

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

December - 2015

The following series is **free, downloadable small-group materials** based on each week's Mass readings and taking into account the seasons of the liturgical year. Each study provides an introductory reflection on some aspect of the readings or on personal spirituality. Each of the readings is provided along with a few questions designed to engage the heart and stimulate the group's discussion. These small-group materials will be provided on a continuing basis in monthly segments.

We would suggest the following 60-to-90 minute format for the small group:

1. Open with a moment of quiet reflection and prayer.
2. Discuss the introductory reflection with a question or comment like, "What do you feel is important for us to grasp in this introduction?" or "What stood out to you from these opening paragraphs?" As the facilitator of the discussion be ready to share one or two things which were important to you from the introduction.
3. Have someone read the First Reading and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions. **Effective group-dynamic techniques should be used to further stimulate the discussion and affirm the participation.**
4. The Responsorial Psalm provides a reflective transition from the First Reading to the Gospel Reading, so have the Psalm read aloud. You may do this without additional comment, or you may want to draw their attention to something you feel is pertinent.
5. You can either read this week's Second Reading next and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions, or cover the Second Reading after you cover the Gospel Reading. The Second Reading does not always have a clear connection to the other Sunday Mass readings, **so do not feel like you need to force a connection.** However, you can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw a connection by asking, "How do you see this passage tying into the theme of the readings?"
6. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.
7. Approximately equal time for discussion should be given to each of the sections: Introduction, First Reading, Gospel Reading, and the Second Reading. Obviously, if one section is especially stimulating, you should give some additional time to discussing it.
8. Close the discussion with group prayer, using various prayer formats.

We trust that God will use these materials to make His Word more meaningful to you, both within the small group environment and during Mass as you hear the Scripture is read and taught. **We would appreciate knowing if you are using the *Reflecting on Sunday's Readings*, and would welcome your feedback, either through the Emmaus Journey web page form, or by direct e-mail.**

Sincerely in Christ,

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Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT—December 6, 2015

Introduction: “Pre-evangelism” is a modern ministry term that refers to the biblical process of preparing people to receive the Good News of Jesus and the salvation available through him. In one sense it is very much like the agricultural process of preparing the soil to receive seed so that the seed has the optimal chance of germinating and springing into life. The farmer prepares the soil by plowing, tilling, and adding various soil supplements, depending on the condition of the soil. This process takes time, energy and money, however without proper soil preparation much seed would be wasted and the harvest greatly diminished.

John the Baptist was a herald of Jesus’ arrival on the scene and history of man’s salvation. John’s austere life and straightforward proclamations prepared the way for the appearance of Jesus and the starting of his ministry. John was involved in “pre-evangelism” long before the term was coined, for he conditioned hearts to be receptive to the arrival of the Lamb of God, and Jesus’ work of salvation. Consequently, when Jesus presented himself to John to be baptized, several of John’s disciples were prepared to follow Jesus, ultimately becoming his disciples. Because of John’s preparatory work the seed of Jesus’ words fell on the receptive soil of their hearts, bringing forth both growth and fruit.

We know that Christ has come, that’s what we celebrate during this season of Advent. However, there dwells in our midst many people for whom Jesus’ coming does not exist. Though they may know his name and even use it when cursing, they don’t know who he is, they do not comprehend what he has done for them, and they have never encountered him personally. Many are bruised and battered by life, cynically rejecting the Truth, and steeling themselves against further hurt, they remain unreceptive to the seeds of Truth.

Like the people of John the Baptist’s day people need a herald to awaken their hearts to the Good News. As Pope Paul VI points out “Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live.” (Evangeli Nuntiandi, 21) Like the farmers soil, people need someone who cares enough to gently break up the fallow ground of their hearts by their living witness, so that it can receive the seeds of Truth.

The season of Advent is a prime time to begin this process with people we know. Advent lends itself to being friendly and expanding relationships. Casual conversations about Christmas plans, feelings, and traditions can easily overflow into a gracious and non-threatening sharing with others the real meaning of Christmas for us. Little kindnesses and thoughtful, unexpected acts of grace-filled giving can soften and melt hearts steeled by life’s hurts, communicating love, care and concern. We not only can be, but must be, heralds of Jesus especially during this season of Advent. Who knows? Perhaps God will use us in this season to herald his coming to a friend or family member who will hear him, for the first time.

First Reading — Baruch 5:1-9

¹ Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on for ever the beauty of the glory from God. ² Put on the robe of the righteousness from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting. ³ For God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven. ⁴ For your name will for ever be called by God, “Peace of righteousness and glory of godliness.” ⁵ Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height and look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east, at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them. ⁶ For they went forth from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne. ⁷ For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. ⁸ The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God’s command. ⁹ For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

1. This passage speaks of the joyful return of captive Israelites to Jerusalem and to the community of those who gather around the word of the Holy One. How would you describe to someone who is living in spiritual captivity, the transformation available to them in Christ?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 126:1-6

¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. ² Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” ³ The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb! ⁵ May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy!

⁶ He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

Second Reading — Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

⁴ ...always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ... ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

2. What part do you think our prayers play in another’s spiritual growth?

Gospel Reading — Luke 3:1-6

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; ³ and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

3. What do you think John the Baptist was doing in the wilderness? Does his experience have any application for us?

4. Isaiah prophesied of John the Baptist’s crying out in the wilderness. What do you think is the wilderness of our society?

5. How would you restate John’s message of preparation, and promises, so that people today would understand and respond?

Responsorial Reading — (Ps) Isaiah 12:2-6

²“Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” ³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

⁴And you will say in that day: “Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name; make known his deeds among the nations, proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵“Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. ⁶Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

Second Reading — Philippians 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

⁵Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. ⁶Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

3. How does prayer, supplication and thanksgiving transform our anxieties into peacefulness?

4. How do you think the peace of God is expressed or experienced in one’s life?

Gospel Reading — Luke 3:10-18

¹⁰And the multitudes asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹And he answered them, “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.” ¹²Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³And he said to them, “Collect no more than is appointed you.” ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

¹⁵As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, ¹⁶John answered them all, “I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.

5. In verses 10-14 John expresses several behavioral changes. What corresponding change in attitude is necessary to sustain these behavioral changes?

6. What do John’s statements in verses 15-17 intimate about the nature of Jesus and his ministry?

5. Explain as best you can your understanding of what sacred Scripture and the Church teach about the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT—December 20, 2015

Introduction: Since this Fourth Sunday of Advent falls close to Christmas, quite naturally our minds and energies may be focused on the upcoming Christmas celebrations, family gatherings, and traditional remembrances. We will need to be watchful and observant this week and during Mass to not let our minds wander from the wonder of the miraculous to the minutia of the mundane.

The Incarnation of Christ is so filled with the miraculous that it is difficult for us as we meditate on one aspect of it to not be immediately awed by some corresponding wonder. Certainly we are dazzled by the immediate, profound, and joyful surrender of Mary, the humble handmaiden of God. Her simple trust and willingness to say yes to God's will in the face of the societal consequences which faced an unwed mother, should astound any reasonable observer. "But Mary" as Pope Paul VI observed, "is above all the example of that worship that consists in making one's life an offering to God. This is an ancient and ever new doctrine that each individual can hear again by heeding ... the very voice of the Virgin as she, anticipating in herself the wonderful petition of the Lord's Prayer—'Your will be done'—replied to God's messenger: 'I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me' And Mary's 'yes' is for all Christians a lesson and example of obedience to the will of the Father."

Yet even as we contemplate the wonder of Mary's response our thoughts are eclipsed and dazzled more intensely by the humble submission of the Son to the Father. He who participated as co-creator of the universe and who was perfectly united with the Father, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, willingly surrendered all rights, and humbly embraced a body prepared for him. Though he knew that his body was to be a living sacrifice that once for all would remove the effects of sin and death, yet he in willing cooperation says, "I have come to do Thy will." We stand awed to consider that the Almighty Lord would visit earth in the form of a helpless, totally defenseless and dependent, babe. We are astounded that the Ruler of the Universe would submit to the constraints of so flawed a society of man. We are amazed that he whose appearance is described as "the hair of his head was as white as wool or as snow, and his eyes like a fiery flame, his feet were like polished brass refined in a furnace, and his voice like the sound of rushing water," (Rev. 1:15) would encapsulate his glory in human flesh so that we might know him and know of his love for us. Amazing grace!!

The wonder of Jesus' incarnation is explained by Romano Guardini in the book *The Lord*: "At first a child like any other, it cries, is hungry, sleeps, and yet is 'the Word...become flesh.' It cannot be said that God 'inhabits' this infant, however gloriously; or that heaven has set its seal upon him, so that we must pursue it, suffer for it in a manner sublimely excelling all other contacts between God and man; this child is God in essence and in being ... The young creature in the stall of Bethlehem was a human being with human brain and limbs and heart and soul. And it was God. Its life was to manifest the will of the Father: to proclaim the sacred tidings, to stir mankind with the power of God, to establish the covenant, and shoulder the sin of the world ... and the victory of the Resurrection into the new existence of grace."

It is no wonder that the baby in Elizabeth's womb jumped for joy, or that Elizabeth, full of the Holy Spirit, and tapping into the wisdom of God, should proclaim "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" As we kneel in adoration and expectation on this Fourth Sunday of Advent may God grant us similar insight, allowing our hearts to also "jump with joy."

First Reading — Micah 5:1-4

¹Now you are walled about with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike upon the cheek the ruler of Israel. ²But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

³Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth; then the rest of his brethren shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth

1. What insight does this prophesy of Jesus' birth give you regarding our relationship with him?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 80:1-2, 14-15, 17-18 (NAB: Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19)

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou who leadest Joseph like a flock!

Thou who art enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth ² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh!

Stir up thy might, and come to save us! ...

¹⁴ Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, ¹⁵ the stock which thy right hand planted. ...

¹⁷ But let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, the son of man whom thou hast made strong for thyself!

¹⁸ Then we will never turn back from thee; give us life, and we will call on thy name!

Second Reading — Hebrews 10:5-10

⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, ‘Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,’ as it is written of me in the roll of the book.” ⁸ When he said above, “Thou hast neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, “Lo, I have come to do thy will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.

¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

2. How does this passage help re-define God’s expectation for Israel and for us?

Gospel Reading — Luke 1:39-45

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

3. What are the reasons for which Elizabeth proclaims Mary blessed?

4. How important in your life is Mary’s example of submission and trust? Where do you feel a similar call to surrender?

5. What can we do to restore the wonder and awe of Jesus’ incarnation?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY—December 27, 2015

Introduction: Tracing one's genealogy, the study of human descent through family lines, is an occasional fad for some and an intense preoccupation for others. The quest to ascertain where we came from and to whom we are related is made more poignant by the isolation people experience, and by the family disintegration we see in our society. It is fun, and can be helpful to understand our family roots, for they can show us not only our lineage but give insight as to why we function as we do. In one sense history is a simple and natural compilation of family relationships. Men and women have become great and/or infamous because of the contributions of their family, or in some cases in reaction to their family.

Pope John Paul II taught that, "Since human beings are made 'through love' and 'for love,' and because love is 'the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.' This vocation is the heart of marriage and the heart of the family. Confirmed for Christians in the redemption won by Christ's self-sacrificing love, the demands and obligations of family life are liberating, not confining." When this love is present it can make the most impoverished home rich, and when it is absent the most opulent home becomes impoverished.

Most families love photo albums. When we flip through the picture pages of our children, their mates, and our grandchildren, we enjoy again the various joyful stages of family life. This week's gospel reading is like a page from a family photo album giving us insight into Jesus' family life, where Mary and Joseph, the Holy Family, provided just such a home of love for Jesus. Of course the Holy Family's home of love didn't just happen by accident, and neither will ours. Before they embraced the marriage bonds Joseph and Mary embraced God and were devoted followers and servants of his. That is why they were able to survive, even before marriage, the strain on their relationship which was brought about by Mary's untimely pregnancy. But because Mary was following God wholeheartedly she readily said yes to the Holy Spirit's call. Because Joseph was a just and holy man he not only set about to deal with Mary and this unexplained development in a loving way, but when he recognized that this prophecy was of God, he too wholeheartedly followed God at all cost. Their lives give us insight as to how we can similarly be a holy family. Loving, holy people make loving, holy families. This begins not with the first "I do" of the marriage ceremony, but with previous "I do's" to love and follow God at all cost.

As we look at this picture of Mary and Joseph's relationship with Jesus we see them relating to him in grace and freedom, and with respect and concern. In addition, we see Jesus living in a responsive and submissive relationship fruitfully growing in this environment of love. That is what a holy family is all about. It should be a mini-picture of the Church and of our relationship with Christ and with his people. It should be redemptive in nature, a place where forgiveness and reconciliation are commonplace. It should be revelational in manner, where insight into the nature and character of Christ is not only taught verbally but is demonstrated by the behavior of the members, starting with the parents. As Pope John Paul II explains, "Men, for their part are called to live their fatherhood as an icon of the very fatherhood of God."

Our family trees may have a few broken or diseased branches, and perhaps our own family did not begin on the solid foundation of total commitment to God. But don't be discouraged, through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit we can begin afresh today to emulate the Holy Family and build our family into a redemptive, revelational environment that is holy to the Lord.

First Reading — Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14

² For the Lord honored the father above the children, and he confirmed the right of the mother over her sons.

³ Whoever honors his father atones for sins, ⁴ and whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure. ⁵ Whoever honors his father will be gladdened by his own children, and when he prays he will be heard. ⁶ Whoever glorifies his father will have long life, and whoever obeys the Lord will refresh his mother; ...

¹² O son, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; ¹³ even if he is lacking in understanding, show forbearance; in all your strength do not despise him. ¹⁴ For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and against your sins it will be credited to you.

1. How are lives affected by the behavior of previous generations according to this passage?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 128:1-5

¹ Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways! ² You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.

³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

⁴ Lo, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD. ⁵ The LORD bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!

Second Reading — Colossians 3:12-21

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, ¹³ forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

¹⁸ Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

2. Which characteristic listed above do you think is the primary strength, and which is the greatest weakness, of your immediate family?

Gospel Reading — Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹ Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom; ⁴³ and when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴ but supposing him to be in the company they went a day's journey, and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances; ⁴⁵ and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking him.

⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; ⁴⁷ and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ And when they saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." ⁴⁹ And he said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them. ⁵¹ And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man

3. How do you think Jesus' parents felt when they discovered that Jesus was missing?

4. What lessons can we apply from this snapshot into the lives of the Holy Family?

5. How could verse 52 be used as a blueprint for a child's development?