

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.

This companion is designed to help you dive more deeply and purposefully into sacred scripture. *One Sunday at a Time* offers reflections based on the Sunday and holy day of obligation readings for Mass. We are offered 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.

One Sunday at a Time is designed to help you listen and remember. 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. The calendar dates of the Sundays, holy days of obligation, and other feasts for the most current Liturgical Year A as determined by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops are available at uscbb.org. Every week provides the citations for the readings so you can look them up in your own Bible or online. If you commit to using this companion—if you make the time to read and reflect, even just one Sunday at a time—your life will be blessed and your Mass experience will never be the same.



Included within each Sunday is an opening prayer, some background information about the scriptures for the week, word definitions, facts about the narratives, 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. And don’t dismiss the titles for each Sunday. They’re meant as quick phrases to help jog your memory throughout the week. Use them as your week’s focus—as easy summaries of God’s message.

You can use *One Sunday at a Time* as a personal companion on this journey, or you can gather with a group to discuss the readings and background information as a community. Try using it with your family, especially if you are a parent who is often too busy wrangling children during Mass to even have a chance at hearing the Word of God. Maybe you’re a minister or priest looking for content to feed your talks and homilies. This is the perfect resource for you, too.

This year, God wants to speak to you through sacred scripture. The Church is inviting us reconsider the simplicity of being spiritually fully present for Mass. This resource will help you make your journey with God one Sunday at a time. Even just once a week, preparing your heart to fully engage at Sunday Mass means you can encounter the Source of all love, whom we know as God. Your journey begins on the pages that follow. It’s time to stop overthinking your spiritual life and start living in harmony with the liturgy of the Church. It’s time to take it *one Sunday at a time*.





ADVENT



Put on the Armor of Light

First 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.

First Reading: Isaiah 2:1–5

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 122:1–2, 3–4, 4–5, 6–7, 8–9

Second 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” (Rom 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 reminding us 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.

RELATED FACT

Oftentimes 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 such as 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 one of the central themes not only 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 AD 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 spouse? A disagreement with extended family or coworkers? 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’s 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. St. 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.

Knowledge of the LORD

Second 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.

First Reading: Isaiah 11:1–10

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 72:1–2, 7–8, 12–13, 17


Second 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 holy 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's 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 “shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord”



(Is 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.

RELATED FACT

As you hear Isaiah say that the “child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy” (Is 11:8–9), you may 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, the children of God, 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 (see 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” more than thirty times in his twenty-eight 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 spiritual 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.