

A LECTOR'S GUIDE & COMMENTARY

TO THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

YEAR B

J. TED BLAKLEY



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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"
I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."

Ezekiel 37:3

Some people came from Jairus' house to say,
"Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?"
But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue,
"Do not fear, only believe."

Mark 5:35–36

This book has a story... a death and resurrection story.

Three years ago, I was approached by St. Mark's Press to revise *A Lector's Guide to the Episcopal Eucharistic Lectionary* by Frank Mulligan, which unfortunately had been rendered obsolete by the adoption of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) by The Episcopal Church in 2006. St. Mark's Press commissioned me to update Mulligan's work by bringing it into conformity with the RCL. At least, that was the plan, but plans have a way of changing.

As I started working on the revised edition, a new vision for the guide began to emerge. What if the guide were designed not only for those who *read* the Scriptures aloud in worship, but also for those who *hear* the Scriptures being read. In short, what if we produced a combination *lector's* guide and *listener's* guide? Might this be a way of helping people engage the Scriptures? Might this transform the lectionary from just a convenient list of readings to a tool of community spiritual formation. Imagine what could happen, if not only lectors and lay readers, but all those in the pews developed a habit of reading, studying, and praying the lectionary readings in preparation for worship. What if, while lectors are practicing and preparing themselves to proclaim the Word of God through the public reading of Holy Scripture, the rest of the Christian community is preparing itself to receive the Word of God by engaging the readings in advance? This new vision could be achieved if we expanded the commentary portion of the guide. In *A Lector's Guide*, Mulligan offered a very brief "General Sense" of each reading (30 to 70 words). My thought was to offer a much longer, yet still brief "Commentary" (400 to 800 words) that would illuminate a reading by explaining it and by situating it within its historical, cultural, and literary contexts.

I presented this new vision to St. Mark's Press. They offered their enthusiastic support, and *A Lector's Guide and Commentary to the Revised Common Lectionary* (LGC) was born. Thus, within a few months, the project that began as a single-volume revision of an earlier work soon became a completely new, three-volume series. Since I began the project in a Year B, Year C was the first volume to be published. Year C came out in June 2009, and Year A appeared the following year in October 2010. So, while Year B is the second volume in the LGC series, it is the final volume to be published.

Friends of Year B

But Year B almost wasn't.

Earlier this year, before the manuscript was a third complete, I received the sudden and unexpected news that I had lost my job; my position had been eliminated due to a lack of funds. Losing a job is never easy, and my concern about the future was compounded by the fact that there are many fewer jobs in a depressed economy and my wife, Rebekah, was pregnant with our fourth child. Furthermore, I did not know what would happen to Year B. Without an income and needing to find a new job, I wondered where would I get the time and energy to finish the book. While other types of writing projects might be able to be put on hold, Year B could not; it needed to be ready by Advent. If Year B did not get published this year, then the chances were that it would never get published. That was a dark thought.

But, into this darkness, God shone a ray of light: the Friends of Year B. The Friends of Year B is an ad hoc group made up of some two dozen parishioners from Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Wichita, Kansas, which is the parish that operates St. Mark's Press. When Year B looked dead, the Friends of Year B suddenly sprung up and sprang into action. They were inspired and united by a shared vision for the ministries of St. Mark's Press and the LGC series, convinced that God raised them up in order to find a way to make Year B a reality. The Friends of Year B composed letters, wrote proposals, and secured funding for the writing, printing, and initial marketing of the book. They prayed with one another and for one another. They shared their hopes and their dreams, their faith and their doubts. Members will tell you that they did not always see how God would bring Year B about, but they remained committed to what they discerned as their calling. They even organized a rota of babysitters so that I could write and Rebekah could edit. As the Friends of Year B sought to make Year B a reality, they faced many challenges, and they met those challenges with wisdom, grace, and trust. Needless to say, the final volume of *A Lector's Guide and Commentary* would not have become a reality save for the toil and vision of the Friends of Year B and all the others, both inside and outside Good Shepherd parish, who supported this endeavor with their time, talent, and treasure. As it takes a village to raise a child, so it took a village to resurrect Year B.

The Friends of Year B and those who offered their financial support have requested to remain anonymous as testimony to the fact that the successful completion of Year B was a community effort and that it is God who deserves all

the praise and glory. Nevertheless, I have told their story here to honor them, to thank them, and to thank God for inspiring and working through them. Rebekah and I are grateful for the spiritual, emotional, and financial support that you have showered upon us.

Acknowledgements

In addition, I would like to thank the clergy and vestry of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church for all the time and energy they devoted this past year to matters related to St. Mark's Press and the publishing of Year B. In particular, I would like to thank Fr. Andrew O'Connor for supporting this process and Deacon Robert Hirst for his prophetic voice and encouragement.

As always, a very special thanks goes to the host of editors and proofreaders who helped bring this manuscript into its final form: Jo Auchterlonie, Rebekah Blakley, Mike Buchanan, Linda Dixon, Diane Grubb, Doug Lipperd, Meg Rice, and Robert Seaton. You will never know how much better this book is because of your work. (Well, maybe you do know.)

Lastly, I wish to extend my sincerest love and affection to my family: to my wife, Rebekah, and to our three children—Emma (10), Thaddaeus (7), and Esther (2½)—and our soon-to-be fourth child. I wish I could write faster so that I would have less time away from you. Thank you for the sacrifices you have made.

My continued hope and prayer is that *A Lector's Guide and Commentary* will contribute to what God is doing to transform the world through his beloved Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. May God draw so close to us and may we be drawn so close to God that we come to know and experience God as love and come to know and accept ourselves, our neighbors, and our enemies as God's beloved children.

Blessings.

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Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, A.D. 2011

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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 2 is cited as 1 Samuel 3:1–10, (11–20). The person responsible for selecting the readings must decide whether 1 Samuel 3:1–10 or 3:1–20 is to be read.

Occasionally, the Guide offers its own suggestions for lengthening a reading; these suggestions are found in the Notes. For example, in the RCL, the OT reading for Epiphany 3 is Jonah 3:1–5, 10. However, I think the story is much more powerful when we read about what the Ninevites did to show the extent of their repentance, so I suggest that Jonah 3:1–10 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 B, the Gospel of Mark is read almost every Sunday in the Season after Pentecost. Since one of the chief goals of the Commentary 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 or subsequent weeks' readings.

For example, in Proper 15, the Notes for Ephesians 5:15–20 reads: *Sequence.* 6 of 7. This indicates that Ephesians 5:15–20 is the sixth of seven sequential NT readings from The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians.

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, these other biblical passages are cited so that readers can consult them. If the cited passage happens to be a lectionary reading in Year B, then the day on which that reading occurs is also cited. For example, in the Commentary for the Wisdom of Solomon reading for Proper 8, reference is made to Solomon's prayer for wisdom at the beginning of his reign, and so the following parenthetical cross-reference is included: *1 Kings 3:6–9, Prop 15*. Armed with this information, a reader can look up the story in 1 Kings and also consult its Commentary in Proper 15.

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 B 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 offers both Mark 8:31–38 and Mark 9:2–9 as possible readings; however, the Episcopal adaptations omit Mark 9:2–9.

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 from 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 Solomon</i> <i>(a.k.a., 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>
NLT	<i>New Living Translation</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>
ch.	<i>chapter</i>
chs.	<i>chapters</i>
e.g.	<i>for example</i>
esp.	<i>especially</i>
et al.	<i>and others</i>
Gr.	<i>Greek</i>
i.e.	<i>that is</i>
JW	<i>The Jewish Wars</i>
NT	<i>New Testament</i>

OT	<i>Old Testament</i>
RCL	<i>Revised Common Lectionary</i>
v.	<i>verse</i>
vv.	<i>verses</i>

SEASON OF ADVENT

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 64:1–9

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

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Mark 13:24–37

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 64:1–9

Notes

Sequence. 1 of 3

Commentary

Isaiah 63:7–64:12 is a psalm of lament (or complaint), which is a common form of psalm found in the Psalter. Psalms of lament can be offered by an individual or a whole community. They normally begin with a recounting of the LORD's past deeds of deliverance in the hope that the LORD will respond in like manner and deliver the petitioner from the present crisis. This litany of the LORD's past deeds occurs in 63:7–14. Then, in 63:15, the community begins to offer up its petitions. They ask the LORD to "Look down from heaven and see" the trouble that they are in. The Promised Land has been taken away from them, and their enemies have destroyed God's house, the temple.

64:1–4. In today's reading, the people's petitions intensify. They do not simply want the LORD to see what is happening, they want him to do something about it, something decisive and radical. They want the LORD to rip open the curtain that

separates the heavenly and earthly realms and to come down and perform mighty deeds just like he has done in ages past. They want all the nations of the world, especially those who have oppressed them, to see the glory and power of their God.

64:5–7. The community then offers a corporate confession of sin, of sorts. They acknowledge that their own sins have made them unclean, so unclean that even their righteous deeds are like filthy rags, rags that a woman uses during her menstrual period. Yet, with the same breath they use to confess their sin, they argue that their waywardness is the LORD’s fault. “*You were angry*, and we sinned; *because you hid yourself* we transgressed” (64:5b).

What sort of confession is this? Even though it was the people’s ongoing unfaithfulness that triggered the LORD’s anger, they reverse the order of cause and effect in a desperate attempt to get the LORD to act on their behalf. Essentially, they are saying, “If you, O LORD, would stop being angry with us and would cease hiding your face from us, if you would just turn and save us, then we would be able to worship and serve you once again.”

64:8–9. In their final petition, the people back away from this accusatory approach and appeal to the LORD’s mercy as their Father. They acknowledge that the LORD has every right to deal with them as he sees fit, to shape them in whatever way he desires. They would ask, though, that he remember that they are his people.

Suggestions for Lectors

As reflected in the Commentary, today’s reading occurs in three movements, each of which has a different tenor. In the first movement (64:1–4), the people are desperate for the LORD to act, *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down* (64:1). Read these verses with the pleading intensity that they require.

In the second movement (64:5–7), there is a mixture of penitence and accusation; your voice should convey these qualities at the appropriate time.

Finally, in the third movement (64:8–9), the people express unadulterated, unqualified remorse. You are the people’s representative, so soften your voice as you acknowledge your sin and ask for the LORD’s mercy.

Pronunciation Guide

Isaiah (ī-ZAY-uh)

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3–9

Commentary

The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians is the second longest of Paul’s letters in the NT; only Romans is longer. In this lengthy epistle, Paul addresses a number of problems besetting the Christian community in Corinth. Many of the problems relate to the question of how the Corinthian Christians, both individually and as a community, are to live out their Christian faith within a culture whose values are often so different and antithetical to those of the gospel.

The church in Corinth was established by the Apostle Paul during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1–17). Corinth was clearly an important mission, for Paul remained there eighteen months preaching the gospel, all the while supporting

himself by making tents. In today's reading, Paul writes from Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) and sends his greetings.

1:3. In keeping with ancient Greco-Roman conventions of letter writing in the ancient world, 1 Corinthians begins by identifying the sender and the recipient (1:1–2). In this case, the senders are identified as Paul and Sosthenes, and the recipient is the “church of God that is in Corinth” (1:2). Instead of the standard, “Greetings!” of the Greco-Roman world, Paul employs the distinctly Jewish-Christian salutation of “Grace to you and peace...” (1:3).

1:4–9. In ancient letters, the salutation was often followed by a short prayer of thanksgiving. Here Paul gives thanks for the grace, knowledge, and spiritual gifts that God has showered upon the Corinthians. All these things demonstrate that God is committed to the Corinthians' ongoing transformation, growth, and maturity. God has not only called them (and us) into relationship with him, God has also provided what they (and we) need to remain faithful until the Lord Jesus Christ returns.

Suggestions for Lectors

Deliver the salutation with warmth in your voice: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:3). As you continue with the prayer of thanksgiving (1:4–9), be conscious of what you are saying and to whom you are saying it. For example, as you read *I give thanks to my God always for you* (1:4) and *He will also strengthen you to the end* (1:8), think of yourself as the apostle Paul, and direct your heartfelt prayer to those who have gathered for worship. Remember, as lectors, we are not simply passing on information; our voices are the vehicle for the living Word of God.

Pronunciation Guide

Corinthians (kuh-RIN-thee-uhnz)

MARK 13:24–37

Notes

Sequence. 1 of 2

Commentary

Today's reading is set in Jerusalem near the end of the last week of Jesus' life. At the beginning of this week, Jesus performed two symbolic actions. On Palm Sunday, he rode into Jerusalem as Israel's king (11:1–11). Afterward, he entered the temple and disrupted commercial activities (11:15–19). Citing the prophets, Jesus argued that the temple, which God had intended to be “a house of prayer for all the nations” (Isa 56:7), had been turned into “a den of robbers” (Jer 7:11). By temporarily disrupting such activities in the temple, Jesus was dramatizing the fact that temple operations would one day cease altogether.

The next day, Jesus returned to the temple where he was questioned about his authority to engage in these prophetic actions (11:27–12:44). As Jesus leaves the temple for the last time, his disciples express amazement about the grandeur of the

temple complex with its massive stones and buildings. Jesus is not impressed. Since the temple is not fulfilling its God-ordained purpose, it will be destroyed. Its destruction will be thorough for “not one stone will be left hereupon another, all will be thrown down” (13:2). Within a generation, his predictions come true. In A.D. 70, the armies of Rome raze the temple as punishment for the First Jewish Revolt in A.D. 66.

When questioned by his disciples about the coming destruction, Jesus begins a lengthy discourse of which today’s reading is a part. He talks about wars, rumors of wars, and the upheavals of creation (13:5–8, Prop 28); he talks about his followers being persecuted (13:9–13); and he talks about false messiahs and false prophets coming in his name (13:14–23). Then, in today’s reading, Jesus talks about his own coming (13:24–37). He will arrive at an unexpected hour, so his followers will need to remain vigilant.

13:24–27. After all the political upheavals and persecutions, Jesus will come with the glory and power of a king, and he will gather all the citizens of his kingdom who have, by the grace of God, persevered. The image of the Son of Man coming in the clouds is taken from Daniel 7:13 (Prop 29). In Daniel, one like a son of man comes to the Ancient of Days (that is, God) and receives a kingdom after having endured great suffering and persecutions. This is the perfect image for Jesus, who suffered the humiliation and pain of the cross and yet one day will receive a kingdom.

13:28–31. Unlike evergreens, which are so prominent in the land of Israel, fig trees can be used to interpret the seasons. When a fig tree goes into leaf, one knows that summer is just around the corner. Everything that Jesus has been telling his disciples functions like the fig tree’s leaves. When his disciples see all these things taking place, then they will know that the Son of Man—Jesus himself—is at the gates.

13:32–37. However, he wants to make clear that these signs will not be as precise as we might like. The signs might indicate that the end is near, but they cannot tell us the day or the hour of Jesus’ coming. In fact, Jesus himself does not even know when he is coming; only the Father knows. The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour, so constant vigilance is required. Jesus has called and equipped his disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God by word and by deed (3:13–15). Instead of wasting their time with fruitless speculations, wondering when their master will return, his disciples ought to devote themselves to their apostolic mission. That is what it means to keep alert and awake.

Suggestions for Lectors

In today’s reading, Jesus discloses things that will happen in the future, so read with a hint of mystery in your voice, especially in the opening section (13:24–27).

Emphasize the commands and instructions Jesus issues by elevating your voice and reading slowly and deliberately: *From the fig tree learn its lesson* (13:28); *Beware, keep alert* (13:33); *Therefore, keep awake* (13:35), and *Keep awake* (13:37).

In 13:32, do not pause at the comma after *heaven*, but do pause after *Son*; this will better emphasize the contrast between *neither the angels of heaven nor the Son*, on the one hand, and *but only the Father*, on the other. In 13:35–36, the word *or* occurs four

times. The first three belong together because they link different times in the night watch: *evening*, *midnight*, *cockcrow*, and *dawn*. Initially, the fourth *or* looks like it belongs to this sequence but does not, so it is important to distinguish it from the previous *ors*. Therefore, treat the last comma in 13:35 as a period, and the *or* in 13:36 as though it begins a new sentence, as in: ...*or a dawn. Or else he may find....*

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1–11

Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Peter 3:8–15a

Mark 1:1–8

Overview of Readings

While the readings for Advent 1 concern Jesus' *second* coming, the readings for 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 was to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of God's Messiah. Texts like Malachi 4:5 led people to believe that the prophet Elijah would return to prepare the way for the coming of God and God's anointed agent (cf. Mark 9:11). The gospels present John the Baptist as fulfilling this role (Matt 11:7–15; Mark 9:13; Luke 1:13–17). As Jesus once said of John, "if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen" (Matt 11:14–15).

ISAIAH 40:1–11

Notes

Sequence. 2 of 3

Commentary

In Isaiah 1–39, the prophet announces the LORD's judgment upon the people of Judah for their centuries of idolatry and injustice, that is, for their ongoing refusal to love God with their whole heart (Deut 6:5; Prop 26; Exod 20:1–7, Lent 3) and their failure to love their neighbors as themselves (Lev 19:18; Exod 20:8–17). Isaiah 39 ends ominously as the predicted destruction and exile of Judah at the hands of the Babylonian empire becomes imminent. Isaiah 40 skips ahead many years and introduces a new movement in the prophetic drama. Beginning in Isaiah 40, the ominous note of judgment gives way to a joyful tune of hope, forgiveness, and restoration for God's people as the prophet announces a *new thing* that the LORD is about to do (42:9; 43:19; 48:6).

40:1–2. Isaiah 40 presupposes that God's people have been in exile for some time. After years of silence, the word of the LORD is sent forth to offer solace to these

exiles in Babylon. “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). In other words, the exile is officially over. The LORD has forgiven his people and is soon coming to bring them back home to Zion.

40:3–5. In Isaiah 6, the prophet Isaiah is granted a vision of the LORD of hosts. The hosts are the heavenly beings who serve as royal attendants and who belong to the LORD’s divine council (cf. Ps 82:1; Job 1:6). When the LORD asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?” (6:8), those whom the LORD is addressing, and who constitute the *us*, are members of the divine council.

In today’s reading, the divine council is addressed again, this time by the voice that cries out, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (40:3). The divine council is called up to construct a highway right through the wilderness that stretches between Judah and Babylon, a highway that will facilitate the return of the exiles. As if in a royal procession, the LORD himself will gather his people from Babylon and lead them swiftly and safely home. This wilderness highway will stand as a monument showing the whole world that the LORD has taken his people back. In this way, the LORD’s glory will be seen by all peoples everywhere.

40:6–8. In 40:6, another angelic voice is heard. Unlike in 40:3, this voice does not itself cry out, but issues the command to cry out. The prophet responds, “What shall I cry?,” and then proceeds to speak of grasses withering and flowers fading. Initially, it seems as though the prophet is talking about the transitory nature of human life in general, but with further reflection, it appears that something more specific is in view.

At this point, the prophet has not yet heard the new message of “Comfort, O comfort my people” (40:1). He is only familiar with the old message of judgment, which has dominated chapters 1–39. Therefore, when he hears the command to “Cry out,” he wonders aloud, “What’s the point? The LORD has breathed his word of judgment upon his people, and they have withered. The predicted exile has come about, so what more needs to be said?” (40:6b–7). In reply, the angelic voice affirms what the prophet has said, “The grass withers, the flower fades,” but then adds, “*but* the word of our God will stand forever” (40:8). This *but* is important because it points to a new word of the LORD, the good tidings of forgiveness and return from exile that the prophet is to announce to the exiles.

Nevertheless, this word is not entirely new, because alongside the declarations of imminent judgment in Isaiah 1–39, we also find declarations of restoration. For example, in Isaiah 28, the prophet first proclaims the word of judgment by referring to “the proud garland” of God’s people and “the fading flower of its glorious beauty” (28:1, 4). Right after, the prophet proclaims the word of restoration: “In that day the LORD of hosts will be a garland of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people” (28:5).

Therefore, while the word of the LORD in Isaiah begins with judgment, it ends with mercy and forgiveness. With God, judgment never seems to be the last word. In

today's reading, the prophet is commissioned to cry out the good news to the exiles: "The LORD has forgiven you; your God is bringing you home."

40:9–11. Even Jerusalem and Mt. Zion are enlisted as heralds of the good news. "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" (40:9).

When God comes, he will come with power and might to free his people from their foreign captors. And then afterwards, God will become the shepherd of his people, gathering his scattered flock, feeding them, and guiding them.

Suggestions for Lectors

There are four movements in today's reading (40:1–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–11). Between movements, pause for a full second and conclude each by reading the last line of the movement slowly and deliberately.

Deliver the opening line of the first movement slowly and with feeling: *Comfort, O comfort my people* (40:1). When you come to the three lines beginning with *that*, increase your intensity and tempo as you read each successive line. Your intensity should climax with *band*. After *band*, pause and emphasize *double*. Then, read the final line slowly and calmly with pauses after almost every word, as in: *double... for all... her... sins* (40:2).

The whole of the second movement is the proclamation of the voice, so read it with a raised voice as if you are delivering this message to a large crowd.

The third movement is dynamic and features the back-and-forth exchange between the angelic voice and the prophet. Raise your voice for the angelic command, *Cry out!*, then respond in the uncertain voice of the prophet, *What shall I cry?* As suggested in the Commentary, 40:6b–7 constitutes the prophet's own musings, and in 40:8, the angelic voice responds to those musings. Since this change of speaker is not signaled in the text, your voice will need to make the distinction for your listeners. Read *All people... surely the people are grass* (40:6b–7) in a reflective tone of voice almost as though you are talking to yourself. Then pause for a second before proceeding with 40:8. Begin the angelic voice repeating the prophet's words in a straightforward manner, *The grass withers, the flower fades* (40:8a). Then say *but* and pause for a second. Resume the angelic voice with strength and conviction as it proclaims, *the world of our God will stand forever* (40:8b).

In the fourth movement, the angelic voice continues with even more energy and intensity as it announces the arrival of God. Finally, in 40:11, replace the intensity with tenderness and compassion as you deliver the final line. In fact, you should use the same calming tone of voice here as you did at the opening of today's reading.

Pronunciation Guide

Isaiah (ī-ZAY-uh)

Jerusalem (juh-ROO-suh-luhm)

Judah (JOO-duh)

Zion (ZĪ-uhn)

2 PETER 3:8–15A

Commentary

The Second Letter of Peter presents itself as having been written by Simon Peter, one of Jesus' twelve disciples. In the opening chapter, Peter confides in his readers that the Lord Jesus Christ has informed him that he will not live much longer (1:14). Therefore, with the time he has remaining, Peter intends to devote himself to the task of reminding his Christian readers about the grace, power, and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, whose "divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness" (1:3) and who has made it possible for us to "escape from the corruption that is in the world" (1:4a) so as to "become participants in the divine nature" (1:4b). In today's reading, Peter concludes his epistle by talking about the day of the Lord's return at the end of the present evil age.

In chapter 3, Peter begins by saying that, in the last days, there will be those who scoff at the idea of the Lord's return, saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" (3:4).

3:8–9. Some of this scoffing may be due to the fact that the Lord has not returned as quickly as some had been expecting or teaching. For Peter, this "delay" is no cause for concern because, as he reminds his readers, God's timing is different from ours. "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day" (3:8). Consequently, we really have no basis for saying that the Lord is slow in returning. In fact, what we regard as slowness is better understood as an example of the Lord's love and patience because his desire is that all people have the opportunity to repent and receive the gift of eternal life. This is what Peter is talking about at the end of today's reading when he writes that we should "regard the patience of the Lord as salvation" (3:15a).

3:10–13. That being said, Peter warns that the Lord's patience in coming is not endless; one should not treat his delay as an opportunity to become lax in matters of holiness and godliness. The Lord's arrival will still be as sudden and unexpected as a nighttime burglar. As Jesus himself said, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming, . . . for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (Matt 24:42, 44).

When he comes, all of creation will experience the effects. The old heavens and the old earth, which have become subject to decay and death, will dematerialize in order to be replaced by a new heavens and a new earth. And everything that people have done upon the earth will be disclosed and made known to all.

3:14–15a. This should give Peter's readers an extra incentive to lead lives of holiness and righteousness in the here and now as they await their Lord's return with patient trust.

Suggestions for Lectors

As reflected in the Commentary, today's reading falls into three sections: 3:8–9, 10–13, 14–15a. Lectors should draw each section to a close by slowing down at the end and then pausing for a second before moving on.

Each section has something worth emphasizing. In the first and third sections, emphasize the patience of God, which keeps the door to salvation open: *but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance* (3:9) and *regard the patience of our Lord as salvation* (3:15). In the second section, emphasize the question, *what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness...?* (3:11).

Throughout the reading, Peter expresses a sense of urgency. At the same time, he conveys a real concern for those whom he addresses as beloved (3:8). Let both of these qualities come through in your reading.

MARK 1:1–8

Notes

Sequence. 2 of 2

Commentary

Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, the Gospel of Mark does not begin with stories of Jesus' birth and childhood. Instead, Mark begins with Jesus as an adult at the beginning of his public ministry. In today's reading, we are introduced to John the Baptist who introduces Jesus to the people of Judea and Jerusalem and to the readers of Mark as well.

1:1. The question that Mark is primarily concerned with is the question of Jesus' identity, which resurfaces throughout the gospel narrative. For example, in response to the first healing Jesus performs, an exorcism, the witnesses exclaim, "*What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him*" (1:27, Epi 4). Likewise, when Jesus stills a storm at sea, his awestruck disciples wonder aloud, "*Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*" (4:41, Prop 7). Even Jesus poses the question of his identity. At the midpoint of the narrative, he asks his disciples, "*Who do people say that I am?*," and then, "But who do you say that I am?" (8:27, 29, Prop 19). These questions keep the matter of Jesus' identity at the forefront of the reader's mind. Of course, as readers, we already know who Jesus is because this information is provided in the opening line of the gospel; Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. Thus, the reader knows from the very beginning what characters in the gospel, especially the disciples, are at pains to understand. This is part of Mark's dramatic irony, and what makes the gospel so interesting.

Yet, just knowing these titles for Jesus is not enough because we all have our own ideas of what these titles connote. Thus, Mark's story about Jesus is designed to provide us with a more complete and accurate picture of what it means for Jesus to be Messiah and Son of God. As the reader will discover, being the Messiah and the Son of God does not just entail great deeds of power but profound acts of suffering as well.

In addition to revealing Jesus' identity, the twin titles in Mark 1:1 are reflective of the gospel's overall two-part structure. The body of Mark's narrative is framed by a brief prologue (1:1–8) and epilogue (16:1–8). The body itself can be divided into two, slightly overlapping parts (1:9–8:30; 8:27–15:47). Each part concludes with a

climactic recognition scene in which a character identifies Jesus with one of the titles from the opening line. Part I concludes with Peter's confession, "You are the Messiah" (8:29), and Part II concludes with the centurion's declaration, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (15:39). What is so striking about these two scenes is how unique they are within the gospel. Peter is the only human character in the entire narrative to identify Jesus as the Messiah, and the centurion is the only human character to recognize Jesus' divine identity as the Son of God. Demons know who Jesus is (1:24; 3:11; 5:7), and God himself identifies Jesus as his Son (1:11, Lent 1; 9:7, Lent 2), but Peter and the Gentile centurion are the only *human* characters to declare Jesus to be "the Messiah, the Son of God" (1:1).

1:2–3. For Mark, the beginning of the good news about Jesus does not begin with Jesus. It begins with the promises God made to his people that predate Jesus, promises that speak of one who will come and prepare the way for God's Messiah. Although Mark writes, "as it was written in the prophet *Isaiah*" (1:2a), the citation that follows is a conflation of at least two OT texts—Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3, and perhaps Exodus 23:20 as well.

The prophet Malachi is concerned with "the great and terrible day of the LORD" (4:5), the day when Israel's God will come in judgment to restore his people. In Malachi, the LORD says to his people, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before *me*" (3:1). When Mark appropriates this prophecy, he changes the last pronoun from first person to second person. "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of *you*, who will prepare *your* way" (1:2). In Malachi, the messenger was to prepare for *God's* arrival, but in Mark, this messenger prepares for *Jesus's* arrival. This modification of Malachi's prophecy is Mark's way of underscoring the unique connection between Jesus and God.

Mark does something similar with Isaiah 40:3. He does not alter the text itself but alters the context within which the text is read.¹ In Isaiah, preparations are to be made for the arrival of the Lord God, but in Mark, it is clearly the arrival of the Lord Jesus that is in view. Once again, Mark employs a subtle strategy in an effort to bring into sharper relief the mysterious link between God and Jesus. The prophets spoke of God's coming to restore his wayward people; Mark sees these prophecies as having been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.

1:4–8. The messenger of Malachi and the voice of Isaiah turn out to be John the Baptist. In Malachi, the messenger is specifically identified as the prophet Elijah (Mal 4:5), and the description of the Baptist's clothing matches that of Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8; cf. Zech 13:4). In Isaiah, the voice is located in the wilderness, so the Baptist carries out his ministry in the wilderness. John enjoins the people to get ready to meet their Lord and King. His message must have been powerful and effective, for crowds of

¹ Mark 1:3 differs from Isaiah 40:3 in most English bibles. This is not because Mark has altered the text of Isaiah but because he is drawing upon a Greek version of Isaiah 40:3 that differs from the Hebrew version upon which most English translations are based. In the Hebrew text of Isaiah 40:3, the voice cries out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." In the Greek version, the voice is in the wilderness, proclaiming the message, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of our God."

people traipsed out into the wilderness to confess their sins and be baptized as a sign of their repentance.

Yet, the Baptist knows his ministry is merely preparatory in nature. He knows that someone more powerful is coming. His ritual washings with water are nothing compared to the one who will wash people on the inside with God's cleansing Spirit.

Suggestions for Lectors

Read 1:1 as though it were the title of a book, then pause for a second or two afterwards before proceeding in a storytelling voice.

At the end of 1:3, increase the volume and pitch of your voice as you proclaim: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.* Direct these words to your listeners as though they were the intended audience—which, of course, they are.

Use this same elevated voice when delivering the words of the Baptist. In 1:8, emphasize the points of contrast between the ministries of John and Jesus, as in: *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

Pronunciation Guide

Isaiah (ī-ZAY-uh)

Jerusalem (juh-ROO-suh-luhm)

Judean (joo-DEE-uhn; -DAY-)

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Psalms 126 *or* Luke 1:46b–55; † Canticle 3 *or* 15

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

John 1:6–8, 19–28

ISAIAH 61:1–4, 8–11

Notes

Sequence. 3 of 3

Commentary

Isaiah 61–62 offers a poetic, prophetic description of the restoration of God's exiled people and of a rebuilt Jerusalem (= Zion) following the Babylonian exile. In today's reading, an unnamed figure is introduced. His description brings to mind the servant figure(s) in the four Servant Songs of Isaiah (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9, Palm; 52:13–53:12, GFri). Whether this figure represents a single individual or God's people as a whole, he has been called to execute the LORD's plans of restoration and transformation.

61:1–4, The Servant. In the OT, the LORD equips those whom he calls to perform particular tasks. For example, when David was still a boy, the prophet Samuel was sent to anoint him as king over Israel. When Samuel "took the horn of oil, and anointed [David] in the presence of his brothers,... the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon [him] from that day forward" (1 Sam 16:13, Prop 6). The Spirit would

be David's constant companion, giving him the authority and ability to rule over God's people on God's behalf.

The same has happened here. The Lord GOD has anointed the speaker with the Spirit so that he can carry out all of the assigned tasks identified in 61:1b–3a. These include the actions of bringing, binding up, proclaiming, releasing, comforting, providing, and giving. The beneficiaries of these activities are the poor, the powerless, the oppressed, and the marginalized. The year of the LORD's favor refers to the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:10ff), which occurred every 50 years. In the Year of Jubilee debts were cancelled, slaves were freed, and all land that had been sold reverted to its original ancestral line of ownership.

Those who mourn in Zion will be given a festival wreath instead of ashes of sorrow because the city and its walls will be rebuilt, as will the other cities devastated by invading armies. In fact, those who are restored and transformed by the servant's work will themselves rebuild the ancient ruins.

61:8–9, *The LORD*. At this point, the LORD steps in and speaks for himself. The LORD loves what is equitable and just. His people who have been oppressed and deprived of their land and freedom will be compensated. Moreover, the LORD will establish an everlasting covenant with them so that they, and their descendants after them, will inherit these blessings. Then, all the peoples and all the nations of the world will know that these are God's chosen people. In this, we hear echoes of the LORD's original promise to 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; cf. 17:1–8, Lent 2).

61:10–11, *The Servant*. The reading concludes with the servant offering a song of thanksgiving for what the LORD has and will accomplish.

Suggestions for Lectors

Today's reading uses first person pronouns throughout (*I, me, my*), yet as we saw in the Commentary, the speaker actually alternates between the Servant and the LORD. This shift is quite subtle and could easily be missed by your listeners. Be sure to pause for a full second both before and after 61:8–9 to signal this change in speakers.

Also, adopt a different tone of voice for the Servant and the LORD. Read the Servant's parts with an elevated voice and a slightly accelerated tempo as though you are announcing something wonderful and joyous to your listeners. In contrast, read the LORD's part slowly and deliberately, though not subdued, in order to convey his majesty and the grandeur of his vision.

Isaiah 61:1b–3a comprises one long, complex sentence. Practice it until you can read it easily and naturally and with the right intonation. Sometimes it can be helpful to reformat complex sentences so that its logic and flow can be visualized.

1b 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;
- 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
- 3a to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

As we can see, the most striking feature is the sequence of infinitive clauses—*to bring, to bind, to proclaim*, etc. The second and third of these infinitive clauses take up two lines, so make sure to sustain your intonation through to the end of the second line. You can do this more easily by not pausing at the commas after *captives* and *favor*.

Pronunciation Guide

Isaiah (ī-ZAY-uh)

Jerusalem (juh-ROO-suh-luhm)

Zion (ZĪ-uhn)

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16–24

Commentary

The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is one of two NT letters addressed to Christians in Thessalonica, the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. Paul founded the church in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1–9). Written from Corinth a few months after he left Thessalonica, 1 Thessalonians is our oldest surviving Christian writing. It is the first of Paul's extant letters and predates all other writings within the NT.

In the second half of the letter (4:1–5:22), Paul instructs these new Christians in matters of belief and practice. He reminds them that they live at the end of the ages and that the Lord Jesus Christ will return suddenly like a thief in the night (5:2, 4). Consequently, they should remain awake and take care not become spiritually complacent as they await Christ's return.

5:16–22. In today's reading, Paul draws his letter to a close by offering a litany of parting exhortations. These are designed to offer some direction and support for what it means for us to lead intentional, attentive Christian lives.

5:23–24. The reading concludes with a benediction in which Paul expresses his hope that God will sanctify his readers entirely. In other words, Paul prays that God will heal, renew, and transform every dimension of their human person and personality—spirit, soul, and body—so that they will be ready to receive their Lord when he comes. Of course, Paul's prayer is not mere wishful thinking. He is confident that the one who has called the Thessalonians is committed to their transformation. "He will do this" (5:24). Paul writes the same thing to the Christians

in Philippi: “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

Paul wants us to know two things. First, we must be intentional about leading lives of holiness and goodness. Second, we have not been left to ourselves to lead such lives. We participate with God in our transformation by developing such spiritual habits as rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all circumstances, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit at the core of our being that produces the fruits of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22).

Suggestions for Lectors

There is a qualitative difference in both form and content between 5:16–22 and 5:23–24. In 5:16–22, Paul issues a series of short commands, but in 5:23–24, he offers a relatively longer blessing. When you read, make sure that the tone and tempo of your voice reflects these differences.

When you read the commands in 5:16–22, seek a balance. On the one hand, each of these commands stands on its own, so you want to give each its due by reading slowly and pausing between each command. On the other hand, some of the commands are related to one another. Those should be read with an intonation that conveys that they belong together. Let the punctuation be your guide. For example, in 5:16–18, there are three separate commands: *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances*. Yet, they all belong under the same rubric, *for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*, which is why they are separated by commas instead of semicolons or periods.

Pronunciation Guide

Thessalonians (thes'-uh-LOH-nee-uhn-z)

JOHN 1:6–8, 19–28

Commentary

In all four gospels, John the Baptist serves as the forerunner to Jesus. John’s preaching and practice of baptism prepares the people of Israel for Jesus’ arrival. And John’s baptism of Jesus is the starting point of the Jesus’ ministry, for it is only when John baptizes Jesus that the latter is anointed by the Holy Spirit and equipped for his messianic task.

While the supporting role of John the Baptist is emphasized in each gospel, only in the Gospel of John is there such a concerted effort to clarify the Baptist’s identity and secondary status. But why? Like Jesus, John the Baptist had a following, and there is evidence that a John the Baptist movement continued to exist after his death (cf. Acts 18:24–19:5), even into the second century. It is likely, then, that these disciples of the Baptist regarded him as the Messiah. If so, then the author of John is attempting to defend Jesus’ messianic identity against rival messianic claims for the Baptist. That is the focus of today’s passage.

1:6–8. Today’s reading begins in the famous prologue to the gospel. Only three people are specifically mentioned by name in the prologue—John the Baptist,

Moses, and Jesus—and only the Baptist is mentioned by name more than once (1:6, 15). Up to this point, the prologue has been focused upon the eternal Word of God as the agent of creation and as the source of light for all people. Then, in 1:6, John the Baptist is suddenly introduced as one who was called by God to direct people's attention to the light that was coming into the world. John played a critical role as a witness to the light, but he himself was not the light (1:7–8; cf. 1:15, 29–36; 3:25–30).

1:19–23. During the Baptist's public ministry, he is questioned by a delegation of priests and Levites from the Jerusalem temple: "Who are you?" Without hesitation, he clearly and unambiguously states that he is not the Messiah. When pressed further, he also denies being any of the other messianic-type figures that many of his contemporaries have been expecting. He is not Elijah (Mal 4:5), nor is he the prophet like Moses (Deut 18:18; cf. John 6:14; 7:40).

The Baptist's interrogators demand an answer to their question that goes beyond mere denials, so he offers them a cryptic response by citing Isaiah 40:3 (Adv 2). In Isaiah, the announcement, "make straight the way of the Lord," belonged to the good news that the exile was over. The LORD had forgiven his people, and he was coming to collect them from Babylon and to lead them back home. The Baptist makes clear that he is just a voice; he is simply calling people to prepare for the arrival of God.

1:24–28. The Pharisees ask a follow-up question. If he is not anyone special, then why is he engaged in a ministry of ritual cleansing. The Baptist does not answer their question, at least not directly. Instead, he takes it as an opportunity to point away from himself to the one who is coming after him. Thus, he fulfills his role as one who was sent "as a witness to testify to the light" (1:7a).

Suggestions for Lectors

Rely upon your skill as a storyteller as you present today's episode to your listeners. The episode comes with its own introduction (1:6–8), so read it in a different manner than you read the rest. Read it as though you are reading a prologue.

The episode is driven by dialogue, so focus your attention there. The Baptist is asked a series of questions by priests and Levites who have come down from Jerusalem. The first three questions are fairly straightforward; they appear to be simple, fact-finding questions: *Who are you?... Are you Elijah?... Are you the prophet?* However, the responses the Baptist offers are not satisfying, so his interviewers become a bit animated: *Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?* (1:22). Finally, they become almost agitated, and they begin to challenge his activities, *Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?* (1:25). Just as the tenor of the Baptist's questioners change, you need to change the tenor and intensity of your voice as you repeat their questions.

At each stage of the story, the Baptist responds with the same level of intensity as his questioners. Initially, his answers are straightforward and without emotion, but they become increasingly more energetic as the episode unfolds. Again, convey this in your reading. The Baptist's last response should receive the most emphasis. Raise your voice as though you are making an announcement to a large group of people: *I baptize with water.... his sandal* (1:26–27).

Pronunciation Guide

Bethany (BETH-uh-nee)

Elijah (ee-LĪ-juh; ih-)

Isaiah (ī-ZAY-uh)

Jerusalem (juh-ROO-suh-luhm)

Jews (JOOZ)

Jordan (JOR-duhn)

Levites (LEE-vīts)

Messiah (muh-SĪ-uh)

Pharisees (FAIR-uh-seez)

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16

Luke 1:46b–55 *or* Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26

† Canticle 3 *or* 15 *or* Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26

Romans 16:25–27

Luke 1:26–38

2 SAMUEL 7:1–11, 16

Commentary

In last week's reading from 2 Samuel, we read the story of how David brought the ark of the covenant into his new capital, Jerusalem. When the ark was first constructed in the wilderness years, it was housed in the tabernacle, which was a portable shrine. So, when David brings the ark into Jerusalem, it seems entirely appropriate that he should install it in a tent.

7:1–3. Yet, when things have settled down and the kingdom is at peace, David begins to wonder about the disparity between his own palace of cedar and the LORD's tent. His prophetic advisor Nathan does not need a special word from the LORD. He has seen how the LORD has been with David and how he has blessed everything David has put his hand to, so he simply encourages David to do as he sees fit.

7:4–7. Still the LORD does have an opinion on the matter; after all it is his house they are talking about. The LORD sends a message to David through Nathan. He begins by stating that in all the time he has been with his people, he has never once asked anyone to construct a permanent place of residence for him. In any case, it would be impossible, for he is not a god made of wood or stone but the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen. As he says in Isaiah, "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?" (Isa 66:1). In short, the LORD is content with what he has; he is not interested in a new house.

7:8–11. What the LORD *is* interested in are his people and those whom he calls to shepherd them. The LORD has not forgotten his promise to Abraham and Sarah to make them into a great nation so that they may become the means by which God's

blessing comes to all peoples (Gen 12:3). The LORD intends to protect and preserve his chosen people. He intends to shape them with his character so that they may live out their priestly vocation to mediate the presence, knowledge, and forgiveness of God to all peoples everywhere.

God's people need good leaders if they are going to live out their vocation as God's people. One way the LORD will accomplish this purpose is by making a house for David. Despite David's many faults, the LORD sees in him a faithful follower, a man after his own heart (1 Sam 13:14). The LORD will not only bless David, he will bless David's offspring as well.

7:16. In short, the LORD is committing himself to the Davidic line and is establishing a royal dynasty. From now on and for forever, one of David's descendants will rule as king over the people of God. The first will be David's son Solomon; the last will be David's descendant and Lord, Jesus the Messiah.

Suggestions for Lectors

Read the opening verses in your normal narrating voice (7:1–3). Then, at the beginning of 7:4, drop your voice slightly and read with a different overall tone as you deliver the LORD's words to David through Nathan. In 7:4–7, the LORD asks two rhetorical questions, both of which expect a negative response: *Are you the one to build me a house to live in?* (7:4) and *did I ever speak a word...*? (7:7). Increase the pitch of your voice when asking these questions.

The most important part of today's reading is the covenant that the LORD establishes with David and his offspring, so do what you can to highlight it. Since the covenant the LORD is making with David is a unilateral covenant, one established and maintained by the LORD himself, highlight the commitments the LORD is making to David, by emphasizing each of the *I will*'s:

7:9 *I will make...*

7:10 *I will appoint...*

7:11 *I will give...*

Then, when you reach the final verse, slow down and intensify your voice as say, *Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me...* (7:16a). Do not let a syllable be lost here, especially in the final clause, *your throne shall be established forever* (7:16b).

Pronunciation Guide

David (DAY-vid)

Egypt (EE-jipt)

Israel (IZ-ree-uhl; -ray-)

Nathan (NAY-thuhn)

ROMANS 16:25–27

Commentary

In the last chapter of Romans, Paul begins to draw his letter to a close. In 16:1–16, he extends his greetings to various Christians, and then in 16:17–23 he offers some final instructions. In today's reading, Paul concludes his letter with a doxology.

16:25–27. A doxology is an offering of praise to God, and in this doxology Paul praises God for “the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed... and made known to all the Gentiles... to bring about the obedience of faith” (16:25b–26). This language recalls the opening lines of Romans (1:1–7), especially where Paul speaks of bringing about “the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles” (1:5).

In Paul’s usage, a mystery did not refer to something mysterious but simply to something that remains undisclosed and, therefore, unknown. What is this mystery that has been kept secret for so long, but has now finally been revealed on account of Jesus? Simply this, all people come into a right-relationship with God on the basis of the faithfulness of Jesus and not on the basis of obedience to the law. Since this righteousness is rooted in faith instead of the law, it is open to all who come to trust in Jesus, be they Jew or Gentile. Moreover, because this righteousness is rooted in the faithfulness of Jesus versus the workings of the law, it is able to produce a truer, more lasting obedience than the law ever could. This is what Paul means by the obedience of faith, obedience that is enlivened, motivated, and sustained by faith versus the dead works of the law. For Paul, this is truly grounds for praise.

Suggestions for Lectors

Today’s reading is quite short so make sure your listeners are ready and attentive before you begin. Since a doxology is praise directed toward God, direct your words to God instead of to your listeners.

Today’s reading is also complex, with three verses constituting a single sentence. The basic thought is quite simple, *Now to God be the glory forever*. But Paul wants to identify this God and offer reasons why this God deserves our praise and adoration, so he describes God with reference to Jesus Christ and the gospel.

One way to tackle a complex sentence is to reformat it so that you can see its logic and flow more easily. Identify the central thought and then build your intonation around that. The following is just one way to visualize the structure of this sentence. The italicized portions are the main thought, and these should be emphasized in your reading. Read them slowly in a raised voice full of praise.

Now to God
who is able to strengthen you
according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
according to the revelation of the mystery
that was kept secret for long ages but
is now disclosed, and
through the prophetic writings
is made known to all the Gentiles,
according to the command of the eternal God,
to bring about the obedience of faith—
to the only wise God,
through Jesus Christ,
to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Pronunciation Guide

Gentile (JEN-tīl)

Romans (ROH-muhnz)

LUKE 1:26–38

Notes

Sequence. 1 of 3

Commentary

The Gospel of Luke begins with two annunciations, that is, two angelic announcements of coming births. In the first annunciation, the angel Gabriel appears to the priest Zechariah and announces that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a son named John, whom we know as the Baptist (1:5–25). In the second annunciation, Gabriel is sent to a teenage girl, Mary of Nazareth, to inform her that she will conceive and give birth to a son, whom she is to name Jesus (1:26–38). Each of these births is remarkable in its own way. Elizabeth is barren and beyond normal child-bearing years, while Mary will conceive without the aid of a human partner. As the angel says to Mary in today's reading, nothing is impossible with God.

1:26–29. In today's reading, the angel Gabriel is sent to Nazareth, a small backwater village located on the outskirts of Jewish society and on the fringes of the great Roman Empire. In other words, Nazareth is a most unlikely place for the beginning of God's empire. Gabriel arrives "in the sixth month" (1:26), that is, the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. He is sent to Mary, who is described as a betrothed virgin. Mary is likely young, and she has never engaged in sexual relations with a man. This information makes Gabriel's announcement all the more remarkable.

1:30–33. Gabriel's greeting says a lot about Mary for he greets her as one who is favored by God. The reader is never told why Mary should be so honored. Whatever the reason, she has been chosen to play a special part in God's plans to restore Israel and to redeem the world. Mary will conceive and bear the Messiah, the anointed king who will rule over God's people throughout all eternity.

1:34–38. Mary is understandably perplexed by Gabriel's words. Not only is she speaking with an angel, but this angel is talking about matters that seem quite impossible to her. How could she possibly become mother to the Messiah, the Son of God, when she is still a virgin? After all, even though God has performed some amazing deeds in the biblical record, nothing like this has ever happened. God has made it possible for barren women to conceive, but always with the aid of their husbands. Yet, on this occasion, Joseph will play no role in the conception.

Instead, much as the Spirit of God brooded over the chaotic waters at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:2), so now the Spirit will brood over Mary, and the power of God will bring into being the child who will be called the Son of God. As evidence of God's ability to bring about the seemingly impossible, Gabriel informs Mary of the pregnancy of her cousin Elizabeth. (In the scene following today's

reading, Mary confirms this by visiting Elizabeth (1:39–45).) With all humility and without concern for what this will mean for her, this young village girl gives her consent and agrees to participate in what God wishes to accomplish through her. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (1:38).

Suggestions for Lectors

Today’s story is not a fairytale, but it begins like one. Begin by reading *In the sixth month* with the same intonation you would use for *Once upon a time*, then continue in your best storytelling voice as you narrate this story to your listeners.

The angel gives two brief speeches. Draw each speech to a close by slowing down and reading the concluding clause with purposefulness. At the end of the first speech, pause after *kingdom*, *be*, and *no* and emphasize *no*, as in: *and of his kingdom... there will be... no... end* (1:33). At the end of the second speech, accent and pause after *nothing* and pause again after *impossible*, as in: *For nothing... will be impossible... with God* (1:37).

The line that deserves the most attention is Mary’s willing consent to her role as the bearer of God’s Son. Deliver her words of acceptance with a quiet confidence and a strong quietude.

Pronunciation Guide

David (DAY-vid)

Galilee (GAL-uh-lee)

Gabriel (GAY-bree-uhl; *not* GAB-ree-el’)

Jacob (JAY-kuhb)

Joseph (JOH-sif; -suhf)

Mary (MAIR-ee)

Nazareth (NAZ-uh-reth; *not* -rus)