lamentations</i>
Ezek	<i>Ezekiel</i>
Dan	<i>Daniel</i>
Hos	<i>Hosea</i>
Joel	<i>Joel</i>
Amos	<i>Amos</i>
Obad	<i>Obadiah</i>
Jonah	<i>Jonah</i>
Mic	<i>Micah</i>
Nah	<i>Nahum</i>
Hab	<i>Habakkuk</i>
Zeph	<i>Zephaniah</i>
Hag	<i>Haggai</i>
Zech	<i>Zechariah</i>
Mal	<i>Malachi</i>

APOCRYPHA/DEUTEROCANONICAL

Tob	<i>Tobit</i>
Jdt	<i>Judith</i>
Wis	<i>Wisdom of Solomon</i>

Sir	<i>Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)</i>
Bar	<i>Baruch</i>
Let Jer	<i>Letter of Jeremiah</i>
Sus	<i>Susanna</i>
Bel	<i>Bel and the Dragon</i>
1–2 Macc	<i>1–2 Maccabees</i>
1 Esd	<i>1 Esdras</i>
Pr Man	<i>Prayer of Manasseh</i>
Psalms 151	<i>Ps 151</i>
3 Macc	<i>3 Maccabees</i>
2 Esd	<i>2 Esdras</i>
4 Macc	<i>4 Maccabees</i>

NEW TESTAMENT

Matt	<i>Matthew</i>
Mark	<i>Mark</i>
Luke	<i>Luke</i>
John	<i>John</i>
Acts	<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>
Rom	<i>Romans</i>
1–2 Cor	<i>1–2 Corinthians</i>
Gal	<i>Galatians</i>
Eph	<i>Ephesians</i>
Phil	<i>Philippians</i>
Col	<i>Colossians</i>
1–2 Thess	<i>1–2 Thessalonians</i>
1–2 Tim	<i>1–2 Timothy</i>
Titus	<i>Titus</i>
Phlm	<i>Philemon</i>
Heb	<i>Hebrews</i>
Jas	<i>James</i>
1–2 Pet	<i>1–2 Peter</i>
1–2–3 John	<i>1–2–3 John</i>
Jude	<i>Jude</i>
Rev	<i>Revelation</i>

CHURCH SEASONS AND HOLY DAYS

Adv	<i>Advent</i>
Asc	<i>Ascension</i>
AshW	<i>Ash Wednesday</i>
Chr	<i>Christmas</i>
East	<i>Easter</i>
EastEv	<i>Easter Evening</i>
EastVig	<i>Easter Vigil</i>

Epi	<i>Epiphany</i>
GFri	<i>Good Friday</i>
Lent	<i>Lent</i>
MThu	<i>Maundy Thursday</i>
Name	<i>The Holy Name of Jesus</i>
Palm	<i>Palm Sunday</i>
Pent	<i>Pentecost</i>
PentVig	<i>Pentecost Vigil</i>
Prop	<i>Proper</i>
Tri	<i>Trinity Sunday</i>

BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

KJV	<i>King James Version</i>
NET	<i>New English Translation</i>
NIV	<i>New International Version</i>
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
RSV	<i>Revised Standard Version</i>

MISCELLANEOUS

a.k.a.	<i>also known as</i>
A.D.	<i>Anno Domini</i>
B.C.	<i>Before Christ</i>
BCP	<i>Book of Common Prayer</i>
c.	<i>about</i>
cf.	<i>compare</i>
e.g.	<i>for example</i>
esp.	<i>especially</i>
i.e.	<i>that is</i>
Gr.	<i>Greek</i>
NT	<i>New Testament</i>
OT	<i>Old Testament</i>

SEASON OF ADVENT

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 2:1–5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11–14

Matthew 24:36–44

Overview of Readings

The first season of the Christian year is the season of Advent, which is a season of eager anticipation and expectant waiting. The word *advent* derives from the Latin *adventus*, which means *coming*. Thus, during the four Sundays of Advent, we—both individually and as the worshipping Christian community—are preparing ourselves for the coming of God in Jesus, the Christ (that is, the Messiah).

While we might associate Advent primarily with Christ's first coming as God incarnate, the readings for Advent 1 concern Christ's second coming at the end of history when he will complete God's work of redemption begun during his earthly life, nothing less than the restoration of all of creation. Therefore, today's readings prepare us to remember and celebrate Christ's birth even as they help us reorient our lives in the light of Christ's return.

ISAIAH 2:1–5

Notes

Sequence. 1 of 4

Commentary

Isaiah son of Amoz was a prophet who carried out his prophetic vocation in the southern kingdom of Judah. His ministry spanned the reigns of four Judean kings—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—making him active during the latter half of the 8th century and perhaps the first decade or two of the 7th century B.C. Thus, Isaiah prophesied before, during, and after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Isaiah was, therefore, in a position to warn Judah that if things did not change, Judah would go the way of Israel. Isaiah's warnings fell on deaf ears. In 586 B.C., Judah was defeated by the Babylonians; Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple razed, and Judah's leading citizens taken into exile.

In Isaiah 1–12, the prophet indicts Judah for its persistent sins of idolatry and injustice. In 1:2–3, the LORD takes his people to court, and like a prosecuting attorney, presents his case before the heavens and the earth, who serve as judge and jury. The

LORD says:

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me (1:2).

Yet in the midst of this indictment, the LORD offers his people a glimmer of hope. In today's reading, the LORD presents the vision of a future when Jerusalem is restored, and Zion, the mountain on which Jerusalem is situated, will serve as a beacon drawing the whole world to worship and walk in the ways of the one true, living God.

2:1–3. Israel's vocation was to be a light unto the nations. When the LORD selected Abraham and Sarah as the first of his chosen people, his intention was to fashion a nation of people in his image so that they might be a means of blessing to all the nations of the world.

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen 12:2–3, Prop 5).

Similarly, when the LORD rescued Abraham and Sarah's descendants from their servitude to the Egyptians, he describes them as his "treasured possession out of all the peoples" of the earth (Exod 19:5), who would become "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6a). Yet to be God's treasured people does not so much characterize Israel's *status* as it defines Israel's *vocation*; being the chosen people of God signifies *responsibility*, not privilege. To the extent that Israel lived in covenant relationship with God, Israel would acquire, embody, and reflect the very character of God, as individuals and as a nation. This would equip them to serve as God's priests to the world, mediating the presence, knowledge, and forgiveness of God to all peoples everywhere.

Over the centuries, Israel failed to be a light to the nations, despite the efforts of those whom the LORD appointed and anointed to lead and guide Israel. Consequently, the LORD decrees judgment for his people. This judgment, though harsh, will not be the last word for God's people. Today's reading anticipates the time when Israel will finally fulfill its vocation to be a blessing and a light to the world so that all the peoples of the earth will flock to Jerusalem to worship together in the temple of the LORD on Mount Zion.

2:4–5. The oneness and singularity of their worship will become manifest in the oneness of the human race. In that day, peace will reign. Swords and spears and guns and tanks will find new work in agriculture as the new creation takes shape. (Or, as one of my colleagues put it, "The swords, spears, guns and tanks will get requisitioned by the Department of Agriculture in God's new administration.")

Suggestions for Lectors

When reading a poetic text, it is always helpful to have a basic understanding of how poetry works and, in this case, of how Hebrew poetry works in the Bible. The most prominent and pervasive characteristic of biblical poetry is repetition, specifically parallelism where repetition occurs between two or more poetic lines. For example,

in today's reading, verse 4 is composed of six poetic lines that happen to occur in pairs called strophes (a-a', b-b', c-c'). Semicolons are used at the end of strophes, while commas are used to distinguish poetic lines within a strophe.

- a He shall judge between the nations,
a' and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
- b they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
b' and their spears into pruning hooks;
- c nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
c' neither shall they learn war any more.

Notice how the second line of each strophe reinforces the first by restating it in different words. The first two strophes employ synonyms to create the parallelism, while the last strophe exhibits a more general type of parallelism.

As lectors, when we pay attention to the relationships between poetic lines, we are able to replicate those relationships in our reading. Instead of reading 2:4 as though it were six separate lines or one long sentence, we can adopt an intonation and a cadence that reproduces the three poetic pairs for our listeners.

Pronunciation Guide

Amoz (AY-moz)

Isaiah (ī-ZAY-uh)

Jacob (JAY-kuhb)

Jerusalem (juh-ROO-suh-luhm)

Judah (JOO-duh)

Zion (ZĪ-uhn)

ROMANS 13:11–14

Notes

Sequence. 1 of 2

Commentary

Immediately prior to today's reading in Romans, Paul instructs his readers to "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (13:8). Then, in today's reading, Paul expresses the urgency behind this command using two metaphors: waking from sleep and putting on new clothes.

13:11–14. Paul's writing here and elsewhere suggests that Paul believed Jesus would return within his lifetime and usher in the fullness of the age to come. For Paul, the end of the age was at hand: "the night is far gone, the day is near" (13:12). Now, more than ever, it is time to live honorably. The day of salvation—which is also a day of judgment—is dawning, so it is time for us to wake up and get dressed so that we might be prepared to greet the new day. Paul describes this as putting on the Lord Jesus Christ and making no provision for the flesh. This is reminiscent of his earlier

instructions in Romans to stop presenting our bodies to sin as instruments of wickedness but rather present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness (6:13, Prop 8). In practical terms, putting on the Lord Jesus Christ involves engaging in spiritual habits and practices like worship, prayer, feeding the hungry, reading Scripture, clothing the naked, practicing hospitality, and so on; in short, anything that directly or indirectly involves us in loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Suggestions for Lectors

Today's reading starts quickly, so make sure your listeners are situated and ready to go before you begin. Paul is excited and wants his readers to wake up and get out of bed. Read in an animated fashion with a slightly increased tempo and an elevated voice. Continue in this fashion until the last phrase in 13:13, *not in quarreling and jealousy*, which should be read at a reduced speed. This will provide a nice contrast with previous two phrases—*not in reveling and drunkenness*, *not in debauchery and licentiousness*, and will also provide a nice transition for your delivery of Paul's final commands in 13:14, which should be read more slowly and deliberately.

MATTHEW 24:36–44

Notes

Sequence. 1 of 4

Commentary

Today's reading takes place in Jerusalem during the last week of Jesus' life. Earlier in the week, Jesus performed two symbolic actions. On Palm Sunday, he processed into Jerusalem on a donkey as Israel's king (21:1–11, Palm), and afterwards, he engaged in a prophetic demonstration disrupting activities in the temple (21:12–17). Jesus returns to the temple the following day, where he responds to questions regarding his authority for doing all these things (21:23–23:39). By week's end, Jesus will be dead, condemned as a false prophet by Israel's leaders and executed by the Roman authorities as a messianic pretender, an enemy of the state. On this, his last day in the temple precincts, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple (24:2). His disciples ask him when this will happen and what signs will signal his return and the close of the age (24:3). Jesus responds with a lengthy discourse (24:4–25:46, Prop 27–29), of which today's reading is a part.

The signs of the end of the age and of the return of Christ are many, varied, and somewhat ambiguous; so discernment is called for. There will be wars, famines, and earthquakes, but these are just the beginning birth pangs of a long, drawn out labor (24:7–8). In the meantime, reports and rumors will circulate about Jesus' return, but these are not to be believed, for many false prophets and false messiahs will arise to deceive many (24:4–5, 11–12, 23–26). Moreover, Jesus' own followers will experience hardship and persecution (24:9–22). But after the suffering of those days, Jesus will return as the Son of Man enthroned upon the clouds, and the signs of his coming will be cosmic in scope. The lights of the sun and moon will be extinguished, and the stars will fall out of the sky (24:27–31). Then, all of the nations of the earth will behold him coming with great power and glory. Thus, when Jesus returns, there will be no

mistaking it.

24:36. Yet the time of his return is a complete unknown. The angels don't know when it will happen; Jesus himself doesn't know when it will happen. Only God the Father knows. Consequently, Jesus' return will take many by surprise.

24:42–44. So Jesus instructs his followers to keep awake and to always be prepared. The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour, so constant vigilance is required. The four parables that follow today's reading provide some insight into what it means to keep vigilance: the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Slaves (24:45–51), the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids (25:1–13), the Parable of the Talents (25:14–30), and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (25:31–46). In the last parable, those who inherit the kingdom are those who have fed the hungry, watered the thirsty, clothed the naked, nursed the sick, befriended the stranger, and visited the imprisoned. Certainly, a life that is characterized by such acts of compassion, mercy, and love constitutes a life of vigilance.

Suggestions for Lectors

In today's reading, Jesus discloses to his disciples things that will happen in the future. Read, therefore, with a hint of mystery and intrigue in your voice.

In the opening verse (24:36), do not pause at the comma after *heaven* but only after *Son*, this will better set up the contrast between *neither the angels of heaven nor the Son*, on the one hand, and *but only the Father*, on the other.

Verses 38 and 39 deserve attention because they constitute a single, very long, complex sentence. As you prepare, read through this sentence multiple times. Work out your intonation for the various phrases and clauses, identify the best places to pause and for how long, and decide where you will take your breaths. This sort of preparation will allow you to deliver the sentence smoothly and effortlessly.

Emphasize the commands and instructions Jesus issues by elevating your voice and reading more slowly and deliberately: *Keep awake therefore...* (24:42); *But understand this* (24:43), and *Therefore you also must be ready...* (24:44).

Pronunciation Guide

Noah (NOH-uh)

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1–10

Psalms 72:1–7, 18–19

Romans 15:4–13

Matthew 3:1–12

Overview of Readings

Whereas the readings of Advent 1 concern Jesus' second coming, the readings of Advent 2 focus upon his first coming. In all three years of the lectionary cycle, the OT readings express the expectations of a future messianic age, an age of restoration, reconciliation, and peace (*shalom*) to be inaugurated with the arrival of God's anointed

agent. (The word for *anointed one* is *Messiah* in Hebrew and *Christ* in Greek).

Similarly, in all three years, the gospel readings introduce us to John the Baptist, whose vocation it was to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of God's Messiah. Because of texts like Malachi 4:5 (cf. Mark 9:11), it was believed that the prophet Elijah would return to prepare the way for the coming of God and God's anointed agent. The gospels present John the Baptist as fulfilling this role (Matt 11:7–15; Luke 1:13–17).

ISAIAH 11:1–10

Notes

Sequence. 2 of 4

Commentary

In the 8th century B.C., the prophet Isaiah answered the call to speak the word of the LORD to God's people (6:8). Unfortunately, the word Isaiah was commissioned to speak was a word of judgment against the southern kingdom of Judah (6:9–13). For far too long, the people of God had failed to maintain their side of the covenant. They did not love God with their whole heart, preferring instead to worship other gods alongside the LORD. Nor did they love their neighbors as themselves, preferring instead to practice injustice. The LORD worked with his chosen people like a farmer who takes care of his vineyard, but the LORD's people did not yield the fruit of justice. The LORD says, "When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" (5:4b). The LORD, "expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a [victim's] cry [for help]" (5:7b). So Isaiah has been sent to make public the LORD's plans to demolish his vineyard. Yet in the midst of Isaiah's pronouncements of judgment, one can sometimes hear rumors of the LORD's future plans to revive and restore his vineyard to its former glory. In today's reading we hear one of those rumors, which concerns a new king and his kingdom.

11:1–5. One of the principal factors that contributed to the people's unfaithfulness was poor leadership (3:12b–15; 56:10–12). Consequently, Isaiah envisions the day when the LORD will raise up a king who will possess all of the qualities necessary to rule and guide God's people into leading lives characterized by righteousness and justice.

Three centuries earlier, the LORD had made a covenant with David making him the patriarch of a royal dynasty.

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors,
I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from
your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house
for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.
I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he
commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use,
with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my
steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away
from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure

forever before me; your throne shall be established forever (2 Sam 7:12–16).

Now, three centuries later, the line of Davidic kings appears to be coming to an end as Judah's exile looms on the horizon. Instead of a mighty tree, the Davidic dynasty looks more like a lifeless stump (cf. 6:13). Yet the LORD keeps his word; so a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse, the father of David (cf. 4:2). That is, a new king descended from David will arise to lead God's people. Like David, this king will be equipped with the LORD's own Spirit. He will promote singular devotion to the LORD, and he will work for equity and social justice among the people. Instead of a sword and shield, he will be armed with truth, righteousness, and faithfulness.

11:6–9. Consequently, the kingdom he establishes will be characterized by a true and everlasting peace. The borders of his kingdom will extend to envelope the whole of creation; his peaceful reign will be manifest even within the animal world. The effects of the Fall will be reversed as natural enemies are reconciled to one another. There will be no more killing or death because “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD” (11:9).

11:10. Moreover, it will not only be the people of God who benefit from the Messiah's reign but all the nations of the world. The “root of Jesse” will serve as a signpost, as a light shining into the darkness, and all peoples everywhere will be drawn to Jerusalem to worship and come to know the only true and living God.

Suggestions for Lectors

Today's reading occurs in four movements, or stanzas (1–3a, 3b–5, 6–9, 10–11); pause and look up at your listeners prior to the beginning of each new movement to signal the shift. The second movement begins with *He shall not judge* (11:3b). In addition, slow down and read the last line or two of each movement more deliberately.

As you practice, pay attention to the punctuation, and notice how sentences are comprised of poetic lines that parallel one another through the use of synonyms. For example, in 11:1 there are three pairs of synonymous words or phrases.

a A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
a' and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

In 11:3b–4, the sentence is comprised of three pairs of poetic lines (a-a', b-b', c-c'), that is, three strophes. The first strophe (a-a') contains two pairs of synonymous words or phrases. The second and third strophes (b-b', c-c') contain three sets of synonyms although they do not occur in the same sequence. This is repetition with variation.

a He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
a' or decide by what his ears hear;

b but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
b' and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

c he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
 c' and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Developing an awareness and appreciation for parallelism and repetition will help you develop a rhythm and intonation for reading biblical poetry.

Pronunciation Guide

Assyria (uh-SIHR-ee-uh)

Egypt (EE-jipt)

Elam (EE-luhm)

Ethiopia (ee'-thee-OH-pee-uh)

Hamath (HAY-math; -muth)

Isaiah (i-ZAY-uh)

Jesse (JES-ee)

Pathros (PATH-ros)

Shinar (SHĪ-nahr)

ROMANS 15:4–13

Notes

Sequence. 2 of 2

Commentary

Prior to today's reading, Paul calls upon his readers to pursue those things that "make for peace and mutual upbuilding" (14:19). In particular, Paul stresses the importance of not doing things that offend or challenge the spiritual sensibilities of fellow Christians. For example, while Paul is convinced that eating meat sacrificed to idols is perfectly acceptable for Christians (14:4), not everyone would agree. In fact, for some Christians eating meat might be a stumbling block to their faith, especially if they are new to Christianity or if they have come out of a pagan context. In such situations, it is better to refrain from eating meat in order to protect the faith of others as well as preserve Christian unity and fellowship, which is God's ultimate goal.

15:4–6. God's vision for Christians is that they "live in harmony with one another" (15:5) so that they might praise and glorify God with one voice.

15:7–13. Throughout Romans, Paul has argued that salvation is not only for God's chosen people (the Jews) but for all peoples everywhere (Gentiles). This was God's plan from the beginning. Salvation—which entails the transformation of the human character and personality into the likeness of Christ—is accomplished by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Jewish law. This opens the door for Gentiles.

Paul is a zealous proclaimer of the gospel because he is convinced that it has the power to free people from the tyranny of sin and death and lead them into new life, *be they Jew or Gentile*. "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first *and* also to the Greek" (1:16, Prop 4; cf. 2:9–10). When Paul reads the Jewish Scriptures, he sees provisions made for the salvation of the Gentiles on the basis of faith:

The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame"

(Isa 28:16). For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 10:11–13, Prop 14).

So as we near the end of Romans, Paul reprises what he has said from the beginning of the letter, namely, that the Gentiles are among the intended beneficiaries of the gospel. The gospel was designed “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles” (1:5; Adv 4) so that “the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (15:9).

To welcome *Gentiles* into the family of God, Jesus became a servant of the *Jews* (the circumcised) in order to fulfill God’s promises to the *Jewish* patriarchs, promises that concerned *Gentiles* (the uncircumcised). Here, one is reminded of the LORD’s promise to the patriarch Abraham when he first called him.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, *so that you will be a blessing*. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you *all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (12:1–3, Prop 5)

As God’s chosen people, the Jews were called to be the light of the world so that the peoples of the world might be drawn into the light and so come to know the only true and living God through the testimony of his chosen people.

Suggestions for Lectors

Today’s reading begins and ends with a blessing (4:4–6, 13), so read these portions with heartfelt sincerity. The central section contains a litany of OT citations; pause briefly before and after each. As you make your way through these Scriptures, increase your tempo through the first three until you come to *and again Isaiah says* (15:12). Decrease your tempo as you read through the fourth and final OT citation, and emphasize the final line: *in him the Gentiles shall hope* (4:12b). If you can, memorize this line so that you can deliver it while making eye contact with you listeners, most of whom will be Gentiles.

Pronunciation Guide

Gentiles (JEN-tīlz)

Isaiah (ī-ZAY-uh)

Jesse (JES-ee)

MATTHEW 3:1–12

Notes

Sequence. 2 of 4

Commentary

In today’s reading, we are introduced to John the Baptist, a prophetic figure whose vocation it is to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of the Messiah. In the

first century, because of texts like Malachi 4:5–6, it was believed that the OT prophet Elijah would return to prepare the way for the coming of God and God’s anointed agent.

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse (Mal 4:5–6).

Later in Matthew, Jesus himself identifies John the Baptist as the Elijah who was to come (11:14; cf. Luke 1:13–17). Even John’s appearance resembles that of Elijah, who is once described as “a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waste” (2 Kgs 1:8; cf. Zech 13:4).

3:1–6. John’s message is the same basic message that Jesus will begin to proclaim after his baptism, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2; cf. 3:17). Here, it is important to recognize that the expression *the kingdom of heaven* does not refer to a place but to a political reality. The kingdom of heaven is not where God resides or where people go after they die. Instead, the kingdom of heaven (or the kingdom of God) refers to God’s rule, God’s reign, or, one might even say, God’s government. So when John announces the imminent arrival of God’s kingdom, he is not saying that the world is about to come to an end but that things are about to change. Of course, for those whose values and ways are not God’s values and ways, it will feel like the world is coming to an end. With God becoming king, things are going to be different. John the Baptist’s job is to prepare Israel for the long-awaited, much-anticipated arrival of their God. “Get yourselves ready,” John says, “because God’s new administration is about to take over.”

Matthew understands John the Baptist to be the voice in the wilderness that the prophet Isaiah spoke about, the one who cries, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Matt 3:3b; Isa 40:3). In Isaiah, this citation is an announcement of the end of the Babylonian exile. Isaiah 40 begins with the LORD consoling his exiled people:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD’s hand
double for all her sins (40:1–2).

Since the people’s sins were what sent Judah into exile, the forgiveness of their sins means the end of exile. The LORD is coming to lead his exiled, but now forgiven, people back to Jerusalem from Babylon. The wilderness region that stands between Babylon and Jerusalem must be prepared as for a royal procession. Its rocky terrain must be leveled, and a highway must be constructed. For John the Baptist, Isaiah’s description of the end of exile serves as an appropriate metaphor for the preparations that are in order if Israel is going to get ready to receive its king. In dramatic, symbolic

fashion, John goes out into the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, but the highway he has in mind is not made of rock. It is made of flesh, and it goes right through the wilderness of the human heart. So, crowds of people make the symbolic journey into the wilderness to confess their sins and to be baptized by John as a sign of their repentance.

3:7–10. Yet the baptism John proclaims is no mere ritual. The people trekking into the wilderness should not think that a dip in the Jordan is sufficient preparation for the coming of the Messiah and God’s kingdom. John’s baptism symbolizes a change of heart, which is not simply an internal matter. A true change of heart will be manifest in one’s actions. Singling out the Pharisees and Sadducees, John calls to them in his fiery manner, saying, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance” (3:8). They should not think that they will automatically escape God’s judgment simply because they belong to God’s chosen people, simply because they are descendants of Abraham, for God can turn anyone and anything into his children. Instead, like everybody else, they need to bear the fruits of repentance.

3:11–12. While John’s message is the same as Jesus’, his manner of proclamation is quite different. John baptizes with water for repentance, but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John’s work is preparatory, but Jesus’ work is the real thing. While John’s baptism symbolizes the people’s intentions to lead transformed lives, Jesus’ baptism will actually bring about those transformations. This will not be an entirely pleasant process. When let loose in the world, the Holy Spirit will become an unquenchable fire, reducing everything that is not of God to ashes. In this way, the world will be cleansed of all sin, violence, and death. This will take place at all levels of human power and influence. Individuals, communities, and cultures will be transformed as will the various social, economic, and political structures of the world. The Holy Spirit will baptize everything with the white-hot love of God, and in its wake, God’s new world and God’s new people will emerge.

Suggestions for Lectors

The first half of today’s reading can be read in a straightforward manner with your typical narrator’s voice and tempo (3:1–6). Pause for a second both before and after the quotation from the prophet Isaiah, and read the quotation itself in a lower voice.

The reading takes a turn in 3:7 when John begins to address the Pharisees and Sadducees directly. Raise your voice, increase your tempo, and speak with intensity as you question their motivation for coming out to be baptized (3:7b–10). Back off just a little as John describes the ministry of the one who is coming (3:11).

Pronunciation Guide

Abraham (AY-bruh-ham)

Jerusalem (juh-ROO-suh-luhm)

Jordan (JOR-duhn)

Judea (joo-DEE-uh; -DAY-)

Isaiah (ī-ZAY-uh)

Pharisees (FAIR-uh-seez)

Sadducees (SAJ-uh-seez; SAD-yoo-seez)

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1–10

Psalms 146:5–10 (= 146:4–9 BCP) *or* Luke 1:46b–55; † Canticle 3 or 15

James 5:7–10

Matthew 11:2–11

ISAIAH 35:1–10

Notes

Sequence. 3 of 4

Commentary

In Isaiah 1–39, the prophet announces the LORD's judgment upon the people of Judah and Jerusalem for their decades and centuries of idolatry and injustice. Isaiah 39 ends ominously as the predicted destruction and exile by the Babylonian empire becomes imminent. Isaiah 35 is interesting because, in the midst of these chapters of judgment, it offers a glimpse of the future restoration of God's people following the Babylonian captivity. It is as though the LORD did not want his people going into exile without knowing that one day they would be forgiven, their exile would be over, and they would return to their homeland. Much of the description in Isaiah 35 can be found later in Isaiah 40–55.

35:1–2. When the people of God are finally released from their captivity, all of creation will rejoice. This rejoicing is depicted with the image of desolate places—the wilderness, the dry land, and the desert—becoming like a garden in full bloom, with all the beautiful richness of colors and aromas this implies.

35:3–4. The prophet is to encourage the exiles and give them hope by announcing the advent of their God who will come to rescue them. Even though the LORD employed foreign nations to execute his judgment upon his chosen people, a day is coming when the LORD will judge the nations according to how they have treated God's chosen people (14:1–2; 34:1–17). As the LORD said when he first called Abraham and Sarah:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and *the one who curses you I will curse*; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen 12:2–3).

Thus, the day of vengeance for the nations will be a day of salvation for the people of God (34:8; 61:2; 63:4). That being said, there are many passages in Isaiah where foreigners are invited to become part of God's people (cf. 56:1–8, Prop 15), which fits Israel's vocation to be a blessing and a light to the nations (42:6, Epi 1; 49:6, Epi 2).

35:5–10. A vast, rugged wilderness stands between Babylon and Jerusalem. It too will be transformed. For the exiles return home, a highway will be constructed through the wilderness (reminiscent of the way through the sea during Israel's exodus from Egypt). It will be safe; it will be so well-marked and straight that even fools could never get lost on it. The highway will be called the Holy Way because no one who is

unclean will be permitted to travel on it. From an ancient Jewish perspective, the unclean includes all Gentiles as well as those within Israel's own ranks who are blemished in some way, for example, the blind, the deaf, the mute, and the lame as identified in 35:5–6. The unclean within Israel will also not travel the Holy Way but for quite a different reason than the Gentiles. They will be healed of their infirmities and so made clean. The deaf will hear, the blind will see, the mute will talk, and the lame will leap. Israel's handicapped population will be unclean no more, and they will travel on the Holy Way along with all the rest.

Suggestions for Lectors

Today's reading is filled with good news, so let your voice be filled with excitement and enthusiasm as you paint a picture of the renewed creation. The reading occurs in four movements, or stanzas (1–2, 3–4, 5–7, 8–10). Pausing and looking up prior to the beginning of each new stanza is a nice way to signal the transitions.

As was noted in the Suggestions for Lectors for last week's reading from Isaiah, pay particular attention to the punctuation and to how the poetic lines are related to one another. Biblical poetry is rife with repetition and parallelism, and developing an awareness and appreciation for these elements will help you develop a rhythm and intonation for reading biblical poetry.

For example, verse 5 is composed of two poetic lines where the second line (a') reinforces the thought of the first (a) through synonymous parallelism.

a Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
a' and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

Sometimes the synonymous elements are found in a different sequence as in verse 10, where the verb comes first in b but second in b'.

b they shall obtain joy and gladness,
b' and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Pronunciation Guide

Carmel (KAHR-muhl; KAHR-mel)

crocus (KROH-kuhs)

Isaiah (ī-ZAY-uh)

Lebanon (LEB-uh-nuhn; -non')

Sharon (SHAIR-uhn)

Zion (ZĪ-uhn)

JAMES 5:7–10

Notes

Suggested Reading. James 5:7–11

Commentary

The Letter of James was written by James, the brother of Jesus (Matt 13:55; Gal 1:19), who is not to be confused with the apostle James who was one of Jesus' twelve disciples, the son of Zebedee and the brother of John (Matt 4:21, Epi 3). There is no evidence that James followed his brother during his lifetime, but he was clearly a leader within the Jerusalem Church following his brother's resurrection and ascension. Not only did he play a major role in the Jerusalem Council held in Acts 15, but Paul describes him as a pillar within the Jerusalem Church, along with Cephas (that is, Peter) and the apostle John (Gal 2:9). In the NT letter that bears his name, James appears to be writing to Jewish Christians living outside Palestine (James 1:1).

5:7–11. In today's reading, James offers encouragement to those who are experiencing hardship and perhaps even persecution. He reminds them to be patient, to hang on because Jesus' return is near. James lifts up the OT prophets, as well as Job, as models of patient endurance. At the heart of all this talk about patience and endurance in the midst of suffering, James calls upon his readers not to "grumble against one another" (5:9). Here, James wants to make sure that the problems and hardships that Christians will face do not lead to a breakdown of community, which grumbling can trigger. As James wrote at the beginning of his letter,

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing (1:2–4).

Suggestions for Lectors

James calls upon his listeners to live lives of patient endurance. His words are not those of a drill sergeant but of one who understands hardship. Read with a measure of gentleness in your voice. You may wish to read with more intensity when you deliver the instruction about not grumbling in 5:9. But return to your quiet gentleness as you remind your listeners of those saints of old who endured suffering with faith.

Pronunciation Guide

beloved (buh-LUV-uhd)

Job (JOHB; *not* JAWB)

MATTHEW 11:2–11

Notes

Sequence. 3 of 4

Commentary

In last week's gospel reading, we were introduced to the ministry of John the Baptist, who went about in the Judean wilderness strangely clad, announcing the arrival of the kingdom of heaven and baptizing people in the Jordan River. Jesus was among those who were baptized by John (3:13–17). Afterwards, Jesus was led farther out into the wilderness to undergo a battery of tests administered by the devil (4:1–11; Lent 1).

After forty days, Jesus returns to find that John has been arrested (4:12). Upon learning of John's arrest, Jesus returns to Galilee and begins his public ministry (4:17, Epi 3).

At the time, the reader is not given any details regarding John's arrest. Only later does Matthew reveal that John was arrested due to his criticism of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee. Antipas, who was one of Herod the Great's sons, had married his half-brother Philip's wife, Herodias. This would have been fine had Philip been dead, but he wasn't. John had been publicly criticizing Antipas over the whole affair, claiming his union with Herodias was unlawful (Lev 18:16). Eventually, Antipas had John thrown into prison.

11:2–6. In today's reading, John is still in prison, and he is hearing reports about everything that Jesus is doing. At the time of Jesus' baptism, John clearly understands him to be the Messiah because he initially refuses to baptize Jesus saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3:14, Epi 1). Sitting in prison, however, John seems to be experiencing doubt. After all, John had announced imminent judgment. The messiah would arrive with a winnowing fork in his hand to separate the wheat from the chaff (3:12). "*Even now*," John cries, "the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:10). Certainly, the reports about Jesus are astonishing. Jesus is doing some incredible things, yet the wicked remain in power, and John remains in prison. So John sends his disciples to Jesus with a simple question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (11:3).

Jesus' reply is at once cryptic and clear. Though he does not offer a simple, unambiguous 'yes' or 'no', what he does say carries very clear connotations, especially for someone like John the Baptist who would have been familiar with Isaiah. Everything Jesus lists comes right out of the passages in Isaiah that describe God's forgiveness and regathering of his exiled people. For example, when envisioning the end of the Babylonian exile, Isaiah writes:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then *the eyes of the blind shall be opened*, and *the ears of the deaf unstopped*; then *the lame shall leap like a deer*, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert (35:4–6; Adv 3).

And, consider the following:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead (26:19).

Of particular significance is the final item in the list, "the poor have good news brought to them" (11:5). This statement stands out not only because it is the only non-miraculous item in the list but because it points to Jesus' messianic identity as the one who has been anointed with God's spirit to bring about God's new world.

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me *to bring good news to the oppressed*, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release

to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God (Isa 61:1–2).

11:7–11. Having responded to John's question about his own identity, Jesus now takes the opportunity to speak to the crowd about John's identity. John is not a palace prince but a prophet, and not just any prophet. John is *the* prophet spoken of in Malachi 3:1, whose vocation it is to prepare the way of the LORD (cf. Isa 40:3). Later in Malachi, this unnamed prophet is identified as Elijah (Mal 4:5). In Matthew, Jesus says that John the Baptist is the Elijah who was to come (Matt 11:14). If John is the prophet who prepares the way of the LORD, then Jesus must be the LORD whose way John prepares. So, in identifying John with Elijah, Jesus is implicitly identifying himself with the LORD.

Today's reading concludes with a very curious statement. "Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (11:11). In one breath, Jesus gives John the greatest of compliments, but in the next breath, he seems to take it all away. What is going on here? The new age of God's reign is so superior to the old age that the least in the kingdom of God is greater than the greatest figure of the previous age.

Suggestions for Lectors

As reflected in the Commentary, today's episode contains two scenes. In the first (11:2–6), Jesus is approached by the disciples of John the Baptist. The emphasis in this scene is upon the message John's disciples are to relay to their imprisoned master. The message involves a list of six items. Whenever you are confronted with a long list of items, add some dynamics by varying the tempo with which you read each item and by varying the length of time you pause between each item. Not every item needs to have its own unique tempo, but there should be some slight variation throughout the list. This way the list does not sound like a list. The following suggestions are just one way of reading today's list.

Read the first three items as though they are sentences in their own right. Read them at a slightly slower tempo than your normal pace, and with full pauses at the end of each. Group the next two items together by reading them more quickly, with more energy, and with only the slightest of pauses after *hear*. Pause fully after *raised*. Read the last item more slowly and deliberately than you read the first three items. Include slight pauses after *poor* and *news*. Finally, as you read each clause, emphasize the recipients of each action: *blind*, *lame*, *lepers*, *deaf*, *dead*, and *poor*. These suggestions are illustrated as follows:

SLOWER *the blind receive their sight,...*

SLOWER *the lame walk,...*

SLOWER *the lepers are cleansed,...*

FASTER *the deaf hear, the dead are raised,...*

SLOW AND DELIBERATE *and the poor... have good news.. brought to them.*

In the second scene (11:7–11), Jesus turns and talks to the crowds, so elevate your voice, and speak with greater energy and intensity. Jesus' questions occur in pairs so group them together by pausing only briefly after the first question in each pair and by pausing longer after the second question. In addition, pause for a full second or

two at the end of each verse. This allows Jesus' question or statement to hang in the air a bit so that your listeners have a brief moment to reflect on it. Read the final clause slowly and deliberately: *yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he* (11:11).

Pronunciation Guide

blessed (adj., two syllables; BLES-id)

Messiah (muh-SĪ-uh)

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 7:10–16

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19 (= 80:1–7, 16–18 BCP)

Romans 1:1–7

Matthew 1:18–25

ISAIAH 7:10–16

Notes

Sequence. 4 of 4

Commentary

In Isaiah 7, King Ahaz of Judah and the leading citizens of Jerusalem are in a state of panic. King Pekah of Israel has forged an alliance with King Rezin of Aram, and they intend to march against Jerusalem. In order to alleviate any concerns regarding the safety and security of Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah is sent to Ahaz with a word from the LORD saying that the plans hatched by Israel and Aram will fail. In fact, within a relatively short time, these two kingdoms will fall to the Assyrian empire and so will pose no further threat. Consequently, Ahaz should not attempt to make any alliances of his own but trust Isaiah's counsel regarding the LORD's plans. "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (7:9b). In today's reading, the LORD offers Ahaz a sign to confirm that these things will come to pass.

7:10–13. After informing Ahaz of the imminent fates of Israel and Aram, the LORD invites Ahaz to request a sign from him. This is an remarkable offer. While it is quite common for individuals to ask the LORD for a sign or even for the LORD to give someone a sign unbidden, it is quite unusual for the LORD to invite somebody to ask him for a sign. Moreover, the sign is without restrictions or qualifications. It can be absolutely anything; it can be "as deep as Sheol [the underworld] or as high as heaven" (7:11). Ahaz, however, passes on the invitation, stating that he would not put the LORD to the test. His reply possesses the appearance of piety, yet it is treated as just another refusal to trust in the LORD.

7:14–16. Despite his refusal, the LORD intends to give Ahaz a sign anyway. In the OT, a sign served as a pledge to confirm that whatever the prophet prophesied would come to pass. The sign was an event that could be either ordinary or miraculous. On this occasion, it is quite ordinary. The sign involves a young woman giving birth to a child who will be named Immanuel, which in Hebrew means *God with us*. More

specifically, the sign is this:

He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted (7:15–16).

In other words, by the time the boy reaches two years of age, the kingdoms of Israel and Aram will have been destroyed. This sign is reconfirmed in 8:1–4, using slightly different metaphors.

Many English translations of 7:14 use the word “virgin,” while many others, including the NRSV, use the words “young woman.” These translations have come under fire from those who think the translation “young woman” eliminates the miraculous nature of the sign. After all, Matthew interprets Mary’s miraculous conception of Jesus as a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 (Matt 1:23). The Commentary for today’s gospel reading looks at Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14 (see below). Yet here, it is important to recognize that, in its OT context, the sign is not miraculous. The Hebrew word in question simply denotes a female of marriageable age, a young woman of sufficient sexual maturity to conceive and bear children. The virginity of the woman is not the focus, and there is nothing in the passage that would suggest the woman conceives the child without the participation of a human father. In fact, the parallel sign in 8:3 counts against such an interpretation for it explicitly states that Isaiah “went to the prophetess and she conceived and bore a son.” Instead the sign is focused upon the name of the child and what will happen by the time he turns two.

Suggestions for Lectors

Start out today’s reading using your normal narrator’s voice. Then, beginning with Isaiah’s words, *Here then, O house of David!* (7:13a), elevate your voice and convey the LORD’s frustration and exasperation. Maintain your intensity throughout the remainder of the reading. As you draw the reading to a close, slow down and read the final few words *will be deserted* more deliberately with slight pauses between each word.

Pronunciation Guide

Ahaz (AY-haz)

Immanuel (ih-MAN-yoo-el)

Isaiah (i-ZAY-uh)

Sheol (SHEE-ohl)

ROMANS 1:1–7

Commentary

Paul’s letter to the Romans is somewhat unique in that it was written to a church that Paul did not himself establish. In fact, Paul has never visited the church in Rome, though he has often wanted to (15:22). Paul writes to the Christians in Rome to introduce himself and the gospel that he preaches as an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul’s hope is that the Roman Christians will want to support him and his missionary efforts in Spain (15:24). Romans was written while Paul was en route to Judea with a special collection for the Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem church (15:25–28). Once he

delivers the collection, he intends to make his way to Spain via Rome (22:28).

The first seven verses of Romans form just one sentence. Stringing together subordinate clause after subordinate clause, Paul summarizes the gospel that he, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, has been entrusted with.

1:1a, 7. The first and last verses of today's reading contain the elements one normally finds in the introductions of ancient letters. Ancient letters begin by identifying the sender—in this case, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ" (1:1a)—followed by the recipient—"To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints" (1:7a). The next element is the greeting, which normally consists of the single word, "Greetings!" Examples of this can be found in the openings of two letters embedded in the book of Acts (15:23; 23:26) and in the opening of the Letter of James.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings (1:1).

In most NT letters, this secular greeting has been transformed into a distinctly Christian greeting by substituting the word *grace* for *greetings* and by expanding the greeting to include other distinctively Christian elements. So, in today's letter, Paul greets the Roman Christians by writing, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:7b).

1:1b–6. In these five verses, Paul describes himself as an apostle who has been entrusted with the gospel, which concerns the grace of Jesus Christ and involves the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God by faith. These six elements—apostle, gospel, Jesus Christ, grace, faith, and Gentiles—are key elements in Paul's message in Romans. (1) *Apostle* denotes someone who is sent out to perform a particular task on behalf of another and who generally operates with the authority of the sender. In this case, Paul understands himself as having been called to proclaim the gospel of God, the good news about what God has done. (2) This *gospel* that Paul has been entrusted with is not something completely new but has been in the works for a very long time. Though the gospel concerns recent events, it will be critical for Paul's argument later in Romans to show that the gospel was revealed beforehand to the prophets in the OT scriptures. (3) The gospel concerns *Jesus Christ*, whose human ancestry reveals him to be the son of David and thus the Messiah and whose resurrection from the dead reveals him to be the very Son of God. (4–5) More specifically, the gospel concerns how Jesus made it possible for people to be saved by *grace* through *faith*. (6) Paul himself was appointed as an apostle to the *Gentiles*. His commission was to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles and to incorporate them into the people of God by making them obedient to God, not through works prescribed by the law but through faith.

The Revised Common Lectionary offers a number of readings from Romans in Year A, during Advent and during the Season after Pentecost (Prop 4–19). The themes of apostle, gospel, Jesus Christ, grace, faith, and Gentiles are explored in greater detail in those readings.

Suggestions for Lectors

Paul's writing can be complicated; even Paul's salutations can be complicated. In today's reading, Paul strings together clause after clause and phrase after phrase as he

greet the Christian community in Rome. As a lector, your first task is to become familiar with the structure of what Paul is saying, to determine what goes with what. The following outline offers one way of visualizing the structure.

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ,
called to be an apostle,
set apart for the gospel of God,
which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures,
the gospel concerning his Son,
who was descended from David according to the flesh
and was declared to be Son of God with power
according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead,
Jesus Christ our Lord,
through whom we have received grace and apostleship
to bring about the obedience of faith
among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name,
including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,
To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Your second task will be to practice reading the text until you are able to deliver it smoothly and confidently. Use the intonation of your voice to help your listeners connect the various parts. For example, consider the following portion:

1 the gospel concerning his Son,
2 who was descended from David according to the flesh
3 and was declared to be Son of God with power
4 according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead,
5 Jesus Christ our Lord,
6 through whom we have received grace and apostleship

Read lines 1 and 5 with the same intonation and tempo. Likewise, read the relative clauses (lines 2–4, 6) with the same intonation and tempo, only drop your voice when reading them in order to distinguish them from lines 1 and 5. What will happen is this: You will read *the gospel concerning his Son*, and then your voice will drop as you provide additional information about the *Son*. Then, your voice will return to its previous level for *Jesus Christ our Lord*. In this way, your audience will be able to connect lines 1 and 5 in their hearing, at least at a subconscious level, and Paul's meaning will come through. This is just one example of how we convey understanding of the text through the dynamics of our delivery.

Pronunciation Guide

Gentiles (JEN-tīlz)

MATTHEW 1:18–25

Notes

Sequence. 4 of 4

Commentary

Of the four gospels, only Matthew and Luke offer narratives of Jesus' birth. Luke's account is seen through the eyes of Mary, while Matthew's account is written from the perspective of Joseph. Somewhat surprising, the story of Jesus' birth in Matthew comprises a mere eight verses, and most of it is devoted to Joseph's dilemma.¹

1:18–19. The birth of the Messiah is a scandalous affair. To be more precise, the scandal resides with the mystery surrounding Jesus' conception. Joseph and Mary are engaged to be married, yet before the wedding and before they have begun to live together, Mary becomes pregnant. At this point in the narrative, the reader is informed that Mary's pregnancy is due to the Holy Spirit. Joseph, however, has been granted no such insight. Joseph knows only two things: he knows where babies come from, and he knows the kid is not his. The only explanation available to him, or to anyone in a similar situation, is that Mary has committed adultery. Joseph is now faced with a dilemma. But, what exactly is the nature of the dilemma?

Generally, it is assumed that Joseph's dilemma has to do with whether to divorce Mary publicly or privately. If he were to choose a public divorce, he would be required to give his reasons for doing so. He would have to reveal her adultery to the community, which would expose her to public shame and ridicule. On the other hand, if he were to send her away quietly, he could protect her honor and minimize her shame. Yet Joseph is described as a righteous man, as someone who takes God's law seriously. How could a righteous man transgress God's law by covering up an abomination like adultery?

Yet the dilemma facing Joseph is much more serious than the above interpretation suggests. The dilemma is not about preserving Mary's *honor* but about preserving her *life*. In the ancient Jewish world, adultery was a capital crime, punishable by stoning. For example:

If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deut 22:23–24).

And again:

If... this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman's virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deut 22:20–21).

Honor killing is both an ancient *and* a modern phenomenon. "Honor killing is the practice of killing girls and women who are thought to have endangered a family's honor by allegedly engaging in sexual activity before (or outside of) marriage" (*Joseph's*

¹ This interpretation is indebted to Matthew J. Marohl's excellent study, *Joseph's Dilemma: "Honor Killing" in the Birth Narrative of Matthew* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2008).

Dilemma, 5). In cultures where honor killing has been and is still practiced, it is understood that when a person commits a sexual impropriety, they have not only brought dishonor upon themselves, but more importantly, they have brought dishonor upon their entire family and community. By their actions (and sometimes by actions done to them), they have stained the family honor. If the family honor is to be restored, that stain must be removed. In cases of premarital and extramarital sex (and even in cases of rape or incest), that stain is removed by means of an honor killing, whereby a male member of the family murders the offending female member to restore the family honor.

The reality of honor killings, ancient and modern, brings Joseph's dilemma into sharper relief. To keep Mary's pregnancy a secret would be to disobey God's law; yet, to reveal it would be to hand Mary over to certain death. In the end, Joseph decides to preserve Mary's life rather than his own righteousness, and so he opts for a quiet divorce.

1:19–22. At this point, God comes to the rescue. Before Joseph can execute his plan, an angel appears to him in a dream. This is the first of many dreams Joseph will receive (2:13, 19, 22). The angel lets Joseph in on what the reader already knows; Mary's pregnancy is an act of the Holy Spirit not an act of adultery. Joseph should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife because the child is from God and will be special. When the child is born, Joseph is to name him Jesus, or actually Joshua. In Hebrew, the name Joshua (or, Yeshua) means *Yahweh saves*. Thus, Jesus' name reveals his vocation and destiny, for it is through the Lord Jesus that the Lord God will save his people from their sins.

1:23. All of this is understood by Matthew as a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, which belongs to today's OT reading. As was noted above in the commentary for Isaiah, in its OT context, the sign of the virgin conceiving and bearing a son had to do with the political crisis that the southern kingdom of Judah was facing at the time. Conceived by natural means, Isaiah's Emmanuel was a sign that God would rescue his people from their political troubles. And, it came to pass as Isaiah prophesied.

Yet, the word of God is living and active, and a single word from God can find fulfillment in more than one way. In Isaiah's prophecy of Emmanuel, Matthew sees a foreshadowing and prefiguring of the Messiah. As Isaiah's Emmanuel was a sign of God's rescuing his people from a political crisis, so Matthew's Emmanuel—conceived by miraculous means—will be the one through whom God will rescue his people from the moral and existential crises they face. This new Emmanuel will save God's people from their sins, thereby freeing them from death, which came into the world as a result of sin.

1:24–25. Joseph does as he is instructed, and in so doing, his dilemma is resolved. In taking Mary as his wife, Joseph is neither transgressing God's law nor handing Mary over to death. Mary's life has been spared as has Joseph's righteousness.

Suggestions for Lectors

This is a very familiar, yet always dramatic story. Begin with your typical narrator's voice and tempo, but slow down as you relate the amazing news: *before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit* (1:18). Of course, at this point, Joseph

does not know the full story; he is operating with the assumption that Mary has committed adultery. So lower your voice as you relate Joseph's dilemma over what to do about this shameful, embarrassing situation (1:19–20). Then, raise your voice and increase your intensity when you deliver the angel's message (1:21–22). Invest your words with hints of the surprise and relief that Joseph must have felt upon hearing this good news. Read Isaiah's prophecy more slowly and deliberately (1:23), then return to your typical narrator's voice as you draw the episode to a close.

Pronunciation Guide

Emmanuel (ih-MAN-yoo-el)

Joseph (JOH-sif; -suhf)

Mary (MAIR-ee)

Messiah (muh-SĪ-uh)