

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 this ***Ascend*** follows 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*.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

1st Sunday of Advent / Dec. 3, 2017



“He will keep you firm to the end.”

+ OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, thank You for today. For the mystery, hope, and joy that come in anticipation of all the good You have yet in store. Please be with us in all our anxieties. Teach us how to have faith in Your will for our future. Amen.

1ST READING: Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

2ND READING: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

GOSPEL: Mark 13:33-37

+ BEYOND WORDS:

We are a culture terrible at waiting. We are a microwave, ATM, movies on-demand kind of society. We are a text-happy, push notification people with express checkout and overnight delivery. We are a fast food culture, but we sometimes forget that this God we love and serve most often moves at a crock-pot pace. This is painful for us, His impatient children. God doesn't mind keeping us waiting. One day for God is like a thousand "human" years (2 Peter 3:8).

With Christmas fast approaching, it gets more and more difficult to "wait" on the coming of the Lord. We want the santa decorations put out before we've even had a chance to put the Halloween decor away. Saint Paul recognized this impatient, human longing; it's why he had to remind and encourage the Christians living in Corinth in this Second Reading to be patient. He implored them, "as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ... keep firm to the end... because God is faithful."

We can trust Isaiah's words in the First Reading, that the Lord will come in glory "for the sake of his servants." God will send us a redeemer precisely because He loves us! While we wait, we need to be patient, watchful, living our lives in such a way that we are ready for His return.

God doesn't tell us the *exact time* He will come, but that is precisely because He loves us. For if we knew the exact date, how many of us would live sinfully until the last day, only to repent at the last moment? Knowledge of God's exact plan and timing could breed even more sin than ignorance of God. In this way, we are reminded to keep watch, to always be ready, and to be patient with the Lord. Unlike the habits instilled by our modern culture, the best thing (God) is worth the wait.

Random Fact

The Psalm mentions the "cherubim" who are the second highest rank within the nine orders or "choirs" of angels. Double-winged and manlike in appearance (although in the book of Ezekiel, they are given an even more otherworldly appearance), they are the guardians of God's glory. The nine angelic choirs ranked, in order, are: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, archangels, principalities, and angels.

Behind the Scenes

As previously mentioned, two of the ongoing "themes" throughout Advent are the need for vigilance and the epic battle between the light and the darkness. Night is associated with darkness (for obvious reasons). The

Romans structured night into four “watches” of three hours apiece. Saint Mark references all four different watches in his account of Jesus’ passion, making use of common time-telling standards his Roman audience would have found familiar.

Word Play

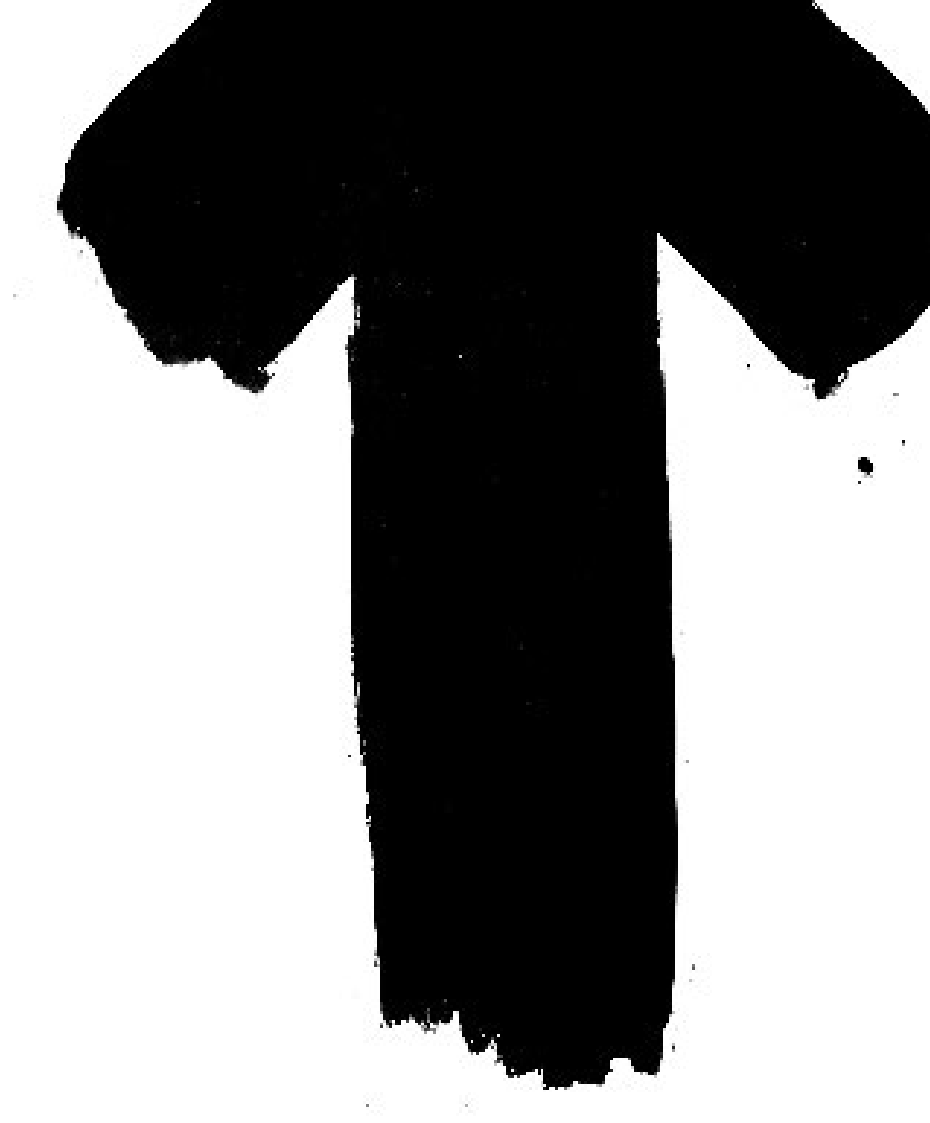
“**Be watchful**” is a popular theme during the Advent readings. In this time of anticipation and waiting, we must be vigilant – always keeping our eyes open for the coming Messiah. From the Greek *gregoreo*, keeping watch meant not only to be “on the lookout” but also to remain awake, even through the night (darkness).

+ JOURNAL:

1. Do you struggle to wait patiently? Why?
 2. What do you fear about the future? Why do you have this fear?
 3. How can you be more attentive to the moment at hand? Would this positively affect your life? Why or why not?
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+ CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

This week, when it best works practically, fast from knowing the time for an hour, afternoon, or day. Do not look at your phone or clock once. Embrace the given moment with complete presence of heart, mind, body, and spirit. Take the time to journal afterward about your experience and reflect on how you can try to make this practice of being fully present a more common occurrence in your life.



A VOICE CRIES OUT

2nd Sunday of Advent / Dec. 10, 2017



“Cry out at the top of your voice.”

+ OPENING PRAYER:

Thank You so much, Lord, for the peace that comes with the knowledge that You have already won the war for us. Please teach us how to continuously turn our eyes back to You for our every need, especially when we’ve fallen due to the lure of sin. Redeem our hearts as You have redeemed our souls. Thank You Lord, for Your love, today and always. Amen.

1ST READING: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 85: 9-10, 11-12, 13-14

2ND READING: 2 Peter 3:8-14

GOSPEL: Mark 1:1-8

+ BEYOND WORDS:

Anyone who has ever had a team in the championship game is familiar with the desire to trash-talk. You’ve watched your team beat opponents, survive the playoffs, and make it to the finals. Even if the opponent is bigger or better on paper, your confidence has you believing that your team has a fighting chance. Your hope leads to a certainty that is outwardly expressive. God’s people weren’t even in the championship game when Isaiah spoke and penned this First Reading. They weren’t even

winners in the earthly sense. In fact, they were actually in ruin. They were slaves, without a land to call home. They were scattered, weakened, and hopeless. They were not a team that would instill fear in an opponent, yet these were the people God sent Isaiah to inspire. God promised His people that they would be victorious, that He was with them, and that He already had a plan in the works. In a time of great timidity, God told them to be bold in proclamation, joy, and hope.

Saint Peter has this same sense of hope and boldness in the Second Reading. Even in the midst of persecution, Peter sees brighter days coming. He reminds the Church (and us) not to put God on our own timetable and to trust in His promises. He urges us to change our ways and live holy lives now instead of waiting... a theme continued within the Gospel account. John the Baptist proclaims that God is sending a redeemer to save us through a powerful new baptism. Because of this, all those with ears to hear should repent, and seek out holiness.

No matter how we have been doing in our faith journey, the season of Advent provides the opportunity to return to the Lord in the sacraments, reminding us we should be “eager to be found without blemish” as St. Peter encourages. These next weeks of Advent, our focus will demonstrate whether or not we seek our holiness as proactively as the Lord seeks us. With the aid of Christ’s grace, we will be victorious. The championship trophy will be ours if we are united with Him. Even if we can’t find confidence in ourselves, we should always have confidence in God. Raise your hearts to heaven with great gladness. Let your voices cry out to the God who never abandons us, and who lifts us to victory with His mighty arm.

Random Fact

Locusts are considered kosher or “clean” insects for the Jewish people to eat. Eating unclean animals was forbidden and clearly spelled out in Leviticus but since God had deemed locusts clean and edible, John the Baptist’s consumption of them demonstrated he was faithful to God’s covenant law.

Behind the Scenes

This Gospel passage with John the Baptist is clearly designed to evoke images of the mighty prophet Elijah during his earthly ministry. Where does John the Baptist baptize? The Jordan River. Where did the prophet Elijah ascend into heaven by chariot? The Jordan River. What does 2 Kings tell us Elijah wears? A haircloth and leather belt. What does St. Mark list as John the Baptist's wardrobe of choice? A haircloth and leather belt.

The allusions are not accidental and can easily be taken as literal (as many scholars attest to being valid). Animal skin pelts were normal and customarily worn by prophets during Old Testament times. Identifying John the Baptist in the same light as Elijah put the "modern" prophet and cousin of our Lord on par with historic heavyweights of Jewish history.

At the same time, this scene taking place at the Jordan River would not only have evoked memories of Elijah, but also of Joshua and the Israelites boldly marching through, en route to Jericho, as well as the healing of Naaman the Syrian from leprosy. These famous and historic stories of deliverance spoke of God's faithfulness and provided the perfect backdrop for the heralding of God's dawning salvation.

Word Play

"Hark, the _____ angels sing!" What's the first word that pops into your head? Herald. We sing it but do we really understand the word? A **herald** is an official messenger who brings important news. Isaiah uses the term to empower and challenge them and us to share this good news of God's redeemer, coming in power.

+ JOURNAL:

1. When you look at your future, do you see success or failure? Why?

2. Take a deep look within and ask yourself, "In what areas of my life do I feel as though I don't measure up to the best version of myself?"
3. Ask God, "What do I need to believe about myself - or You - in order to realize I am capable of being my best in those areas?"

+ CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

It's easy to sing holiday carols, but is your heart joyful enough about what God did (and does) through Jesus to actually share it with other people? Let this week be your answer.



PERFECTLY HOLY

3rd Sunday of Advent / Dec. 17, 2017



“In all circumstances, give thanks...”

+ OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, You are perfect. You are good. You are true. You created us in Your image and You desire us to see that we were made for friendship with You. Please help me to recognize that the path You have me on is the path to holiness – perfect holiness – in heaven with You. Amen.

1ST READING: Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11

RESPONSORIAL: Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54

2ND READING: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

GOSPEL: John 1:6-8, 19-28

+ BEYOND WORDS:

Do most modern Christians really want to be holy, or are they content to be “good enough”? Do you really seek holiness or do you still feel as though you can keep one foot in two camps? If you really, truly desire holiness, is there anything you can think of in your life that you could/should change?

What’s stopping you?

This week’s readings are a gut check for the Christian soul. In the Second Reading, St. Paul gives us very practical suggestions to aid us in our daily pursuits of holiness. We’re told to rejoice, to pray, to give thanks, to test everything, and to retain only what is good. We’re warned against quenching the Spirit, despising hard prophecies, and accepting any evil. Why? Because God doesn’t just want us to be holy, he wants us to be perfectly holy.

The initial reaction to that message is usually, “Ouch. Can’t I just be ‘good enough,’ God? That’s still better than most!” Isaiah answers this question in the First Reading. This is not a rags-to-riches story. God doesn’t just want to make small strides with us; God wants to take us from rags and ruins and make us royalty. We are the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, and prisoners. And God wants to give us a robe, a crown, and jewels. How will God accomplish such an audacious task? By sending us the only One who can rescue us: Himself. We can be made perfectly holy by virtue of our relationship and intimacy with the One who is perfect holiness. This is why we have reason to rejoice on this Gaudete (Latin for “rejoice”) Sunday of Advent. Why settle for “good” when you can be perfect? Say goodbye to the rags, for the Lord is offering you the riches.

Random Fact

This week’s Responsorial Psalm is not actually from Psalms but, rather, from the Gospel of Luke. Mary’s utterance – the Magnificat – is otherwise known as a canticle, which is a hymn or chant (usually from Scripture) that acts as a song of praise. Very rarely does the Responsorial Psalm at Mass (which follows the First Reading) ever come from a book other than Psalms.

Behind the Scenes

The Holy Spirit is mysterious. Much like the wind, while we cannot physically “see” the Holy Spirit, we can see the Holy Spirit’s power, effect, and presence in the world around us. Still, when we read St. Paul’s writings, we see that the early Church’s comprehension and understanding of the Holy

Spirit, His role, and ultimate power are still being “worked out” by most.

This Second Reading, to the Church in Thessalonica, is a perfect example. Saint Paul uses a phrase like “do not quench the Spirit,” but what all does that mean, exactly? Well, as is often the case in Scripture, the answer lies in the verses that immediately precede and follow. If we “pray without ceasing” we will constantly be aware of the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit around us. Discernment becomes far easier if we are always looking for ways and places that the Spirit may be guiding us or speaking to us. If we “test everything” it means we are discerning the situations before us to see if they fall in line with the Gospel teachings. By “retain(ing) what is good” we ensure that we are living in line with the will of God for us and not being led astray by our own sinful inclinations or the enemy, himself.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, in his “Commentary on St. Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians,” further explains that when we do not discern through the Spirit’s guidance, if we fail to use our God-given gifts to achieve His will or otherwise “impede” the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives or the lives of others, we have then *quenched* the Spirit.

Word Play

The First Reading promises us “**vindication** by our God.” An interesting word, *vindication* comes from the Latin *vindicare* meaning “avenged” or “claimed.” God was on a rescue mission. God, the original avenger, came to save us all from the destruction of sin.

+ JOURNAL:

1. Do you ever find yourself carrying a “poor is me” attitude? What holds you back from recognizing that you are capable of greatness?
2. What is one area of your life you struggle to see yourself as capable of greatness? Self-image? Ability?

Talent? Faith? Fill in the blank: “I struggle to see myself as a great _____.”

3. Right underneath that line in your journal, write out the following, “I am capable of greatness.” Then cross out the line above.

+ CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Anytime this week you are tempted to doubt that you are not capable of something good, something God is calling you to, take a deep breath and ask Him to intervene. Ask Him to send His Holy Spirit upon you to help you see clearly that you are capable of greatness – to see yourself as He sees you. He will give you what you need to accomplish the task He has set before you.



THE LORD IS WITH YOU

4th Sunday of Advent / Dec. 24, 2017



“Do not be afraid...”

+ OPENING PRAYER:

Thank You Lord for Your will. Thank You for teaching us to trust You in all things. No matter how hard it may be some days, please continue to give us the faith to believe in Your will as supreme for our lives. Amen.

1ST READING: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29

2ND READING: Romans 16:25-27

GOSPEL: Luke 1:26-38

+ BEYOND WORDS:

Imagine you are watching television and images of starving children come onto the screen. You are moved with pity and immediately decide to quit school or work to serve only the poorest, starving children. Everyone would praise you for such a noble sacrifice! You arrive at your new home and after a short time realize the work doesn't fulfill you. You weren't built for a third world country, you don't understand the culture or the language, and you are painfully homesick. Picture yourself wishing you'd stayed home and instead given money to missionaries who serve these sick children. Would you be “angry” with God for

not blessing your spontaneous mission? Why?

God pays for what *He orders*. For what He orders, yes, but not for what we order and put on God's tab.

This analogy is imperfect, but it serves to make a point. If God calls you to a foreign mission field, He will also equip you with the desire, temperament, ability, knowledge, passion, etc. to fulfill that vocation. We cannot, however, get annoyed with God if we put ourselves on a mission of our own making and then shake our fist at heaven if He doesn't bless it. He didn't ask for the mission to begin with.

In this week's First Reading, King David sets out to do something amazing for God. He wants to build God a house – a temple. The Lord has been dwelling in a tent for decades and now David wants to rightfully honor the Lord. Before he can lay the first stone in a majestic temple, however, God teaches the powerful king a lesson from which all of us can learn.

Who's in charge here, God or us? David is reminded, as we are, that if God doesn't call us to it, He won't bless it, no matter how noble the cause. God already had a plan for a perfect, everlasting temple/dwelling place. Not a house made by David, but a new temple named Mary, wed to a man “from the house of David.” God's plan, as St. Paul tells us in the Second Reading, was not reactionary; this plan was a “revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages.” God did not need David's favors, only his obedience. In this way, Mary's response to the angel is the perfect prayer: “May it be done to me according to your Word.” If you really want to please God, don't tell God what you're going to do *for Him* but, rather, what He desires for you.

Random Fact

We hear that King David's palace is “a house of cedar.” Cedar was the highest quality wood available and the material of choice for royalty and builders alike. Cedar wood was free of knots, incredibly durable, and gave off an aroma that eliminated the need for air fresheners

(which wouldn't be invented for another millennium or two). Cedar also repelled insects with its smell and taste. It was resistant to the fungus and disease that left other types of wood rotting after only a few years, thus saving money on both exterminators and future remodels.

Behind the Scenes

In today's Gospel, we hear the angel proclaim, "The Lord is with you" to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This phrase is not just a blessing; it's a warning and a reminder that what Mary is about to experience will be a thrilling and terrifying journey of faith. Many times, when we hear the promise of God's divine presence being with a person, danger follows.

Before Moses takes on the mighty Pharaoh, God promises, "...I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). As Joshua leads the Israelites into the battle of Jericho, God, again, promises, "...I will be with you" (Joshua 1:5). When Gideon takes on the Midianites and Amalekites, an angel promises him, "the Lord is with you..." (Judges 6:12). When David prepared to fight the mighty Philistine, Goliath, on an apparent suicide mission, King Saul utters, "...the Lord be with you" (1 Samuel 17:37).

When the appointed time had come, the God of the universe sent an angel to a tiny town called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a local carpenter. The angel greeted the handmaiden with what phrase? "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you..." (Luke 1:28).

And still today, at four points within every single Mass, the priest utters this blessing/warning to we, the modern faithful, to remind us of God's presence and of the beautiful danger and mystery of the Mass we are about to take part in, and the world we are about to enter back into.

Word Play

The word **handmaid** used by Mary in St. Luke's Gospel is powerful on many levels. From the Greek and, later, Old English, a handmaid is simply "a female servant."

Mary's decision and consent to become the Mother of God is overshadowed not only by the Holy Spirit but by her immense humility, recognizing and professing that, although she has been picked by God for this unfathomable honor, she is but a humble servant.

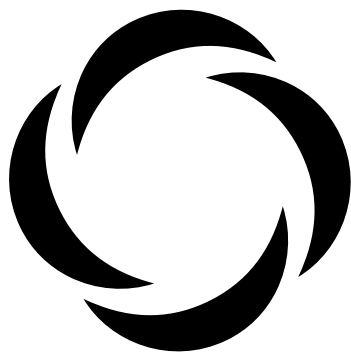
+ JOURNAL:

1. Is it easy to trust that God has a plan for your life that is greater than your own? Why or why not?
2. When is it especially hard to trust God's plan for you? Why?
3. We are reminded at every Mass that the Lord is with us. When is it hard to recognize that this is true? When is it easy?
4. How can you remind yourself of His profound presence in your daily life?

+ CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

At the beginning of each day this week, offer this simple prayer with your whole heart: "May it be done according to Your Word." In the evenings, take time to reflect on how that experience of offering your entire day went. Was it easy to offer your day to the Lord? Did you forget? Did it change how you viewed the actions of your day? Each night, use these questions to spark a conversation with the Lord.





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