

ASCEND

A COMPANION
TO THE SUNDAY READINGS
CYCLE A

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Authored by Mark Hart and Joel Stepanek

Designed by Ryan McQuade and David Calavitta

Copy editing by Elizabeth Bayardi and Rachel Peñate

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*Thy words became to me
a joy and the delight
of my heart; for I am
called by thy name;
O LORD, God of hosts.*

Jeremiah 15:16

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INTRODUCTION

Our words have power and weight. We can say something that can uplift a heart or tear it down. Our words can encourage, motivate, build, or destroy. The power that our words hold is a reflection of the One who gave us the breath to speak them – they are a reflection of the power of God’s Word.

What we speak, powerful as it may seem, will one day pass away. Our words will be forgotten, but God’s Word will remain. The Word of God endures forever.

Right now, you probably have the most powerful collection of words ever assembled sitting on your shelf or stuffed away in a drawer. You have a book that will change your life, and has changed the lives of millions before you. This book isn’t a collection of stories or words – it is the very Word of God. That book is your Bible. This companion is designed to help you dive deeply into the words that your Bible contains.

The reflections in this companion haven’t been chosen at random, though. They are very intentional. Each of the weeks within *Ascend* follow the schedule of the Sunday Lectionary for the Catholic Mass. The Lectionary is an intentional cycle of Sacred Scripture that the Church proclaims at Mass every day during the year. Over the course of three cycles (a three-year period), Catholics hear most of the Bible. But hearing and listening are two different things. We can passively hear something, but ignore it. We can hear something and forget it. When we listen, however, we take something in. We wrestle with it. We make it a part of who we are and how we live.

Ascend is designed to help you listen. The words we hear each Sunday at Mass are powerful. They reveal who God is and the relationship that He shares with us. They recount the stories of those who came before us in faith. The Word is a great love story, poured out onto simple pages for us.

Use this companion to prepare for the readings each Sunday. Every week provides the citations for the readings so you can look them up in your own Bible. Make the time to do it and, when you do, *take your time* reading. Included within each Sunday is some background information about the Scriptures for the week, word definitions, facts about the narratives proclaimed that Sunday, focused questions for journaling reflection, and a challenge. All of this is written so that you can really “unpack” what God wants to say to you through Sacred Scripture each week.

Use *Ascend* as a personal companion on this journey, or get together with a group to discuss the readings and background information as a community. This year, God wants to speak to you through Sacred Scripture. The Church is inviting us to ascend the spiritual mountain, to gain a closer perspective on God and a “higher” perspective on life. This resource will help your soul scale the summit of the Sunday Mass, encountering the source of all love, whom we know as God. Your climb begins on the pages that follow. It’s time to go above and beyond. It’s time to *ascend*.

GET LIT

1st Sunday of Advent

OPENING PRAYER

Lord, your brightness shines within all those who love you. You are my sword and shield. You defeat evil with the light that shines forth from you. Jesus be my armor. Help me put on the armor of light, that I may be able to fight for you. Amen.

1ST READING: Isaiah 2:1-5

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 122:1-2, 3-4, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

2ND READING: Romans 13:11-14

GOSPEL: Matthew 24:37-44

BEYOND WORDS

Darkness has a subtle way of overcoming us. As seasons change — the days shorten, and the nights get longer — the light almost “narrows.” The same can be said of the spiritual life. When we give in to selfish wants and desires, sin darkens our lives and intellect. Just as St. Paul is warning the believers in Rome to “cast off the works of darkness” (Romans 13:12) and protect themselves (just as they saw the Roman soldiers do with battle gear) with “the armor of light,” so must Christians be aware of the battle between light and darkness raging on around us.

The prophet Isaiah uses this battle language and imagery in the first reading this week, reminding us that it is from the Lord’s mountain and house that victory will come. After being reminded of the battle our souls are embroiled in, Christ turns our attention and hearts upward in this Gospel from St. Matthew warning us to be prepared not only for the battle, but also for its end. The Son of Man will come back at a time beyond our knowledge. The war will subside. Darkness will be cast away. Even in the night — even in these dark times — we must remain

spiritually awake and astute. Advent offers us the chance to slowly, weekly, breathe light into darkness. As the season (and new liturgical year) progresses, the days will lengthen. Over the next four weeks, we will look to the house of the Lord and see His light shine brighter and brighter, as the great Judge draws closer.

RANDOM FACT

Ofentimes in Sacred Scripture when we read “the night” or “the darkness,” as we do in the second reading from St. Paul, it is intended to have a dual purpose. While the author may be speaking literally about the time of day, when sinful acts like drunkenness and promiscuity typically happen, it is often meant to convey even more. The “night” and “darkness” are symbolic references to the evil and death that infest and infect the present world. We are called to be lights in this darkness, this culture of sin and death, until such time as the one, true Light returns and vanquishes darkness forever.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Note the wordplay in the Gospel when Jesus invokes the tale of Noah. The people in Noah’s time were not prepared for the flood. Noah began preparing and building the ark when the skies were still sunny. Christ is warning the people to be prepared which is not only one of the central themes of Advent, but also of the Christian life. No matter how many people try to “predict” the end times, there is no reason to stress if we are living in right relationship with the Lord. This is one of the reasons that the ark was compared, by the early Church Fathers and so many saints, to the Church:

“The contemporaries of Noah would not believe in his warnings as he was building the Ark, and thus they became frightful examples for all posterity. Christ our God is now building His Church as the Ark of Salvation, and is calling upon all men to enter it” (St. Augustine).

“There is no entering into salvation outside the Church, just as in the time of the Flood there was no salvation outside the Ark which denotes the Church” (St. Thomas Aquinas).

WORD PLAY

The phrase, *“therefore, stay awake”* spoke of Christ’s coming on multiple levels. This was not only a historical signal to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but also a reminder of Christ’s second coming in glory. Additionally, we must have the eyes to see Christ among us and before us in the Eucharist, living a life of sanctity and worthiness before approaching the altar. In the same way, some saints saw Advent celebrating the threefold coming of Christ in the manger, at the end of time, and upon the altar.

JOURNAL

1. What battle are you fighting right now? Is it a battle against sin? A fight with a friend? A disagreement with parents? In what ways is God calling you to ask for His help?
2. If Jesus were to come again right now, would you be ready?
3. What is something in your life that you must get rid of in order to be ready for Jesus’ second coming? How can you get rid of it?
4. What is the armor of light? How can you use it to fight off sin and evil?

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK

This week St. Paul, in the second reading, asked you to put on the armor of light to fight off sin and evil. One piece of the armor is the rosary. Saint Padre Pio referred to the rosary as a spiritual weapon. Pray the rosary (or a decade) every day this week. As you pray, really focus on how God will deliver you from the battle you are in.

LONG TIME COMING

2nd Sunday of Advent

OPENING PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit. Give me the grace to trust the Lord's promises and the courage to cooperate with His will. Father, I surrender to you all of my fears, doubts, and insecurities so that I can serve you to the best of my ability. Open my heart as I dive into your Word so that I may realize how good and faithful you are. Amen.

1ST READING: Isaiah 11:1-10

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17

2ND READING: Romans 15:4-9

GOSPEL: Matthew 3:1-12

BEYOND WORDS

Prophecy is a tricky thing. Far more than some kind of divinely inspired “fortune telling,” the prophets were ordinary people called to share extraordinary things. Many of the prophecies that God entrusted to His holy mouthpieces were speaking of truths both in the present and for the future. The words from today's first reading, however, demonstrate a promise God makes and communicates through Isaiah that would take a long time to come to fruition ... centuries, in fact.

God may not act on our timeline, but He does act. Our heavenly Father may not fulfill all of His promises during your lifetime, but He will fulfill them. This is why St. Paul can write with such certainty in the second reading to the Romans. God's Word is supposed to bring us encouragement and foster endurance for this Christian walk we are living. Just as John the Baptist pointed us ahead to Jesus' arrival and our ultimate judgment, so the Church echoes our need to spread and share the Gospel with any and all we encounter so that, indeed, the world

“The earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD.”

“shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:9). His prophecies might take time to unfold, but that time allows the rest of us to share the Good News with even more souls before Christ returns.

RANDOM FACT

You might hear Isaiah say the “child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy” (Isaiah 11:8-9) and be a little confused. Why is some baby hanging out in an adder’s (a small poisonous snake) den to begin with? Some scholars have noted that when in the darkness of their den a cobra’s eyes are wide and sparkle from the exterior light. Such a sight would entice a child to reach in. The verse is intended to imply that when the Messiah comes no harm from a serpent will come to a child. We, children, will have nothing more to fear of the great serpent, Satan, that seeks to destroy us when we are in Christ.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Anyone remotely versed in the Old Testament knows well the importance of the Jordan River. It was where Abram and Lot parted company, where Jacob/Israel wrestled with God, and it was through the Jordan that the wandering Israelites would take Jericho en route to securing the Promised Land. What many do not realize, however, is that this Gospel story of a prophetic calling and empowerment beside a river echoes a scene with the prophet Ezekiel. He was commissioned by God beside the River Chebar where there was also a heavenly vision, the voice of God and a Spiritual reception (Ezekiel 1:1, 2:1-2). Jesus is the new Ezekiel, being sent as a new voice and prophet to the new Israel in a way old Israel (and those familiar with its history) would have recognized.

WORD PLAY

When you read St. Matthew's Gospel (as we will all year, now that we are in Cycle A) you'll notice the phrase "*kingdom of heaven*" proclaimed quite a bit. In fact, if one were looking for the signature phrase the Holy Spirit poured through St. Matthew's Gospel, this would be it. Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven" over 30 times in his 28 chapters. The phrase is far too deep to unpack here, but it might help to think of "the kingdom of heaven" as the Kingdom of God being established on Earth. The goal of the Church is to establish and fulfill the will of God on Earth "as it is in heaven."

JOURNAL

1. Do you regularly invite the Holy Spirit into your life? What gift do you particularly need right now?
2. Is there an area of your life that you haven't given to the Lord? Why? Are you afraid that He won't take care of it?
3. Who is God calling you to share the Good News with? How can you improve your relationship with that person in order to improve their relationship with Christ?
4. What does hope mean to you? Why is it an important part of the Christian faith?

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK

Try to see this week through the lens of hope. Hope helps us recognize and give thanks for the good parts of our day, while providing consolation through the bad parts. Although some promises take longer than others to fulfill, hope allows us to realize how present God is in our lives. He is constantly working in our waiting.

LET IT BE

Immaculate Conception

OPENING PRAYER

Lord, your brightness shines within all those who love you. You are my sword and shield. You defeat evil with the light that shines forth from you. Jesus be my armor. Help me put on the armor of light, that I may be able to fight for you. Amen.

1ST READING: Genesis 3:9-15, 20

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4

2ND READING: Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

GOSPEL: Luke 1:26-38

BEYOND WORDS

Sometimes we say “yes” to something without any idea of the consequences or rewards that it will bring. What might seem like a simple, “Yes, I can help you move,” can turn into a full day (or even weekend) commitment, or, “Yes, let’s stay out late” can lead to trouble (and a rough morning). Other times we say “yes” to a service project and find out that we seemingly receive much more than we give. Our ability to make decisions is powerful and can have far reaching impacts (both good and bad).

This week’s readings are about choices and the far-reaching impact they can have. In the beginning of human history, two people made a choice. These people — Adam and Eve — choose to disobey God rather than listen. Just prior to this reading in Genesis, we see Adam and Eve encounter a spiritual being who convinces them that God’s will for them is not good. They believe it and choose to follow their own will rather than stay in a relationship with God. Because humanity has disobeyed God and refused to follow God’s law, death becomes a reality and

their “yes” to this disobedience creates havoc in its aftermath: We were separated from God and our relationship was broken.

In the Gospel we hear about another encounter a woman has with a spiritual being. But, this time, the outcome is different. God invites this woman, Mary, to be obedient to His will so that God can undo what our sin has done. Mary says, “yes” to becoming the mother of Jesus and her consent has far reaching consequences. In this moment, the world changes. God becomes human and begins His mission of salvation.

Two situations, two choices — one brings death and one brings life. We are given Mary as a model and example of what it looks like to respond to God’s will in a way that brings life. God wants to do great things through our lives — as St. Paul reminds the Ephesians of this in the second reading. God wants us to be holy and has chosen us to be a part of his family. We have the choice to respond in obedience and experience the great things God has in store, or to refuse and accept the consequences of separation.

RANDOM FACT

The archangel Gabriel appears three times in the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament he appears to the prophet Daniel to explain visions. In the New Testament, Gabriel appears to Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist) and to Mary.

BEHIND THE SCENES

The greeting that the archangel Gabriel uses for Mary is unique. The word that we translate into “full of grace” is only found in this single place in the New Testament. It is not a greeting used in the Old Testament in the same way it is applied to Mary. It makes sense, then, that Mary would have been, in some way, “troubled” by what was said and wondered what this greeting meant. Mary would’ve been familiar with stories involving

angelic beings often bringing with them a major message or mission. Standing face-to-face with Gabriel would have been intimidating, to say the least.

Mary's response to Gabriel's declaration of her conception of Jesus seems to mirror the same exchange that Gabriel has with Zechariah earlier in the Gospel of Luke, but the results are different because the disposition of heart was different. Zechariah also questions how his wife might conceive, but instead of receiving an explanation he loses his voice. The request came from a place of doubt rather than a place of inquisitive trust. Mary's request for clarification prompts Gabriel to explain the role of the Holy Spirit so that she (and all of us) can understand the divine action that is taking place here of God's initiative — not the action of any other event.

WORD PLAY

The response of Mary is to say, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). This is commonly referred to as “Mary’s *fiat*,” because the words “be done” are translated from the Latin verb “*fiat*.” The word also appears in the Lord’s Prayer and during Jesus’ agony in the garden.

JOURNAL

1. Where are you currently living outside of God's commandments or laws? Are there areas where you are not following God's will? Why?
2. In what ways is God inviting you into something great? How does God want to use your “yes” to do more in your life?
3. What “great things” do you think God wants to do in your life?

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK

This week, go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We all step outside of God's law for our lives sometimes and refuse to be obedient to His will, choosing our own above His. The Sacrament of Reconciliation gives us the opportunity to restore our relationship — it is saying “yes” to living in God's will and allowing God to do great things in us.

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a full copy of Ascend today!