

A LONGER LOOK AT THE LESSONS

Study Guide and Leader Guide

for Pericopes as listed in *Lutheran Service Book*

Series B

Advent 1–Transfiguration

By Ken Behnken



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Introduction

The Three-Year Series of Scripture readings appointed for use in public worship first appeared in 1969 in the *Ordo lectionum Missae*, developed by the Roman Catholic Church. Shortly thereafter, the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) prepared a Lutheran version of this series, which was eventually included in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and, with some slight modifications, in *Lutheran Worship* (1982). *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (1993), the hymnal of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, also included a version of the ILCW lectionary.

In 1983, the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), an ecumenical study group, published the *Common Lectionary* based on the *Ordo lectionum Missae* as well as the Lutheran and various Protestant three-year cycles in use at the time. After significant field-testing, the CCT then published the *Revised Common Lectionary* in 1992, which was adopted for use in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1998, and adapted for use in *Lutheran Service Book*, the new hymnal of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

This revised edition of *A Longer Look at the Lessons* takes into account the differences between various versions of the Three-Year Series in use among Lutherans today and provides studies for the system you have designated. The studies offer guidance for personal study, and prompt discussion and application of the pericopes by adult Bible study groups.

Two basic principles were followed in structuring the various versions of Three-Year Lectionary: a *thematic principle* and a *principle of semicontinuous reading*. The *thematic principle* is generally employed during the festival half-year. Readings are selected to emphasize the themes of the festivals and the seasons that surround them. The primary reading is always the Holy Gospel, and that is why it is studied first in these materials. The Old Testament Reading (or First Reading) and the Epistle are then selected to support and enhance the theme set forth by the Holy Gospel.

The *principle of semicontinuous reading* is applied especially during the nonfestival half of the Church Year (the Sundays after Pentecost). The Holy Gospels of Series A are largely from Matthew; Series B from Mark; Series C from Luke. Readings from John are inserted in all the series, especially during the festival half-year. The Epistles also represent semi-continuous readings through particular letters. The Old Testament Readings, however, are selected thematically in relation to the Holy Gospel throughout both halves of the Church Year.

The overall purpose of assigning Scripture readings in this way is to provide an annual review of salvation history and of major Christian doctrines, as well as to read significant sections of Holy Scripture during certain times of the Church Year. Pastors have found these pericopal studies helpful as they prepare their sermons and services from week to week.

Study Guide

How to Use the Study Guide

The Study Guide has been prepared with three goals in mind. First, it provides information about the lessons and their contexts. A look at the Greek or Hebrew is sometimes included. Doctrinal emphases are pointed out, and the text is often related to other statements of Scripture. Second, it asks questions that help the group explore the texts and provoke analytical thought. Answers are to be sought first in the pericopes themselves, with other references cited for backup or expansion of the thought. Questions that explore the text are just asking “What does it say?” to focus attention. They are easy to answer—so easy that people sometimes feel uneasy about stating the obvious. Help your group understand this. Don’t spend time on these; just get a focus on what the text says and how it says it, and move on to questions that ask “What does it mean?” These require more time and thought. Let your group struggle a little if necessary; don’t be in a hurry to provide answers yourself. Sometimes, restating the question will help them move to the point. Third, the Study Guide encourages discussion and application to Christian life today by asking “What does it mean for us?” This is the essential goal of every Bible study. Give your group members time to express themselves. Encourage and accept their applications and testimonies. Don’t hesitate to share your own views and experiences, but *don’t take over*, or they will back off and wait for you to do this every time. Fill-in-the-blanks exercises focus the attention of the group on key words of the text, and they are intended to provide emphasis of their significance in a simple way.

Make use of added Scripture references—but save time by using slips of paper to assign them ahead of time to individuals who don’t mind reading aloud in your group.

Lesson 1

First Sunday in Advent

With this First Sunday in Advent, the Church begins a new year. We look ahead once again to the great festivals: Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. We begin the new year as we ended the old—with eyes and hearts looking up, waiting for the return of our Lord and the beginning, not just of a new year, but of a new age. We move into Series B in the Three-Year Lectionary, in which the Holy Gospels are taken largely from the Gospel of Mark.

It was the unanimous testimony of the Early Church that this Gospel was written by John Mark. Mark's mother owned a house in Jerusalem that served as a meeting place for believers, so already as a youth, Mark had personal involvement in the Church. A relative of Barnabas, young Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first mission journey, but left them at Perga and returned to Jerusalem. When they planned their second mission journey, Barnabas wanted to take Mark along again, but Paul refused. The two finally went separate ways. Mark later became Peter's assistant and, in his Gospel, recorded Peter's eyewitness account. Mark's Gospel is succinct, unadorned, yet vivid. It was written for the Church at Rome, largely with Gentile readers in mind. It emphasizes what Jesus did more than what He said. The book as a whole is characterized as “the beginning of the Gospel”—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Apostolic preaching was the continuation of this Gospel.

The Holy Gospel: Mark 11:1–10

It was a time of political and religious ferment. Zealots were engaged in guerrilla warfare against Rome, some of their leaders even claiming to be the Messiah. Expectations of the coming of the Promised One were high. John the Baptist, the voice in the desert, intensified the hope. For most Jews, the political and the religious combined in a hope for restoration of the kingdom of David and the glory of Israel. The situation was ready-made to produce the kind of popular demonstration that accompanied Jesus' deliberate fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy of the meek King coming to Jerusalem. It would be the catalyst to precipitate His arrest and condemnation and execution.

Jesus gave two of His disciples instructions. Unlike other instances when Jesus allowed His disciples to “iron out the details,” this time His instructions were explicit.

Jesus' anticipation of the readiness of the owners of the colt to release it for His use proved to be correct. The colt was one “on which no one has ever sat.”

1. Why were the men standing there, ready to let disciples take the animal? How does Jesus say His “The Lord has need of it” to us today?

The disciples prepared the colt with their outer robes. They and others began to catch the spirit of the occasion and carpeted the path with robes and branches. They were met by those coming out of

Jerusalem to see what was happening. Finding that Jesus was finally asserting Himself, they joined eagerly in the occasion. Psalms 113–118 provided the *Hallel* that was sung as part of the Passover. Now key phrases were chanted by those heralding Jesus' coming and welcoming Him. "Hosanna!" meant "Save now!" but had become a general exclamation of praise. "Hosanna in the highest!" connected their praise with that given by the heavenly choruses.

2. How was this especially fitting as a way of greeting Jesus as King?

"Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" was definitely messianic in its thrust. "In the name of the Lord" meant more than just "as the Lord's representative" but signified the one who was bringing the "name," the revelation, of Yahweh.

3. How was this use of Psalm 118:25 especially appropriate on this occasion?

Jesus' deliberate fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy prompted the crowd to shout, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

4. What expectations are seen in their acknowledging Jesus as the king who would rule on David's throne?

The crowd's enthusiastic reaction points to the spontaneity of the occasion.

5. When have you felt that kind of spontaneous enthusiasm in your worship and in your service?

In entering Jerusalem as He did, Jesus displayed the pattern of His saving work and of the Church's mission. He came in peace, not war. He conquers by His Spirit, not by might or power. Those who want to see Christianity represented by a king on a prancing horse at the head of a conquering army are missing the point of Jesus' humble service. It led Him to the cross for us and, through the cross, to the crown. As we join the crowd in His procession, we are challenged to walk His way and to trust His approach to ministry (1 Kings 19:11–18; 1 Corinthians 2:1–5).

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 64:1–9

This pericope is from the final section of Isaiah's prophecy, a proclamation of Yahweh's judgment of the nations and His salvation of His people. It is part of "the prophet's intercessory prayer." Like the priest, the prophet also interceded on the people's behalf before God.

6. What was Isaiah asking in calling on the Lord to be as fire kindling brushwood and causing water to boil?

7. What were some of the awesome things the Lord did for His Old Testament people as they waited for Him? How has He come to your help as you waited for Him in your life as a Christian?

8. God does “meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember [Him] in [His] ways.” Does He also get angry with us when we continue to sin against His ways? Why does sin arouse God to anger?

Verse 6 is a most striking expression of the pervasive effect of sin in human life. We expect to have sinful deeds exposed and judged by God, but here the prophet says that our ___ are like a ___. This judgment was very pointed for Israel. “Polluted garment” referred to menstrual cloths. According to the Levitical code, Israelite women were ceremonially unclean during their menstrual periods (see Leviticus 15:19–24).

9. Why are even our righteous deeds not clean and pure in God’s sight? (See Psalm 51:6 and 1 Corinthians 4:5.)

10. What does “we all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away” say about sin’s effect on human life? How is that amplified by “You have hidden Your face from us, and made us melt”?

11. “But now, O LORD” introduces the final plea of the intercessor, a plea that continues through the end of the chapter. What is the basis of this plea to the Lord for His help?

12. How does this Old Testament Lesson relate to today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Paul wrote First Corinthians to deal with quarreling factions that were disturbing the Church's unity in Christ, and to answer questions about which they had written him. Paul had invested 18 months of ministry in Corinth and had established a congregation there, largely from the Greek community. The "chief city of Greece," Corinth numbered 250,000 citizens and 400,000 slaves. It was a wealthy center of East-West commerce. Pagan religions flourished and determined the city's lifestyle. The temple of Aphrodite, goddess of love, offered 1,000 female slaves as temple prostitutes, available free for the "worship" of Aphrodite. Corinth's emphasis on commerce combined with its pagan culture to glorify unbridled pursuit of things and of carnal pleasures. "To Corinthianize" became a euphemism for "to practice sexual immorality." In such a setting, it is no wonder that a church of new converts struggled.

As was his style, Paul began his letter with encouraging, even complimentary, words. He reminded the Corinthian Christians of the relationship they shared in Jesus and of the spiritual resources God had given them. He encouraged them to use these resources to resolve their differences in honest, loving ways. "Grace and peace" was a greeting commonly used in letters of that day, but was especially appropriate as Paul's greeting.

13. How did Paul's use of this ordinary greeting give the words full meaning? How have these words of Paul come into usage in our worship life?

14. What was it that occasioned Paul's continual thanksgiving for the Christians of Corinth?

15. The factions in the congregation were fighting about which one of them had the most and best spiritual wisdom and insight. As Paul congratulated them for being enriched in their speaking and knowledge, to what did he point as the source of that enrichment? How had Paul's testimony been confirmed in the Corinthian Christians?

16. Why does God give spiritual gifts to individuals in His Church? (See 1 Corinthians 12:7.)

17. What promise did Paul point to as inherent in God's bringing people to faith and blessing them with spiritual gifts? What is the one thing that will prevent that promise from being fulfilled?

18. What will enable our congregation's Christian fellowship to remain strong and guiltless?

Lesson 2

Second Sunday in Advent

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:1–8

Typically, Mark jumped right into his task, giving both the title and the purpose of his Gospel in seven Greek words, translated “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” His only prelude to telling about Jesus’ life and work is these few words about the Way-Preparer. It was important that his readers, largely Gentile Christians, understand that the Christ had His roots in Old Testament prophecy and that His Way-Preparer did too. Mark’s quotation from “Isaiah the prophet” is actually a combination of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Isaiah was an entity in itself while Malachi was combined with others as “The Book of the Twelve,” so Mark credited the major prophet. The quotation gives John’s person, his message, and the desert setting their basis in Old Testament prophecy.

John means “Yahweh is gracious”—a most appropriate name for the Way-Preparer of the One whose name, *Yeshua* (Jesus), means “Yahweh saves.” Luke says of John: “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (1:80).

As an adult, John offered “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The Greek *metanoia*, “repentance,” literally means “a change of mind and heart.” *Metanoia* implies far more than a guilty feeling upon getting caught; it includes a genuine change in the will to go in a completely new direction. *Aphesis*, “forgiveness,” implied “a sending away.” Only God can do it, but when He sends sins away, a person is fully free of them and of their consequences (see Psalm 103:12).

19. What outward act expressed the inner truth and qualified people for Baptism? How is that a part of our lives as Christians?

20. What was the point of John’s having them come out to meet him in the desert?

Mark’s description of John and of his ministry of preaching and baptizing leads to his stating John’s reason for being as the Way-Preparer. His mission was to point people to ___ who would come after him.

21. How did John emphasize the superiority of the One whose way he was preparing? How did he contrast their ministries?

22. When did the promised baptism with the Holy Spirit take place? (See Acts 1:5; 2:1–4; 11:1–18; Titus 3:4–7.)

23. What is the difference between John’s Baptism and the Baptism that Jesus later commanded? (See Matthew 28:18–20.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 40:1–11

Isaiah was God’s prophet during the reign of Hezekiah in Judah. It was a time of great peril for the nation. Assyrian armies had conquered the nations to the north, including the kingdom of Israel. They swept southward toward Jerusalem, overwhelming villages along the way. But Isaiah continually assured Hezekiah that God would prevent them from conquering Jerusalem. A siege was begun—and ended suddenly when, in response to Assyrian arrogance and blasphemy, “the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians” (2 Kings 19:35).

Chapters 1–39 of Isaiah deal with that history and Isaiah’s related prophecies. With chapter 40, the thrust changes to a future conquest of Judah by Babylon, and the eventual return from exile of a remnant to rebuild. The Lord prophesies through Isaiah about the future—also the ultimate, eschatological future of the messianic kingdom. In the Gospels, we hear Jesus quoting from “Isaiah the prophet.”

Chapter 40 begins the prophetic poems that announce the coming judgment of the nations and their gods and the vindication of Israel. They promise a return of exiles from Babylon, but they also have a cosmic, “end times” thrust. In this pericope, the new emphasis is fairly shouted: “Comfort, comfort My people, says your God.”

24. What is the significance of each of the three comforting proclamations to be spoken tenderly to Jerusalem?

25. What is the purpose of the highway construction project the voice calls for?

26. How would “the glory of the LORD . . . be revealed”? What dimension is added by “all flesh shall see it together”? How did Isaiah assert the authority and dependability of what he was proclaiming?

27. What did “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever” say to the exiles? With what truth does it make us reckon regarding our own lives?

28. What does the enduring dependability of God’s Word encourage in those who proclaim it? What does it do for those who hear it?

29. How is the Lord God described as displaying characteristics both of mighty power and of touching gentleness? Why is seeing both characteristics vital to those who put their trust in Him? In whom have we seen these qualities come together fully?

30. How does this Old Testament Lesson relate to today’s Holy Gospel?

Before moving on, read this great poem aloud again, using this pattern: verses 1–2, all; verses 3–5, one man; verses 6–8, one woman; verses 9–11, all.

The Epistle for the Day: 2 Peter 3:8–14

Peter’s words about the Lord not being “slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness” relate to the second coming of Christ and to the scoffing of some because of the Lord’s seeming delay. The Old Testament faithful had gone through their time of waiting too. Their “How long, O Lord, how long?” revealed their eagerness for the coming of the consolation of Israel. But Peter says, “With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” Paul wrote, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman” (Galatians 4:4). God acted according to His own will and plan and timing to fulfill His promise to rescue His people. He does the same in our lives.

Peter was pointing to the time when all mankind will see the full glory of the Lord at His return. Also in this, God has His own time schedule (see Mark 13:32).

31. Why, according to Peter, is Jesus not in a hurry to return and bring this present age to an end? How does the Lord’s desire for “all to reach repentance” involve us?

32. What is the point of “the day of the Lord will come like a thief”?

“The heavens will pass away,” “the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved,” “the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed,” “new heavens and a new earth”—all point to the end of this age and the beginning of the new. Some see in them the complete destruction of the present universe and the creation of a completely new universe; others see in them a divine process of purification

and renewal of the existing universe. But all agree that Peter is saying that the old order of things will be replaced by a new order of things.

33. Toward what should the temporary nature of our world motivate us? Does it make a difference in all of this whether the Day of the Lord comes before we die or whether we die before the Day of the Lord comes?

34. How will our living holy and godly lives “hasten” the coming of Christ? How do we go about involving ourselves in the effort to be without spot or blemish, and at peace with our Lord at His coming?

Lesson 3

Third Sunday in Advent

The Holy Gospel: John 1:6–8; 19–28

John began his Gospel with words reminiscent of Genesis 1. He wrote of the Word who was with God and who was God and who made all things as having life in Himself, and that life being the light of men. He continued this metaphor as he told of John the Baptist, saying that John was not the ____, but came only as a ____.

35. In God’s saving plan for His world, what occasioned the coming of John the Baptist at just that time?

John the evangelist’s description of John the Way-Preparer agreed with the Way-Preparer’s testimony about himself. John the Baptist had considerable impact on Jewish society. Josephus estimated that 300,000 people came out into the desert to be baptized by him. The whole Jewish society was buzzing with conversation about John—wondering whether this prophetic figure, with his uncompromising call for a repentance validated by a change in attitudes and actions, was the promised Christ. Opinions on both sides of the question must have flowed freely, even among the members of the Sanhedrin. Finally, that body, referred to as “the Jews” in John’s Gospel, was constrained to send official representatives, priests, and Levite guards to observe and to investigate and to interrogate John. John was true to his calling. In response to their pointed question, he stated clearly: ____.

Since Elijah had gone bodily into heaven in a fiery chariot, there was expectation that he would return prior to the coming of the Messiah (see Malachi 4:5–6). “The prophet” also had messianic overtones (see Deuteronomy 18:18).

36. Jesus later identified John as “Elijah” (see Matthew 17:10–13). Why, then, did John tell his interrogators “I am not [Elijah]”?

37. John’s questioners asked, “Who are you?” How did John identify himself? What does his answer reveal about John?

As Mark’s Gospel tells us, John called people to “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). Though Old Testament ceremonial law had a number of cleansings with water, John’s general call to the Jewish people to a Baptism of repentance for forgiveness was something new. It is understandable that his interrogators would press him about his authority to call for this new kind of

Baptism if he was not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet. The Jewish people were familiar with baptism, especially as a ritual act of cleansing for Jewish proselytes. But they were unfamiliar with a need for Jews to be baptized.

In recording John's answer, the evangelist quoted only his "I baptize with water" (1:26). The other Gospels let us know that he completed the contrast by saying of the One whose way he was preparing, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Look a little beyond this pericope into its context and you see that the evangelist was keying in on the specific identification of Jesus by John. Read verses 29–34, remembering that John the evangelist had been a disciple of John the Baptist before becoming a disciple of Jesus. He had heard the Baptist's testimony himself. John the Baptist identified Jesus not only as the one "who baptizes with the Holy Spirit" but also as the ___ of God and the ___ of God.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Chapters 56–66 deal with the restoration following the exile in Babylonia. This section of Isaiah is Isaiah's prophetic and poetic vision of what will be for Judah in God's plan, colored by anticipation of the messianic kingdom.

38. What was to be the essential ministry of the One on whom the Spirit of the Lord came? What was assured by "the LORD has anointed me"? Which phrases in verses 1 and 3 show the impact this ministry of Good News will have?

39. How can "the year of the LORD's favor" and "the day of vengeance of our God" stand side by side?

40. What is the point of calling the citizens of Zion "oaks of righteousness"? What was God's purpose in planting them?

41. To what important event did "They shall build up the ancient ruins" and the following phrases point? "I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them"; "their offspring shall be known among the nations"; and "all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed."

It is still true of the Jewish people today, living in virtually all parts of the world, that they are blessed with intellect and abilities that make many of them leaders in almost every area of life. The prophecies find their true fulfillment, however, in the children of Abraham who put their faith in Abraham's Seed, the Lord Jesus Christ. Verses 10–11 follow as an eschatological hymn that praises the Lord from the viewpoint of the fulfillment of His promises.

42. What poetic pictures are used to describe the beauties of salvation? What will be the result of the Lord's dealing so graciously with His people?

43. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

This pericope is part of Paul's final instructions to the Thessalonian Christians—and what beautifully concise and pointed instructions they are! First, he touched on their relationship with their leaders and with each other (see vv. 12–15). Then he addressed their personal faith and life in their relationship with God. Three little verses virtually cry out to us, “Memorize us!” They urge a continual outlook (or uplook) that expresses and nourishes personal devotion.

44. “Rejoice always.” The Greek says more than “be happy”; it commands conscious, active rejoicing. In a world of troubles, illnesses, accidents, disappointments, and losses, how can we actively practice rejoicing *always*? (See Philippians 4:4–7.)

45. “Pray without ceasing.” This does not mean that we go around constantly mumbling prayers. We do have to concentrate also on other things in our daily living. What does “pray without ceasing” call for? (See Ephesians 6:18; Romans 12:12.)

46. “Give thanks in all circumstances.” The Greek calls for more than “feeling thankful”; it commands an active, conscious giving of thanks—and we are to do this in *all* things that might affect Christian faith and life. Why can we actively thank God even in circumstances that are unhappy, even threatening and hurtful to us? (See Romans 8:28, 31–32.)

47. Why must this “will of God . . . for [us]” always be understood as being *in Christ Jesus*?

Five short injunctions follow—actually three, for the last two are just extensions of the third. They deal with receiving God's instruction and guidance.

48. What will effectively “quench the Spirit” in a Christian life? What will do this in the life of a Christian congregation?

The gift of prophecy was one of the *charismata*, the special gifts of the Spirit, through which God brought guidance to the Early Church. “Prophecy,” also in the Early Church, was usually what we would call “preaching”—instruction from God as His Word is taught and applied by Church leaders or by fellow members (Colossians 3:16).

49. What constitutes treating such prophecies with contempt?

50. “Test everything”—not just teachings, but *all* things that might affect Christian faith and life. The Greek word for “test” was used also in regard to the testing of coins to determine their genuineness. What is to be the result of such testing in a Christian’s life?

51. In his closing blessing, Paul asked God to sanctify the Thessalonian Christians through and through. What does *sanctify* mean? Why did Paul, in this regard, call God “the God of peace”?

“Your whole spirit and soul and body” refers to the whole person. In biblical terms, the *pneuma*, “spirit,” is the inmost being designed originally to relate intimately to God’s Spirit—a relationship now restored in Christ. The *psyche*, “soul,” is the life force with its intellect, emotions, and desires. The *sōma* is the physical body with its needs.

52. How can the whole person be kept blameless at the coming of the Lord Jesus?

Lesson 4

Fourth Sunday in Advent

The Holy Gospel: Luke 1:26–38

Luke probably interviewed Mary, the mother of Jesus, and provided details that she shared with him, such as this account of the angel announcing that she would be the mother of the Messiah (see Luke 1:1–4). Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke accurately recorded that event for us here.

With “In the sixth month,” Luke connects the experience of Mary that he is about to recount with what had proceeded. It was the sixth month of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, who would be the mother of John the Baptist. The same angel, Gabriel, who had told Zechariah about that special child, was now sent to Nazareth to a virgin named Mary. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. In Jewish society of that day, the betrothal (the agreement between two families) was the legally binding act. Joseph and Mary were husband and wife legally, but their living together in consummation of the marriage awaited a scheduled time of wedding festivities. For Mary, the angel had an even more wondrous message than the one he had brought to Zechariah. She, a virgin, would conceive and carry and give birth to a son whom she was to name ____ and who would be called ____.

Matthew, as he recorded the birth of Jesus, saw it as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy (see 1:22–23).
53. Why was Mary chosen to be this favored one?

Luke established immediately that Joseph, who would be the child’s legal father, was a descendant of David—but what Luke told about the angel’s message and Mary’s reaction to it also clearly established that Joseph was not _____. At the end of chapter 3, Luke listed a genealogy that many feel is Mary’s through her father (tradition names him “Heli”), which declares that she, too, was of David’s line. Both legally and physically, Jesus was the Son of David.

54. Why was it important for the Gospel writers to establish this fact?

Mary “was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.” Imagine the agitation and wonder we would feel if the Lord’s messenger were suddenly to say to us, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

55. What is the significance of God’s assigning the name *Jesus* to this special child?

56. What was the angel explaining to Mary by saying, “The Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end”? How did the angel explain the process that would be involved in this virgin’s conceiving and giving birth to a son?

57. To what validating evidence did the angel point Mary?

58. How did Mary show that God had not made a mistake in choosing her to be the mother of the Savior? What does her example encourage in us as we prepare for Christmas?

The Old Testament Lesson: 2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16

1 and 2 Samuel, originally one book, are a record of the time during which Israel moved from *theocracy*, in which the guiding and ruling figure was the Lord’s prophet, to *monarchy*, rule and leadership by a king. When the people desired a king to lead them “like all the other nations,” Samuel resisted. But the Lord told him, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them” (1 Samuel 8:7). The Lord chose Saul, a Benjaminite, to be Israel’s first king. Samuel arranged for kingship on a covenantal basis: the king would not be autonomous, but would be subject to the Word of the Lord through His prophet. Both the king and the people were to realize that the Lord was their ultimate ruler.

In time, Saul became faithless, disobeyed clear commands of the Lord, and at one time, even willfully took to himself the priestly function of offering a sacrifice to the Lord—to serve his own ends. The Lord rejected him and his line, and sent Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint young David, son of Jesse, to be Saul’s successor. When Saul and his sons died in battle, David became king. Soon all Israel united around him, and he led them to victory over their enemies and to a time of peace and prosperity and prominence. He captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made it his royal city and residence. He brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, publicly acknowledging the Lord’s kingship over him and the nation.

David was not perfect, of course. In his adultery with Bathsheba, in his murder of her husband, and in his laxity in disciplining his sons, which finally led to civil war, he fell short of the theocratic ideal. But he remained a man after God’s heart because he was willing to acknowledge his sin and repent. He wanted relationship with the Lord above all else. The Lord was gracious to David. In general, his rule was noted for its justice, wisdom, integrity, courage, and compassion. In later history, his reign became the standard by which the reigns of the kings were measured.

59. What was it that David wanted to do for the Lord? What motivated him to want to do this?

60. Why do you think the Lord declined his offer? What was the Lord saying with His “Did I speak a word . . . saying, ‘Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?’”

61. How did the Lord turn David’s offer around and make it a blessing to Israel as a nation and to David as its king? What emphasis stands out in the rule of David and the promise that his dynasty would be established after him?

62. Who was it, in God’s will and plan, who would build “a house for [His] name”? (See vv. 12–15.)

63. What is the most dramatic aspect of the Lord’s promise to establish David’s “house” and kingdom?

David began his rule around 1009 BC. His royal line continued in the kingdom of Judah until the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and, for a time, his descendants ruled as vassals of Persia after the exile. Since then, no Davidic king has ruled from Jerusalem.

64. To what does this promise that David’s throne “shall be established forever” point?

65. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 16:25–27

Paul began his Letter to the Romans by formally and forcefully stating his authority as “an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God.” Here he ends with a doxology to the One “who is able to strengthen you according to my Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ.” His readers were Christians who did not know Paul personally, except for those he greeted by name. Paul wrote as one who hoped to come to them, and formulated and explained and applied the Gospel of Jesus in greater detail in Romans than in any of his other epistles. As he took the pen into his own hand to write closing words personally, he was still concerned that they be firmly based in the Gospel. At the beginning of his letter, he had said, “I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to *strengthen* you.” In closing, he used the same Greek word to emphasize that it had been his one goal in writing his detailed and instructive letter to *strengthen* them. All of his final words are embodied in a doxology to the One who does the

strengthening through the Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, and they invite us to join in his words of praise.

66. Why would it be so important for the Roman Christians that they be *strengthened* in faith and life?

Three Greek phrases stand out in the doxology: *chronois aiōniois*, “long ages”; *tou aiōniou Theou*, “the eternal God”; and *eis tous aiōnas*, “forevermore.” The first points back into the eons of eternity; the third points ahead into the eons of eternity; the second points to the revelation of the mystery in human history as the act of the God of the eons, the eternal God, whose will and purpose cover everything: past, present, and future.

67. What is “the mystery that was kept secret for long ages”? How has the mystery “now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations”? What is God’s purpose in making His mystery known?

68. How does this doxology, which praises God as the one who is able to establish us through His mystery revealed in Christ, enhance our Christmas observance?

In closing our study, let’s apply the doxology to ourselves and say it together:

“Now to Him who is able to strengthen [us] according to [the] Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

Lesson 5

Christmas Dawn

Only occasionally does Christmas Day fall on a Sunday and its texts become the focus of *A Longer Look at the Lessons*. When it does, we have opportunity to dig deeply into the Holy Gospel that tells the familiar story of the birth of the Savior and explore also its related readings.

The Holy Gospel: Luke 2:1–20

There is a double purpose in Luke’s citing the imperial decree requiring the census and noting that it was when Quirinius was governing Syria. As a historian, he thus established the date of the event he was recounting—and as a proclaimer of Jesus Christ as the Savior, he wanted to explain how God arranged circumstances so that the Promised One would be born in Bethlehem, as prophesied. The census was the first in Roman history, but it led to periodic enrollment of the population of the empire every 14 years, a pattern that continued for two centuries. Generally, the Romans just counted the people where they lived, but in the land of the Jews, the arrangement was that people were required to travel to the place that was their “family center,” the locale associated with their clan. This is why Joseph, a descendant of David, had to travel to David’s town, Bethlehem, with his wife, Mary, at a time when ordinarily they would not have made such a journey. The circumstances that God used to arrange for this involved people, like the emperor, who had no idea they were being used in this way. But it all came together in God’s will—the imperial decree, its dissemination, the organization of the census, the journey to Bethlehem—and all with exactly the right timing.

The English Standard Version’s (ESV) “with Mary, his betrothed” is a confusing translation. It may suggest to us that Joseph and Mary were just “engaged” when they traveled to Bethlehem and her son was born. In Jewish custom, the betrothal, the formal agreement between two individuals and their families, was the legally binding arrangement. When betrothed, the two were legally husband and wife, though their living together and consummating the marriage was often a year away. This explains why Joseph, when he found that Mary was pregnant, planned to divorce her (Matthew 1:18–19). But when God’s angel explained the wondrous situation to him, he “took his wife, but knew her not [had no sexual union with her] until she had given birth to a son” (Matthew 1:24–25). The Greek *emnesteumene* is a perfect participle and may be translated “having been betrothed.” The King James Version (KJV) rendered this “his espoused wife.” Actually, the betrothal period had ended when Joseph took Mary to his home. She accompanied him to Bethlehem and was enrolled as his wife.

The census requirements produced crowded conditions in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph found no room available in the inn, so they made do in the stable. This was not so unusual. People of that time often lived in close proximity to their animals. The stable was probably a cave dug out of the hillside behind the inn. Mary laid her newborn child in a manger.

69. What is a manger? What do the circumstances of His birth say about the coming of God's Son into our humanity? (See 2 Corinthians 8:9.)

It was also not unusual for shepherds to camp out in the fields and group their flocks together for bedding down. Some sources suggest that shepherds generally were not held in high regard in that society, were considered dishonest and unreliable, and were not even allowed to give testimony in court. These particular shepherds, however, were probably pious Jews, part of the remnant who looked for the Messiah's coming. But they still were shepherds, and were not well thought of by townspeople.

70. What does God's choosing to make the announcement of Christ's birth to shepherds say about God's saving will for people? Why did they immediately react with fear at the appearance of the angel? How did the angel reassure them?

71. What is the significance of the titles by which the angel referred to the newborn child:
Savior?

Christ?

Lord?

The song of the angels praised God for the effect this wonderful event would have on humanity. The thrust was from God to men, the fullest demonstration of His grace. It brings "peace among those with whom He is pleased." This is misinterpreted when it is thought to indicate a difference between people, some being pleasing to God and others not; but in its context, it is clear that the angels' song is *pure Gospel*; it announces God's surprising gift of salvation and praises Him for it.

72. What do the reactions of the shepherds and Mary to their unusual experience that night encourage in us?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 62:10–12

The last chapters of Isaiah celebrate the restoration of Judah following the exile in Babylon. These words of comfort and assurance end a chapter that speaks about God's blessing Zion with a new name. "Zion" is Jerusalem, and more specifically, the temple mount. But "Zion" is used here to refer to the messianic people of God who have been "brought home" and have experienced God's blessing. God's people in the Holy City raise a banner inviting all nations to see what He has done for them. The basis of all this is the Lord's own proclamation, which goes out to the ends of the earth.

73. What is the heart and center of the Lord's proclamation?

74. Why does the Savior come with both reward and recompense?

The meaning of names was very significant to the Hebrews, so in this song, to promise God's favorable action, Zion is given new names.

75. What will the messianic people be called? instead of what? What will Jerusalem be called? instead of what? (See Isaiah 62:4.)

The restoration of Judah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple *did* happen in subsequent history, but not in so glorious a measure as indicated here. Christians see the ultimate fulfillment of these promises of hope and restoration in the gathering of God's people from all nations to life with their Savior as His Church.

76. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Titus 3:4–7

Titus was a young Gentile Christian who became one of Paul's assistants. He provided helpful service to Paul as his representative to the Corinthian Christians when Paul's apostolic authority was being questioned. Later, Titus was given responsibility for organizing and strengthening the newly-formed congregations on the island of Crete, where he had worked with Paul to bring the Gospel to a rather militantly pagan society. Paul wrote his Letter to Titus to give advice regarding Titus's ministry, but also to give Titus's work the stamp of his own apostleship. As he contrasted the Gospel of Jesus with the foolish ideas and permissive lifestyles of the false teachers who were disturbing these new Christians, Paul was led by the Spirit to give us in this pericope a most beautiful description of the grace of God and its blessings to those who believe.

"When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared" makes this Epistle an ideal choice for Christmas Day, for that's when we celebrate the appearance of the love of God in the birth of His Son as our Savior.

77. What does Paul again make clear about our salvation? Why is it so important and helpful for us to be reminded of this again and again?

78. What is "the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit"? Why is it important to see Baptism as God's action and not our own?

79. Why must our becoming “heirs according to the hope of eternal life” always follow our “being justified by His grace”?

In verse 8, Paul describes what he had just been saying: “The saying is trustworthy.” This is a phrase he reserved for very significant statements of salvation by grace. Note that all that he has been saying ends up with encouragement to “be careful to devote [yourselves] to good works.” The Christmas spirit, stirred up in us by our celebration of God’s gift of His Son to be our Savior, is to be displayed not only in songs of praise to God, but also in our everyday relationships and interactions with those around us as we do what is good.

Lesson 6

Christmas Day

Only occasionally does Christmas Day fall on a Sunday and its texts become the focus of *A Longer Look at the Lessons*. When it does, we have opportunity to dig deeply into the Holy Gospel that tells the familiar story of the birth of the Savior and explore also its related readings.

The Holy Gospel: John 1:1–18

Today's Holy Gospel is the lofty prologue of the Gospel of John. It established the theme of the Gospel: Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God made flesh to save us! Of the Bible's writers, only John wrote in terms of the *Logos*, the "Word." In Greek philosophy, the *Logos* was the reason of God that controlled and guided the changing world, the mind of God that brought order out of chaos. John went beyond such philosophy to say, "In the beginning ___ the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was ___ God, and the *Logos* ___ God." It has been suggested that this might be rendered, "In the beginning, God expressed Himself, and this very Expression was with God, and this Expression was in fact God." Every expression or self-revelation of God has been and is through this *Logos*: the creation of the universe; the "Angel of the Lord" in the Old Testament covenant; the mighty signs and wonders; the redemption of sinful mankind in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and the final establishment of God's glory on the Last Day—all the divine *Logos*, God expressing Himself! This is the point of John's prologue, to be expanded on by what followed.

80. What similarities are there between John's opening statements and the first verses of Genesis 1?

81. How does John take his readers beyond the Genesis revelation that God created everything just by "saying the Word"?

82. What dimension did John add with his "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men"? (See 2 Corinthians 4:6.)

83. Verse 5 may be translated “has not understood it” as well as “has not overcome it.” What is the significance of each of these ways of understanding John’s words?

From the cosmic, John moved to the local and specific. He clarified John the Baptist’s role and his relationship to the Light that was coming into the world: John was not the Light, but was sent to be a witness to the Light.

84. How is it that “the world” did not recognize its Creator when He came? Why did even “His own people,” the chosen people, not receive Him?

85. How does one receive this true Light that gives light to everyone?

86. How did John emphasize that being “born of God” is not a result of our human initiative, effort, or achievement?

John moved to the climax of his prologue by stating God’s great Gospel surprise: “The Word became flesh.” The Greek *sarx*, “flesh,” makes the Word’s real identification with our humanity unmistakable (see Luke 24:36–43). John wrote, “The Word became flesh and dwelt [literally, “tabernacled,” or “tented”] among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

87. Which two aspects of God’s glory are to be seen in His one and only Son?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 52:7–10

This beautiful passage brought comfort and assurance to the exiles in Babylon. It projected to the return of the remnant and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple—all in terms of the return of the Lord Yahweh to Zion. For exiles longing for home, it was truly good news. And we who celebrate Christmas Day rejoice in remembering to what lengths our gracious God went to restore us back to Him!

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news” refers to messengers who ran from the scene of a battle to bring news of the outcome to a waiting king and people. A city’s watchmen would be the first to see and hear the messenger and then would proclaim the good news to the waiting populace of the city. “Eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion” pointed the exiles to that which would be the visible evidence of Yahweh’s return to rule over His people in Jerusalem: the rebuilt temple and the renewal of the worship of priest and people in the house that was Yahweh’s dwelling place among them. All of these phrases combine to speak joyfully to our Christmas celebration,

for we can “see eye to eye” the Babe of Bethlehem, the eternal Word made flesh to be God’s Good News to us and for us.

88. The waste places of Jerusalem were encouraged to “break forth together into singing.” What was to be the reason for their singing in joy? Why is it that we find it so satisfying to express our Christian joy with singing on this happy Christmas Day?

“The LORD has bared His holy arm before the eyes of all the nations” said to the exiles that the Lord was preparing to do battle for them. The nations would see the return of the remnant and the renewal of Judah’s national identity—though as a vassal state of the Persians.

89. How is “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” an appropriate assurance for us on Christmas Day?

90. How does this Old Testament lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Hebrews 1:1–12

The Letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who, because of the persecution and hardship they were experiencing as Christians, were tempted to revert back to a comfortable, safer Judaism. Rome had granted Judaism the privilege of being a legal religion, but Christians were becoming the targets of official opposition and would soon be declared by Rome to be an illegal religion. The writer encouraged their faithfulness by reminding them of the superiority of the completed covenant in Jesus Christ as compared with the incomplete covenant, the purpose of which was to point ahead to Him. They needed to know that all they had gained spiritually through faith in Christ would be forfeited if they reverted to Judaism. Understandably, the letter is replete with quotations of Old Testament Scripture, starting already in the first chapter.

91. Identify the seven descriptive statements by which the writer demonstrated the superiority of the Son as the revealer of God.

In quoting the Old Testament, the writer argued the superiority of the Son over angels by showing that no angel had ever been called _____. Angels were instructed by God to _____. God makes His angelic messengers winds (swift) and a flame of fire (powerful), but it is said of the Son _____.

Verses 10–12 are directed to the One through whom God has spoken conclusively, the One whose superiority over the angels has been established. “You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of Your hands” identifies Him again as _____. “They will perish, but You remain . . . the same, and Your years will have no end” ascribes to Him _____. “Like a robe You will roll them up” says that He will be the One who _____.

The writer's quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures are from the Septuagint, the translation of its Hebrew into Greek, and often are freely and interpretatively rendered. We should understand that the Holy Spirit inspired and guided the New Testament authors also to select from those passages in the Septuagint He wished to make available for New Testament readers.

92. How is what we are celebrating today the division of human history into "long ago" and "in these last days"?

Lesson 7

Circumcision and Name of Jesus

When Christmas Day is a Sunday, New Year's Day is also a Sunday. We begin a new calendar year with this date. It is a secular holiday. But the Church Year began with the First Sunday in Advent. Today's focus for the Church is on the event in the life of our Lord that took place on His eighth day: His circumcision and naming.

The Holy Gospel: Luke 2:21

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant Yahweh established with Abraham and his descendants. It was commanded by the Lord and was essential to participation in the covenant blessing (see Genesis 17:1–14). Originally, circumcising of the baby boy was done by his father. Later, a professional *mōhel*, a man of the Jewish community trained and skilled in this operation, was called in to carry out the procedure on behalf of the father. In many instances, as a tie to ancient practice, a flint knife was used as the instrument of circumcision; possibly this was the case when Jesus was circumcised.

93. What significance can we see in the fact that Jesus was circumcised in accordance with the Law of Moses? (See Galatians 4:4–5.)

The formal giving of a name accompanied circumcision. Names were chosen for their meaning. Many Jewish names gave praise and glory to Yahweh or expressed the parents' hope in terms of their son's service to Yahweh. The name *Yeshua* was prescribed by God through the angel who had spoken to Mary and to Joseph. (*Jesus* is the Greek form of *Yeshua*.) *Yeshua* was not a unique name; every Joshua in Jewish history and Jewish society bore it. But Jesus personified its truth through His life and death and resurrection. *Yeshua* means "Yahweh is salvation." The angel had said to Joseph, "He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). As we think of the name *Jesus*, we may properly think of its meaning simply as "Savior."

Paul wrote that because Jesus lived up to His name fully, obedient to His Father even to the point of death on a cross, His name has become the name that is above every name (see Philippians 2:5–11).

94. Why is it important that we Christians not just talk about God but bring a clear witness to *Jesus*?

The Old Testament Lesson: Numbers 6:22–27

This lesson centers on “the Aaronic Benediction,” so called because it was given by the Lord to Aaron, the first high priest, and to his sons, as a means of speaking His blessing upon the people of Israel. It is significant that we make a careful study of this blessing because its use continued for more than 3,400 years in the worship life of the Jews and the Christians, and it is part of our worship today. When this blessing is placed on us at the close of our worship, it ties us to God’s people of every era.

We notice immediately that it is a threefold blessing. In its original usage, this was probably just a way of stating a *fullness* of blessing. The Old Testament faith generally emphasized Yahweh’s oneness as the one and only living God in contrast with the polytheism of Israel’s neighbors. The full revelation of God as the triune God awaited the fulfillment of the covenant promise in the coming of the Son of God as our Savior.

The *Mishnah*, a codification of oral laws and rabbinical traditions that attached to the Law of Moses after the Babylonian exile, states that this blessing was used daily in the temple, and that in that act of blessing, the divine name was spoken in its proper form, *Yahweh*, as the blessing was pronounced. Ordinarily, though, Jews avoided saying the name itself, for fear of somehow speaking it in vain, so instead of the specific *Yahweh*, which means “I AM,” they would substitute the more general *Adonai*, which means “Lord.” But in the temple worship, the name *Yahweh* itself, the name by which God had identified Himself to Moses at the burning bush, was spoken by the priest as a blessing upon the people. Significantly, the “you” in this blessing is second person singular; the blessing was placed on each individual, not just on the nation in general.

95. What is the New Testament equivalent of placing God’s name on His people in blessing?

“Bless” has a positive thrust. “Keep” stresses God’s guarding His people from evil. Together the two promise God’s full blessing for every aspect of your life.

A “shining face” is a sign of pleasure. God making His face to “shine upon you” implies His pleasure in and favor toward you. For the Lord to “lift up His countenance upon you” indicates that nothing is disturbing your relationship with Him. He is ready, in His grace, to look right at you and see you as His son or daughter—and you’re ready for that too.

The peace that God gives is more than absence of turmoil. The Hebrew *shalōm* describes the positive well-being and security that are yours as you live in awareness of God’s continuous presence and blessing, and implies that you are also at peace with those around you.

96. How do you feel about the formal use of this ancient blessing in the worship life of the contemporary Church? What attitude should we concentrate on cultivating in ourselves as the Lord’s name is being placed on us through this blessing?

The Christian Church also uses what we call “the Apostolic Benediction”: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). This New Testament benediction is clearly trinitarian in its formulation and its thrust.

97. Why did it not replace the Aaronic Benediction completely in the Church?

98. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Galatians 3:23–29

In Galatians 3, Paul continued to establish the Gospel truth of salvation by grace through faith and not by obedience to laws. He quoted Old Testament Scriptures to confirm that this had been God's saving plan all along, and he pointed to father Abraham himself as the classic example. He referred his readers to Genesis 15:6: "[Abraham] believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness." When taken seriously, Paul argued, God's Law always exposes our sin, so it is evident that sinners will not be saved by obedience to the Law, but only by faith in God's promise of love and forgiveness. In the verse preceding today's Epistle, he concluded, "The Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by *faith* in Jesus Christ might be given to those who *believe*."

The ceremonial law and its system of sacrifices provided a means by which the Old Testament faithful could show their faith in God's promise of forgiveness and appropriate it to themselves. That the ceremonies and sacrifices were limited in effect is seen in the fact that they had to be repeated again and again. But when the Promised One came and became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, He accomplished once for all what the laws could do only partially (see Hebrews 10:11–12). As a result, Paul argued, the demands of the ceremonial law are no longer pertinent. The text says, "The law was our guardian until Christ came." Paul called the law a *paidagōgos*. In Greek society, a young boy was often placed under the supervision of an educated slave who became the boy's "pedagogue," his guide and companion, training him in honest, moral behavior until the boy reached maturity and became responsible for himself. Here Paul was saying that the law was such a pedagogue, serving Israel in its time of immaturity. But now, with God's people reaching full spiritual maturity as the result of faith in Christ, the pedagogue of ceremonial laws is no longer needed. In fact, Paul was making it clear that to continue under law now is a denial of the maturity and personal freedom and responsibility that God has given us under the Gospel of Jesus.

99. What status does faith in Christ Jesus confer on us?

100. What does our being baptized into Christ contribute to this?

101. In the list of distinctions that no longer apply to life under the Gospel, which does Paul highlight? What other distinctions can you think of that have been removed by our oneness in Christ?

102. What point was Paul making by saying that Christians have become "Abraham's offspring" and "heirs according to promise"?

Lesson 8

First Sunday after Christmas

The Holy Gospel: Luke 2:22–40

Joseph and Mary walked the six miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem for a purpose. The Law of Moses declared a woman to be ceremonially unclean following childbirth. The birth of a son called for seven days of seclusion as “contagiously” unclean, followed by another 33 days of religious impurity, during all of which she was not to come into contact with hallowed things, nor enter the sanctuary. In the case of the birth of a daughter, the numbers were doubled (see Leviticus 12). Joseph and Mary had come to the temple to offer the prescribed sacrifice for her purification: “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

They also had brought Jesus, now 40 days old, “to present Him to the Lord.” This ritual requirement, the redemption of the firstborn son, memorialized God’s sparing the firstborn of the Israelite families in Egypt the night the angel of the Lord slew the firstborn of all the Egyptians (see Exodus 13:11–16). The concept was that from that time on, every firstborn belonged to the Lord. The firstborn animals were to be sacrificed to Him; the firstborn sons were to serve Him throughout their lives. In actual practice, the Levites served in the place of the firstborn (see Numbers 3:5–13). The firstborn sons were “redeemed” (bought back from the Lord) to live with their parents by the offering of the appointed sacrifice. This ritual presentation of Jesus to the Lord and His redemption through the offering of a sacrifice were carried out by Joseph and Mary after she had gone through her rite of purification.

103. What is especially striking about *these* two parents acknowledging that their firstborn son belonged to God?

Simeon is introduced simply as “a man in Jerusalem.” He was not particularly prominent in Jerusalem’s religious circles, but had great spiritual qualifications: he “was ___ and ___, waiting for ___, and the ___ was upon him.”

104. What does it mean that Simeon was “waiting for the consolation of Israel”? What promise had the Holy Spirit made to Simeon? How did Simeon recognize the baby Jesus as the Lord’s Christ?

Simeon’s song of praise is called the *Nunc Dimittis* from its first words in Latin. In the fifth century, it became part of the Church’s worship life, fittingly used as a liturgical song that celebrates our having seen the Lord’s Christ in Holy Communion.

105. What did Simeon say that made Joseph and Mary marvel?

106. To Mary, Simeon spoke of the destiny that awaited her son, a destiny that would have a direct effect on her. What does it mean that Jesus was “appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel”? (See 1 Peter 2:6–8.) How would Jesus be “a sign that is opposed . . . , so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed”? (See John 10:22–33.) When did a sword pierce through Mary’s soul?

Anna is introduced, not just as a woman but as “a prophetess.” Since she was a fixture in the temple, Anna’s testimony about Jesus must have carried some weight with those who heard her.

107. What do you think Anna said as she “began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem”?

Luke does not mention the flight to Egypt and the family’s living there for a time. Having provided significant information about Jesus’ birth and infancy, Luke wrote in a summary way about His childhood development in His family in Nazareth.

108. Could we say about our own children in our Christian homes, “[They] grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon [them]”?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 61:10–62:3

Chapters 56–66 deal with the restoration following the exile in Babylon, and contain Isaiah’s prophetic and poetic vision of what will be for Judah in God’s plan, colored by anticipation of the messianic kingdom. In this passage from chapters 61 and 62, two word pictures portray the joyous attitude of the prophet and of all who respond in faith to the glad tidings of salvation. The first is that of a wedding—the groom adorned with a festive wedding headdress, and the bride with her jewels. The second is that of a garden causing seeds to grow.

109. What “clothes” have been received from the Lord that so delight the prophet?

110. What is the produce that this “garden” will yield? Who will see this garden and benefit from it? How is that significant to us?

In the opening verses of chapter 62, Isaiah exults over the coming fulfillment of his prophecies in the salvation of God’s people.

111. What are the qualities of His saved people that will be displayed before the nations?

112. What is the significance of their being given a new name by the Lord? (See vv. 4–5; Jeremiah 33:16; Revelation 2:17; 3:11–12.)

113. Zion, Yahweh’s saved people, will become the Lord’s crown of beauty. Why is the crown of beauty held in His hand and not worn on His head?

114. How does this lesson tie in with the emphasis of today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Galatians 4:4–7

“When the fullness of time had come” refers to the right *chronos*, the right point in history when God determined it was appropriate for His “children” to become “adult sons and daughters” (see vv. 1–3). God sent His Son, His “only-begotten Son.” He was not created by God but was eternally begotten by the Father. The Greek for *sent* has the weight of “sent out from God on a mission.” The same word described Jesus’ commissioning some of His disciples to be apostles.

We might ask: “Why *that* particular point in history?” No one can answer definitively; the answer is to be found only in the determinative will of God. However, we can make the following observations about that time period: 1) for several hundred years the known world had been influenced by Greek culture and language; 2) due to their dispersion, the faith and writings of the Jews had been spread across numerous nations and cultures and had attracted adherents to the faith; and 3) Roman rule had brought with it an enforced public peace, an international roadway system, and a reliable postal system that enhanced communication.

115. Pagan religions had stories of theophanies—the gods coming into the human scene for a time. How do Paul’s words describe something radically more than a theophany? What is established by the phrase “born of woman”? What does it mean that God’s Son was “born under the law”?

Paul said God’s Son came to *redeem* those under bondage to the law. The Greek describes “paying the price to set a slave free.”

116. From what aspects of bondage to the Law has Christ freed us? (See Galatians 3:13; 5:4–6.)

117. How did God's Son's placing Himself under the Law as Jesus Christ buy us freedom from the Law? (See Romans 5:18–19.) Does Christ's redeeming us from the Law mean that we are now free to disregard the great principles of God's Law? (See Romans 6:15–18.)

118. What are our rights as those who have received adoption as God's "sons [and daughters]"?

"Because you *are* sons [and daughters]" emphasizes the accomplished redemption that is ours through faith in Christ's once-for-all atonement. "God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts" emphasizes the new relationship we enjoy with God as a result of our having been brought to faith in Christ.

119. What does our being able to say "Abba! Father!" mean to us?

120. What is the lasting benefit of our being elevated from slavery to full sonship and daughterhood?

Lesson 9

Second Sunday after Christmas

The Holy Gospel: Luke 2:40–52

Out of all the incidents that Mary must have told Luke when he interviewed her, the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write this story as representative of the childhood of Jesus. Jesus was 12 years old—about to take His place in the Jewish community as a *Bar Mitzvah*, a “son of duty,” and take on the responsibilities of an adult male Jew. Joseph and Mary were faithful in their religious duties, and participated in all the required rites and ceremonies, including the Passover festival in Jerusalem.

When the seven-day festival was completed, Mary and Joseph joined the company of pilgrims for the return to Galilee. Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem.

121. How could these parents travel a whole day without concern that Jesus was not at their side?

Retracing their steps, they looked for Jesus along the way and at the place where they had camped in the hills outside Jerusalem. Finally they found Him in the temple, sitting among the rabbis, caught up in their teaching and discussion. Luke does not explain where Jesus spent the nights while alone in Jerusalem. Perhaps one of the rabbis befriended Him and brought Him back with him to the temple during the days.

122. What impression did Jesus make on the teachers and the people who gathered around them?

We might expect parents in that circumstance to be firm in disciplining such a thoughtless son, and Mary did express her concern and disappointment. But the Greek softens her complaint by having her call Jesus *teknon*, “child,” instead of *huios*, “son.”

123. What evidently was awakened in Mary and Joseph by the circumstances they found that softened her rebuke?

Responding to His mother’s complaint, Jesus only expressed surprise that they had not known where He would be. The Greek is *en tois tou patros mou*, “in the things of My Father.” It specifies neither the “My Father’s business” of the KJV nor the “in My Father’s house” of the ESV, but “house” is an appropriate translation, for the temple surely was the place where the Father’s “things” were to be found. Remarkable here to note is that Jesus uses the singular “my” instead of the plural “our” when referring to His Father. This denotes the unique relationship between Jesus and God, between God the Son and God the Father.

124. Why did His parents not understand what He was saying to them? How did His mother react to incidents such as this?

Returning to Nazareth, Jesus “was submissive to them.” With His *Bar Mitzvah*, Jesus’ formal instruction at the synagogue school ended. Joseph’s training Him in the skills of carpentry accelerated. Jesus grew into the adult community of Nazareth.

125. What adverbs might we use today to label the four aspects of His growth that Luke described?

The Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 3:4–15

Verse 3 of this chapter says, “Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father, only he sacrificed and made offerings at the high places.” “High places” were mountaintops or hilltops where the Canaanites worshiped Asherah and Baal, their fertility deities. Their worship practices often included sexual immorality along with the sacrifices and feasting. On entering Canaan, Israel was ordered to destroy the pagan high places. They were to offer their sacrifices only at the tabernacle

That worship of Yahweh at the altars of high places had become accepted is shown by Solomon’s frequently going to Gibeon, the “great high place.” More significant is the fact that after the Philistines destroyed Shiloh and stole the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle itself and its bronze altar were set up at Gibeon. Then the ark was recovered. David brought it to Jerusalem, but the tabernacle was left at the high place in Gibeon. It’s where the Israelites went to worship Yahweh. That’s where Solomon went and where Yahweh appeared to him (see 2 Chronicles 1:2–6).

126. What does it say that the Lord was willing to appear to Solomon at Gibeon? Why was the Lord pleased with Solomon’s response and request?

127. Why has “as wise as Solomon” become a proverbial phrase? (See 1 Kings 4:29–34.)

128. What does it say that after this encounter, Solomon returned to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices before the ark of the covenant and to celebrate there with a royal feast?

129. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 1:3–14

Ephesus was “the jewel of Asia,” the Roman province on the west coast of what we call Turkey today. It enjoyed a large inland harbor, connected to the Aegean Sea by a channel several miles long. It was a bustling metropolis of 200,000, a center of commerce, a seat of government, prosperous and worldly. Its civic pride centered in the temple of the goddess Diana, a building 342 feet long and 164 feet wide, surrounded by 100 stately marble columns 55 feet tall, with walls and roof also of gleaming white marble. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. To this proud pagan city Paul devoted three years of his apostolic ministry, with such effect that Acts says, “all the residents of Asia heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (19:10).

The central theme of the epistle is this: In the fullness of time, all things in heaven and earth are to be united in Christ (v. 10). As Paul assured the Ephesians—and, by extension, assures us—of a place in this divine plan, he unfolded the mystery of predestination. Many scholars think this whole pericope is one long, flowing sentence in Greek that gushed out of the inspired apostle as he dictated his greetings at the beginning of his letter. It is a trinitarian doxology, each section of which is ended with “to the praise of His glory.”

Fill in key words or phrases to appreciate the wonder of it more fully: “Blessed be the ___ of our ___, who has blessed us in ___ with every ___, even as He ___ us in Him before the ___, that we should be ___ before Him. In love He ___ us for ___ through ___, according to the purpose of ___, to the praise of His ___, with which He has blessed us in ___. In Him we have ___ through His ___, the ___ of our ___, according to the ___, which He ___ upon us, in all ___ making known to us the ___, according to His ___, which He set forth in ___ as a plan for the ___, to ___ all things in Him, things in ___ and things on ___. In Him we have obtained an ___, having been ___ according to the purpose of Him who ___ according to the ___, so that we who ___ might be to the praise of His ___. In Him ___, when you heard ___, the ___, and ___ in Him, were sealed with the ___, who is the ___ of our ___ until ___, to the praise of His ___.”

130. The phrase “in Christ” or its equivalent occurs 12 times. Why is God’s choosing so pointedly qualified in this way? (See John 14:6.) What do the phrases “adoption through Jesus Christ,” “according to the purpose of His will,” and “to the praise of His glorious grace” say about our being chosen?

131. “We have redemption through His blood.” The *apolutrōsis* was the ransom payment to emancipate a slave. What does this say about God’s plan by which He has made us His sons and daughters in Christ?

132. When will God’s eternal plan and purpose be fully put into effect?

133. How is it that *we* were included in this mysterious purpose of God?

134. What does it mean to you in your Christian life that God chose you in Christ from eternity to be His son or daughter?

Lesson 10

Epiphany of Our Lord

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 2:1–12

The Magi were from the region of Babylon or Persia, where the science of astronomy had been highly developed and had spawned its related pseudoscience, astrology. Magi were valued as counselors in the courts of ancient kings. As they told King Herod, they had seen an unusual star in the east, which they had related to prophecies about a king of the Jews. Many Jews continued to live in that area after the Babylonian exile, so it is not improbable that the Magi had learned of their messianic hopes.

Today, some scholars relate the star to a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC which would have appeared to the Magi as a bright star low on the eastern horizon. God does indeed at times use natural means to manifest and assert His will and purpose, but this naturalistic explanation does not fit the biblical account in all details. Matthew said the star went before them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem “until it came to rest over the place where the child was.” Clearly this was a miraculous phenomenon, designed and utilized by God to lead the Magi to Jesus.

Herod’s reaction to the inquiry of the Magi was what you would expect of this shrewd, ruthless old king who had murdered his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle, and others whom he saw as challenges to his throne: he immediately began plotting the elimination of this new rival, this King of the Jews.

135. What does it say that the chief priests and scribes were immediately able to refer to Micah’s prophecy to identify the birthplace of the promised King?

Herod’s plan to identify the newborn King and eliminate Him was thwarted when the Magi were directed by God not to return to him. In his fury, he broadened the effort and brought weeping to many homes throughout the area of Bethlehem (see vv. 16–18).

The Magi, on finding the Christ child, worshiped Him, falling on their knees and bowing with their heads to the floor. Opening their treasures, they presented gifts of great value to the newborn King: gold and frankincense and myrrh. Already in the Early Church, the gifts were seen to have been chosen for their meaning: gold, a suitable gift for a king; frankincense, an offering to Him as God; myrrh, a prophecy of His death as the Savior. Others have suggested that they symbolically represent what we, too, must offer Him: the gold of willing surrender of all of life to Him; the frankincense of our inmost thoughts and prayers; the myrrh of patience in suffering when carrying our own crosses.

136. How may we bring suitable gifts to the Christ, whose birth as our Savior we have celebrated again?

137. *Epiphany* means “a manifestation” or “a revelation.” How does the story of the Magi provide an appropriate beginning for the season in which we focus on Jesus’ showing Himself to be God’s Son, the Savior of the world?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 60:1–6

This lesson is the first part of a prophetic Hebrew poem (vv. 1–22), which is typified by the repetition of key words within a carefully-defined structure in order to highlight its theme.

138. What is the key word in the first two verses that provides the poem’s theme?

Isaiah says Jerusalem will glow in the light of the glory of the Lord and will become a beacon to attract the nations.

139. What is the key word in the remaining verses of this lesson?

Nations and their kings will not only come to Jerusalem to bask in the light of the glory of the Lord for themselves, but will bring great ___ with them and will join God’s people in bringing ___.

The kind of prominence and attractiveness prophesied in this song had never been realized by Jerusalem through the centuries of human history. Instead, it continued to be a site of turmoil and warfare and darkness. Still today it is a city divided politically and religiously. Christians look at Isaiah’s prophecy and see that the glory of the Lord did indeed come to Jerusalem in the person of Jesus. And we rejoice that the nations have indeed found their way into “Jerusalem,” the Church, to enjoy the light of His gracious love. The full realization of the picture this ancient song of prophecy painted, however, awaits the glory of the Lord and the gathering of sons and daughters out of the nations into the new Jerusalem.

140. How does this Old Testament lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 3:2–12

Paul had already written encouraging words to the Gentile Christians in Ephesus—that they had been made alive in Christ, saved by grace, created in Christ for good works, and that they were no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household. He followed that in this lesson by pointing to this Good News as God’s revelation to him, his God-given ___ into the mystery of Christ. And the mystery, which now was revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets, was that the Gentiles are ___, members of ___, and ___ of the promise in Christ Jesus through the ___.

Paul exulted in what he had been called *for*: “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches in Christ.” But he never forgot what he had been called *from*. And so he thought of himself as ____, the unworthy recipient of God’s ____ that had been given to him.

141. Why is honest recognition of our unworthiness a necessary prerequisite to our valuing the grace of God in Christ?

This mystery was hidden in God’s will and purpose through the long centuries during which the chosen covenant family of Abraham and the chosen covenant nation of Israel were ordered to be “holy unto the Lord”—consciously separate from the pagan peoples who surrounded them. In this way, God was safeguarding His covenant of grace and blessing until the time it would be fulfilled. Then, as was the original intention, it would be a blessing to all the peoples on earth (see Genesis 12:1–3). The covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the mystery, was now to be made known—and Paul had been called to be a key person in implementing that revelation.

142. How is the mystery of God’s all-inclusive love to be made known? How did Paul emphasize the far-reaching impact of the surprise involved in the revelation of this mystery?

143. How may we involve ourselves in the Church’s responsibility to make known the mystery that is Christ? How may we underscore for our world that the mystery of Christ’s love is all-inclusive?

144. What is the result for us in our everyday lives of this mystery’s having been made known to us?

Lesson 11

Baptism of Our Lord

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:4–11

John the Baptist carried out his ministry in the desert region of the Jordan River. The stream's sources are springs supplied by Mount Hermon to the north, which rises to more than 9,000 feet. The river winds a torturous path for 104 miles down to 1,292 feet below sea level at the Dead Sea. It is appropriately named *Jordan*, "The Descender."

John's appearance in a rough tunic woven of camel's hair, cinched at the waist with a leather belt, combined with the wilderness setting to mark him as a prophet (see Zechariah 13:4). That he subsisted on what the desert provided completed the image of this man of God. Some suggest that the "locusts" were pods of a desert plant, but it was not uncommon for the poor of Palestine to eat locusts. They were allowed in the Levitical code (see Leviticus 11:20–22). Legs and wings were removed, and the bodies were dried or roasted, or ground up and baked. Palestine's wilderness country was known for its wild bees, and their hives supplied some of John's nourishment.

145. Why did the evangelists include such details about John's appearance and lifestyle in their Gospel accounts?

John came "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The Jews were familiar with proselyte baptism for Gentiles, required of those who converted to Judaism. But they were unfamiliar with the need for baptism among Jews.

146. What was the outward action that qualified people for John's Baptism?

147. In his preaching, John was true to the purpose of his ministry as the Way-Preparer for the Messiah. How did John contrast himself with the importance of the One coming after him? How did he contrast their ministries?

148. How would Jesus' baptizing with the Holy Spirit be different from John's Baptism? (See Matthew 28:18–20; Titus 3:4–7; Acts 1:5, 8.)

When Jesus came to John to be baptized, it was not as an act of repentance for His own sins, but it was the right way for Him to begin His ministry. Thus He put Himself in the place of all sinners—“to fulfill all righteousness,” as Matthew’s Gospel puts it. His saving work ultimately would involve Him in the same stance when He would carry our sins in His body and give Himself in suffering and death as God’s atoning sacrifice.

149. Why was the Spirit given to Jesus at His Baptism? (See Isaiah 61:1.) Why did the Spirit descend in visible form like a dove? (See John 1:32–34.) What significance is there in the fact that the Father spoke His affirming words at this time?

150. How does this event underscore the Christian doctrine of God’s revelation of Himself as the Holy Trinity?

“When He came up out of the water” cannot be used exclusively to argue for baptizing by immersion. Jewish tradition included many “baptisms,” religious applications of water. The probability is that John stood in a shallow eddy and baptized by scooping up water and pouring it on those who came down into the water to him. In that case, “came up out of the water” simply means Jesus returned to the river’s bank.

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 1:1–5

Genesis, the book of beginnings, speaks of the meaning of life as God’s gift. Chapter 1 uses broad, sweeping terms to praise the Creator for His act of creation. Genesis is one of the five books of Moses, the *Torah*. *Torah* means “law,” but in the Scriptures, its meaning is much broader than just “laws.” It tells of God’s covenant of grace and gives “instruction” about life under the covenant.

151. Hebrew poetry used repetition of key phrases. Which phrases in this account are repeated again and again?

While there is disagreement about the meaning of the word *day* in this passage, those who favor the traditional view are correct. The Hebrew *yōm* means a literal 24-hour day. “There was evening and there was morning” supports this interpretation. While some look at the size and the apparent age of the universe and argue that the “day” of Genesis points poetically to an era, or that “day” is used with various meanings in other parts of the Bible, there is nothing within the context of this passage to suggest a non-literal rendering of *yōm*. If God could create the universe over long eons of time, He could create the universe in six 24-hour days—or, for that matter, in one instant. Key here is trusting God’s reliable, written Word, which shows Him creating the universe from nothing through His Word of power, as He wanted it to be, and leading to His creation of humankind in His own image.

152. What does this passage point to immediately as the effective instrument in God’s creative activity? (See John 1:1–3; Hebrews 11:3.) When John plays on this creation account in John 1:1–5, what added insight into this effective instrument of creative activity do we gain?

153. God said, “Let there be light,” but this was before sun, moon, and stars were created. What might this “light” be understood to be? How does the New Testament use the theme of light and darkness in talking about our life in Christ? (See Ephesians 5:8–14.) What is suggested by God’s calling the light “day” and calling the darkness “night”?

154. How does this lesson tie in with the emphasis of today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 6:1–11

Paul insisted that we are justified by faith in Jesus, and that observance or nonobservance of laws doesn’t even enter into consideration in the matter of our being declared right and just by a gracious God for Jesus’ sake (see Romans 3:28). Some of Paul’s opponents evidently pushed his words to an extreme and accused him of teaching that since we are saved by grace, it doesn’t matter how we live (see 3:7–8). They misconstrued freedom from the curse of the Law and made it an excuse for licentiousness. That still happens when a Christian tells himself or herself, “It doesn’t matter if I indulge my sinful desires; telling Jesus ‘I’m sorry’ will take care of that.” Some may even persist in deliberate sins and imagine that going to church and Communion unrepentantly and without faith covers their situation and wipes their slates clean. But Paul did not offer a “cheap grace.”

In this pericope, Paul makes it clear that faith in Jesus is not just intellectual agreement with some theological propositions, but it is a spiritual dynamic that touches a person’s whole life.

155. Why, according to Paul’s answer to his own question, can Christians no longer just live in sin? What did Paul say Baptism into Christ does for us?

156. What is the result of our being “buried therefore with Him by baptism into death”?

157. How does our being “crucified and risen” with Christ remove sin’s power to enslave us? (See 1 John 4:19; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15.) How can we live with the fact that though we are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection and freed from slavery to sin, we still sin in thought and word and even deed?

158. What will help us make progress in expressing in Christian discipleship that we are in fact “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”?

Lesson 12

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

The Holy Gospel: John 1:43–51

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the synoptic Gospels. They have the same narrative style as they view the life and ministry of Jesus. John wrote his Gospel much later. He included some basic narratives and added others, but focused especially on the longer discourses of Jesus. Only John tells of the first contacts between Jesus and those who had been disciples of John the Baptist. He tells how he and Andrew were with Jesus for part of a day after they had been directed to Him as “the Lamb of God” by their master. Andrew then found his brother Simon and brought him to Jesus. Then Jesus called Philip, who invited Nathanael to come and see Jesus for himself.

Philip, from Bethsaida, “The House of Fish,” was probably involved in the fishing industry, as were Peter and Andrew and James and John. His name is of Greek origin, possibly suggesting that he grew up in a Jewish home with more liberal views, although, because of centuries of Greek influence, it really was not an unusual name among the Jews. We’re told Jesus *found* Philip to say to him, “Follow me.”

159. What does this say to us about Christian discipleship? (See John 15:16.)

Philip extended the Lord’s finding by going to his friend Nathanael. Philip’s approach to Nathanael indicates that he and Nathanael were serious students of the Scriptures. Pious Jews practiced a daily discipline of reading and meditating in a quiet place. Nathanael’s sitting in the shade of a fig tree might well refer to his time for such devotion.

160. Why did Nathanael react when Philip identified Jesus as “Jesus of Nazareth”? What can we learn for our own witnessing from Philip’s “Come and see”? How can we and our friends see Jesus?

161. Jesus approached Nathanael with some complimentary words that would be sure to gain his attention. What is the significance of His calling Nathanael “an Israelite indeed”? What does His adding “in whom there is no deceit” say about Nathanael’s character and personality?

162. In His reference to Nathanael being under the fig tree, what might Jesus have keyed on that would make His remark especially pointed for Nathanael? What “greater things” did Nathanael come to see as a disciple of Jesus?

163. With His allusion to Jacob’s experience at Bethel, what point was Jesus making about Himself and His ministry?

Nathanael called Jesus “the Son of God,” but Jesus referred to Himself as “the Son of Man.” When pressed at the time of His trial, Jesus did openly acknowledge that He is the Son of God, but He usually used the title “Son of Man” as He referred to Himself (see Matthew 26:63–64). His use of “Son of Man” was drawn from Daniel 7:13–14 and had messianic overtones, but was not popularly used in speaking of the promised Messiah.

164. Why did Jesus avoid referring to Himself as the “Messiah” or “Christ” during the course of His ministry and even tell His disciples not to do so?

The Old Testament Lesson: 1 Samuel 3:1–20

Samuel was the boy who was “lent to the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:26–28) by his parents in gratitude when God heard the prayer of his mother, Hannah, that she might be blessed with a son. The boy may have been as young as five or six years of age when he was brought to the tabernacle and dedicated to the Lord’s service. How old he was when he was called by the Lord is difficult to say, for the Hebrew word for “boy” is very broad in scope. Josephus, a first-century historian, said Samuel was 12 when the Lord spoke to him, but that may be because that had become the age in Jewish tradition at which a boy became a “son of duty” (*Bar Mitzvah*) and took personal responsibility for his faith and religious life.

165. What incidents in Jesus’ life does Hannah’s dedication of her son to the Lord, the service of Samuel in the tabernacle, and his interactions with the Lord bring to mind? What does “Samuel was lying down in the temple [tabernacle] of the LORD, where the ark of God was” suggest about Samuel and his service in the tabernacle?

The New International Version reads “ministered *before* the LORD.” The English Standard Version says, “Samuel was ministering *to* the LORD under Eli.” Either may be correct. “*To* the LORD” suggests ministering to please the Lord.

166. Do worship, praise, and service of His people do something *for* God? What if we neglect to serve Him or worship Him only thoughtlessly?

The earlier prophets in Israel's history are referred to as "ecstatic" prophets. They had no written Word on which to expound, nor did they write their messages, as the later prophets did. They received revelations and directions from the Lord in sounds and dreams and visions. That "the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision" made Samuel's emergence as a prophet all the more important. It said that the channel of communication between the Lord and His people would flow once again. Samuel lived during the time when Israel was just a loose confederation of tribes, before they became a united kingdom. It was their worship of Yahweh that held them together. For them to have a prophet of the Lord among them again was most reassuring to them.

167. What is meant by "Samuel did not yet know the LORD"? What does the calling of Samuel emphasize about those who are to be God's spokesmen to His people? What additional words appear in the text to introduce the Lord's third call to Samuel, and what does this imply?

168. Has the Lord called you by name? When can we say our own "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears"?

The message of judgment of Eli and his sons the Lord gave to Samuel was caused by the sons' abusing their functions as priests and dishonoring the Lord in the process (see 2:27–36). The judgment was fulfilled in the deaths of Eli's sons and Eli's own sudden death when the report about them came to him (see 4:1–18).

169. What does the necessity of Samuel's revealing and not covering up the message the Lord gave to him say to the spiritual leaders of the Church today?

170. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 6:12–20

The Church in Corinth was troubled by division into factions. One of these was a libertine group who claimed that because their relationship with Christ was a matter of the spirit, whatever they were involved in physically would not really affect their life with Christ. This grew out of the Greek world's philosophy of dualism: that spirit is good and vital, and that the material is not good and is unimportant. This is a view that may lead people to either of two extremes: to asceticism, in which they seek to repress

and inhibit expressions of physicality in order to emphasize their spirituality; and to libertinism, in which they feel they can go ahead and indulge their body's appetites without restraint, assuring themselves that it doesn't really matter because "it's what's inside that counts." Pagan Corinth was notorious for its "if it feels good, do it" approach to life. Pagan temples even provided the services of cult prostitutes with whom the devotees could "worship." Those in the libertine group evidently were practicing and approving immoral sexual activity, contending that such behavior had no effect on their inner life and relationship with Christ.

Paul had emphasized that it is faith in Christ, not keeping of laws, that makes us Christians. He insisted that Christ frees us from both the curse and the compulsion of the Law. But in this pericope, Paul threw some of the libertines' pet phrases back at them to show them that their idea of *unlimited* freedom is not the kind of freedom that Christ gives. Their bywords were "All things are lawful for me" and "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food"; in other words, "Do it!"

171. What did Paul say are more important considerations than "Is it lawful?"

Paul did not deny human physicality and its need for expression, but insisted that Christians have reason to keep such expressions in line with God's intentions and will. The reason: we are bought at a price. Paul wrote, "Do you not know that your ___ are members of ___? . . . Do you not know that your ___ is a ___ within you? You were bought with a ___. So ___ God in your ___."

172. How did Paul show that it is a fallacy to think that casual, promiscuous sexual immorality has no lasting effect on a person?

173. In our society, which is so permissive and obsessive in its sexual attitudes and actions, how can we "flee from sexual immorality"?

Lesson 13

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:14–20

Mark, in his hurried, “newspaper” style, did not devote much time to background. In the first 13 verses of his Gospel, he quickly told of the ministry of John the Baptist, the Baptism of Jesus, and Jesus’ testing by the devil in the desert. Then he moved immediately into an account of the ministry of Jesus, an account that emphasizes what Jesus did more than what He said. A favorite word of Mark was *euthus*, translated “immediately” or “at once” or “without delay.” In one sentence, Mark told of the end of John’s ministry and the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and even gave a summary of Jesus’ proclamation.

174. What three elements do you find in this summary of Jesus’ proclamation?

The Greek word *kairos* speaks of “an appropriate time” or “an opportune time.” The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is not a place. It is His rule in the lives of men and women. When that rule confronts us at the appropriate time in God’s plan, it becomes the opportune time for us. *Metanoiete*, “repent,” called for a change of heart and mind that influences one’s whole direction in life. *Pisteuete*, “believe,” involves more than intellectual acceptance of a fact; it calls for a relationship of confidence and trust. Both are imperatives in the present tense, which in Greek calls for continuing action—“keep on repenting and keep on believing”—in the *kairos* that God gives us.

175. What did Jesus’ “The time is fulfilled” say to people to whom He was preaching? What does it say to you for your life?

176. What did Jesus’ “The kingdom of God is at hand” say to people to whom He was preaching? What does it say to you for your life?

177. What did Jesus’ “Keep on repenting and believing in the Gospel” say to people to whom He was preaching? What does it say to you for your life?

178. How are repentance and faith *enabled* by the Good News assurance that we are accepted by God?

Most scholars believe that Mark traveled with Peter as his scribe and assistant. The Gospel of Mark is seen as Peter's eyewitness account, and so it appropriately begins with the call of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew to be fishers of men.

179. How is it that these men were immediately ready to leave everything at once to follow Jesus?

180. What three elements or emphases come together to make up the call that Jesus extended? What do each of them say to us for our lives as His disciples?

181. What does it say about their mission that Jesus called ordinary, uneducated men to be His disciples and apostles? What does this say to you about the work you may be asked to do in the Church?

The Old Testament Lesson: Jonah 3:1–5, 10

Jonah was a prophet of the Lord at the time of Jeroboam II of Israel (see 2 Kings 14:25), a time when Damascus, the capital of Syria, had fallen to the Assyrians. Jeroboam was able to regain much of the northern territory that had been lost to the Syrians. But looming on the northern horizon was the awesome might of Assyria, which was taking on the proportions of a true world power.

The Book of Jonah tells the story of the prophet who tried to run away from the Lord and from his assigned duties as the Lord's prophet. He had been ordered to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, with a call to repentance. Jonah wanted Assyria to be judged and destroyed by the Lord, not to hear a call to repentance with its implicit assurance that the Lord would have mercy on them if they would repent. Fleeing, Jonah sailed for Spain. When the ship was threatened by a severe storm, Jonah was identified as the cause of all this and was thrown overboard. He was swallowed by a great fish the Lord had prepared. He was kept alive inside the fish, and, when he repented and prayed for the Lord's forgiveness and help, he was vomited by the fish upon the seashore. Having learned his lesson, Jonah was ready to do things God's way—even if it resulted in God's being merciful to Israel's enemies.

While some scholars consider the story of Jonah a parable, the story is a true, historical, dramatic and miraculous display of the depth of the Lord's concern even for nations who do not know Him. Jesus' comparing Himself to Jonah, using Jonah's experience in the fish's belly as a type of His burial, makes it impossible to think of Jonah in less than historical terms (see Matthew 12:38–41). Jesus' own words compel us to see the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah as real people who had really repented as a result of the real preaching of a real Jonah, who had spent three days inside a real sea creature.

182. What does it say about Nineveh that it was “three days’ journey in breadth”?

Jonah proclaimed, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Because of the Hebrews’ tendency to speak in concrete terms, “forty days” is seen as implying “a time long enough to accomplish what is intended.” Here, since it is used as a deadline in connection with an urgent warning, a specific amount of time appears to have been meant.

183. How could one man’s preaching have such impact on a powerful pagan people?

184. What is the point of their calling for a fast and putting on sackcloth?

185. The changeless God is described here and in some other places in the Scriptures as “relenting,” “repenting,” and “changing His mind” about things. How do you feel about this kind of anthropomorphism?

186. Under what circumstances has God been happy to “change His mind” about His judgment of our sins?

187. How does this Old Testament lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 7:29–35

These words of Paul must be understood in the context of his giving apostolic advice to the Corinthian Christians “in view of the present distress,” the threat of official persecution of the Church (see 1 Corinthians 7:25–28).

Paul recognized marriage as part of the natural order and valued it as a blessing, a gift from the Creator, and even compared the marriage relationship to the relationship between Christ and the Church (see Ephesians 5:22–33). Paul was not devaluing marriage with his “let those who have wives live as though they had none.” But so they could live in good order and in undivided devotion to the Lord in the face of severe testing, Paul was advising them to remain single if they were unmarried. He himself was an example of this, unmarried and only “anxious about the things of the Lord.” Paul, of course, recognized

that not everyone had the gift of continence to be able to live the single life in purity (see 1 Corinthians 7:1–7). So he assured them: “If you do marry, you have not sinned.”

188. What new consideration did Paul bring into his advice with “the appointed time has grown very short” and “the present form of this world is passing away”?

189. What was he saying to the Corinthian Christians with his “from now on” statement?

190. How are Paul’s words pertinent and meaningful to us, even though we do not face official persecution for our faith as a “present distress”?

191. After writing so descriptively about the divided concerns of those who are married as compared to the greater single-mindedness of the unmarried, how could he end up saying, “I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you”?

Lesson 14

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:21–28

One significant result of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of the Jews in Babylonia was the development of the synagogue. The Jews in exile could not go to Jerusalem to worship; besides, the temple was in ruins. The sacrifices and rituals were not even possible. So the faithful gathered in groups to read and discuss the sacred Scriptures, to sing psalms, to pray, and to praise the Lord. In time, this practice was formalized. It became the rule that a community with at least 10 Jewish heads of households was to have a synagogue, an “assembly house.” Larger cities had more than one. By Jesus’ time, the practice of going to the synagogue for worship and study on the Sabbath was firmly established. As a boy, Jesus received formal instruction in the sacred Scriptures at the synagogue. As a Jew, Luke tells us, it was Jesus’ “custom [to go] to the synagogue on the Sabbath day” (4:16).

192. How was the development of the synagogue a distinct blessing for the Jews? What does Jesus’ habitual attendance at the synagogue encourage in us?

The synagogue did not have designated readers of Scripture. Any capable man might be invited by the elected rulers of the synagogue to read and explain the sacred writings. Distinguished guests were regularly honored in this way. Synagogue services centered on reading and explaining and discussing Scripture and included singing of psalms and a time of prayer. They provided the pattern for the worship of the early Christians.

As Jesus traveled from village to village in Galilee and His reputation as a rabbi grew, the synagogues were the logical places for Him to initiate contact with people. Having left Nazareth after being rejected there because He applied messianic Scripture to Himself and His ministry, and having made Capernaum His headquarters, He went “immediately,” “at first opportunity,” to the synagogue.

193. Why were the people amazed at Jesus’ authoritative manner of teaching? How may today’s preachers and teachers of the Word be similarly authoritative as they carry out their functions in the Church?

“Immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ‘What have You to do with us . . . ? Have You come to destroy us?’ ”

194. Why did Jesus immediately silence the man and not allow that kind of testimony to continue?

195. What impact did Jesus' healing of the man by exorcising the evil spirit have on the Capernaum community? What does the miracle say to us today?

The Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 18:15–20

This text was recognized by Jewish scholars as messianic in character. Moses promised that the Lord would raise up a prophet like him, one to whom the people would be ready, willing, and able to listen, because of the nature of His person and His message. “The Prophet” was one of the designations used to refer to the Promised One.

“Horeb” is Mount Horeb—or Mount Sinai—also referred to as “the mountain of God.” It was on Horeb that the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush to call him to his mission. One of the assurances the Lord gave Moses was that later the people of Israel would worship Him on this mountain (see Exodus 3:12). It was to Horeb, then, that Moses, under God's direction, led the Israelites when they were freed with great signs and wonders from slavery in Egypt. There the Lord spoke to Moses and to the people and reaffirmed with them as a nation the covenant He had made with their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Exodus 19:3–8). At Horeb, the Lord thundered His moral law, the Ten Commandments, to the people gathered at the mountain's base (see Exodus 20:18–23).

196. Why did the people not want the Lord to speak to them directly anymore? Why would it be all right for the Lord to speak to them through Moses?

197. What qualities would “the Prophet” have that would allow and encourage Israel to listen to Him? What message was “the Prophet” to bring to God's people?

198. What would be the responsibility of those who would hear Him?

Both the Old and the New Testaments carry strong warnings against false prophets. As the Church formalized its doctrines on the basis of these Scriptures, it was concerned that heresy, false teachings that distort or detract from the Gospel, be identified and rejected. The Lutheran Confessions were composed in a similar manner, saying, “We believe and teach . . .” and “We reject and condemn. . . .”

199. Why is it urgent that the Church safeguard its doctrines by insisting that its prophets (preachers, teachers) remain faithful to the inspired Word?

200. How can we put a person's teachings to the test? (See 1 John 4:1–6; Matthew 7:15–20.)

201. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 8:1–13

To understand what Paul wrote here, we must consider the context and the social setting. The Christians of Corinth had come out of a pagan society. The city had many temples dedicated to pagan gods, and participation in pagan worship rites had been part of their former lifestyle. Sacrifices were offered to these gods, but usually they were only partly used in the temple, and the remainder of the meat was sold to butchers, who sold it in the public market. Some of the Christians had conscience scruples about eating meat that had been dedicated to pagan gods. They thought that such an act would be, to an extent, “worshiping” them again. So they refrained from buying and eating such meat, and they thought everyone in the congregation should be expected to refrain from doing so. Others in the congregation did not share their conscience scruples. They just bought the meat and ate it without worrying about its prior use. In the opposite extreme, some even thought that they were free to continue to join their friends in the sociability of the feasts in the pagan temples, as long as down deep, they believed in Jesus as their Savior (see 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1). These contrasting understandings and attitudes had resulted in considerable tension and conflict within the congregation, so this was one of the questions about which they had written to Paul.

202. Paul stated both the problem and its solution in a few words: “‘Knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up.” What warning is implicit in his “If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know”?

203. What encouragement and direction did he give with his “If anyone loves God, he is known by God”? (See 1 John 4:7–12.)

204. First Paul dealt with the matter of knowledge and its application to the question in the life of the congregation. To help them all gain greater knowledge and understanding, what did Paul tell them about pagan idols?

As the son of pious Jewish parents, Paul had no doubt been conditioned to develop an attitude of strong aversion to the pagan world and its “graven images.”

205. Do you think Paul had conscience scruples about buying such meat and eating it?

Next Paul expanded on the importance of exercising love to provide the atmosphere in which tensions, such as these about eating such meat, could be resolved and all could be helped.

206. Why did he refer to those with conscience scruples about eating the meat as “the weak”? How did he, in love and concern for them, try to help them become stronger? Why was he so concerned that they not be put into situations in which they might go against their consciences?

207. Paul’s words become instruction for us in our appreciation of and application of our Christian freedom. He valued knowledge, but what did he value more in Christian interaction? What limits does love place on our Christian freedom?

208. What situations in today’s Church and world require the same kind of application of love and a voluntary limiting of our freedoms?

Lesson 15

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:29–39

Jesus' public ministry took on a double emphasis: teaching and healing. Both had been evidenced at the synagogue in Capernaum, when a man possessed by an evil spirit interrupted Jesus' teaching. Jesus had dramatically silenced the spirit and ordered him out of the man. The incident led to a continued ministry of healing—in Peter's home within the circle of Peter's family, and outside the home in response to the people of Capernaum who expectantly brought their sick to Jesus.

After the synagogue service, at Peter's invitation, Jesus went to Peter's home for the evening meal. In Jewish custom, this was a joyous gathering of the family as the conclusion of their Sabbath worship. Peter's brother, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, were probably also present—possibly also Philip and Nathanael. There had been a close relationship among these fishermen even before their call to follow Jesus. Zebedee, the father of James and John, operated a fishing business of some proportion. Peter and Andrew and Philip, from nearby Bethsaida, and possibly also Nathanael all may have worked alongside James and John in their father's business. And now they had added reason to be together, now that Jesus had become the center of their lives.

209. What does this family meal following the synagogue service suggest for our observance of the Lord's Day?

At the house, they found Peter's mother-in-law sick in bed with a high fever, as Dr. Luke reported it in his Gospel. The Healer reached out His compassionate hand and the woman was immediately healed.

210. What does "immediately they told [Jesus] about her" suggest to us? How did Peter's mother-in-law give evidence of her enjoying an instantaneous, complete healing?

211. When the Sabbath ended, the people were free to carry out the joyous "work" of bringing their sick to Jesus. What was Mark saying with his "the whole city was gathered together at the door"?

212. What does it say to us that Mark, and also Dr. Luke, wrote of "all who were sick" and those "oppressed by demons"? Why did Jesus not allow the demons to testify about Him? (See Mark 1:23–26.)

The next morning, Jesus was up before dawn, out of the house, even out of the town, to find a desolate place (the Greek even calls it a “desert” place) for a time of prayer.

213. Why did Jesus, the Son of God, feel the need to pray to His Father in heaven? What do you think Jesus talked to His Father about on this morning after He had had such impact on the people of Capernaum?

214. What does His going to a desolate place for prayer say to us for our prayer life?

Peter and the others searched for Jesus until they found Him. They reported that the crowd had assembled again, fully expecting Jesus to continue His ministry to them. Then, however, we learn what was on Jesus’ mind—His outreach to all the villages of Galilee. The Gospels may be seen as describing three separate tours carried out by Jesus among the Galileans during His “year of popularity.”

215. What does Jesus’ “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also” say to the Church in its Gospel mission?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 40:21–31

Isaiah was God’s prophet during the reign of Hezekiah in Judah. It was a time of great peril for the nation. Assyrian armies had conquered the nations to the north, including the kingdom of Israel. They swept southward toward Jerusalem, overwhelming villages along the way. But Isaiah continually assured Hezekiah that God would prevent them from conquering Jerusalem. A siege was begun—and it ended suddenly when, in response to Assyrian arrogance and blasphemy, “the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians” (2 Kings 19:35).

Chapters 1–39 of Isaiah deal with that history and Isaiah’s related prophecies. With chapter 40, the thrust changes to a future conquest of Judah by Babylon, and the eventual return from exile of a remnant to rebuild. Chapter 40 begins the prophetic poems that announce the coming judgment of the nations and their gods and the vindication of Israel. They promise a return of exiles from Babylon, but also have a cosmic, end-times thrust.

216. What is suggested by “Has it not been told you from the beginning . . . from the foundations of the earth”?

217. How is Yahweh’s authority over the natural world described? How is His authority over the world’s mighty people manifested?

218. Some Israelites were comparing the one, true God with their captors' many gods. How does Yahweh ridicule such comparisons? How would His saying He “brings out their host [the stars] by number, calling them all by name” and “not one is missing” be of comfort to His people in exile?

219. Why is it understandable that the exiles might complain, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”?

In contrast to their feeling weak and forgotten, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, assures them that “He does not ___ or grow ___; His ___ is ___.”

220. How would the Lord's strength become His people's strength?

221. How does this lesson tie in with the message of today's Holy Gospel?

We all feel weak and weary at times and need to hope in the Lord. Before moving to the second lesson, read together the Lord's promises to His people in verses 28–31.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 9:16–27

Paul continually had to defend his apostleship, not only against Jewish Christians who questioned his accepting Gentiles into the fellowship without requiring circumcision, but also against factions in Corinth, especially those who claimed superior knowledge direct from the Spirit. In this section of his letter, he explained why he had insisted on working to support himself instead of exercising his right as an apostle to have those whom he was serving provide his living. He insisted that he had that right, but did not use it because he didn't want to “put an obstacle in the way of the Gospel of Christ” (see vv. 12–15). Then he moved to what so strongly motivated him to proclaim the Gospel as an apostle.

222. What drove Paul to the point where he said, “Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!”? What reward did he enjoy as a result of preaching voluntarily and not for pay?

223. It has been said that if a man can do any other work happily rather than preach, he should do it. Do you agree?

Freedom in Christ combined with Paul's drive to "win more of them" led to his being ready to "become all things to all people." This does not suggest that he was wishy-washy and vacillated on matters of principle.

224. What was the basis of Paul's being "free from all"? How did Paul express that freedom in his life and work? Why was he willing to make himself "a servant to all"?

225. What did Paul say was his reason for meeting people where they were and respecting their religious views and feelings? Under what circumstances did Paul put his foot down and not go along with the views of others?

Paul used runners and boxers in the games as analogies to point to the discipline needed for him to do what his apostleship required—and for us to do what our discipleship requires.

226. Why should we be even more motivated than they are in our dedication to run our race as Christians?

227. What guidance can the Church of today gain from Paul's approach to ministry?

Lesson 16

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:40–45

Here we see the compassionate Jesus on a collision course with pharisaic legalism. In this passage about Jesus healing a leper, Mark contrasts Jesus' concern for the sick and suffering over against the self-righteousness of the religious leaders of the day. Leprosy, which we know today as Hansen's Disease, was incurable in ancient times. It was a terrible burden for those who contracted it. They were required to withdraw from normal social contact and, as a result, were dependent on the gifts of family and friends for their supply of food and clothing. They often banded together, as is indicated by the fact that on one occasion, ten lepers approached Jesus. There was one man who, according to the other evangelists, in order to get to Jesus, had to work his way through a crowd—who probably gave him wide berth, and not too happily.

228. What is remarkable about the man's approach to Jesus with his request for healing? What is there about his approach that we must imitate when coming to Jesus with petitions for His help in our circumstances?

Jesus responded with deep compassion, which was not only empathetic, but also sought to relieve human suffering. Jesus' compassion moved Him to action. He reached out to touch the "untouchable" and said, "I will; be clean." The Greek has the verb *thelō*, "I will"—the only place in Scripture where Jesus used it. "Immediately"—one of Mark's favorite words—he was cured, restored to health and wholeness.

229. Why the sudden change on Jesus' part from the loving "Be clean" to the strong warning to the man not to tell anyone, but to go and show himself to the priest and offer the appropriate sacrifice?

230. How did the healed leper respond to his healing? What effect did this have on Jesus' ministry?

The Old Testament Lesson: 2 Kings 5:1–14

This familiar Bible story is part of a section of 2 Kings called "the Elisha cycle," which tells of various miracles the Lord did through the hand of Elisha. The story of Naaman the leper is a Sunday School favorite because a young Israelite girl, a slave in the household of Naaman, is a heroine of faith

and love in helping her master. Naaman, a Syrian general, had gained his king's favor because "by him the LORD had given victory to Syria."

231. What is remarkable about the young slave girl's telling her mistress about the prophet in Samaria?

Naaman fully expected to have to pay handsomely for the services of this foreign prophet—but, as it turned out, Elisha declined to accept his lavish gifts. Naaman carried a letter of introduction to the king of Israel. The tone of the letter stating the king of Syria's expectations suggests that Israel was subject to Syria at the time.

232. How did the king of Israel react on reading the king of Syria's letter?

233. When Elisha intervened, what appears to have been his motivation in providing for Naaman the cure he desired?

234. How did Elisha react when finally Naaman and "his horses and chariots" appeared at the door of his house? Why did Naaman go away angry?

Naaman's servants finally convinced him to do what the prophet had ordered—and he immediately experienced the healing results that he desired.

235. Why did Elisha prescribe actions for Naaman to carry out which in themselves appeared to be foolish and ineffectual?

236. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 10:19–11:1

Paul was calling the Corinthian Christians to a decisive break with the paganism in their past. He wanted them to know they couldn't walk on both sides of the street at the same time. To develop his argument, he compared feasts at the pagan temples with their celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Paul told them that eating the bread and drinking the cup in the Lord's Supper involved them in "a participation" in the body and blood of Christ (10:16). He pointed to the same significance in Israel's

history, where eating the festive meals that accompanied their sacrifices was “participating in Yahweh.” Then he said that the same was essentially true of the sacrifices and feasts at pagan temples. Though ___ offered to an ___ was not anything, and though the ___ itself was not really anything, the pagan feasts and sacrifices were offered to ___, and if they participated in them, it involved them as participants with ___. He told them bluntly: “You cannot drink the ___ and the ___. You cannot partake of the ___ and the ___, and to do so might provoke the Lord to ___.” They needed to decide who it was with whom they wanted to be participants!

237. How might Christians today be guilty of trying to have a part in both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons?

When pointing them to their participation in Christ in the Lord’s Supper, Paul added the horizontal dynamic of the Sacrament. He wanted them to recognize that their participation in Christ involved them also in a participation in and identification with the body of Christ, the Church (10:17).

238. In what sense is our Holy Communion with Christ also a holy communion with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ? How does this encourage us to be decisive in our discipleship?

Once again, Paul returned to the question of freedom and its limits. Again he responded to their “All things are lawful” by saying there were more important considerations than whether something is permissible. They needed to remember that not all things are ___; not all things will ___. “A more excellent way” (12:31) that he was encouraging always considers the needs of others in love and seeks their true good. They were to be strong in their freedom in Christ and not burden themselves with conscience scruples about eating meat bought in the marketplace because it might have been part of a sacrifice at a pagan temple. But they were also to be strong enough in love to refrain from eating it if, as a result, brothers or sisters in Christ were going to be tempted to go against their consciences. They were not to insist on expressing their freedom if that might cause anyone to ___.

239. Whether we do or we don’t in matters of conscience, what is to be our aim in making decisions that determine our actions as disciples of Jesus? How did Paul give encouragement and support to those who were strong in their sense of liberty in Christ?

240. How could Paul so boldly say, “Be imitators of me”? Can we say the same to our children and grandchildren and our fellow Christians?

Lesson 17

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

The Holy Gospel: Mark 2:1–12

The buzz about His healing a leper was making it impossible for Jesus to go into the towns because of the press of the crowds. Mark jumped immediately to Jesus' return to Capernaum. Jesus was teaching in a house, and the crowds gathered. The house was filled, and even the doorway was blocked by people eager to hear His Good News. Suddenly, His teaching was interrupted by the four men who removed part of the roof so they could lower their friend to Jesus. Jesus did not complain. He saw their eager faith and was ready to respond to a new opportunity to help someone who looked to Him in his need.

241. Since it was obvious that the group wanted their invalid friend to be healed, why was Jesus' first reaction to say to him, "My son, your sins are forgiven"?

When Jesus addresses the leper with "son," He uses the Greek word *teknon*, meaning "child." This was a form of intimate, familial address, showing the Savior's warm compassion for the man.

Publicity about His healing of the leper had preceded Jesus, so the crowd in the house included teachers of the law, the scribes, who were checking Him out, looking for ways to discredit Him with the people. They immediately thought Jesus was blaspheming, taking on Himself a prerogative that belonged only to God. Jesus knew their thoughts.

242. Which *is* easier: to forgive sins, or to bless a paralytic with immediate healing?

The question required no answer other than Jesus' demonstration that He, the Son of Man, had authority to forgive sins by providing the paralytic with immediate healing. Jesus spoke three imperatives to the man: ____, ____, and ____. And Mark recorded the paralytic's immediate response to all three; he ____ and immediately ____, and ____.

243. What was the crowd's reaction to this miracle and what it displayed about Jesus?

244. Why did Mark not mention the reaction of the teachers of the law who were silenced by Jesus' comments and action?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 43:18–25

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah recorded Isaiah’s ministry to Judah during the years when Assyria threatened the region. The 39th chapter introduced the Babylonians, and the prophetic thrust moved toward identifying them as the nation that would be the Lord’s instrument of judgment for Judah. Chapters 40–66 expanded on this and offered assurance that a remnant of those carried off into exile would return to rebuild. Chapter 40 begins the prophetic poems that announce the coming judgment of the nations and their gods and the vindication of Israel. They speak of the exiles from Babylon but also have a cosmic, eschatological, “end-times” thrust. Chapter 42 introduces “the Servant of the Lord” with the first of what scholars call “The Servant Songs.” Some identify this servant as Israel herself, but some of the songs describe a ministry *to* Israel by this Servant. Looking at the Servant through the window of the New Testament shows the Servant to be the true Israelite, the One who became the Suffering Servant to fulfill God’s promise of salvation, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Isaiah prophetically addressed the exiles. In telling them of the Lord’s judgment of Babylon, he pointed them to “signs and wonders” that accompanied the Exodus of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt (see 43:16–17).

245. Why, after having reminded them of wonders of old, did the prophet abruptly tell them to “remember not the former things” and not “consider the things of old”? What “new thing” was the Lord in the process of doing for them?

246. What was the point of “[making] a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert”?

247. How did the prophet picture the Lord’s care of His people? What was the Lord’s ultimate purpose in showing them His love and care?

248. What “new thing” does the Lord do for us as His people today?

The thrust moves to an indictment of Israel’s disregard of the Lord in their exile, their not calling on Him and not exerting themselves for Him. Then, just when we would expect the Lord’s judgment and condemnation of His faithless people, the Good News breaks through.

249. What is the point of the Lord’s saying that He blots out transgressions for His own sake and remembers them no more?

250. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 2 Corinthians 1:18–22

Paul had changed his plans about his visit in Corinth. Originally he had planned to sail there from Ephesus, but then decided he would travel overland, visit the Macedonian churches first, and end up with a longer stay in Corinth before sailing to Jerusalem. Some of his mean-spirited opponents in the Corinthian congregation criticized him for not keeping his word. In his letter, Paul refuted that, telling them he did not say in the same breath “Yes, yes” and “No, no.”

Travel plans are a minor matter, and usually everyone understands that sometimes changes are made in them—but Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to know that when it came to his message, his proclamation of the Good News of Jesus, there was absolutely no vacillation between yes and no. In the Son of God, Jesus Christ, it had always been _____. Paul stressed God's integrity and his own integrity as Jesus' apostle.

251. How could Paul say that the Corinthian Christians could be sure about his message “as surely as God is faithful”?

252. How is Jesus Christ the ultimate yes in regard to the promises of God? What is the only appropriate response to God's yes to us in Christ?

Paul provided another list of three: three actions by which God made both him and the Corinthian Christians stand firm in Christ. We, too, are the recipients of their blessings: He ____, He ____, and He ____.

253. When did God set us apart and equip us for His purposes by anointing us?

254. What “seal” establishes the fact that we belong to God?

255. In what sense is the Holy Spirit God's down payment of what is still to come in the future for us?

Lesson 18

Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Holy Gospel: Mark 2:13–22

In one little paragraph, Mark tells of Jesus' straightforward call of Levi (Matthew), a tax collector, to be His disciple, and of Levi's unhesitating response.

256. What does it say about Levi that he had become a tax collector? What does it say about Jesus that He was ready to call a tax collector to join His select group of disciples? What does it say about Levi that he was ready to "[leave] everything," as Luke put it (5:28), to follow Jesus?

257. How has your vocation to be a disciple influenced your work life?

Levi invited "tax collectors and sinners" to his house to have contact with Jesus. We note that Levi "evangelized" by inviting his close associates and friends to meet the Lord.

258. How may you cultivate friendships with people who are not with you in the Church in ways that will give you opportunities to introduce them to Jesus?

259. How is Jesus' "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" both an incisive judgment and a surprising invitation? What does this statement of Jesus indicate is necessary if a person is to respond to His call and follow Him? (See Psalm 51:16–17; 1 John 1:8–9.)

Fasting as a religious devotion is intended to focus a person's attention away from earthly concerns to his relationship with God in an attitude of humble repentance. The Mosaic Law required faithful Jews to fast only as part of the observance of the annual Day of Atonement. After the Babylonian exile, four other yearly fasts were instituted. The Pharisees, legalistically zealous and eager to impress the people, fasted twice a week, and some whitened their faces and wore torn clothing as proof of their penitence. Someone asked Jesus, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered with a counterquestion. It reminded them that John the Baptist had used the same analogy with them (see John 3:26–30).

Jewish weddings were week-long affairs, a time for joyful celebration and feasting, not a time for fasting. With His question, Jesus explained it would be out of place for His disciples to fast while He was with them.

260. What would be the appropriate time and place for fasting on the part of His disciples?

261. The question was larger than just the matter of fasting. With Jesus' coming, there was a new quality to be enjoyed in faith and life. What point was Jesus making with His analogies of the unshrunk cloth sewed on an old garment and putting new wine into old wineskins?

The Old Testament Lesson: Hosea 2:14–20

Hosea's prophecy is the first of the Minor Prophets, so called only because of their relative brevity compared to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Hosea lived and worked in the Northern Kingdom, beginning in the time of prosperity under Jeroboam II and continuing into the years of rapid decline that led to Israel's fall to the Assyrians. Hosea's message was dramatized by his life circumstances, which included marrying an adulterous wife and fathering three children, whose names symbolized parts of his prophetic message.

In a motif that fits Hosea's own life experience with Gomer, his adulterous wife, the Lord spoke in chapter 2 through His prophet to His adulterous people, Israel. He pronounced judgment against them because of their having become enamored of a Canaanite fertility god, Baal. But now He again expressed His love for them and His desire for them to return to Him. He refers to the experiences of their ancestors in the exodus and the settlement of the Promised Land, when their relationship was fresh and Baal worship had not come into their experience.

262. How does the Lord assure Israel that leading her "into the wilderness" (like her ancestors) will be a source of blessing, not punishment?

263. What would a covenant with the animals do for Israel? (See v. 12.) How would the Lord provide a peaceful situation for His people as a nation?

Two Hebrew words were used to speak of a husband—*Ishi* and *ba'al*. Evidently this was behind the Israelites' thinking that they could worship Yahweh also in worshiping Baal, and the Lord wanted them to know that this was no less than an idolatrous practice.

Verses 19 and 20 explain the point of leading Israel "back into the wilderness." There would be a new beginning, a new betrothal—an opportunity for Israel to recommit herself to Yahweh in response to His commitment to her. Five traits will be the foundation of the betrothal covenant as "the bride-price." The Lord promises to betroth Israel to Himself forever in ____, in ____, in ____, and in ____.

264. What will the Lord's paying that kind of "bride-price" produce in Israel?

265. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 2 Corinthians 2:12–3:6

Paul expressed his confidence in Christ even in a troubled situation—so much so that he said God always led him and the other apostles in ___ and through them, spread everywhere the ___.

266. In what sense is the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ a "fragrance from death to death," while at the same time a "fragrance from life to life"?

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians as a strong defense of his apostleship and his ministry. Some had come, making much of letters of recommendation from congregations they had influenced with their false emphases. They had sown the seeds of question and doubt about Paul's credentials and about his Gospel, possibly by asking if he had shown them such a letter. Paul's reaction was that he didn't need any letter of recommendation to them or from them.

267. How were the Corinthian Christians themselves Paul's "letter of recommendation" for any and all to read? In what sense were the Corinthian Christians a "letter from Christ"? What had been the effectual instruments in Christ's writing His letter in their hearts?

Paul had made bold statements, and he realized it. But he wanted the Christians of Corinth to know that "such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God."

268. Why is it important that all ministers of the Gospel—and all Christians—say sincerely as we speak of our ministries, "Our sufficiency is from God?"

269. What is meant by the new covenant being "not of the letter but of the Spirit"?

270. Both the "letters on stone" and the new covenant of the Spirit are from God. Why does the one kill and the other give life?

Lesson 19

Transfiguration of Our Lord

The Holy Gospel: Mark 9:2–9

The Epiphany Season follows the celebration of the birth of Jesus and points to His life and ministry with an emphasis on His *manifesting* Himself as the Son of God (which is what “epiphany” means). The Feast of the Epiphany is always January 6, a remembrance of the coming of the Magi. The first Sunday to follow is always devoted to the Baptism of Our Lord, and the last Sunday of the season always celebrates the Transfiguration of Our Lord. These two occasions, on which a voice from heaven declared to Jesus, “You are My Son, whom I love,” are like bookends that hold the story of Jesus’ ministry together and provide their own distinct epiphanies of Jesus as the Son of God.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him to witness the manifestation of His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. This inner circle was granted the privilege of being close to Jesus at special times (see Mark 5:35–42; 14:32–34). These three, along with Andrew, Peter’s brother, were the first to be called by Jesus to be His disciples. Why Andrew was not included in the inner circle we cannot say, but there is no evidence of any friction as a result of the Lord’s granting this special position to the three.

271. Why did Jesus want an inner circle of disciples who would enjoy an especially close relationship with Him?

“After six days” attaches this event to what went before (see Mark 8:27–38, noting especially v. 38). Jesus was “transfigured” before them. *Metemorphōthe* means a change in form, a transfiguration revealing something from within. Jesus was giving His inner circle of disciples a visual demonstration of His true glory as the Son of God.

272. What significance do you see in the fact that Mark emphasizes that even Jesus’ clothing became dazzling white? (See Isaiah 64:6; Revelation 7:13–14.)

273. Moses and Elijah came to interact with Jesus as part of this dramatic display of His divine glory. Why was it these two who appeared with Him? What did they talk about? (See Luke 9:30–31.)

All of the evangelists tell of Peter’s reaction and suggestion that he build three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, and Mark’s Gospel is generally understood to be Peter’s own eyewitness account. Peter later made the incident part of his testimony (see 2 Peter 1:16–18).

274. What was going on in Peter’s mind to suggest his building the shelters? What does it show us about Peter that he was ready to admit that he was fearful and didn’t know what to say, but spoke up anyway?

The voice from heaven spoke from a cloud. Clouds often were the setting of God’s revelation of Himself to His people (see Exodus 19:16–19; 40:34–39; Acts 1:9).

275. What was the Father’s main concern for the three disciples relative to their recognizing Jesus as His Son?

276. Why did Jesus order the three not to tell about this experience until after He had risen from the dead?

277. What does this manifestation of Jesus’ glory say to us for our life today?

The Old Testament Lesson: 2 Kings 2:1–12

278. Elijah, aware that his time was coming to an end, tried to take leave of his assistant, but Elisha was persistent in staying with him. What was Elisha anticipating?

The companies (literally “sons”) of the prophets at Gilgal and Bethel and Jericho were the theological students of their day. Scholars point to Samuel as one who originated or at least developed this concept of the Lord’s prophets training others to be “forth-tellers” of the Word. It appears here that Elijah was under divine constraint to meet one last time with each of these companies, which were under his prophetic authority. These men sensed that Elijah was to be taken from them that day, and 50 from the Jericho school followed Elijah and Elisha to the Jordan River. Elijah rolled up his cloak and struck the water of the Jordan. The water divided to allow them to cross over on dry land.

279. Of what did this remind Elisha and the students? What did it say to them about their master, Elijah?

Elisha's request for a double portion of Elijah's spirit is generally seen not as a request for twice as much as Elijah had received, but as a request for "the inheritance of the firstborn." In Jewish society, the firstborn son inherited twice as much as his brothers and became the head of the family. Elisha was asking for the position of leadership as a prophet and for the power of the Spirit to equip him for it.

280. Why did Elijah say Elisha had asked "a hard thing"?

281. Why was Elisha's receiving what he had requested made contingent on his seeing Elijah's departure?

Elisha saw the chariot and horses of fire and his master being swept up bodily into heaven, and he knew his request had been granted. His cry "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" is generally seen as Elisha's referring to Elijah himself as God's powerful "army." The same will be said of Elisha (2 Kings 13:14).

282. When he could see Elijah no longer, why did Elisha tear his clothing?

283. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:6

Moses was the prophet whom "the LORD knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10). The Lord invited Moses to come into His presence on Mount Sinai, and He continued to meet Moses in the Tent of Meeting. On the occasions when Moses interacted with God in this direct way, he would come out of the tent with his face glowing—a reflection of the glory of God. It was an awesome sight, and it put fear into the hearts of the Israelites and their leaders. So Moses would accommodate them by wearing a veil over his face until the "glory" faded and his face took its normal appearance once again.

Paul referred to this as he wrote about the surpassing glory of the new covenant in Christ over the old covenant. But he changed the veil's point of reference as he applied it to his own day. He talked about a veil being over the ___ of those who stubbornly clung to the old covenant when they heard the message of Christ, and said that only in ___ is that veil taken away for anyone who turns to Him. Then, where the ___ of the Lord is, there is ___, and we, with ___ faces, reflect ___.

284. We reflect our Lord's glory by faith. It is not given to us a part at a time—but we "*have* redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (Ephesians 1:7). What process, then, is Paul describing with his "we all . . . are being transformed into [His] image from one degree of glory to another"? What is the dynamic that energizes this process?

Paul changed the veil's point of reference again and wrote of the *Gospel* being veiled to those who are perishing. He said the Gospel was veiled to them because they were blinded by "the god of this world."

285. Who is this "god of this world"? Compare Jesus' own term for him in John 12:31.

286. What is it about the natural man that causes a blind spot when it comes to the Good News of Jesus? (See 1 Corinthians 2:14.) What is the point over which blindness or stumbling occurs? (See 1:23.)

287. Why was the preaching of the cross a stumbling block to Jews? Why is the preaching of the cross "foolishness" to the worldly wise?

288. In the face of the world's blindness and self-styled wisdom, why is it tempting to preach ourselves instead of Jesus Christ as Lord?

289. What is involved in preaching Jesus Christ as Lord?

290. If the Israelites of old couldn't bear to look at the reflected glory on the face of Moses, God's prophet, how are we able to look at the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ, the very Son of God? (See John 1:17.)

291. How does Paul's attitude toward his ministry challenge pastors, teachers, and lay leaders of the Church today?

Leader Guide

How to Use the Leader Guide

Put in time and effort to make these thoughts your own. Notes on your Study Guide will help you remember them in class. If you think a point is stated particularly well in the Leader Guide, you may want to quote it, but do not use the Leader Guide continually as “the last word.” Your group’s ideas about themes and emphases and applications may differ from those in the Leader Guide. That’s okay; explore their insights. Since each study is a unit in itself, you may easily use substitute leaders. Provide them with a Study Guide and Leader Guide, along with instructions for their use, well in advance.

Each lesson in the Leader Guide begins with the collect assigned for the day. You may use this prayer, or another prayer suitable for your needs, to begin your study. Suggested also are the hymns and songs, listed topically in the index of *Lutheran Service Book*, appropriate for the season or day. The index begins on page 993.

Lesson 1

First Sunday in Advent

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Mark 11:1–10

1. The village of Bethphage was near Bethany, both situated just over the crest of the Mount of Olives to the west of Jerusalem. The residents of Bethphage were impressed and influenced by the raising of Lazarus in nearby Bethany. John concluded, “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what [Jesus] did, believed in Him” (11:45). They may not have had personal contact with Jesus, but the owners of the colt responded happily when told, “The Lord has need of it.” Jesus says His “The Lord has need of it” to us regarding our time, our abilities, our money and possessions, and our lives. He surely has a right to expect us to respond with whatever the occasion demands, for He bought us to be His own to serve Him. He carries out the mission of His kingdom of grace through us as our words and lives evidence the new life and new direction we have found in our relationship with Him.

2. “Hosanna!” as an exclamation of praise to Jesus, was—and still is—a fitting way of greeting Him because He came to “Save now.” Ours is the joy of the redeemed. We happily sing our praise and welcome our Redeemer. That we invite the saints and angels to rejoice and praise Jesus with us is only fitting. After all, Jesus said, “There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10).

3. “He who comes in the name of the Lord” was one of the focal points of the Passover celebration. Families at their tables left one chair empty for Elijah, who was to come before the day of the Lord (see Malachi 4:5–6). That the crowds used this verse from the Psalm says they hoped that Jesus would prove to be the promised Messiah.

4. That they looked for “the coming kingdom of our father David” showed that they were expecting a messiah who would assert himself, overthrow the domination of the Romans, and restore the kingdom of Israel to former prominence and prosperity. This was the general expectation of the Jewish people, and that was why Jesus usually avoided referring to Himself as the Messiah and told His disciples not to use that title as they spoke about Him.

5. Members of your group may share their experiences of spontaneous enthusiasm. Be ready to tell of some of your own. Our joyous Palm Sunday and Easter worship offers opportunities for such an unplanned experience, when something especially touches us or we find ourselves caught up in a song of praise. Those who have sung great music in a large chorus know the chills and thrills of being lifted beyond normal experience in their praise of God. Those who have found themselves suddenly in a circumstance that requires their spontaneous effort in service know how in that experience we can lose

ourselves, sometimes enjoying energies that take us well beyond our normal strength and ability for unusually extended periods of time.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 64:1–9

6. In asking the Lord to be fire that kindles brushwood and boils water, Isaiah was asking Him to assert His power so that His enemies would have to acknowledge Him and quake before Him.

7. The Old Testament is replete with examples: the Lord’s rescue of Israel from Egypt; their food and drink in the wilderness; the victory over Jericho and the conquest of Canaan; the death of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers besieging Jerusalem, and so on. By being ready to share an incident from your life, you will encourage others to do the same.

8. *Wrath* is a better word than *anger* to describe the Lord’s reaction to those who continue to sin against His ways—also when Christians, in spite of knowing better, are involved in willful sin. It is not just a matter of His “getting mad” or “losing His temper.” His wrath against sin is deeply seated in God’s nature. He cannot and will not coexist with willful sin. He hates sin, not just because it offends His majesty, but especially because of what it does to the sinner. Luther, in his conclusion to the commandments, says, “We should fear His wrath and not do anything against [His commandments].” The Good News, of course, is that God turns away from wrath to forgive the repentant in Christ.

Fill-in answers: We expect to have sinful deeds exposed and judged by God, but here the prophet says that our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

9. Even our righteous deeds are not clean and pure because God does not judge by outward appearance but by the attitudes and motives of the heart.

10. About “fade . . . and . . . take us away,” this is the ultimate judgment against persistent, willful sin—sinners are hardened, and God turns His face away from them and lets them go deeper into sin. (See Romans 1:24–32.)

11. The intercessor’s plea is based on the Lord’s being Father and Maker. Look at verses 9–12 in class. They take the plea a significant step further, asking the Lord to curb His anger and not remember sins. They remind Him again of the covenant with the meaningful phrase “we *are* all Your people.”

12. The Holy Gospel shows the promised King entering Jerusalem to acclaim as He moves toward His redemptive suffering and victorious resurrection. This lesson begs the Lord to come and forgive and renew His people.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 1:3–9

13. Paul’s “grace and peace” was much more than a general good wish like our “have a nice day” because he reminded his readers that true grace and peace are “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” These are familiar words because many pastors speak them as a pulpit greeting as they are introducing their sermons.

14. Paul thanked God because of the grace of God that was given to the Corinthians in Christ Jesus.

15. Paul explained their enrichment in all speech and all knowledge with “the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you.” Spiritual knowledge and wisdom come through the Good News of Jesus through the Spirit-powered Word, not through a “direct line” to the Spirit (see Romans 10:14–17). This was at the heart of their controversy. Some were claiming that their views and teachings were by direct inspiration, and were putting down those who didn’t share their spiritual *gnosis*, “knowledge.” (This was the beginning of what is called the Gnostic heresy.) This can still be a problem in the Church today. The only remedy is to insist that all teaching be based on the prophetic and apostolic Word, not on subjective personal insight. Paul’s testimony was confirmed among the Corinthians by their receiving spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts are not natural talents, but gifts that are displayed because the Spirit of Jesus is equipping people for the mission of the Church and working through them.

16. God gives spiritual gifts, not to amaze and exalt individuals, but to equip them to serve the common good. Spiritual gifts are not to be divisive in effect, but unifying. (See 1 Corinthians 12–14 for Paul’s full exposition of spiritual gifts, their purpose, and their use among the Corinthians.)

17. The promise inherent in God’s bringing people to faith and blessing them with spiritual gifts is that they will be kept strong and guiltless to the end. Paul ended this section with “God is faithful.” The Greek emphasizes this by making *pistos*, “faithful,” the first word in the sentence. The one thing that would frustrate God’s faithfulness would be our willfully turning away from Christ to go our own faithless way (see Revelation 2:10; 2 Timothy 4:9–10).

18. Faithful use of God’s Word and Sacraments, the means of grace, together with fellow Christians and in private study and devotion, will keep us under the dynamic influence of the Holy Spirit and in fellowship with Jesus—and encourage us to live out our faith by loving one another deeply from the heart (see 1 Peter 1:22–2:3).

Lesson 2

Second Sunday in Advent

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:1–8

Baptism was nothing new for the Jews, not only because of the requirement of baptism for Gentile converts, but also because the Old Testament ceremonial law included many “baptisms,” or ritual cleansings. “Being baptized by him in the river Jordan” does not necessarily imply immersion as the method of baptizing.

19. The act that qualified those seeking Baptism was an open confession of their sins. This confession is still an outward expression of our repentance, and we join in doing it in a formal way in our worship services, but it is the inner turning of the *heart* from sin to trust God’s grace that qualifies in God’s sight.

20. Traditionally, the prophets came out of the wilderness with the Lord’s message for His people. Elijah, in whose spirit John came, was related in Israel’s mind to the desert area in which John worked. Josephus said some 300,000 people came out to hear John and be baptized by him during his brief six-month ministry.

Fill-in answer: John’s mission was to point people who came out to him to the Mightier One who would come after him.

21. Removing the sandals of the master or a guest was a task reserved for the lowest of slaves. In his humility, John said he was not worthy to untie the sandals of the Coming One. John said he baptized with water; the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

22. This baptism with the Holy Spirit took place on the Day of Pentecost and continued into the life of the Early Church, also among Gentile converts.

23. John’s Baptism “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” was an Old Testament rite, underscoring repentance enabled by the Spirit. It was intended for Jews preparing for the coming of the Christ. The Baptism commanded by Jesus following His resurrection (Matthew 28:19–20), intended for both Jew and Gentile, is an expression of the completed covenant. Like Jesus’ Baptism, John’s Baptism was a means of grace.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 40:1–11

The first paragraphs provide the historical setting. Read them, invite comments, and move on.

24. “Her warfare is ended” is military language that says the tour of duty (the exile) would come to an end. “Her iniquity is pardoned” suggests that the suffering imposed on faithless Judah will have accomplished its purposes for the remnant. “Double for all her sins” may be understood to mean “You’ve already suffered more than enough,” or it may be seen as a promise of a gracious “double blessing” for those returning from exile. The latter seems to fit the emphasis better (see Isaiah 61:7).

25. In ancient times, when great rulers visited parts of their empire, it was not unusual for the people to carefully and laboriously smooth out the roads on which the rulers would travel. In our world, the interstate highways that cut through mountains and bridge ravines give a comparable feeling.

26. Since the voice called for “a highway for our God” by which “the glory of the LORD” would be revealed, the picture surely implies the repentance and the change of life direction that remove “rough places” and glorify the Lord in the hearts of those who receive the Lord as He comes to them. “All flesh shall see it together” gives these words an eschatological thrust, pointing to the final revelation of the Lord’s glory in the coming of the Messiah. The excitement of the Church everywhere in the world as we await the celebration of another Christmas is a preview of this, a preliminary enjoyment of the glory that will be ours at the Lord’s return. Isaiah’s “the mouth of the LORD has spoken” provides the seal of authority and dependability to what he has proclaimed.

27. To the exiles, “the grass withers, the flower fades” said that even the great and powerful have only their brief day, but God is eternally dependable—the restoration of the remnant would indeed come. For all of us, this puts our brief years into perspective and encourages us to live looking up, focusing our lives on the enduring.

28. “The Word of our God will stand forever” encourages those who proclaim it to shout it boldly from a high mountain, to be heralds of good news to the Church, and to point the world to God in His Word. It stimulates those who hear it to give careful attention to its proclamation and to deepen their trust in the Lord, who is always sensitive to our needs, and whose promises are never-failing.

29. *Mighty power*: “The Lord GOD comes with might, and His arm rules for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him.” *Touching gentleness*: “He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” Both the power and the gentleness of the sovereign Lord are intrinsic to the covenant He made with His people and to the promises He has given us. In His power we see His sure and certain ability to rule all things according to His will, and we are assured that He will provide reward and recompense for His suffering people in their faithfulness. In His gentleness we find assurance of His understanding of our particular situations and His comforting care for us in all our needs. Who can ask for a better picture of this than the assurance that He tends His flock like a shepherd, carrying the lambs in His arms and gently leading those who have young? Both qualities come together clearly in the Lord Jesus Christ. He who was ready to be delivered into death for our sins and then was able to rise again for our justification surely will assert His mighty power and His compassionate love to guide us and bless us in all our needs (see Hebrews 2:14–18; 4:14–16).

30. This lesson includes the prophecy about the voice calling people to prepare the way for the Lord; the Holy Gospel describes the One whose way was prepared.

The Epistle for the Day: 2 Peter 3:8–14

31. God’s time schedule is not ours. Jesus is not in a hurry to return because “He is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” This involves us because we are His ambassadors through whom He calls: “Be reconciled to God!” (see 2 Corinthians 5:18–6:2).

32. Thieves do not send advance warning, but depend on coming at the most unexpected time. No one knows the day or the hour of the return of the Lord, and it is not in our province to try to pinpoint and predict the time. We are to be aware always that He is coming “soon.”

33. The temporary nature of our world should motivate us to practice a conscious detachment from things and a determined attachment to the Lord (see Matthew 6:19–21). We are encouraged to live holy and godly lives. The word *holy* does not imply moral perfection, but being “separated” by God for Himself—being different from the world around us, becoming like our brother Jesus in outlook and conduct (see Romans 12:1–2; 2 Corinthians 3:17–18; 5:9–10). It surely makes no difference which comes first, the Lord’s coming or our own deaths. In either case, in the resurrection of the dead, we will ultimately stand before the Lord to be judged, and by His grace, we will receive from Him the gift of eternal life He has promised us (see 2 Corinthians 5:7–10; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 2 Timothy 1:12).

34. We are not going to change the time schedule in God’s plans. However, we should labor in the Lord’s harvest in order to hasten the coming of that day by bringing others to the Savior (Acts 3:19–20). We are and will be without spot or blemish and at peace with our Lord only as we live under His grace and forgiveness. It is not something we accomplish in ourselves. It is His gracious work, so we are conscientiously to involve ourselves in the use of Word and Sacraments in the fellowship of a Christian congregation and to make prayer and Bible study a part of our personal lives, remaining always under the Spirit’s care.

Lesson 3

Third Sunday in Advent

Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 1:6–8, 19–28

Help your group see the relation between the first verses of John's prologue and the first verses of Genesis 1: God, creation, light, life.

Fill-in answers: The evangelist was making it clear that John the Baptist was not the light, but came as a witness to the light.

It is possible that there may have been a "John the Baptist sect" when this Gospel was written. At least Paul's experience in Ephesus seems to indicate that John's influence was still widespread at the time of his mission journeys (see Acts 19:1–7). The gifted preacher Apollos also taught about Jesus accurately, but knew only the Baptism of John (see Acts 18:24–26).

35. God's saving plan called for the coming of John the Baptist at just that time because human history was at the point of "fullness of time" in God's will for humanity (see Galatians 4:4). The True Light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

Fill-in answer: In response to the pointed question of his interrogators, John stated clearly: "I am not the Christ."

36. Though Jesus later explained that John was indeed the "Elijah" who was to come before the Day of the Lord, John did not apply that to himself because the general expectation was that Elijah himself would return bodily from heaven. That had not happened. The angel foretelling John's conception and birth to aged Zechariah and Elizabeth said, "He will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17).

37. When asked to identify himself, John called himself "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." This showed his humility and his purposefulness. John saw himself as unworthy even to untie the thongs of the sandals of the One coming after him. John was willing to lose his personal identity and be just the voice of God calling attention to the Messiah.

Fill-in answers: John identified Jesus as the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, but was even more specific as he called Him the Lamb of God and the Son of God.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

38. The essential ministry of the One on whom the Spirit of the Lord came was to bring good news. “The LORD has anointed me” assured the messenger of good news that he had been chosen and commissioned and would be enabled by the Lord.

The ministry of Good News will “bind up the brokenhearted,” proclaim “liberty to the captives” and “the opening of the prison to those who are bound,” and “comfort all who mourn,” bringing those who mourn in Zion “a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

39. Both of these phrases meant much to a people in exile. “The year of the LORD’s favor” was rich in positive promise for them that the remnant would be allowed to return to reestablish a national identity and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. “The day of vengeance of our God” was the other side of the equation. It cheered them, too, with the promise of the Lord’s judgment against their enemies. Their ultimate application involves the Day of the Lord, when the eternal kingdom will be ushered in. Also at that time, there will be the double emphasis of favor and vengeance.

40. Oaks are sturdy trees that often look like they have always been there and always will be there. At one time, many of the hillsides of Palestine were covered with oak groves. The main point is that they are “the planting of the LORD.” Those who are established in righteousness are so established by the grace of God. God “plants” His people and nourishes us in righteousness so we will display the splendor of His grace.

41. “They shall build up the ancient ruins” pointed ahead prophetically to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple by the faithful remnant who would return from exile in Babylonia.

42. The closing doxology pictures “the garments of salvation” and “the robe of righteousness” in terms of the beauty of the wedding garments that adorn the groom and the bride, and in terms of the life quality of the sprouts that grow up from seeds planted in a garden. The result of God’s dealing so graciously with His people is that righteousness and praise will sprout up before all the nations. This is the purpose of the Church’s witness today, and it will be fully true at the Last Day.

43. The description of the ministry of the One on whom the Spirit of the sovereign Lord comes relates to the faithfulness of John the Baptist in his ministry—and its effect on the people—as he prepared the way for the Lord. The prophecy was fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus Himself.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

44. We may rejoice *always* if our rejoicing is in the Lord, celebrating His presence with us and His assurance of strengthening and ultimate victory.

45. Praying continually calls for developing an awareness of Jesus’ presence and an attitude that brings Him easily into every thought and every activity of life. We can pray anytime, anywhere. Intentional, daily prayer and meditation on God’s Word are essential to the ongoing development of the Christian.

46. We can actively thank God in *all* circumstances because we know He has allowed them and is at work in them for our good.

47. It is only when we look at God “in Christ Jesus” that we see Him as our loving, forgiving Father. It is only when we remember that God now always looks at us “in Christ Jesus” that we may be confident that He will indeed be at work in everything for our ultimate good. Our ultimate good in life is that we relate to God as His children in Christ and live our lives out of that knowledge.

48. Willful persistence in sins of commission or omission will effectively put out the Spirit’s fire, for He leads us in Christ always to make our wills submissive to and subject to God’s will. In congregations, a negative spirit that dampens enthusiasm for the Church’s mission, local and international, tends to put

out the Spirit's fire. The seven last words of a congregation may well be "We never did it that way before."

49. Treating prophecies with contempt is a matter of looking at preaching and teaching of the Word as just "human opinion" instead of receiving it as God's Word (see 2 Corinthians 2:13). Every preacher knows that the result of sermons or Bible lessons is due to the Word of God and the receptive ear the Holy Spirit gives the hearer or student, and not due to his brilliant preaching and teaching.

50. As Paul indicates, testing everything should lead to holding on to the good and avoiding every kind of evil.

51. *Sanctify* means "to make holy." In Bible terms, it describes God in Christ setting someone apart for Himself, to be His own, free of sin by His grace. "The God of peace" has overtones of the Hebrew *shalōm*, which carries the idea of a person's total well-being.

52. God brings His *shalōm* into every part of our lives through faith in Jesus, and He nourishes our faith through Word and Sacrament.

Lesson 4

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Luke 1:26–38

Fill-in answers: The angel told Mary that she, a virgin, would conceive and carry and give birth to a son whom she was to name Jesus and who would be called the Son of the Most High.

Luke and Matthew go out of their way to make their point about the wondrous virgin conception and virgin birth of Jesus. A natural concomitant of the doctrine of the virgin birth is to see Jesus as “Second Adam,” fully capable of a human life of full obedience to His Father—on our behalf (see Romans 5:15–19).

53. Why Mary was chosen by God to be the mother of His Son is something that will have to be left in the mystery of God’s will. Mary’s primary qualification is to be found in the fact that she evidently was among that faithful remnant in Israel who were waiting for and longing for the coming of the Promised One. She humbly said of herself, “I am the servant of the Lord,” and later, while visiting her relative Elizabeth, she said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God *my Savior*, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant.”

Fill-in answer: Mary’s reaction to the angel’s message (and Joseph’s reaction to her pregnancy as recorded by Matthew) clearly established that Joseph was not the physical father of Jesus.

54. Prophecies about the Messiah said He would be a descendant of David. His legal descent from David through Joseph was important in establishing Jesus as that descendant according to Jewish law and tradition. That also His physical descent through Mary qualified Him for the title “Son of David” establishes His credentials as the Messiah in every way.

55. *Jesus—Yeshua*—means “Yahweh saves.” It was not a unique name; it was shared by every Joshua in Israel. But Jesus personified its message and fulfilled its meaning.

56. The angel was establishing the fact that her son would be the promised Messiah-King. Mary surely immediately related his words to the Lord’s promise to David through His prophet Nathan that is today’s Old Testament Lesson. The angel explained, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” These are words we can understand, but the mystery involved still remains awesome to us.

57. That her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant in her old age validated for Mary that nothing is impossible with God.

58. Mary humbly stopped her questioning and asserted her readiness to be the servant of the Lord, whatever that might mean for her. Then she acted in faith, pursuing the validation the angel had given her

by going to visit Elizabeth. Mary's readiness to believe the impossible on the basis of God's Word to her encourages us to do the same again this Christmas as we worship the Word made flesh.

The Old Testament Lesson: 2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16

59. Having built his own royal palace, David wanted to build an appropriate house for the ark of the covenant, the location of God's special, earthly presence with Israel.

60. David checked with Nathan, and Nathan agreed—without consulting the Lord. Nathan shows that even prophets can be mistaken when they speak in their own wisdom instead of proclaiming the Word of the Lord. The Lord declined David's offer probably because it had been David's mission to lead Israel in battle to defeat their enemies and to assure their security as a nation in the Promised Land. David had been a warrior-king. As the Lord reviewed His interactions with Israel and stated that He had never complained about not having "a house of cedar," He was making it clear that His priority was not to have a temple for cultic worship, but to raise up rulers who would "shepherd" Israel, leading faithfully in the way of the Lord.

61. David offered a place and a house for the Lord; the Lord turned it around by assuring him that He was providing a place for Israel, a home of their own, and that He would establish a house, a dynasty, for David. The emphasis that it is *the Lord Himself* who had selected David and was giving him success, who was providing a place for Israel, and who would establish David's dynasty, stands out clearly. It would not be David's accomplishment, but the Lord's.

62. Solomon, David's son through Bathsheba, would follow David to the throne and would be the one to build a house for the Lord's name. This underscored the gracious forgiveness of the Lord that covered the sin of repentant David.

63. The most dramatic aspect of the Lord's promise is that He would establish David's house and kingdom and throne *forever*. This came to be known as the Davidic covenant.

64. The Davidic covenant pointed to and was fulfilled by Jesus, the Son of David, who now rules forever as the Lamb upon the throne in heaven.

65. This Old Testament lesson is the setting from which was drawn the promise of the angel to Mary that her son would be given the eternal throne of David.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 16:25–27

66. Rome was truly the center of things in the empire, as evidenced also by the number of people known by Paul who had found their way there for one reason or another. In view of the official persecution that lay ahead of them, which would lead also to the martyrdom of Paul, the Roman Christians would have to be strong.

Paul's threefold use of *aiōn* really made his assurance of God's eternal will and purpose for them stand out for those who were at home in the Greek language. Help your group recognize that our English word *eon* comes directly from this Greek word.

67. The mystery hidden for long ages past is God's eternal will for the salvation of sinners through His Son, Jesus Christ (see Ephesians 1:3–14). The mystery was revealed in the coming into our human history and human family of the eternal Word, to win righteousness for us through His obedient human life, and to win forgiveness for us through His willing atoning sacrifice for our sins. The apostles used the prophetic writings to show their hearers that Jesus is indeed the promised fulfiller of the covenant promise. Luke recorded that the risen Jesus "opened the minds" of His apostles so they would understand this mystery of God's saving love as it was prophesied in the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament (see Luke 24:44–49). Paul stated that also he had received his understanding of the mystery of the Gospel not from other men, but directly from Jesus (see Galatians 1:11–12). It was this insight into the prophecies of

the Old Testament Scriptures that the apostle shared as he witnessed to Jesus in synagogue and marketplace, pointing to the fulfillment of God's covenant promise in the life and the death of Jesus (see Acts 17:10–12; 1 Corinthians 2:1–5). God's purpose in the mystery that is in Christ is that *all* nations, not just His chosen people Israel, might know Him as their Savior through faith in Jesus.

68. We can adopt Paul's doxology as our own as we celebrate the mystery that is Christmas, kneeling at the manger-bed of the Creator who humbly came to be the Savior.

Lesson 5

Christmas Dawn

*Most merciful God, You gave Your eternal Word to become incarnate
of the pure Virgin. Grant Your people grace to put away fleshly
lusts, that they may be ready for Your visitation; through Jesus Christ,
our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one
God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Luke 2:1–20

69. A manger is simply a food trough for animals. We who live at a distance from such a situation may have a tendency to romanticize it into a baby crib, but Mary and Joseph were just utilizing the furnishings that were at hand. In the circumstances of the birth of God's Son as a human being, we see the extent of His love for us. He was willing not only to identify with us by becoming one of us, but came in humility and poverty, displaying that He is ready to reach out to the lowliest of human beings with the riches of His grace.

70. Why God chose these men to be the first to hear the Good News of Jesus' birth is as mysterious as why He chose *us* in Christ to be His sons and daughters. The angel's coming to lowly shepherds, an outcast class in society, certifies that the Good News is for the meek and lowly, and reaches down even to the lowest of the low. This assures us that no one is excluded. We are most certainly included; our unworthiness does not disqualify us. Picture yourself in that situation and you know that you also would have reacted with fear. The circumstance itself was awesome: God's holy angels suddenly appearing to announce the Good News and to underscore it with their song of praise. The message was even more awesome: Christ the Lord, the long-awaited Messiah, had been born! God's redemption of His people was in process! The angel reassured the shepherds with his "Fear not" and by personalizing the Good News: "I bring *you* good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto *you* is born . . . a Savior!"

71. *Savior*: This was a familiar and meaningful word also to the Old Testament faithful, promising them God's gracious deliverance from all their difficulties and assuring them of the forgiveness of their sins (see Isaiah 45:15–21). *Christ*: This word from the Greek is the same as the Hebrew word *Messiah*. It means "the anointed one." Individuals who were selected for special tasks were anointed with perfumed olive oil, just as young David was anointed by Samuel to be Saul's successor as king. Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit at the time of His Baptism by John (see Acts 10:38). *Lord*: The Greek word *kurios* was used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, when speaking about Yahweh, the covenant Lord. The angel's announcement, then, pointed to Jesus as Yahweh Himself, coming to fulfill His covenant promise of a Savior.

72. The shepherds, responding to their awesome experience, went immediately to find the child in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. Then they quite naturally were led to praise God openly and to share

with other people what they had seen and heard. Mary’s reaction was different. She guarded the whole experience as a treasure in her memory, so she could recall all its circumstances easily and meditate on their significance for her and for all people. Remembering the events of the night of Jesus’ birth must have warmed her heart and sustained her faith many times as her child grew toward youth and manhood, to a ministry that set Him apart from her and led Him finally to the suffering on the cross. In the examples of Mary and of the shepherds, we are encouraged in two directions: to deepen our wonder at, and our understanding of, the grace of God by meditating on His Word; and to be active in praising our Savior and sharing His Good News with others.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 62:10–12

73. In this section, the Lord is talking to “the daughter of Zion,” His chosen people, who are assured of rescue and salvation by His proclamation: “Your salvation comes!”

74. “Reward” has to do with the gift of grace that the Lord bestows on His faithful—their rescue from their enemies. “Recompense” assures them that though they may have to suffer for a while in their exile, the Lord will more than make up for that in His coming.

75. The messianic people will be called “The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD” instead of “Forsaken” (v. 4). Jerusalem will be called “Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken” instead of “Desolate” (v. 4).

76. This lesson ties in with the theme of the Holy Gospel with the proclamation from the Lord: “Behold, your salvation comes; behold, His reward is with him, and His recompense before him.”

The Epistle for the Day: Titus 3:4–7

77. This is one of many similar statements in the New Testament that make it clear that we are not saved because of our goodness but only because of the mercy of God. It is important and helpful that we hear this over and over again because the natural religious tendency is toward Law orientation, which logically thinks that it is the good people who will be saved. One man has said, “Even most people who want a free eternal life insurance policy want it to be at least 10 percent deductible.” But only when we fully appreciate the fact that salvation is truly a free gift of God’s grace can we be certain of our salvation. If we think we have to contribute even a small part to our gaining salvation, we will never be sure we have done enough to make our contribution—and all the while, what we do to gain it will be done out of self-serving motivation.

78. “Washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” is a reference to Holy Baptism; the word *washing* makes that clear. In this gracious washing, we are identified with the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ and are given, as Luther put it, “forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.” This and other statements of Scripture help us see that Holy Baptism is indeed a means of grace. The Holy Spirit accompanies the Word of Christ to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to bring us new spiritual life (see Romans 6:3–4). If Holy Baptism is *our* action, only a pledge of allegiance and obedience on our part to Christ, then our continually falling short in this allegiance and obedience becomes a problem for us. But when we see Holy Baptism as *God’s* action, we see that it is His assurance of forgiveness and acceptance. Our sins are washed away. Assurance of forgiveness and acceptance goes with us into every day of our lives as Christ’s disciples.

79. If we are hoping for eternal life on the basis of our goodness or because of what we do for God, we will be eternally disappointed—and doomed (see Isaiah 64:6). Our performance fluctuates from day to day, and we always fall short of God’s glory. But the word *justified* in its biblical sense is a forensic term that means “to be declared right or just.” God declares us to be just and right in His sight by grace through the redemptive life and death and resurrection of Jesus. If this declaration is “by grace,” then it is entirely

God's doing. Then we have a sure and certain hope based on what Jesus has already accomplished for us. It is as sure and certain as Jesus' own resurrection from the dead and His ascension to God's right hand. In writing about this in Ephesians, St. Paul gave strong support to the certainty of our hope by writing in the past tense about what this hope will mean for us in the future. The Old Testament prophets did the same thing, notably in Isaiah 53. When God has determined to do something in His grace, it is as good as done (see Ephesians 2:4–7).

Lesson 6

Christmas Day

Almighty God, grant that the birth of Your only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free from the bondage of sin; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 1:1–18

Fill-in answers: John went beyond Greek philosophy by writing, “In the beginning was the Logos [eternal existence], and the Logos was with God [fellowship in the Godhead], and the Logos was God [divine identity].”

80. Similarities with Genesis 1: “In the beginning”; “God said [Word]”; “light”; “darkness.”

81. John tells us that the creating Word of God is a distinct person (see Colossians 1:15–17).

82. “In Him was *life*, and the life was the light of men” takes us beyond the work of creation into Jesus’ redemptive, regenerative work. In Jesus, we see that God’s great glory is in His loving forgiveness of those who come to Him in Christ. This makes the Logos, Jesus Christ, the either/or figure of human history (see John 3:18, 36).

83. The light of God’s love in Christ is not understood rationally, but is believed spiritually (see 1 Corinthians 1:18–25). Those in darkness may resist, reject, and work against the light, but they will not overcome it (see Luke 24:45–47).

There appears to have been a “John the Baptist movement,” and perhaps John aimed at intensifying the focus on Jesus. He makes it very clear that John the Baptist was not the Light; he came only as a witness to the Light.

84. Though the Word is the Creator of all things, when He became flesh to live among us, He did not come as the glorious Creator but as the humble Redeemer. It takes God-given spiritual insight to see Him as more than a man. Jesus’ humility and His call for humble repentance made Him an offense to those of His people who were proud in their religiosity. Others rejected Him because He didn’t meet the popular, politically-colored expectations of the Messiah.

85. John put it very simply: “to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name.” Jesus is received by believing in Him as Savior and following Him as Lord.

86. Receiving Jesus involves personal faith in Him as Savior and commitment to Him as Lord. This neither happens of our own volition nor by any purely human process. As John put it: “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (see Ephesians 2:8–10).

John’s “tabernacled among us” was surely prompted by the *Shekinah*, the fiery cloud that filled the tabernacle and was the visible presence of the Lord in Israel’s midst. Ultimately, the fulfillment of what the tabernacle and its sacrifices symbolized is found in Jesus Christ, who is God “tabernacled” in human flesh.

87. The two aspects of God’s glory seen in Jesus are grace and truth.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 52:7–10

88. The waste places of Jerusalem were to break forth into singing because “the LORD has comforted His people; He has redeemed Jerusalem.” The people were comforted by the promise that the exile would end, and Jerusalem was redeemed when the remnant returned and its walls were rebuilt. Breaking forth into joyful singing is a most natural expression of one’s exultation.

89. On Christmas Day, Christians around the world, of every nation and tongue and ethnic grouping, rejoice to celebrate the salvation of our God in the birth of God’s Son, our Savior, as the Babe of Bethlehem. Isaiah’s prophecy has found its fulfillment in the universal Christian Church that is the product of the universal Savior.

90. This lesson’s “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” ties in with the Holy Gospel’s “we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

The Epistle for the Day: Hebrews 1:1–12

91. In this passage, the writer of the Hebrews declares that the Son of God:

1. “[was] appointed the heir of all things”;
2. “created the world”;
3. “is the radiance of the glory of God”;
4. “[is] the exact imprint of His nature”;
5. “upholds the universe by the Word of His power”;
6. “[made] purification for sins”;
7. “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

Fill-in answers: In his quotations from the Old Testament, the writer argued the superiority of the Son over angels by showing that no angel had ever been called “my Son” by God. Angels were instructed to worship Him. God makes His angelic messengers winds and a flame of fire, but it is said of the Son: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness beyond Your companions.”

“You, Lord, laid the foundations of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of Your hands” identifies Him again as the Creator. “They will perish, but You remain . . . the same, and Your years will have no end” ascribes to Him eternity. “Like a robe You will roll them up” says that He will be the One who will bring the present age to its conclusion.

The writer of Hebrews was reflecting the truth of Jesus Christ. Mary, who was to be His mother, was told by Gabriel, “the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Though He generally called Himself “the Son of Man” rather than “the Son of God,” Jesus was not bashful about referring to His deity in other ways. John records for us His interaction with the religious leaders in response to His Good Shepherd picture, in which He ended up by saying, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). On another occasion, He told the Jews who boasted about their descent from Abraham, “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58). On both occasions, the Jewish leaders took up stones to stone Him.

92. In celebrating the birth of Christ, we are celebrating the event that brought to an end the repeated “long ago” prophecies that pointed ahead to His coming. That event is the foundation of the “in these last days” era in which we have the conclusive evidence of God’s love and faithfulness in Jesus Christ.

Lesson 7

Circumcision and Name of Jesus

Lord God, You made Your beloved Son, our Savior, subject to the Law and caused Him to shed His blood on our behalf. Grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit that our hearts may be made pure from all sins; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Luke 2:21

93. Jesus was born into a Jewish family and lived under the old covenant. The ceremonial law, by which the grace of God was mediated to His people under that covenant, was vital to His life and that of His parents. Circumcision marked Him as a participant in the covenant that God made with Abraham. The Galatians passage indicates that He was born under Law, also the moral law, to redeem us sinners, for whom the Law's demands are impossible and its threat a curse. Through His perfect, willing obedience, Jesus won the gift of righteousness for us (see Romans 5:18–19).

94. All of the names by which God is known are significant as they express some aspect of His personality. *Yahweh* declares Him to be the living God, the One with life totally in Himself, not dependent on any other for existence. But for us to live with God, we need to know Him also by the name that opens up that life for us: *Jesus*—"Savior." If we talk only about "God," we are missing that which is His supreme glory and message: He is "Jesus," the One who saves.

The Old Testament Lesson: Numbers 6:22–27

The Jewish practice of saying "Adonai" instead of "Yahweh" extended to their reading of Holy Scripture, and led to an interesting mispronunciation of *Yahweh* in the English language. Hebrew had no vowels; the vowel sounds were simply supplied as they were read by those familiar with the language. Jewish and Christian scholars, as they got into detailed study of the Hebrew texts, found it helpful to devise a system of "vowel points" that were added to the Hebrew letters to indicate the vowel sounds. When the Masoretic text was compiled in the 10th century, these were incorporated into the text. This became the standard Hebrew text for translators. When the name *Yahweh* appeared in the text, however, the vowel points for *Adonai* had been placed on it. This led to our English pronunciation of the name of the covenant God as "Yehowah," not "Yahweh." *Jehovah* is still in much more common usage in some churches than *Yahweh*.

95. The New Testament equivalent is God's placing His name on individuals in the washing of Holy Baptism, identifying each one as His child and heir of salvation.

The three small explanatory paragraphs provide some insight into the meaning of words and phrases in the Aaronic Benediction. Invite comments after each of them as you read them for your group.

96. People may feel differently about this, but the Church's continued usage of the Aaronic Benediction grew naturally out of the fact that the first Christians were Jews and their worship was patterned after that of the synagogue. The Christian faith has its roots in the covenant of promise, so it is significant that we continue to use the benediction through which God gave Himself in blessing to His people in the millennia before Christ. When something is thousands of years old in its usage, you don't easily set it aside. The attitude of our minds in receiving this blessing has to be one of humble awe and gratitude. Whether we are standing or sitting, our bowed heads indicate our reverence for God and our readiness to receive Him again into our lives as His name is placed on us in blessing.

97. The New Testament is clearly trinitarian as it proclaims God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. We use trinitarian blessings—or a simple blessing just in the name of Jesus—with great benefit in the contemporary Church. They tie us to all Christians of every century since Christ. But our continued use of the Aaronic Benediction ties us also to the spiritual ancestors of the Church, those who first received the covenant of grace and blessing.

98. The Aaronic Benediction was part of the religious ritual by which the Old Testament people exercised their covenant faith and kept in contact with their covenant Lord, just as circumcision was. It used *Yahweh*, the distinctive name of the covenant Lord, just as *Jesus* has become the distinctive name of the Lord who fulfilled the covenant.

The Epistle for the Day: Galatians 3:23–29

Paul's illustration of the Old Testament's ceremonial law as a pedagogue is crucial to understanding his argument. He was not disparaging the Old Testament laws, but was saying that while they served real purposes for God's people before Christ, Christ's coming fulfilled and completed their purpose. He was insisting that spiritual maturity is to be found in Christ, not in a system designed to give guidance during immaturity. He wanted the Galatians, who were being told by Judaizers to become complete Christians by accepting circumcision and obeying ceremonial laws, to recognize that what the Judaizers were encouraging was a drastic step *backward* and could mean they were denying Christ and rejecting His grace (see Galatians 5:2–4). We, too, need to possess and enjoy the full assurance that life under grace gives, and accept the personal responsibilities of discipleship that it entails, and not resort to a system of rules and regulations to prop up an immature faith.

99. Faith in Christ Jesus gives us status as sons (and daughters) of God. Paul's use of *sons* was not just a result of that society being male-oriented. At that time it was sons who received the inheritance from their fathers, so when the New Testament speaks of our being "sons of God," it is emphasizing that God's grace has given us full standing with Christ as heirs of the heavenly Father. We today would write "sons and daughters" because in our society, there are no such legal distinctions. Daughters inherit from their fathers just as sons do. All of us really are included in Paul's statement of assurance.

100. Our being baptized into Christ (into all of His redemptive work accomplished for us) means that we have been "clothed with Christ." He Himself is the assurance of our being children of God—not circumcision and obeying dietary rules, not any rules of "Jesus-plus religion" added by a church. He became sin for us; we become the righteousness of God in Him. That's the wonder of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

101. Paul points out that as we approach God in Christ, the distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, are no longer pertinent. The key distinction in Paul's argument in Galatians, freedom from law, is that between Jew and Greek. We might add black and white; urban and

rural; citizen and alien; young and old; lifelong member and newcomer; Republican and Democrat. All such distinctions are not significant or pertinent in our life in Christ. We are one in Christ.

102. Gentiles become Abraham's seed as we share Abraham's faith. Abraham believed the promise of the covenant in Christ; we believe the fulfillment of the covenant in Christ. Paul was making the point that it is neither obedience to nor disregard for ceremonial laws that makes us Christians; it is faith in Christ as our Savior (see Galatians 5:6). In Romans, Paul used the picture of Gentiles as branches of a wild olive tree now grafted into God's domesticated olive tree (see Romans 11:17–24). Paul's picture is helpful. It says that both the natural branches and the grafted branches find their nourishment in the soil of God's grace.

Lesson 8

First Sunday after Christmas

O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Luke 2:22–40

The first paragraphs explain the ritual requirements that took Joseph and Mary to the temple. Read the Old Testament references with your group so they understand that they were part of God's ceremonial law for Israel. It's not hard to understand the reason for and the impact intended in the redemption of the firstborn, but that natural functions such as childbirth and menstruation would make women ceremonially unclean is harder to figure out. One suggestion is that the loss of blood, the seat of life, was associated with dying, and the ritual of purification restored the emphasis on living. Another suggestion seems more significant as it relates to the covenant promise, which involved the woman's conceiving and bearing offspring. The menstrual period showed that conception had not occurred; and the recovery time after childbirth was not appropriate for conception.

103. It is especially striking that Joseph and Mary acknowledged that Jesus belonged to God because that surely applied to Jesus more fully than to any other child. He was and is the very Son of God in human flesh.

Fill-in answers: Simeon “was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.”

104. That Simeon waited for “the consolation of Israel” identifies him as one of the faithful remnant, who were looking toward the fulfillment of God's promise of the Messiah. The Holy Spirit had assured Simeon that the fulfillment would take place during his lifetime. It was the Holy Spirit who led Simeon to the temple at that specific time and evidently enabled him to recognize Jesus as the Lord's Christ.

105. Mary and Joseph marveled because Simeon spoke of the Lord's salvation as being “prepared in the presence of *all* peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles” as well as “for glory to [the Lord's] people Israel.” This was a new concept for them, but it was confirmed in their experience when the Magi, Gentiles, visited them and worshiped the child Jesus.

106. Jesus is God's own either/or figure in human history. Relationship with Him is the determining factor in life. You cannot avoid deciding about Him once you have heard the Gospel. Jesus always causes either a falling or a rising (see John 3:16–18). The religious leaders stubbornly rejected Jesus as a threat to their legalistic status quo, which gave them power and position and wealth. The people turned from Him when He didn't live up to their political expectations of the Messiah. Only His “sheep” listened to His voice.

107. Anna was recognized as one who could explain and apply God's Word and will for people who came to the temple. She kept on talking about the child as the Promised One who would bring about the redemption of Jerusalem. The Greek *lutrōsis* is the price for ransoming a slave or prisoner. Anna evidently was speaking prophetically about the price Jesus would pay to accomplish the redemption of God's people.

108. Jesus grew up in a pious Jewish home and participated with His family in the life of the synagogue in Nazareth. He grew in true wisdom as He was surrounded by the pious examples of His parents and as He was taught the Word and moved toward becoming a "son of duty" (*Bar Mitzvah*) Himself. When we supply a similar atmosphere, instruction, and example for our children, we can, by God's grace, apply Luke's words also to them.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 61:10–62:3

109. The "clothes" the Lord has given His prophet are "garments of salvation" and a "robe of righteousness." This analogy was continued in the New Testament (Galatians 3:26–27; Romans 13:12–14).

110. The produce of the "garden" is "righteousness and praise." It will "sprout up before all the nations," thus vindicating the Lord's choice and blessing of His people. This is significant to us because we have come from "the nations" to know the Lord and to wear garments of salvation, the robe of righteousness.

111. The qualities displayed before the nations are righteousness, salvation, and glory.

112. The ancients believed that a person's name contained the person's character or indicated their destiny or status. A new name indicated a new character or destiny or status. Giving a name also implied authority over or ownership of the one named. Note that Jeremiah says Zion's new name will be "The LORD [*Yahweh*] is our righteousness." As *Christians*, we bear the name of the one who was given the name that is above every name, and we happily acknowledge His authority and ownership as our Lord.

113. That the crown is in the Lord's hand and not on His head may signify the fact that the process is still going on. It will not be completed until He comes in glory and "wears His crown" for all to see. Another view: while God glories in His saved ones, we are not the glory that is His intrinsically as God. He is glorious with us or without us.

114. Simeon said Jesus would be a light for the nations and for glory to His people Israel. This relates readily to the righteousness, salvation, and glory to be displayed to the nations by God's people.

The Epistle for the Day: Galatians 4:4–7

Call attention to the way the Nicene Creed underscores the eternal deity of Jesus Christ: "Begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father" (*Lutheran Service Book*, p. 158).

115. Pagan religions had gods "playing at" being humans or animals. Paul's words describe God's commitment to rescue us by *becoming* one of us. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14; see Hebrews 2:14–15). "Born of woman" establishes the true human nature that was taken on by the Son of God. As true man, Jesus was "under law," required to obey the moral law (Ten Commandments) and, as a Jew, to carry out the requirements of the ceremonial law. Ask your group: "How did Jesus show He was serious about His responsibilities as a man living 'under law'?" He actively loved His Father (Luke 22:39–44) and His fellow men (Mark 1:40–41); He willingly complied with the ceremonial law (Luke 4:16; 22:14–15).

116. Jesus freed us from the curse of the Law by taking our sin and guilt on Himself and atoning for them by accepting their consequences in our stead (Matthew 27:46). He also freed us from the deadening

compulsion of the Law as a way to life with God by His invitation to look to Him in faith to find assurance of salvation and rebirth to new life in the power of the Spirit (see John 3:15; Romans 3:19–28).

117. As Representative Man, God’s Son lived a human life of full obedience to His Father’s will—for us. Through faith, we receive God’s gift of righteousness. We are fully free from the requirements of the ceremonial law, the purposes of which were fulfilled when Christ came (see Colossians 2:16–17). We are also free from a wrong opinion about the Law—that we are saved by obeying the Commandments. But we are not free from a right opinion about the Law—that God’s Commandments instruct us in a way of life that will be good for us and good for others, and will glorify God. We are freed in Christ to become “slaves to righteousness,” to do all we can to live the Christian life that is beyond reproach (see Romans 6:16–18).

118. Our full rights as God’s adopted sons and daughters are embodied in our enjoying true self-worth and confidence as we know we are God’s beloved children at all times, even when we fall and fail. Being God’s sons and daughters, of course, encourages us to do our best to live accordingly, for God’s Spirit lives in us. Finally, we have a right to the inheritance of eternal life in the kingdom of our Lord.

119. *Abba* is the Aramaic word by which Jesus addressed His Father in heaven. It has found its way into the native languages of all Christians. *Abba ho Pater* was possibly a formula in common use in the Church of Paul’s day, bringing the Aramaic *Abba* and the Greek *Pater* together. When we say “Abba! Father!” we come to Him with all the confidence of dear children coming to their dear father.

120. The end result of our being elevated to full sonship and daughterhood is that we are heirs of eternal life in Christ.

Lesson 9

Second Sunday after Christmas

Almighty God, You have poured into our hearts the true Light of Your incarnate Word. Grant that this Light may shine forth in our lives; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Luke 2:40–52

The first paragraph describes the family setting of Jesus at the point of a decisive change in His young life. Make it a point to emphasize that God carefully chose Mary and Joseph to provide the necessary parental influence for His Son. This, no doubt, was on Luke's mind in telling this incident as much as the unique qualities that Jesus was showing already as an adolescent.

121. At that time, extended families were the rule among the Jews. When traveling, they would do so in caravans of numerous family members and friends. Women and children traveled in front, while men and boys traveled in the rear. The children belonged to everybody, and older boys enjoyed many adventures as they kept their own company along the way. Mary and Joseph had no reason for concern until evening, when they learned that Jesus had not been with the boys His age.

122. Heinrich Hoffman's well-known painting of this scene, "Christ in the Temple," depicts Jesus standing in the midst of listening elders, as though authoritatively expounding God's truth to them. Rabbinical techniques, however, employed questions and invited discussion and argument. Jesus evidently was drawn into this kind of participation, and "all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers." No doubt Jesus had attended the synagogue school in Nazareth and had developed a natural desire to learn more.

123. If a 12-year-old boy were missing today, probably the last place we might expect to find him would be in church. But Mary and Joseph surely had noticed the reverence and the interest displayed by their unusual son as they visited the temple again and again during the week of the Passover celebration. And when, after searching anxiously for Him, they found Him intently involved with the circle of rabbis in the temple, their remembrance of the circumstances of His coming into their lives must have surfaced very strongly. In their everyday living as a family, most of the time, things must have been rather normal, but situations such as this must have awakened again their sense of the deep responsibility that the Lord had placed on them. That, more than anger and frustration, must have been their feeling as Mary rebuked Jesus.

124. While they knew in their heart of hearts that Jesus was truly the Son of the Father in heaven, they probably did not make this a subject of conversation in the family. And Jesus surely did not go around the house reminding them about it by doing little miracles. But here, all of a sudden, He did speak in such terms and display His true Sonship, and they had difficulty understanding what was taking place

in the life of their son as He grew toward manhood. Luke says Mary “treasured up all these things in her heart.” Out of that treasure, she shared with Luke, and through Luke, with us.

125. We today would say that Jesus grew intellectually, physically, spiritually, and socially. In His life as a child, a teenager, a young adult, and an adult in Nazareth, Jesus basically lived the life of a Jew of His day. His personal growth and His experiences in the human family—in Nazareth, in Galilee, and occasionally in Jerusalem—all were equipping Him to take up His ministry as Rabbi and Messiah when He was about 30 years of age.

The Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 3:4–15

126. The Lord was willing to appear to Solomon at Gibeon because he had gone there in sincerity to worship the Lord. The Lord was pleased with Solomon’s humility and his desire to be a wise and perceptive king for the benefit of God’s people. Solomon said to the Lord, “I am but a little child.” Scholars suggest he may have been only 12 or 13 at the time, no more than 20.

127. In promising the gift of wisdom, God said, “I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.” The passage from 1 Kings shows that Solomon’s reputation for wisdom made him famous throughout the region. Though wise, Solomon later proved to be foolish. He took the path of an Oriental potentate, burdened the Israelites with taxes and conscription of laborers for his many building projects, cemented alliances with other nations by taking their daughters as wives into his harem, and allowed them to bring their pagan religions into Jerusalem with them—all of which ultimately led to the rebellion of the ten northern tribes and the time of the divided kingdom.

128. The temple had not yet been built in Jerusalem, the royal city, and yet that is where David had placed the recovered ark of the covenant. The ark continued to be seen as the seat of Yahweh’s presence among His people, and David had had thoughts of building the temple for its housing. That, however, was to be the privilege of David’s heir, Solomon. Solomon’s return to Jerusalem from Gibeon to worship before the ark of the covenant shows that he acknowledged the central importance of the ark and anticipated the building of the house for the Lord.

129. In this lesson, Solomon chose a gift that would be most valuable to him in his service as the Lord’s anointed king—just as Jesus, already as a young boy, showed that the Word of the Lord is the greatest treasure.

The Epistle of the Day: Ephesians 1:3–14

The paragraph with the fill-in blanks just puts stress on key words and concepts which heighten our wonder at the mystery of God’s grace in Christ. See to it that all have the lesson in the words of the ESV. Make copies of it for those who don’t have it already on the back of this Sunday’s service folder. Use the Leader Guide to read the text between blanks and let the group fill in the blanks.

Fill-in answers: The mystery of predestination: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, so that we who were the first to

hope in Christ might be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory.”

Ask, “Did you feel the movement in the Trinitarian Doxology from the eternal plan of God the Father to its being carried out by God the Son, and His saving work being implemented by God the Holy Spirit?”

130. In His eternal counsel and will, God’s determination to save lost sinners was “in Christ,” to be carried out in the time frame of creation when the eternal Word would become flesh and express God’s surprising love in a redemptive life and death and resurrection as a man. This Jesus is *the way, the truth, the life*. There is neither predestination nor redemption nor salvation apart from Him. Children do not adopt parents; parents adopt children. “Adoption through Jesus Christ” emphasizes that this is God’s gracious doing and that it has been done through Jesus Christ. “According to the purpose of His will” says that God willed it to be done out of His nature as God, His love for His creation, which made Him determined to restore a lost mankind to Himself through His Son. “To the praise of His glory” emphasizes that God’s glory is in His grace and love toward us in Christ, and the end result is that we praise Him for it, here and now and eternally (see 2 Corinthians 4:6).

131. God’s gracious predestining and choosing in Christ was possible because He was committed in love already in eternity that He Himself would pay the price required to free us from sin and hell for life with Him (see 1 Peter 1:18–21).

132. God’s eternal plan will be fully put into effect “in the fullness of time,” when this era ends and the new begins and all things are brought together under the headship of Christ.

133. Why *we* were chosen and predestined for adoption through Jesus Christ is a mystery explainable only by God’s grace. It’s not because we were not as sinful as others, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The how of God’s effectuating this in *us* is more easily understood and explained. We first were brought into contact with this Gospel in Holy Baptism. God marked us with His Holy Spirit, who came to live in us and enable our Christian faith and life. His mysterious and gracious purpose is continued and deepened in us as we build Christian lives around Word and Sacrament.

134. Your group may have various expressions of this. Look for an emphasis of assurance and of humility; our predestination and redemption and salvation do not depend on us but are the gifts of God’s grace in Christ.

Lesson 10

Epiphany of Our Lord

O God, by the leading of a star You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles. Lead us, who know You by faith, to enjoy in heaven the fullness of Your divine presence; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 2:1–12

135. That the religious leaders of the Jews were able immediately to put their finger on Micah 5:2 to determine the place where the promised King of the Jews was to be born shows us that the passage was recognized as messianic, just as other significant passages of the Old Testament were. The surprising thing is that they did not follow up on the Good News from God that the Magi brought to them. It shows that they dealt intellectually with the Scriptures but were not ready to be made wise to salvation by them (see John 5:37–39; 2 Timothy 3:15). Obeisance such as the Magi’s was given to honor also earthly kings, but God’s miraculous interaction with the Magi surely led them beyond just political courtesy to religious concern.

136. Bringing suitable gifts to our Savior requires, first of all, that we give ourselves to Him fully, without reservation, trusting Him as Savior and happily obeying Him as Lord. Then also our gifts of money and service find their true meaning.

137. Epiphany is sometimes called “the Christmas of the Gentiles,” and Orthodox Christians still observe their Christmas on this date. The story of the Magi finding the newborn King of the Jews and worshipping Him celebrates the coming of the first Gentiles to faith in Jesus. It sets the stage for what Matthew wanted to emphasize about Jesus: that He is not only the Messiah of His people, the Jews, but is the Savior of the world. Note that he ended his Gospel with the Great Commission.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 60:1–6

138. The key word in the first two verses of this prophetic poem is *glory*, as in “the *glory* of the LORD.” This alludes to the pillar of cloud, God’s presence manifested within a visible sign.

139. The key word in the rest of the verses is *come*, along with its various synonyms. That the nations would see and come to Jerusalem was itself uplifting and encouraging to the exiles as they longed for a return to Judah. Still today, we Christians are encouraged as we see others—many of them in the far countries of the world—come to the light that is Jesus Christ.

Fill-in answers: Nations and their kings will bring great wealth of the nations with them and will join God’s people in bringing good news, the praises of the Lord.

Note that the poem describes the wealth of the nations being brought to Jerusalem by sea and by the “ships of the desert,” the camel trains by which Midianite traders transported their goods over great distances to carry out their commerce.

140. This lesson prophesied the coming of Gentiles to the Light of God’s glory, which was fulfilled first by the Magi’s coming to worship the Christ child. There is a striking, immediate tie in the fact that those from Sheba come bearing “gold and frankincense.”

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 3:2–12

Fill-in answers: Paul pointed to this Good News as God’s revelation to him, his God-given insight into the mystery of Christ. The mystery was that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

Paul thought of himself as the very least of all the saints, the unworthy recipient of God’s grace that had been given to him. Paul was a combination of confidence, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, and humility, because he was one who formerly had persecuted the Church.

141. When you are full of yourself, there is no room for Jesus and His forgiving love. When you are full of yourself, you think you don’t even need Jesus and His forgiving love (see Luke 18:9–14). When you know you are empty, you are happy to have Jesus fill you with His love and mercy.

142. The mystery of God’s all-inclusive love is to be made known through the Church.

143. We may involve ourselves in making known the mystery by bringing a personal witness to Jesus as the Holy Spirit gives us opportunity and by generously supporting the formal ministry and mission of the Church. We may show the world that the mystery of Christ’s love is all-inclusive by being a Church that is inclusive, not exclusive. While we want to hold uncompromisingly the truth of the Gospel, we need to demonstrate in the fellowship of the Church that this Gospel is for *all* who repent and believe, regardless of human distinctions.

144. The result of this mystery having been made known to us is that in Jesus Christ our Lord, “we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him.”

Lesson 11

Baptism of Our Lord

Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:4–11

145. The evangelists included the details about John the Baptist because John had played an important role in “the fullness of time” events they were telling about in their Gospels. John had been a most prominent figure, fully recognized by the people as a prophet of God. Josephus estimated that 300,000 people came out to him during his brief ministry. By including John’s ministry in the Gospels, the evangelists tied Jesus’ ministry to the Old Testament prophecies, and thus more pointedly identified Him as the Promised One who carried out God’s saving will. This also put John’s ministry into proper perspective for people who may still have been keying in on John instead of Jesus.

146. People qualified for John’s Baptism by confessing their sins. This suggests some public statement of confession, and reminds us that we include public confession of sins and hearing the assurance of forgiveness in a formal way in our regular worship. Not all who came qualified. Evidently some were just interested in getting in on the popular movement. Matthew tells us that when Pharisees and Sadducees appeared, and probably demurred at the requirement of public confession of sins, John’s words changed to a cutting warning (see Matthew 3:7–10).

147. John was true to the purpose of his ministry because he did not let people attach themselves to him, but always pointed to the One coming after him. He said he was not worthy to do even the most menial task for the Coming One. John’s ministry offered a Baptism with water for repentance, but the Coming One would baptize with the Holy Spirit. The baptism with the Spirit happened on the Day of Pentecost and tied the believers to Jesus’ completed work as the Savior. It continued into the life of the Early Church, also among Gentile converts, and is part of the Church’s life still today.

148. The Spirit operated in the hearts of the Jews through John’s preaching and baptizing. John administered “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” which pointed ahead to and prepared for the saving ministry of the Christ. The Baptism commanded by Jesus following His resurrection (Matthew 28:19–20) is an expression of the completed covenant, and is intended for both Jew and Gentile alike. Like Christian Baptism, John’s Baptism was a means of grace, bestowing the forgiveness of sins on account of Christ.

Jesus has been called “Representative Man” because in His life of obedience and in His suffering for sin, He took our place. In Him, we enjoy God’s gift of a vicariously won righteousness and a vicariously won atonement for sin.

149. The Spirit was given to assist Jesus for His ministry. We must remember that while Jesus was truly God’s Son also throughout His earthly life, He did not continually or fully use the divine power that is His. Paul said Jesus “made Himself nothing” to be our servant (see Philippians 2:5–8). His human life was not a pretense. He lived life as a true man. He depended on the power of the Spirit as He faced temptation and as He carried out His ministry. The visible dove was confirming evidence for John regarding Jesus. This experience became part of his witness to Jesus as the Promised One, the Son of God. The voice from heaven was positive reinforcement for Jesus at the outset of His mission, giving Him encouragement for what lay ahead (see vv. 12–13).

150. It is not hard to relate this revelation of God at Jesus’ Baptism to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. God-in-three-persons is seen in the Father speaking from heaven, in the Son being baptized, and in the Spirit descending on Him as a dove. This event, combined with other events in Scripture and with God’s name as stated by Jesus in the Great Commission, makes us see that this is God’s revelation of Himself. He wants us to acknowledge Him as our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sanctifier.

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 1:1–5

151. This passage has many key phrases that are repeated in one form or another from stanza to stanza: “And God said, ‘Let . . . ’”; “And it was so”; “God saw that it was good”; “according to their kinds.” The pattern of having the this passage’s stanzas begin with “And God said” and end with “there was evening and there was morning . . .” is established already in the first stanza. The Hebrews reckoned their days from sunset to sunset, not from sunrise to sunrise.

152. The effective instrument in God’s creative activity was His powerful, creating Word. John 1:1–5 helps us see that God’s powerful Word is more than words. It is God at work to make things happen. God’s Word in action is not just an inanimate force that emanates from God. The Word was with God and was God from the beginning. This is the only-begotten Son who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit as God. When God wanted to express Himself, whether in creation or in redemption, He acted through His Word—His only-begotten Son.

153. Sir James Jeans, an English scientist and a Christian, said that creation could be summed up in six words: “God said, ‘Let there be light.’” He saw this as God supplying the cosmic energy that is the building block of the material world in its atomic structure. This says that if God were to withdraw His “light,” the cosmic energy that comes from His Word, the created world would cease to exist (see Hebrews 1:1–3). Genesis uses the contrast between light and darkness to show the difference between designed existence and formless nonexistence. The New Testament plays on the contrast between light and darkness to show the difference between walking through life without God and walking with God in Christ Jesus. God’s calling the light “day” and the darkness “light” are the equivalent of His declaring everything to be “good” in the other stanzas.

154. At God’s Word, the “light” was supplied for the creation and ultimately for human life on the earth. In the Baptism of Jesus, the triune God is active in terms of providing the “Light” that redeems and sanctifies people to live in His kingdom.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 6:1–11

In Romans 6, Paul moved from the doctrine of justification by faith to its spiritual result: sanctification through the power of the Holy Spirit. The first paragraphs in the Study Guide explain the abusive application of justification by faith that made this shift in emphasis necessary.

155. Paul's answer to his question "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" was "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" Through Baptism, we are identified with Christ's death for us and with the victory displayed by His resurrection. Baptism is a means of grace through which the Holy Spirit effectively works His gift of rebirth in Christ (see John 3:3–6; Titus 3:4–7). It is not just a symbol of what a Christian is taking on himself in obedience to Christ's call.

156. We were buried with Christ by Baptism into death, so we may rise with Him to walk in newness of life.

157. Having been identified by faith with the Son of God who died once for all for our sins, we enjoy a new relationship with Him and His Father. The compelling force of the sinful nature is replaced by the compelling love of our Lord (see 2 Corinthians 5:14–15). We are enabled to love because Christ loved us first. We may live with the fact that we continue to sin by being assured continually that we live under the grace of God in Christ. That happens every time we gather for worship. Nothing can separate us from His love except our willfully rejecting our faith in Him and turning, in willful sin, from Him as Savior and Lord.

158. That we live in a state of grace itself has to compel us to take the new life of discipleship seriously and not let it become a "cheap grace." A young boy reacted to Luther's "the old Adam should daily be drowned and die" by saying, "My old Adam seems to be a good swimmer." The sinful nature does not die easily, and then only through the Gospel. We make progress as we live in Christ, continually plugged into the Word and Sacrament, through which the Holy Spirit works in us to lead us to rejoice in our Lord's continuing forgiveness, and to catch more deeply the Spirit of our Master as His disciples (see Romans 8:9–14; 2 Corinthians 3:17–18; Ephesians 4:11–16).

Lesson 12

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 1:43–51

159. “He found Philip” suggests that the Lord went out of His way to locate Philip and extend His call to him. This is essentially true of all who become Christians. It happens as God sets the stage for His calling by directing the circumstances of their lives, and then takes the initiative in calling them to faith and life in Christ.

The results of studies of evangelistic outreach surely should encourage us not to leave the outreach mission of the Church to the professionals, but to be personal and intentional in our own witnessing to Jesus as the Holy Spirit gives us opportunities. It is through us that our non-Christian friends and relatives and world must hear Christ’s call.

160. Nathanael reacted because he knew that there was no suggestion in Scripture that the Messiah would come from Nazareth. (However, the Scripture does say that the Messiah would be “despised”; see Psalm 22:6; Isaiah 53:3.) There may have been an element of local rivalry too. Some suggest that Nathanael was from neighboring Cana. Philip’s “Come and see” acknowledges the fact that no one can be argued into believing in Jesus. We, too, find that the most effective witness is the invitation to “Come and see for yourself”—an invitation to worship and Bible study. The search always takes us and our friends into the Word, where we are confronted with God’s own dynamic messages about our need and how Jesus fills our need (see Romans 10:14–17; 3:19–24).

161. “An Israelite indeed” indicates that Nathanael was part of the remnant in Israel who waited for the coming of the Messiah, and was a serious student of the Scriptures. God blessed Nathanael with an open, honest nature. You knew where Nathanael stood on things, as indicated by his response to Philip.

162. Nathanael was convinced about Jesus when Jesus showed him that He knew what had been going on in his life. Tradition says Nathanael had spent his time under the fig tree searching Scripture and praying for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus displayed His omniscience to Nathanael and also, by indicating He knew what had been on Nathanael’s mind, may have pointed to Himself as the fulfillment of Nathanael’s prayer. Nathanael and the other disciples saw the many signs and wonders that Jesus did in the course of His healing, helping ministry. If he was from Cana, Nathanael was one of those impressed and strengthened in faith by Jesus’ changing water into wine. The greatest sign and wonder he saw, of course, was the resurrection of Jesus.

163. Jesus’ “angels of God ascending and descending” surely reminded Nathanael of Jacob’s dream at *Bethel*, the “House of God.” Jesus was saying that Nathanael and the others would come to recognize their Lord’s direct line to heaven and the power of God. Wherever Jesus went, there was the house of God.

“Son of God”—“Son of Man.” We are so accustomed to these titles that we don’t appreciate the distinctions. Nathanael’s “Son of God” confessed Jesus to be the Lord Himself. Jesus’ “Son of Man” emphasized His humble identification with humanity, but both in Daniel and in Jesus’ usage of the phrase, there are apocalyptic, eschatological overtones. It is the Son of Man who will come in glory (see Matthew 25:31–33).

164. Jesus avoided the titles *Messiah* (Hebrew) and *Christ* (Greek), both of which mean “the anointed one.” Those titles had been weighted with political baggage in the minds of the Jews. After centuries of domination, they were looking for a kingly Messiah who would restore the kingdom of David in terms of earthly freedom and prosperity.

The Old Testament Lesson: 1 Samuel 3:1–10

165. Hannah’s dedication of her son to the Lord reminds us of Joseph and Mary’s dedication of Jesus in the ritual at the temple and Jesus’ close interaction with the teachers and Bible scholars in the temple (Luke 2:21–24, 41–49). Both Eli, the priest, and Samuel, his attendant, lived in the tabernacle. A lamp was kept burning in the tabernacle throughout the night, but Eli’s eyes were weak, and he often needed Samuel’s help. The text seems to indicate that young Samuel slept in the very room in which the ark of the covenant stood, but this is probably not the case, for the Holy of Holies was curtained off from the rest of the tabernacle. Entrance into the room was forbidden. The phrase does surely indicate the closeness with the Lord that young Samuel experienced as he served in the tabernacle.

166. God is God whether or not we acknowledge Him as God. He doesn’t really need our worship; *we* need to worship Him. But there is an indication here that God is pleased and satisfied when He is worshiped sincerely in faith by His people. St. Paul speaks of the Church being the fullness of Christ as His people complete His saving purpose (see Ephesians 1:22–23). If we neglect to serve and worship God when we know we are privileged to do so as Christians, we not only hurt ourselves and fail our fellow Christians, we do God a disservice and displease Him.

167. “Samuel did not yet know the LORD” evidently means that he had not been confirmed in his relationship with the Lord through personal experience. The Hebrew word for “know” carried the idea of an intimate relationship. Samuel’s calling emphasizes that God is the initiator of the call, and that He calls those who will listen to Him and then speak for Him.

Before the Lord’s third call, “came and stood” is added. This may imply that Samuel saw a vision as he heard the voice of the Lord. God’s messages often came to the ecstatic prophets in the form of visions.

168. We were called by name as individuals in Holy Baptism when God graciously identified us with His saving name, declaring us to be His children. Samuel’s words are a good prayer for us as we open the Bible for personal devotion or at the beginning of worship services. We hear God through His Word, whether written, proclaimed, or signed, as in sign language.

169. What the Lord speaks clearly in His Word is to be spoken clearly by those who are spiritual leaders in the Church, for their own benefit and for the benefit of those whom they serve. God’s Word has messages of judgment against sin that still must be proclaimed to lead manifest sinners to repentance. Ignoring or covering up their sin hurts them and makes the one neglecting his spiritual responsibility accountable to God for his failure to speak the Word of the Lord to the situation (see Ezekiel 33:7–9). The aim, of course, is to produce godly repentance, in response to which the Lord’s word of salvation in Jesus Christ is not to be withheld, but is to be conveyed in all its comforting assurance.

170. The obvious tie is found in Samuel’s call by the Lord and Philip’s and Nathanael’s call by Jesus. Both lead us to consider our own call to faith and life.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 6:12–20

The philosophy of dualism influenced the whole mindset of the Greek world. Because matter was seen as inherently evil and temporary and only the spiritual was seen to be meaningful and lasting, the physical life of people was seen as inconsequential in terms of having any significant effect on life's true reality.

171. Paul said it is more important for Christians to ask “Is it helpful?” and “Will it enslave?” than just to approach life with “Is it lawful?” Since also our bodies belong to the Lord by virtue of His redemption as well as by His creation, and are dwelling places of the Holy Spirit, we are to direct them into thoughts and works and actions that will benefit us and others (see Ephesians 4:29–32). We are not to be ruled by addictions (see Ephesians 5:17–18). In a world in which we have come to recognize the controlling power of physical and psychological addictions, these words give us strong warning, encouragement and guidance.

Fill-in answers: Also our bodies are redeemed by Christ. Paul wrote, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? . . . Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you? You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

172. Paul indicates that sexual intercourse by its very nature unites two people as one, whether they are husband and wife or two strangers. He also says that the sexually immoral sin against their own bodies. His words make us see that there is no such thing as “casual sex” that will not have continuing effects on us. In today's world of AIDS and other serious sexually transmitted diseases, medical people warn that one has sex not only with a partner but “with everyone who has had sex with that partner.” They are speaking of the physical, but Paul makes us see that there are also lasting psychological and spiritual effects of being united with a sex partner.

173. We cannot avoid the pervasive influence of our society's attitudes and actions. The only way for us to flee from sexual immorality is to flee to the Lord, to have His forgiving love cover us, and then consciously to carry Him and His Spirit with us into every situation and circumstance of life (see 1 Corinthians 6:9–11). The old saying is still true: “If you don't want to trade with the devil, don't hang around his store.” We can consciously remove ourselves from and avoid situations that we know will encourage impure thoughts and actions.

Lesson 13

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

*Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities
and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us;
through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with
You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:14–20

174. The three elements in Mark’s summary of Jesus’ proclamation are: “The time is fulfilled”; “The kingdom of God is at hand”; and “Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

175. “The time is fulfilled.” For the people of Jesus’ day, it was historically and pointedly true! The “fullness of time” in which God acted to rescue and redeem was their time in history. But there is an urgency also for us in Jesus’ words. The Bible always tells people who come into contact with the Word of God: “*Now* is the opportune time for you to deal with this!” Even one of our secular proverbs reminds us that opportunity may knock but once (see 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2; Hebrews 3:12–15). We dare not put off “being serious about Jesus and His call” to a later date. No one can premeditate a sincere repentance some time in the future.

176. For the people to whom Jesus spoke, His “The kingdom of God is at hand” was especially pertinent because the King Himself stood before them. Also for us, however, His words carry wonderful assurance that God’s gracious rule in Christ is warm and personal, within the reach of all who will simply receive Him in faith.

177. “Repent and believe in the Gospel” was Jesus’ pointed call to those to whom He preached, urging and enabling a saving action. His words still sound out to us and are weighty with the power of the Spirit to make things happen—to make what He calls for happen in our lives. “Keep on” reminds us that our faith-commitment is a response that needs to be nourished continually as the Spirit works in us through Word and Sacrament. Ask your group: “Can a person repent and not believe? Can a person believe and not repent?” The answer is yes if “repent” is seen only as sorrow over the consequences of sin and if “believe” is only an intellectual or sentimental agreement with theological propositions. The answer is no when the words are connected and combined and understood biblically, for our whole being and all of our lives are involved in the repentance and faith to which Christ calls us.

178. Repentance and faith are enabled by the assurance of the Good News because knowing that the door of God’s heart is always open to those who come to Him in Jesus makes us confident to approach.

179. Jesus’ call did not come to them out of the blue. All had had contact with Jesus before through their association with John the Baptist (see John 1:35–42).

180. The three elements of Jesus’ call are “Follow me”; “I will make you become”; and “fishers of men.”

181. That Jesus called ordinary, uneducated men emphasized that the mission of the Kingdom will succeed through *His* power, not through our own human ability and skill. Like them, we can trust Him to be our model for the Christian life, our mentor in grounding us firmly in God’s truth, and our manager in guiding and enabling the tasks we are assigned through the Holy Spirit as He opens up opportunities for our service.

The Old Testament Lesson: Jonah 3:1–5, 10

The first paragraphs put Jonah into his historical setting. Although it is a historical account, the book is also a carefully constructed literary work.

182. Nineveh is called “an exceedingly great city.” Jonah 4:11 says there were 120,000 there who had not yet reached the age of discretion.

183. Jonah brought a warning of coming destruction to the Ninevites in the full power of God’s Spirit, and God’s Word is power to make things happen (see Jeremiah 23:29; Hebrews 4:12–13). For added impact, Jonah may also have dramatically testified to what he had experienced at the Lord’s hand prior to coming to Nineveh.

184. Fasting and wearing sackcloth instead of one’s normal clothing (and sitting in and covering oneself with dust and ashes) was a customary sign of humbling oneself in repentance (see 1 Kings 21:17–29).

185. An anthropomorphism speaks about God as if He were a man, with hands, a face, able to change His mind, and so on. Anthropomorphisms are intended to help us understand and relate to some of God’s qualities.

186. When God changes His mind and doesn’t carry out His judgment and condemnation of sin, it is always to implement His most basic will and desire: to forgive and restore to relationship with Him. The threat of the Law and the warnings of coming judgment are always intended to lead us to repent and to receive His mercy in Christ, and then we are assured that God never changes His mind about us as His children in Christ (see John 6:37). That’s good to know! It’s the only way we sinners can live with God!

187. The obvious tie to the Gospel is in John’s call to go to pagan Nineveh and Jesus’ call of the apostles to be fishers of *anthrōpoi*, a general, unrestrictive term for “men.” God wants all to be saved and to come to know the truth of His love.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 7:29–35

Take the time to explore the Scripture references in the first paragraph. Some accuse Paul of being “anti-marriage,” even “anti-women.” Properly understanding the context and circumstances in which the Corinthians found themselves helps to eliminate these misperceptions.

188. “The appointed time [*kairos*, opportune time] has grown very short” and “the present form of this world is passing away” were Paul’s assurances that the circumstances in which the Christians of Corinth found themselves were not going to be permanent, so they could work at developing attitudes that would help them get safely through their “present distress.” First-century Christians anticipated Christ’s return in glory already in their lifetime, and every generation of Christians to follow has looked at the “signs of the times” and concluded that “Christ is coming soon” (see Romans 8:18–23).

189. “From now on” encourages us to bring an overriding eternal perspective into our present experiences (see Colossians 3:1–4).

190. We American Christians do not face official persecution, as others in Muslim-dominated countries do, but that does not mean we do not have our own “present distress.”

191. Paul could say “I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you” because he was not laying down a law that required that they not marry, or that married Christians live as if they were

not. He was encouraging a world view in which Christians might be led to follow his advice and restrict themselves in terms of earthly relationships “to promote good order and to secure . . . undivided devotion to the Lord.”

Lesson 14

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

*Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers
that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection
to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations;
through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns
with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:21–28

192. The development of the synagogue made regular gathering around and study of the sacred Scriptures a regular part of the lives of Jews. The Jews became “the people of the Book” instead of people who relegated the daily worship of the Lord to the priests and the temple ritual and only occasionally brought their own sacrifices to the temple. Study of the Word became the core of understanding and practicing their covenant faith. Jesus’ custom to be part of the synagogue congregation to worship and study the Word on Sabbath Days surely encourages us to adopt the same pattern in our lives regarding Lord’s Days. If He needed it, don’t we?

193. The people of Capernaum were surprised at the authoritative manner of Jesus’ teaching because that is not what they were accustomed to. They might also have been questioning each other about who this man from Nazareth thought He was. In Nazareth, Jesus had boldly applied messianic Scripture to Himself. Perhaps He was equally bold at Capernaum. The people were accustomed to teachers of the law giving scholarly recitations of the views of various rabbinical schools without taking a stand about the points under discussion. Thus the scribes displayed their learning, but did not really help the ordinary people grow in their understanding and their application of their faith. Jesus, on the other hand, cut right through to the meaning of the Word and its application to life. He was not bashful about saying “I say to you . . .” and often preceded significant statements with an authoritative *Amen*, “truly” or “I tell you the truth” (see Matthew 5:17–18; 7:28–29). Preachers and teachers today can be authoritative in their functions if they expound and apply the Word in ways that let them say “Thus says the Lord!”

194. Jesus would not be put off by the protests of evil spirits, nor does He withdraw His claim on people today even though they reject Him. At one point, all who have lived will understand what Jesus and His Father “want with them,” but for many it will be too late. Nor was Jesus willing to allow and accept the public testimony about Him from evil spirits, even if what they said was true. He had come to destroy the power of the evil one and would not in any way let His identification in the minds of the people be associated with satanic testimony.

195. The miraculous healing, which demonstrated both His power and His compassion, amazed the men in the synagogue, so that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.” The result was that “His fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.” From that time on He probably had a ready

reception in the synagogues of the Galilean villages. His “year of inauguration”—His Baptism and testing, His first contact with disciples of John, His brief ministry in Judea, and His introducing Himself as a rabbi in Nazareth and Capernaum—moved into His “year of popularity,” when large crowds came to hear Him teach and brought the sick to Him for healing.

The Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 18:15–20

196. The setting and what was happening at Mount Sinai (Horeb) were awesome enough in themselves to fill the people with fear and foreboding, but when the Lord spoke the Ten Commandments from the mountaintop, their fears became more pointed, for they knew immediately that they did not live up to His Commandments. They could not live with the Lord in His awesome holiness as He thundered the Law at them, so they preferred to hear from Him indirectly. This is always the first effect of the Law when taken seriously. It always reveals the truth of our sin and the impossibility of our relating to God just on the basis of what we are and do (see Romans 3:19–20). The people could tolerate Moses’ speaking to them as God’s prophet because Moses was one of them, a sinner just as they were. They were happy to have him as an effective intermediary in their relationship with the Lord.

197. “The Prophet” would come from among their brothers; He would be one of them just as Moses was. He would be like Moses, faithfully representing them before God and speaking God’s Word to them. The Prophet to come would not be a voice speaking from the fire in judgment. He would be a Brother in the flesh and would speak the full truth of God’s forgiving love to them, and He would *act it out* through His life and death and resurrection (see John 3:16–17). He would not have to cover His face with a veil as Moses did when he had been with the Lord in the Tent of Meeting. His disciples would enjoy face-to-face interaction with Him as He led them to understand God’s love and appreciate its meaning for their lives (see 2 Corinthians 3:7–18; 4:5–6).

198. Those who hear the Prophet and His Good News are responsible for listening to Him with believing hearts that will produce obedient lives (see John 3:18; John 10:22–39).

199. God’s warning against prophets who speak falsely in His name, or who speak in their own name, or who speak in the name of a god of their own devising, is always pertinent. Heresy is teaching that distracts from or runs counter to the Gospel of Jesus and leads people to put their trust in, and build a false security through, their own religious performance. Such teachings are deadly to the faith relationship with Christ that saves and are not to be tolerated in the Church. Those who persist in them must be identified as heretics (see Galatians 1:6–9; 5:1–6; 1 John 4:1–8). The great principles of the Lutheran Reformation emphasize this concern—“By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, From Scripture Alone, In Christ Alone.” However, some teachings may be in error without really touching the center of the faith, the Gospel. We should work at correcting such teachings through the application of the Word, but in trying to correct the errors of others, we should treat them as brothers and sisters in Christ, as Paul dealt with errorists in his congregations.

200. We can test the teaching of the Church’s prophets by analyzing their teaching, always asking, “What does God say in His Word? Does their teaching underscore the truth that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus—or does it encourage ‘works-righteousness’ attitudes and actions?” Jesus said the “fruit” produced will display the truth of the teachings. True Gospel teaching will produce teachers and the Christians whom they teach who are confident in their faith and who respond to Jesus’ love by willingly giving themselves to Him and to others in Christian service.

201. The Holy Gospel shows Jesus in action as “the Prophet” whose authoritative teaching from God is to produce not just amazement, but faith and obedience.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 8:1–13

The reference cited in the first paragraph helps us recognize that an abuse of Christian freedom can result in a disloyalty to Christ that becomes an offense to the world around us as well as to fellow Christians. Instead of leading others to Christ, the example given when freedom is abused encourages others to figure that Christ is not all that important after all.

202. Paul warns those who are knowledgeable that they should not be “know-it-all” who think they have nothing more to learn. Sometimes we have to close our mouths to give our ears a chance.

203. Love for God becomes a key factor in Christian living when it is translated into love for others. Then one really knows God and is known by God.

204. Paul told them that an idol “has no real existence,” it is a nonentity. He reminded them that in coming to know that “there is no God but one,” they had come to realize that the pagan gods and goddesses were not real deities. Even though others might act as if the pagan gods and goddesses were “gods” and “lords,” they themselves knew “one God, the Father . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ.”

205. Paul probably had to deal with his feelings about eating such meat as a result of his background, just as he had had to deal with many religious concerns because of his legalistic background as a Pharisee. But he rejoiced that he had found freedom in Christ based on his faith in Christ, and no doubt had overcome such unnecessary scruples.

206. They were “weak” because they were allowing their former lives as pagans to influence and restrict their Christian freedom. They probably thought of themselves as the strong ones because they were so conscientious, but Paul spoke of them as immature. Paul tried to help them with his instruction about idols being nonentities, and by telling them that “food [neither eating nor abstaining] will not commend us to God.” The voice of conscience is a guardian of moral responsibility, built into us humans by our Creator (see Romans 2:14–15). We should *instruct* the conscience through the Word, but we should never ignore it or just reject its warning, lest we silence it.

207. Paul valued love above all in Christian interaction (see 1 Corinthians 13). Love places the welfare of others before personal freedom. “Is it lawful?” (in the lesson two weeks ago) must include “for them” as well as “for me.”

208. Personal behaviors (drinking, eating, etc.) and even different approaches to worship may threaten some who feel they are not right for them. Love limits one’s own freedom so others will not be tempted to go against their consciences—except when others are insisting we must do things their way or not really be Christians. Then we have to display our freedom boldly.

Lesson 15

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

*O Lord, keep Your family the Church continually in the true faith
that, relying on the hope of Your heavenly grace, we may ever be defended
by Your mighty power; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our
Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:29–39

209. The family meal after the synagogue service suggests that we work to retain the tradition of Sunday dinner, bringing the fellowship of worship into our other family interaction on the Lord's Day. Many things tug at us and take family members into separate ways, and Sunday dinner together after worshipping together in church is a time to reinforce our unity as a family in Christ. We need to work at carrying the Gospel's influence into our homes and our family relationships.

210. "Immediately they told [Jesus] about her" encourages us to tell Jesus about the sick in our families and in our Church—and in our world. He is the Healer. His quick action in the case of Peter's mother-in-law encourages us to expect that He will be active also in helping and healing those we point out to Him. Peter's wife's mother got up from her sickbed to do what she enjoyed doing most—helping her daughter get the Sabbath evening meal ready for her family and their friends. She evidently was a widow who lived with them and helped with household tasks.

211. Mark used hyperbole, but the turnout must have been very large. Jesus had begun His ministry in Capernaum in dramatic fashion in the synagogue that day. As Mark said in verse 28, "At once His fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee." They wanted Jesus to touch their sick with His healing.

212. That Mark wrote about those "who were sick or oppressed by demons" indicates that the society of that day distinguished between physical ailments and spiritual oppression. The repeated incidents of Jesus casting out demons in the Gospels suggest that this may have been a common and widespread problem. It seems easy for us to explain their "demon-possession" as mental illness, but some of the incidents, notably the cure of Legion, whose demons entered a herd of swine, do not agree with that. The incidence of demon possession may have increased at the time—Satan's reaction to the coming of the One who would defeat him. Jesus was not willing to have His identification tied to the testimony of the evil one and his demonic forces. He had come to bring freedom from their oppression.

213. Jesus needed prayer because He was a man. As a perfect man He relied on His Father for all things. Jesus told Peter, "That is why I came out."

214. Finding a place of quiet and solitude as Jesus did on many an occasion can give us the environment for sustained prayer and meditation upon God's Word. Would that God grant each of us such a contemplative place for prayer and to recognize it when He does.

215. Jesus took time with people in their settings when needed, as He did with Mary and Martha in their bereavement at the death of Lazarus, but He also showed a restlessness, an eagerness to extend His saving outreach. This took Him finally to the cross to atone for the sins of the world. His example encourages the church to go beyond a “maintenance attitude” to reach out energetically to others.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 40:21–31

The first paragraphs provide the historical setting. Read them, invite comments, move on.

216. These questions state that it has always been obvious to people that the world exists by God’s power and permission. God’s power and deity are seen in the things He has made; this recognition is part of man’s natural knowledge of God. When we consider the heavens, we have to see that they declare the glory of God as they show His handiwork.

217. Yahweh’s authority over the natural world is seen in “He sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.” He “stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in.” His authority over the world’s mighty is seen in Isaiah’s “He brings princes to nothing, makes the rulers of this earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted . . . sown . . . taken root . . . wither . . . the tempest carries them off like stubble.”

218. The Lord’s questions suggest that it is ridiculous even to think of comparing Him to any other “gods.” All they have to do is look to the heavens and be reminded that He is the Creator. Because of the clear atmosphere, undimmed by manmade lights or pollution, the ancient people could see an estimated 8,000 stars in the “canopy” of the sky with the naked eye. That Yahweh brings out the stars by number (one by one) and calls them by name and that not one is missing emphasized for the exiles that God had not forgotten them, knew each one of them and his or her needs, and would be able to be of help to them. This assurance is similar to that given by Jesus when He said that God sees the sparrow’s fall and numbers the hairs of our heads (Luke 12:6–7).

219. Part of a conquered people, carried off into exile, not sure you’ll ever see home and family again—it’s easy to understand that they were depressed and cried out to God. Wars and natural disasters produce that experience for many still today. We all face the same temptation at times to think that God has forgotten us and doesn’t care about our situations—and often as a result of much more trivial circumstances.

Fill-in answers: In contrast to their feeling weak and forgotten, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, assures them that “He does not faint or grow weary; His understanding is unsearchable.”

220. Isaiah says, “They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength.” It is in firm hope based on God’s dependable promises that we are able to cope with the circumstances and persevere. They who wait for the Lord “shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

221. In the Holy Gospel, Peter’s mother-in-law is healed; the whole town brought their sick and those oppressed by demons to Jesus, and Jesus healed various diseases and cast out demons. Hope for help in difficult times, like those experienced by the exiles of the Old Testament Lesson, is to be found in waiting for the Lord.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 9:16–27

222. What drove Paul was the grace of Christ, who had reached out to rescue the “chief of sinners.” Add to that his conviction that he had been commissioned by Christ to be His apostle to the Gentiles. Paul’s faith in Christ was inseparably tied to his call to service. He could not neglect the service without denying the faith. Paul’s reward was his being able to underscore the truth of salvation as a free gift by offering his ministry to people free of cost to them.

223. Almost every preacher has times of discouragement and has considered doing something else, but preachers do need to learn to serve out of a sense of calling, and not just to be doing a job.

224. Paul was “free from all” because he belonged to Christ. He was responsible to Christ and to His informed Christian conscience, not to the will of others. Paul expressed his freedom by making himself “a servant to all.” Paul was willing to be a servant to everyone because he was a slave of Christ, and Christ had come not to be served but to serve and to be the ransom for sinners. Paul said he was a servant to all “to win more of them.”

225. Paul’s reason for meeting people where they were and respecting their views, becoming “all things to all people,” was so he might “by all means . . . save some.” Among Jewish Christians, Paul respected their observance of the ceremonial laws and traditions; among Gentile Christians, he was free to participate in their freedom from such requirements; among the weak, he carefully avoided things that would offend them in their conscience scruples. Paul put his foot down and would not accommodate views that violated the Gospel of Christ—salvation by grace through faith, apart from deeds of law. He did not accommodate the Judaizers’ insistence on circumcision (see Galatians 5:1–6). On the other hand, he did not accommodate the libertine views of some Gentile Christians (see Ephesians 4:17–24). He did not accommodate the know-it-all faction in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 12:29–13:3). Paul was not afraid to take a stand on matters of conscience (see Galatians 1:6–9; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5).

226. Athletes contend for perishable wreaths; we are contending for an imperishable crown.

227. Today’s Church needs to understand the importance of meeting people with the Gospel where they are, while not accommodating them so much that we bend God’s Word to suit their ideas. We must take care that we do not load the Gospel down with a lot of culturally-based baggage. How the Gospel is spoken and applied may have to be adjusted to accommodate how people in various ethnic and cultural groupings hear and understand.

Lesson 16

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

*O Lord, graciously hear the prayers of Your people that we who justly
suffer the consequence of our sin may be mercifully delivered by
Your goodness to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your
Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:40–45

228. What is remarkable about the man’s approach to Jesus is the simplicity of his faith: “You can make me clean.” We’re not told how the man had learned of Jesus’ power to heal; only that he came with the strong expectation of faith. The leper came with expectation but not with a demand. So must we. He said, “If You will.” So must we. He left the response to his expectation fully in the hand of the Healer. So must we.

229. Jesus generally cautioned those who were recipients of His miraculous compassion and power about telling everyone about it, especially if it involved identifying Him as the Messiah. Jesus did not want to be just a miracle-worker, but wanted people to hear the Word He was proclaiming about God’s love—and the Messiah concept had become too politically charged among the Jews.

230. Instead of obeying Jesus’ instructions, the man went around telling everyone what Jesus had done for him. The man’s enthusiastic witness made everyone eager to have some helpful contact with the Healer—so much so that Jesus had to avoid the towns and stay in the countryside. But still the people came out to Him.

The Old Testament Lesson: 2 Kings 5:1–14

231. What is remarkable about the young slave girl’s telling her mistress about the prophet in Samaria is not just that she would approach her with such a recommendation, but that in her recommendation, there is such a note of assurance and certainty. The girl did not doubt at all that Yahweh’s prophet in Samaria would be able to back up her promise and heal her master.

232. The letter from the king of Syria put pressure on the king of Israel by stating the expectation that he would see to it that his servant Naaman was cured of his leprosy. His tearing his robes indicated the shock he felt and his dismay at being asked to do something he knew was well beyond his power. He feared that the king of Syria was purposely asking him to do something he could not do in order to pick a quarrel with him and have an excuse to attack him or remove him from his throne.

233. Elisha was ready to show the Syrians “that there is a prophet in Israel.” His evident desire was to witness to these outsiders that Yahweh had power to help and heal.

234. Elisha reacted in almost a “ho-hum” way—quite a contrast to the king’s anxiety. He did not even come out to deal with Naaman personally, but sent his instructions to wash in the Jordan through a messenger. You get the feeling that he was telling Naaman, “You have leprosy? No big deal. Here’s how Yahweh will cure it for you.” Naaman went away angry for two reasons: First, he was disappointed that the prophet had not come out to interact with him personally. Second, he had been told to wash in Israel’s Jordan River. He compared the Jordan with the more substantial rivers of Damascus and wondered why he couldn’t be washed in the better rivers back home instead of in the lowly Jordan.

235. Elisha’s prescription required Naaman to humble himself and let Yahweh’s prophet heal him on his terms, carrying out prescribed actions that he didn’t really see as appropriate—bathing in the Jordan, and seven times.

236. The tie is obvious. This lesson tells of a leper healed by Yahweh’s prophet; the Holy Gospel tells of a leper healed by Yahweh incarnate, Jesus, the Son of God.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 10:19–11:1

Fill-in answers: Paul said that the same was essentially true of the sacrifices and feasts at pagan temples. Though food offered to an idol was not anything, and though the idol itself was not really anything, the pagan feasts and sacrifices were offered to demons, and if they participated in them, it involved them as participants with demons. He told them bluntly: “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons,” and to do so might provoke the Lord to jealousy.

Evidently, some of the members of the Church were continuing their former associations and were joining friends at temple feasts or participating in the libations to the gods in private homes. They may have been excusing this because they had “superior knowledge” and felt they were free to do it without it affecting their life in Christ. This problem evidently did not go away easily, for Paul took up the matter again. See 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1, which many scholars feel is a fragment from Paul’s “stern letter” that found its way into our Second Corinthians.

237. Christians today might try to have part in both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons by their participation in the worship practices of other religions—practicing the meditation of Eastern religions, for example, or becoming members of religious organizations such as fraternal lodges, which have a universalistic religious practice that sees Jesus as one of many ways to God. Dabbling in the world of the psychic also takes people into a pagan world of spirits and demons and cosmic forces and is destructive of faith and life in Christ.

238. Paul said, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17). Our communing ties us to our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world, but especially with those with whom we stand or kneel at the Lord’s Table. We thus are given responsibility before God for them, and they for us. We are to love and serve them and readily forgive them as Christ forgives us (see Colossians 3:12–17).

Fill-in answers: Those who said “All things are lawful” needed to remember that not all things are helpful; not all things will build up. Their own true welfare and that of others around them is always to be an important consideration. They were not to insist on expressing their freedom if that might cause people to go against their consciences.

239. Whether we do or don’t is often a matter of personal conscience, but we need always seek not our “own good, but the good of [our] neighbor,” and make it our aim to “do all to the glory of God,” and not just to show we are a little better, a little more mature, than other Christians. Paul turned again to the defense of Christian liberty by writing, “Why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?”

240. Paul could say “Be imitators of me” because as an apostle of Jesus, he was following his Lord’s example of dedication to the Gospel and its proclamation, and in serving others in love. We, too, can tell

those around us to follow our example if we are doing the same. We who have children and grandchildren need to remember that we usually don't have to tell them to follow our example. They will. This makes it very important that we be able to show them consistently that we are following the example of Christ.

Lesson 17

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in You, mercifully grant that by Your power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Mark 2:1–12

241. Jesus was being true to His nature as the Word Incarnate. He had come to be the world's Redeemer from sin and death and hell. The Greek text says the man's sins were "sent away" (v. 5).

242. The Jews believed that only God could forgive sins, so for a man to imply he could forgive sins was considered blasphemy. Jesus asked them His question just *because* it really required no answer. The point He was making is that if you can do the one, you can do the other, for both obviously require the power of God. As God alone can send sins away, so He alone can restore a paralytic in an instant. Jesus then gave them a dramatic demonstration of the fact that He had not been blaspheming with His instantaneous healing of the paralytic. It was a clear declaration that He is the Promised One, the Son of God.

This is the first instance in Mark in which Jesus referred to Himself as "Son of Man." It was His most common title for Himself, used 81 times in the Gospels and never by anyone but Jesus. It is taken from Daniel 7:13–14, in which one like "a son of man" is the messianic figure who is entrusted by God with authority, glory, and power. It was recognized as messianic, but because it was not commonly used, Jesus could use "Son of Man" to speak of Himself without arousing the political hopes that had been associated with "Messiah."

Fill-in answers: Jesus spoke three imperatives: Rise, pick up your bed, and go home. The paralytic rose and immediately picked up his bed, and went out before them all.

243. The crowd was amazed, and they praised God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

244. The whole section in Mark aims at showing the growing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. The fact that Jesus' critics had no response and evidently did not join the crowd in praise to God shows that they had retained their stubborn disbelief, and the conflict would continue.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 43:18–25

245. The Lord's people in exile were to forget the former things because they had become falsely secure on the basis of the Lord's dealings with their fathers in the past, as if this were a continuing guarantee to them even in their faithlessness. These words were written with the exiles in Babylon in mind, so the "new thing" referred to God's rescue and restoration of the remnant of His people.

246. “A way in the wilderness” was the counterpart of “a way in the sea” in the exodus. “Rivers in the desert” was the counterpart of the water flowing from the rock. Both stressed God’s intervention in Israel’s history to bring it to pass.

247. The picture that describes the Lord’s care is that of His providing water in the wilderness “to give drink to My chosen people.” It is a familiar picture, prized by people who lived in arid regions, of God’s assurance of His care and refreshment. The ultimate purpose in the Lord’s care, both for His people of old and for us, is “that they might declare [His] praise.” God loves and serves us to develop a relationship with Him in which we learn to love and serve Him willingly in return. He desires a living relationship with us.

248. The “new thing” that God does for us is “His renewing thing.” He draws us to faith in Jesus so we may find our rebirth as His children in the power of the Holy Spirit. Then He continually nourishes our faith and our life with Him through the message of reconciliation in Word and Sacrament (see 2 Corinthians 5:14–21). In regard to Isaiah’s prophecy, it is always helpful to remember that in many respects, it is eschatological in character. Its promises of renewal through the remnant and the establishment of a prosperous, peaceable kingdom surely are messianic in character—promises shared by all who are renewed by rebirth into the kingdom of our Lord.

249. That God blots out transgressions for His own sake emphasizes the truth that our forgiveness is not a result of our worthiness, but is purely a product of God’s grace. When God forgives, He is simply acting as God. “God is *love*” (1 John 4:8). This surprising assurance to His covenant people of His undeserved love after exposing their neglect of Him, their sins and offenses, attached them—and attaches us—finally to the fulfiller of the covenant, our Lord Jesus Christ. That God remembers our sins no more brings wonderful assurance that He does what He was telling His people to do: He forgets the past and does not dwell on it; instead, He lives with us in the continuing present of His forgiveness and leads us to a future in which we will be eternally in His presence.

250. Isaiah’s emphasis on the “new thing” relates the lesson to the Gospel. The Jewish leaders clung to the old, and to their traditional interpretation and use of the old, as if the Kingdom belonged to them. Jesus requires acceptance of God’s gift of a new way to life with Him: faith in Him, which produces fruits of righteousness.

The Epistle for the Day: 2 Corinthians 1:18–22

Fill-in answer: In His Son, Jesus Christ, both God’s dealings with His people and the message of His faithful apostles had been and are always yes!

251. Paul said the Corinthian Christians could trust his message always to be honest and straightforward, consistent with God’s yes, as surely as God is faithful. He had been commissioned by Jesus Himself, after all, to be the messenger of the Good News of God’s faithfulness to His covenant promise in His Son, Jesus. Every preacher today needs to be able to say with Paul, “I have always consistently brought you God’s yes in Christ.”

252. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, the woman’s offspring who effectively crushed the serpent’s head as His heel was bruised on the cross. He is the Seed of Abraham who brought the covenant blessing of God to all the families of the earth. He is the Son of David who brings God’s gracious rule into hearts and lives. He is the Suffering Servant by whose stripes we are made whole. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By whatever scriptural picture you view God’s promise of salvation, you see that it points to Jesus as its fulfiller—God’s ultimate yes who atoned for mankind’s no of sin and overcame the condemning no of death. The only appropriate response to God’s yes to us in Christ is “Amen! Yes! This is most certainly true!”

Fill-in answers: God’s three actions that blessed the Corinthian Christians and us are: He has anointed us, He has put His seal on us, and He has given us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

253. In preaching to Cornelius and his household, Peter said, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38). This happened in connection with His Baptism (Matthew 3:13–17). Paul’s words surely refer to the same gracious anointing with the Holy Spirit in connection with our experience of Holy Baptism (Titus 3:4–7).

254. A seal relates to the identity of the person who owns it and uses it. It marks properties and papers as belonging to that person. God placed His seal on us when He placed His name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—on us in Holy Baptism. He graciously made us His own, children in His family, in that action. It declares to us that we belong to Him now and forever.

255. The Spirit’s continuing presence with us is God’s guarantee that we ultimately will live in His presence eternally. Because all of these acts by which God has rescued us and made us His own in Christ are purely a result of His grace and mercy toward us sinners, we may be confident that “He who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Lesson 18

Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

O Lord, mercifully hear our prayers and, having set us free from the bonds of our sins, deliver us from every evil; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Mark 2:13–22

256. The Romans used people from conquered nations to collect the taxes, generally a lucrative arrangement. Jews who became Roman tax men in this way were seen as traitors to the nation and unfaithful to the covenant. That Levi had become a tax collector shows that he had fallen from faith and hope in the messianic promises. As a tax collector, he was focused on getting rich, even at the cost of being ostracized. Jesus knew the deep needs of humankind, and He came to fill those needs. He knew the deepest need of Levi, loved Levi, and wanted Levi to find new life in Him as His disciple Matthew. Jesus truly is the friend of sinners. Levi probably had his tax booth in or near Capernaum and exacted the Roman toll on commerce traveling on the Way of the Sea, the trade route from Damascus that passed near Capernaum and then north and west to the cities on the Mediterranean coast. He no doubt had heard the gossip about the prophet from Nazareth who was doing all those miraculous signs. Levi was decisive, as may be seen from his becoming a tax collector when he gave up on the covenant faith. Perhaps he had gone to hear Jesus for himself. Now, when confronted by the Fulfiller of the covenant, he responded to the opportunity decisively.

257. Ask your group to tell how being a Christian influences their work.

258. Levi wanted friends who would still socialize with him to get to know Jesus. The phrase “tax collectors and sinners” referred to those who had openly broken with the faith, ceremonially or morally. Levi felt that Jesus’ acceptance and love would mean as much to them as it did to him. We need to cultivate friendships with people outside the Church, and get back to entertaining friends and neighbors in our homes. In friendship settings, the Holy Spirit will give us opportunities to witness to Jesus and to invite them to church with us.

259. A paraphrase has Jesus say, “I did not come to congratulate ‘righteous people,’ but to call sinners to repentance.” His words judge all self-righteousness and make us see that it does not stand up under God’s scrutiny—and they invite all sinners to come to Him in repentance. We must be honest about our sin and need. Otherwise, His offer to us as the Savior from sin does not have its full impact. Our society exalts self-made individuals who succeed through their own effort and skill, and it applauds good people who are good for humanistic reasons—and this works against their accepting the Good News of a Savior from sin. We must look honestly into the mirror of God’s Law. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) forces us to look beyond the outward to examine also our thoughts and motives. Thus we

see that the problem is deep within us, our sinful nature, and that we need the Spirit's cleansing and renewal (see Galatians 5:19–22).

260. That long Sabbath in the Upper Room as Jesus' body lay in the tomb was a time for fasting because the followers of Jesus were in dismay over their Lord's crucifixion. They were waiting to complete His burial, convinced that everything they had hoped would not be realized. Their fast ended on Easter Sunday in the wonder of the risen Jesus' presence with them once again, and would be with them to the end of the age, as He promised.

261. A patch of unshrunk cloth sewn into an old, worn piece of cloth will shrink and will pull at the worn cloth, tearing from it. Jesus was saying it is not appropriate to just patch a little new life of the Kingdom on the old garment of legalistic Judaism. Get rid of the old garment and wear the completely new garment that Jesus provides. Wineskins were skins of goats, removed in one piece. Openings at legs and tail were tied, leaving the neck as the spout. New wine, still fermenting, produces gas. New wine in an old, hardened wineskin would burst it because of the pressure. Jesus was saying the new wine of the Gospel, full of Spirit energy, could not be contained or restricted with legalisms. It called people into a new relationship with God, a new freedom, and a new personal responsibility in life in the kingdom of the Lord. Both illustrations contrasted the system of "righteousness through the law" and the gift of "righteousness by grace through faith in Christ" and the effect the two will have on spiritual attitudes and life.

The Old Testament Lesson: Hosea 2:14–20

262. The Lord's purpose in leading Israel back into the wilderness was "to allure her." He would "speak tenderly to her," "give her her vineyards," and change the Valley of Achor into "a door of hope."

263. Nature and human interaction combine to provide a picture of peace. "Bow, sword, and war" will be abolished so that Israel will know a time when they can "lie down in safety." In our day, with strife between Israelis and Arabs, many who lie down in fear would like to see the promises fulfilled.

Fill-in answers: The Lord promised to betroth Israel to Himself forever in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy, and in faithfulness. This "bride-price" emphasizes the gracious nature of the covenant. It is God who pays the price to assure that the betrothal will be a significant blessing in the life of His beloved.

264. The husband-wife motif continued. The Hebrew for "know" was used to refer to intimate marital relations, but also was used to refer to acknowledgment of a covenant partner. The Lord's act of betrothal will lead Israel to "know the LORD." The covenant, initiated unilaterally by the Lord, evokes a response in the hearts and lives of those who are His, becoming a grace-based bilateral covenant (see Exodus 19:3–8; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15).

265. The Holy Gospel speaks of celebrating the new life we enjoy as the heavenly Bridegroom lives with us and in us. This lesson continues the theme with its husband-wife, new betrothal motif, and the great blessings that result.

The Epistle for the Day: 2 Corinthians 2:12–3:6

Fill-in answers: Paul said God always led him and the other apostles in triumphal procession and through them, spread everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him.

266. Christians who testify to the sweet-smelling Gospel possess a decaying odor for those who trust in their own righteousness for salvation. For those who receive God's grace through repentant faith in Christ, God's witnesses bear the fragrance of life.

267. The Corinthian Christians were Paul's "letter of recommendation" in terms of the results his ministry of the Gospel had produced in them: their faith, hope, and love. Through their displaying these

lasting qualities appropriately, they showed their presence in them. That they had written to Paul with their questions showed that they were still strongly tied to his apostleship. They were a “letter from Christ” to Paul, confirming his apostleship. They were a “letter from Christ” to each other, showing their Christian faith and life were so important that they wanted them to be correct. They were a “letter from Christ” to their community as they met as Christ’s people and celebrated His love. Paul’s words challenge us. Paul pointed to his own ministry among them and especially to the Spirit of the living God as the instruments that produced Christ’s letter in their hearts.

268. Only when we know “our sufficiency is from God” will we devote ourselves to His Word as the means by which the Spirit of the living God will build our competence in proclaiming that Word to others. Then Paul’s motto will be ours: “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4:5). Only when we know that our sufficiency is from God will we count on the Holy Spirit to effectuate the results that God desires through our proclaiming His Word. It is comforting to know that we are just to do our part in proclaiming the Word, and leave results to Him.

269. The old covenant was the covenant written on stone, the covenant based on faithful compliance with ceremonial laws and rituals. That covenant had its limitations. It had to be repeated again and again. It could not fully remove sins, but it did continually mediate God’s grace to *faithful* practitioners. The new covenant stresses Christ’s fulfillment of God’s promise. Its once-for-all quality assures us that nothing more needs to be added to be certain we are cleansed of all our sins. The Spirit dwelling in us leads us to respond in a joyous life of faith and hope and love.

270. The letter written on tablets of stone, the Law code, kills because it continually reveals our sin and our need of forgiveness (see Romans 3:19–20). The new covenant of the Spirit gives life because God’s gift of salvation has been completely accomplished for us by Jesus our Savior. We are forever free from the burden of sin and the curse of the Law. Grace accomplished *for* us what Law could not: we are declared to be God’s children on the basis of God’s action! Grace accomplishes also *in* us what the Law could not (see Romans 8:1–5).

Lesson 19

Transfiguration of Our Lord

O God, in the glorious transfiguration of Your beloved Son You confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of Moses and Elijah. In the voice that came from the bright cloud You wonderfully foreshowed our adoption by grace. Mercifully make us co-heirs with the King in His glory and bring us to the fullness of our inheritance in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Mark 9:2–9

The length of the Epiphany Season is determined by the date of Easter Sunday. Easter falls on the first Sunday following the fourteenth day of the “Paschal Moon,” which occurs on or after the day of the vernal equinox. Since the vernal equinox is fixed as March 21, this means that Easter can never occur before March 22 or later than April 25. Balance is achieved in the Church’s calendar by having also the season of Sundays after Pentecost be variable in length.

271. Jesus is truly the eternal Son of God, but He took on our human nature fully and lived as a real man. He surely had human social needs, and He must have valued the support that He received from this inner circle of disciples. They failed Him at times, as in Gethsemane, but at other times, their caring friendship was “there” for Him.

272. The transfiguration showed the utter holiness of the Son of God also in His human flesh and blood. Matthew says, “[Jesus’] face shone like the sun” (Matthew 17:2). All three synoptic Gospels include the fact that also His clothing, part of His living a human life, became wonderfully bright, but Mark seems to put the most stress on this. The Bible used the analogy of clothing frequently: even our righteous deeds are as filthy rags in God’s sight because of our sinfulness; the saints in heaven have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

273. Moses and Elijah were the representatives of the two major divisions of their sacred Scriptures: the Law and the Prophets. Their appearance applied the full weight of Old Testament Scriptures in validation of Jesus’ person and work. They talked with Jesus about His suffering and dying and what Jesus would accomplish through it.

274. Peter’s remark was off the top of his head, but probably arose out of his feelings of awe and out of a desire to have the exciting experience perpetuated by his building “shrines” for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter appears to have been open and honest by nature, a charismatic type of person who attracted many friends. He knew his faults, among them a tendency to always have to say something. He was not above ribbing himself, admitting he had been afraid and hadn’t known what to say but had said something anyway, even something inappropriate.

275. The Father’s main concern for the disciples as they recognized their master as the Son of God was that they *listen* to Him. It is what He would teach them by word and deed that would matter—and would form the basis of their own proclamation. This was emphasized for them when suddenly they looked up to find only Jesus with them.

276. Had they told of Jesus’ display of glory, the popular, politicized concept of the Messiah would have been encouraged. When He had died and risen, they and their hearers would understand the spiritual nature of His kingdom.

277. Still today, our vision for life must focus on Jesus, the very Son of God. We must listen faithfully to what He teaches and must proclaim His Good News to our world.

The Old Testament Lesson: 2 Kings 2:1–12

278. Elisha was anticipating that Elijah would no longer be with him and was determined to stay with him as long as he could. He no doubt also anticipated “inheriting” his master’s prophetic role and authority.

279. Elijah rolled up his cloak so it became like a rod, or staff, and struck the waters of the Jordan River. The parting of the water was reminiscent of two events: Moses holding his staff over the Red Sea; and the priests with the ark of the covenant stepping into the Jordan River at Joshua’s command, both resulting in the waters separating so Israel could cross on dry land. This miracle emphasized for Elisha and the students that Elijah was a true prophet of the Lord, blessed with the Spirit.

280. What Elisha asked for was hard because it was not something that Elijah himself could give him. It had to come from the Lord according to the Lord’s will for Elisha.

281. Watching what was happening would show Elisha’s faith in his master’s promise, and seeing what transpired would assure him that God was granting his request.

282. Tearing clothes was a sign of grief and sadness—Elisha’s master was gone. In this instance, however, it might have also symbolized Elisha’s tearing himself away from his past as Elijah’s assistant in confidence that he was receiving the inheritance he hoped for, and would be able to carry on the prophetic mission in the spirit and power of Elijah. In verses 13–14, we see him picking up Elijah’s cloak, no doubt seeing it as assurance of Elijah’s spirit resting on him, and then putting the Lord’s promise to the test. His “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” was not an expression of skepticism but of confidence, “reminding” the Lord that he now wore Elijah’s mantle. In the account that follows, Elisha’s authority is fully recognized, and miracles he performed are described.

283. The tie to the Gospel: Elijah appeared at Jesus’ transfiguration. The Old Testament Lesson also stresses the lofty position of the prophets, and the Gospel shows us that is especially true of the Prophet who is God’s Son.

The Epistle for the Day: 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:6

Fill-in answers: Paul talked about a veil being over the minds of those who stubbornly clung to the old covenant when they heard the message of Christ, and said that only through Christ is that veil taken away for anyone who turns to Him. Then, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom, and we, with unveiled faces, reflect the glory of the Lord.

284. Paul is describing the process that we call “sanctification”—our growing in faith and living in hope and learning to love one another as Christ has loved us. This process is not optional, but is part of our Lord’s will for us as His disciples (see John 13:34–35; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15). Also, our sanctification, as Paul tells us here, comes from “the Lord who is the Spirit.” As He must remove the veil, we are energized to put our faith in Jesus. As He energizes us to do that, we energize our hearts to live for Him who died for us and rose again, and we show we are His disciples by loving one another. Paul urges

us to “earnestly desire the greater gifts” of the Spirit, and shows us “the more excellent way” in his great chapter on Christian love (see 1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13).

285. The god of this world, or the prince of this world, is Satan, the “adversary” or “accuser.” A fallen angel, he lives in rebellion against God and seeks to thwart God’s will for humanity (see Revelation 12:7–12).

286. Natural man has lost the indwelling Spirit of God and the spiritual insight that He gives. We can know some things about God naturally: the world of nature testifies that He is powerful; the fact that there is a built-in sense of moral responsibility (conscience) in all humans indicates that God must be holy and cares about right and wrong. We may be led to fear such a God, but for us sinners to relate naturally to the holy, powerful God on a willing, loving level is beyond us. The devil works hard to blind people to the forgiving love of God in Christ, for that is the one thing the Spirit uses to renew our relationship with God. It is the message of the cross, Jesus’ offering Himself in atonement for our sins, that is the point at which blindness or stumbling occurs.

287. Jews focused on the prophecies of a kingly Messiah who would restore Israel to her former glory. They had no room in their expectations for a Messiah who died by crucifixion. That was seen as proof He was not the Messiah. The preaching of the cross is foolishness to human logic because it doesn’t make sense that a holy God would place sin and guilt on His Son and, through faith in Him, let sinners go free and unpunished. Logic says that if we have sinned, it is we who must somehow make up for it. Man-made religions are always works-righteous in format.

288. In the face of the world’s blindness, it is tempting to bring a humanistic message that points to spiritual possibilities in humans themselves for renewed life with God. The temptation is to make the Gospel another self-help psychology.

289. Preaching *Jesus* emphasizes His life, death, resurrection as our *Savior*. Preaching *Christ* emphasizes that Jesus is the *Promised One* who fulfilled God’s eternal plan of salvation. Preaching Jesus Christ as *Lord* identifies Him as *God* (Yahweh), who established His covenant with Abraham, who came Himself to fulfill the covenant as Jesus our Brother, and who now rules all things as God’s right-hand man. While the truths *about* Jesus Christ as Lord are the Good News, we are not just to tell about Jesus, but to introduce people to Jesus personally.

290. Moses’ face reflected the awesome glory of the Law, though that Law did include rites and sacrifices by which Yahweh’s grace was mediated to His sinful people. The light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is pure grace (see John 3:17). In Him we know that God’s great glory is loving and forgiving sinners, restoring us to a relationship with Him that prompts our willing and loving discipleship.

291. The Son of God came not to be served but to serve and to give His life for us. We who are united with Him through faith are called to serve in His name and to give our lives for the benefit of others (see Luke 9:23–26; Matthew 25:34–40; 1 John 4:7–12, 19–21).