

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

February 2018

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

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—February 4, 2018

**Introduction:** My mother died at 97 years of age and it intrigues me to imagine the changes people of her generation have seen in their lifetime. Transportation has moved from horse and buggy to space travel; housing has experienced innovations that went from out-houses to multiple baths with conveniences like whirlpool tubs; kitchens have moved from open hearth to microwave; from vegetable cellars to refrigerator-freezers; from cooking supper to eating out, etc. etc. We live in the wonderful world of change! With all these wonderful technological innovations one would expect that our lives would become more enjoyable and more relaxed. Instead, we have become the most stressed filled generation of all time, and it only gets worse. Terms like “road rage” and “going postal” have become common place as have reports of disasters reeked on others by stress filled individuals.

Christians also, are not exempt from this stress and pressure. In addition to coping with all of these modern changes and the pressure life creates, they have added to their lives the demands of being and doing all that their faith requires. There is no shortage of well meaning individuals who through messages, books, and the electronic media lay one expectation after another on our plate, spelling out the many things we must do to be a faithful Christian. Consequently, we often feel pulled in many directions, running faster and faster, with less and less joy, trying to fulfill the expectations of others.

Jesus, being fully human, also lived amid considerable pressure. He experienced people besieging him for help in overcoming sickness, disease, demon possession, and the many ills of society. Multitudes followed him continually; some to listen and learn, while others, intent on tripping him up, listened to his every word only so that they could accuse him. Both the general population and Jesus' disciples conveyed expectations to him of what he should do and be. How did Jesus avoid succumbing to the stress and pressure life brought on him? Why did he not become angry and stressed-out?

First of all, Jesus maintained a life that was centered on the Father, and on doing his Father's will. This, singleness of purpose and desire to please the Father in everything, brought calmness in the midst of turmoil, and clear direction to his life. All other expectations were perceived and evaluated through this singular lens of the Father's revealed will.

Second, Jesus, being fully human, consistently took time to commune with God the Father through periods of private prayer. Out of these times of aloneness with the Father Jesus found direction, strength and determination to keep his saving mission. And for us also, it is in our moments of solitude with the Father that we are able to become anchored spiritually, to discover and re-discover who we are, why we are created, and how we should live. From these times of reflection and prayer come the life-giving relationship with the Father that enables us to go forth in peace, being peace bearers to those around us. That which Pope John Paul II stated in *On the Coming of the Third Millennium* remains true for us; “In order to recognize who Christ truly is, Christians, especially in the course of this year, *should turn with renewed interest to the Bible* ... In the revealed text it is the Heavenly Father himself who comes to us in love and who dwells with us, disclosing to us the nature of his only-begotten Son and his plan of salvation for humanity.”\*

\* *On the Coming of the Third Millennium*, an Apostolic Letter by Pope John Paul II (40).

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/020418.cfm>.

## First Reading — Job 7:1-4, 6-7

1. What word best describes Job's emotional condition?

## Responsorial Reading — Psalms 147:1-6

**Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23**

2. Compare Job's and Paul's sense of purpose.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Why did "preach the Gospel" dominate Paul's life?

**Gospel Reading — Mark 1:29-39**

4. What demands do you see placed on Jesus' life?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. When you experience stress and pressure, how do you cope?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Suggest several ways we can follow Jesus' example in verse 35.

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—February 11, 2018

**Introduction:** Jesus rightly earned the title, “Great Physician.” Again and again Jesus demonstrated his power and deity by confronting every disease presented to him with complete and thorough healing. Moved by compassion, Jesus confronted leprosy, blindness, congenital lameness, and even death was compelled to respond to Jesus’ power. He did not differentiate between the illnesses of Jew or Gentile, both alike received his loving touch. Though Jesus’ compassion was exceptional, and his healing in much demand, we do not get the impression that the physical wellbeing of people was Jesus’ primary concern. Today’s Gospel reading in Mark coupled with last Sunday’s reading, provide a composite of Jesus’ many acts of gracious healing. When the disciples arrived saying that “everyone is searching for you,” their statement sounded like a mild rebuke of Jesus, implying, “Come on get busy healing these people.” Yet Jesus was compelled to move on to other towns to preach the Good News. The very existence of this reality indicates that there is a greater tragedy than physical sickness; the tragedy of a diseased, spiritually sick soul, estranged from God.

Unlike Jesus, and very much like the disciples, we often see physical infirmities and suffering as the worst of evils. We also are greatly moved, and rightly so, by the plight of others’ physical grief. Unlike Jesus, and very much like the disciples, we often are oblivious to the greater human tragedy of a life lived apart from God.

Few of us are miracle workers, and only some are truly trained to help with physical healing of disease and infirmity. Still, we can and should provide comfort and aid to others during their times of physical duress. But when it comes to providing help and healing for those sick of soul and estranged from God we *can* bring healing power. Like the leper, we can relate the experience of our own spiritual healing, and more importantly we can introduce them to the “Great Physician,” Jesus.

Fr. Henri J.M. Nouwen in the book *With Burning Hearts*, captures the dilemma of our times; “We live in a world groaning under its losses ... It is a world of endless losses, and many, if not most, of our fellow human beings walk with faces downcast on the surface of this planet. They say in some way or another: ‘Our hope had been...but we lost our hope.’”<sup>1</sup>

Hope is a terrible thing to lose, and almost impossible to live without. It is not the affects of physical circumstances alone that rob people of hope, but the fear that their world and life are out of control, and they despair that nobody cares, and nobody has the power to do anything about it. Yet each week we participate in a celebration of the Savior Lord and receive him who is Hope personified, who has proven his love for us and his power to help. We are holding the antidote that can cure them of the poison of despair if we only will share it. As Nouwen explains, “We recognize him, but that recognition is not just for us to savor or to keep as a secret ... Go and tell. What you have heard and seen is not just for yourself. It is for the brothers and sister and for all who are ready to receive it. Go, don’t linger, don’t wait, don’t hesitate, but move now and return to the places from which you came, and let those whom you left behind in their hiding places know that there is nothing to be afraid of, that he is risen, risen indeed.”<sup>2</sup>

1-2 *With Burning Hearts*, by Fr. Henri J. M. Nouwen (pages 88, 81).

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday’s Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/021118.cfm>.

## First Reading — Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

1. Apart from the physical effects how do you think leprosy affected a person?



# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT—February 18, 2018

**Introduction:** Even as the Church uses the seasons of the liturgical year to make us conscious of Christ's presence, so in the Old Testament, God established the Sabbath, the Sabbath Year, and the Jubilee Year to interject his presence into the calendar of our lives. The Sabbath cycle of working six days and resting on the seventh, and the Sabbath Year cycle of working six years and allowing the land to lay fallow during the seventh year, are reminders not only of God's creation process but also God's creation purpose; to have a people lovingly devoted to him.

In a similar way, the Jubilee Year, celebrated every fiftieth year was designed to remind people of God's covenant of atonement. On the Day of Atonement, in the fiftieth year, the people's hearts were awakened with the blaring blast of trumpets announcing the Jubilee. The chief characteristic of this Jubilee Year was the proclamation and experience of freedom. People who had lost their ancestral lands had their lands restored; people who had become enmeshed in debt had their debts totally forgiven; people who had become enslaved through indentured servitude were released and set free to return to their homes and families; the land was left fallow for the year and people were free, free, free to turn their attention to God and his liberating deliverance.

Lent also calls us from the busy occupations of our lives to consider afresh not only the circumstances of our enslavement but also the liberating deliverance we have through Jesus' death and resurrection. The message of the Jubilee year both clarifies and amplifies the purpose of the Lenten Season. "Jubilees were also times of repentance. The deepest form of human liberation—liberation from the grip of sin and its effects—requires the acknowledgement and confession of sins. Confession leads to forgiveness, and forgiveness gives birth to the joy characteristic of the jubilee years."<sup>1</sup> These freedoms, restoration to the home land, debt forgiveness, and release from captivity, were all intended as a foreshadowing or sign of the future atonement and deliverance we would have as followers of Christ. Through him we can be restored to our intended homeland, the Kingdom of God; all the debt we owe because of our sinfulness is totally forgiven; in him, and through his power, we can be released from every enslavement.

Recently a prisoner was released from false imprisonment after serving twenty years for a crime he didn't commit. One can only imagine the joy he and his family experienced to have his supposed guilt wiped clean, his good name restored, to be united once again with his family, and to walk as a free man. What we would not be able to imagine would be his refusal to accept release and restoration, that would be beyond comprehension. Yet many of us foolishly refuse to accept restoration in exchange for estrangement. We refuse the joy of forgiveness in exchange for the weight of guilt. And we refuse the freedom and power of life in Christ in exchange for enslavement to sinful habits. Christ sets us free and Lent calls us to his life of freedom, liberty, and release. "Freedom," as John Paul II told an audience in Baltimore in 1995, "consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought."<sup>2</sup> Let's pray that God will enable us to fully grasp the meaning of his liberating sacrifice on our behalf, and exalt in learning to live a restored relationship with him.

<sup>1</sup> Source unknown

<sup>2</sup> *Witness to Hope*, by George Weigel, page 778.

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/021818.cfm>.

## First Reading — Genesis 9:8-15

1. Using a dictionary, or other resource, define "covenant". Where do you see yourself in this covenant between God and Noah?

**Responsorial Reading — Psalms 25:4-9**

**Second Reading — 1 Peter 3:18-22**

2. How are baptism and the incident with Noah and the flood similar and/or different? (If necessary go back and read the account in Genesis 6:1-9:17.)

**Gospel Reading — Mark 1:12-15**

3. What is the difference between temptation and sin?
4. How does Jesus' temptation experience help us?
5. What effect do you think Jesus' triumph over temptation at the beginning of his ministry had on his later life and ministry?
6. Explain what "repent" should signify for us today.

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT—February 25, 2018

**Introduction:** Perhaps you have heard of the man who wanted to test his wife's hearing. He stood some distance behind her and softly said, "Can you hear me?" Having received no answer, he moved closer and again whispered, "Can you hear me?" Again, having received no answer he moved right up behind her and softly said, "Can you hear me?" Finally, he heard his wife reply somewhat exasperatedly, "For the third time, yes!"

In some ways this story could be analogous of our communication with God. Often, we constantly check to see if he is listening in hopes that he will respond to our deep heartfelt needs and desires. In reality, not only is he hearing us, but he has spoken definitively if only we would listen to him.

Twice in the Gospels the Father spoke audibly regarding Jesus. The first time was at Jesus' baptism when the Father said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." What greater statement could God have made about his Son? This was a profound validation that Jesus was sent from God, and was in fact flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone, Emmanuel, God with us. In addition the Father states, before Jesus accomplished anything in his ministry, that unequivocally, the very nature of Jesus pleased him exceedingly well. For Jesus to please the righteousness of God in this exceptional way verifies that Jesus, within himself, fully met the Father's demands for holiness, righteousness, and goodness.

The second time the Father spoke audibly is recorded in this week's Gospel reading, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." This second audible statement from God the Father clarifies what the Father expects from us, what he sees as our primary responsibility. This message is equally profound in its simplicity. It is not obscured by a do list of responsibilities and behavioral expectations, but consist of one, simple command, "Listen to him." Therein is the essence of spirituality: having our heart, mind, and ears spiritually tuned to hear what he is saying?

These days of Lent should be a listening time for each of us. Could we not begin each day with a moment of quietness, praying Samuel's simple prayer, "Speak Lord, thy servant listens." Then as our day progresses, could we not keep our spiritual antenna tuned to his frequency, looking for him and his message in the simple experiences of our day. Would not he speak to us on our bed, in the night, if like Judah we could devoutly say, "My heart yearns for you in the night, my spirit earnestly seeks You." If we simply determined to actively develop the art of listening to Jesus, our lives would radically change, for the better. "A spiritual life requires discipline because we need to learn to listen to God, who constantly speaks but whom we seldom hear. When however, we learn to listen, our lives become obedient lives. The word *obedient* comes from the Latin word *audire*, which means 'listening.'"<sup>\*</sup>

Sociologists have indicated that it takes approximately fourteen days to break a habit, and approximately another fourteen days to establish a new habit. We have twenty-eight days left in this Lenten Season. If we begin this listening practice today, we can be well on our way to establishing a life giving habit of fulfilling the Father's intention for us, to listen to his Son.

\* *Making All Things New*, by Henri J.M. Nouwen, page 67.

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/022518.cfm>.

## First Reading — Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

1. What was the issue with which Abraham was being confronted?

2. Explain what it means to have an area of our life “withheld” from God. How should we deal with these areas when we discover them?

**Responsorial Reading — Psalm 116:10, 15-19**

**Second Reading — Romans 8:31-34**

3. How is Abraham’s experience a foreshadowing of the Father’s love?

**Gospel Reading — Mark 9:2-10**

4. How would you have responded if you had been in Peter, James, or John’s place?
5. What is the significance of Elijah and Moses’ appearance?
6. What is the most memorable experience you’ve had of hearing the message, “Listen to him”?
7. How do you think the nine disciples who were not invited to the mount with Christ felt?