

“Mahri Leonard-Fleckman sets an incredibly rich table for us to ponder the Sunday Scriptures, giving us a potent mix of biblical scholarship, prayer, and practical advice. She invites individuals and groups to sink deeply into the readings, to go beyond a surface study of the Scriptures in order to let them take flesh in their own lives and the lives of their communities. Her thoughtful instructions for group *lectio divina* challenge us to hear the many ways the texts open up to our sisters and brothers, inviting us into a world of bracing conversations.”

—Michelle Francl-Donnay  
Author of *Prayer: Biblical Wisdom for Seeking God*

“A biblical scholar accepts an invitation to lead a weekly study of the Sunday Scriptures in an active and gritty downtown parish. Mahri Leonard-Fleckman is the ‘expert’ but, as it turns out, so are the diverse participants from the neighborhood who share the Word of God and their lives with one another. *Ponder: Contemplative Bible Study* is the fruit of these encounters. This is a terrific resource for preachers and catechists, as well as for personally reflecting on and praying with the Sunday Scriptures.”

—Jude Siciliano, OP  
Preacher and editor, [PreacherExchange.com](http://PreacherExchange.com)

“Catholic laity have not always felt they had permission to interpret biblical texts. In *Ponder*, Mahri Leonard-Fleckman does better than grant permission: she empowers. Joining traditional Catholic spiritual practices of *lectio divina* and Ignatian contemplation with the fruits of modern critical biblical scholarship, Leonard-Fleckman equips readers with background knowledge and practical tools for their own deep engagement with the readings proclaimed at Mass each Sunday. Through contemplative practice grounded in dialogue and community, she invites readers to engage the Scriptures with mind *and* heart, curiosity and compassion.”

—Anathea Portier-Young  
Associate Professor of Old Testament, Duke Divinity School

“I strongly recommend *Ponder* not only for preachers but for all Christians regularly engaging the appointed scriptural texts in their Lord’s Day worship. Just as the author gracefully bridges serious scholarship with personal prayer in the context of a community of faith, so readers may learn to integrate heart and head in the encounter with God’s Word through attention to the process and insights of *Ponder*.”

—Jan Michael Joncas

Artist in Residence and Research Fellow in Catholic Studies,  
University of St. Thomas

“*Lectio divina* as a form of individual and communal prayer with the Scriptures has grown in popularity. This book will help those who wish to combine prayer based on the Sunday Scriptures with some study of the texts. Both prayer groups and individuals will welcome this book as they center their prayer on the Scriptures.”

—*The Bible Today*

“Here is an outstanding resource for studying the Sunday lectionary and, more importantly, for learning how *to pray* with the lectionary.”

—Frank J. Matera

Professor Emeritus, The Catholic University of America

# Ponder

CONTEMPLATIVE BIBLE STUDY  
FOR YEAR C

MAHRI LEONARD-FLECKMAN



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To the members of St. John's Bible Study,  
who prayed *Ponder* into being,  
and to all those who thirst for God's word.

*O God, you are my God—  
it is you I seek!  
For you my body yearns;  
for you my soul thirsts.*

*Psalm 63:2*



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In the summer of 2012, I attended my first international meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America. I was overwhelmed. The conference was held at Notre Dame—which seemed a formidable place at the time—and I was an introverted graduate student. I remember escaping down to the book exhibit one afternoon for a moment of quiet. As chance (or providence) would have it, I met Mary Stommes, the editor of *Give Us This Day*. She was kind and gracious, and after talking for a while, she invited me to write for the publication. That moment marked the beginning of my relationship with Liturgical Press, for which I am deeply grateful.

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# Introduction

## **Our Roots: St. John's Bible Study or "Neighborhood"**

To explain the goals and format of this Bible study, let me first describe its roots, the community from which it emerged. It began at St. John's Catholic Church, a mid-nineteenth-century parish that is known historically as the "mother church" of Worcester in central Massachusetts. It is a flourishing, gritty, downtown parish that draws a rich and diverse mix of people. Its mission is to serve the poor, and it hosts the largest daily soup kitchen in the city. St. John's also hosts thriving devotions, including its yearly Novena of Grace in Honor of Saint Francis Xavier, also called "The Lenten Retreat of the City of Worcester."

The rectory next door is a sprawling building that once housed priests in the diocese and now provides transitional sober housing for men. The setting for our weekly Bible study is the rectory dining room, a tired but dignified space. We gather at a well-worn table with old, wide, high-backed armchairs. The dining room sits just behind the Worcester train station, close enough that in summer evenings with the windows open, we have to shout to hear ourselves above the sound of trains pulling in and out. In the winter, the old furnace pumps out enough heat directly into the dining room to give us heat stroke, while the rest of the house remains drafty.

We gather after Mass on Tuesday evenings for one hour. Ours is a simple, drop-in, lectionary-based study that regularly gathers five to fifteen people. I provide a handout with the readings for the upcoming Sunday and some corresponding notes. Together, we pray with and then discuss one of the readings, sometimes two, then offer up communal prayers and go on our way.

The group that has been meeting for the past five years, in shifting forms and combinations, is a ragtag community, a mismatch of members. What unites us is our faith. Generally, we are Roman Catholic. Many of us would not rub shoulders outside the Bible study,

excepting perhaps sporadic handshakes in the pews. One member (Matthew) called our Bible study a “neighborhood” of bracing experiences and ideals, as distinguished from the “mutual admiration and unchallenged agreement” that so often marks the sameness of the people we choose to socialize with. “As it is with the neighborhood,” said Matthew, “so it is with the Bible study.”<sup>1</sup>

And so it is. When gathering each week, one never knows who will show up or what the discussion dynamics will be. Lord knows, sometimes the results aren’t pretty! Yet we come back and try again. We are conservative, liberal, and moderate. We range in age from our twenties to our eighties. We are blue collar and white collar, jobless, retired, and working. Over the years, some of our participants have had homes to live in and others have not. Some of us come with mental or physical illnesses or histories of addiction. Our pastor attends regularly to prepare for Sunday’s homily. And I, the Bible scholar, “lead” the group, but the term is loose. When I am unable to make it (which once lasted a full year while I was teaching out of state), other members step in and guide the group with only the aid of the weekly handout.

Over the years, some members of the St. John’s Bible Study have carefully collected these handouts in order to have a full, three-year set. Returning to earlier handouts years later, I find myself surprised by how much I gain from these notes and reflections, as if they were written by someone else. They have become a rich, ongoing treasure in my own personal prayer life. Now that these handouts have been gathered together into this series of books, I hope they may become a valuable resource in your prayer life too.

## The Format

To truly understand this study and the flexibility it offers to individuals or groups, I invite you to use your liturgical imagination. The format on the following pages is simple. Some would perhaps even

1. Matthew was reflecting on and quoting from Christopher Lasch’s *Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), in particular Lasch’s discussion of “communities” of like-minded people versus “neighborhoods” in which people meet as equals, without regard to race, class, or national origins (Lasch, 117, 119–21).

consider it simplistic, though this perception would be misguided. Most importantly, the simplicity of the format allows for freedom and independence of prayer and study. First, I provide the entirety of Sunday's readings so that participants have easy access to the texts without having to consult additional Bibles or missalettes. Only the psalm is missing, not because it is less important, but for issues of space. Having the readings easily accessible has proven invaluable in our own slightly chaotic parish, where the notion of ordering extra Bibles and somehow keeping them together in one space is daunting.

Under each reading are my commentary notes. These notes provide some basic background and information about the readings. The goal is not to lead readers into viewing the texts a certain way (in other words, my way), but to invite readers into their own deep knowledge of the texts, a kind of full-bodied understanding that I like to call "bone knowledge." Therefore, these notes are streamlined to create minimal mental clutter. They include historical and literary context, discussions of translation choices from the Hebrew or Greek (sometimes Aramaic), the broader contexts from the surrounding passages and books, and references to other Sunday readings. In these short summaries, I have distilled my own ideas, in consultation with commentaries and study Bibles, into what I consider to be the most pertinent information for a wide-ranging audience.

Finally, I include a section called "Ponder" that provides possible connections, essential ideas, or ongoing questions to consider from the texts. I have placed these last so as not to overly influence participants at the outset of the study; the goal is to refrain from reading them as long as necessary. This section, connected with the commentary notes below each reading, may be particularly helpful for those who lead the Bible study or are preparing to preach.

Together, the readings, notes, and "ponderings" provide a valuable yet simple tool for ongoing prayer and study. They also create a sort of Sunday missalette that some of our Bible study members take into the pews on Sunday for continued prayer and thoughtful preparation.

## **Union of Heart and Mind**

As for the core principle of this Bible study, it is simple: union of heart and mind. The study takes the words of Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* seriously: Scripture, "the force and power of the word of God," is so

great that it stands as “the church’s support and strength, imparting robustness to the faith of its daughters and sons and providing food for their souls. It is a pure and unfailing fount of spiritual life.”<sup>2</sup> This Bible study is, first and foremost, a practice in gaining intimacy with God through intimacy with our sacred texts. It is to learn to trust our ability to hear God speak to us with great love through Scripture, and to become increasingly comfortable opening our hearts and minds to hear God’s word. We gain this intimacy by full-bodied attention to the text, just as love of God calls for the full-bodied union of heart, spirit, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30).<sup>3</sup> Through prayer and study of Scripture, then, the goal of this study is that each of us knows, deeply and profoundly, that the Scriptures are “nourishment” which “enlightens” our minds, “strengthens” our wills, and “fires [our] hearts . . . with the love of God.”<sup>4</sup>

As a Hebrew Bible scholar,<sup>5</sup> I must admit that I find this distinction between “mind” and “heart” woolly. There is no word for “mind” in the Hebrew Bible, and in the ancient world there was little use for that messy jumble inside our heads. Rather, the ancient Israelites were an embodied people. Everything was rooted in felt experience, including thinking. When we read the term “mind” in our translated Hebrew Bibles, the literal term in Hebrew is most often “heart” or “spirit.” Sometimes it is even liver, intestines or “kidneys,” as in Psalm 26:2, which translates literally, “Examine me, LORD, and test me, search my kidneys and my heart.” According to this ancient people, the heart was the seat of all knowledge. Our intentionality and thinking, our

2. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965) 21, in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

3. The word for “mind” in Mark 12:30, *dianoia*, also translates as “intention” or “purpose.” Mark’s Gospel draws from Deut 6:5, which translates literally from the Hebrew as: “You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, with all your life force, and with all your muchness.” The Gospel adds “mind” to the list of faculties.

4. *Dei Verbum* 23.

5. I use the phrase “Hebrew Bible” rather than “Old Testament” intentionally. Though an imperfect expression, for me it reflects the reality that this inspired corpus of texts is considered holy for both Jews and Christians. As Christians, we use the expression “Old Testament” to reflect our commitment to both the Old and New Testaments. For Jews, we simply refer to “the Bible” or, more specifically, the Tanakh (the Torah or “teaching,” the Prophets, and the Writings).

ability to follow God's teachings comes from within our "inmost being," as knowledge "inscribed upon the heart" (cf. Jer 31:33).

In our contemporary world, saturated as it is with studies of the mind, mindfulness, and mental training, I find myself leaning back into this ancient worldview of the heart as the seat of knowledge (don't tell my neuroscientist husband!). Particularly in a Bible study focused on genuine connection to and understanding of the text, personal experience and prayer are crucial starting points. This heart-centered practice then leads to more careful, authentic reading and attention. In this Bible study, the movement from heart to mind often happens organically, the most thoughtful ideas and challenging questions emerging from a strong grounding in prayer. And this is not a practice that I subscribe to only with Bible study. I have found that even in my own more cerebral, scholarly work, some of the best intellectual questions and insights bubble up organically while marinating in heart-centered reflection.

## The Heart

That said, we begin our Bible study by praying with a Scripture text. This period sometimes takes twenty minutes; sometimes it leads to reflections that take up the majority of the hour. We choose one of the Sunday readings and, without introduction, read and pray with it together. Further below, you'll find the specific instructions that we use to guide our Bible study sessions. Here, I'll describe the two key forms of prayer that our group uses: *Lectio Divina* and Ignatian Contemplation.

### *Lectio Divina*

This ancient form of Christian prayer translates imperfectly as "Divine Reading." It is a tool for recollection, contemplation, and, ultimately, resting in God. In group *Lectio Divina*, we begin by having a participant read one of the Sunday texts aloud, slowly and prayerfully. (If done as personal prayer outside of a group, the person reads the text on their own in the same way, though with greater freedom to stop, linger, and contemplate or "chew" on any words, phrases, or images that come to mind.) As we listen for the first time in the group, we open our hearts to the text, listening as if we have never heard it before, entering into it with curiosity and imagination. Trusting that

the Holy Spirit guides us, we allow it to break open and speak to us. After the first read-through of the text and a moment of silence, we go around the room and share a word or phrase that especially struck us (we say *only* the word or phrase, without further explanation). Participants can always simply say “pass” when their turn comes. One of the gems that comes from this group practice is the creation of a prayer or litany in the repetition of certain words or phrases as we move around the room (again, without any additional commentary).

After this first read-through and response, we repeat, this time with a different voice. (It’s important to have distinct and diverse voices throughout the process.) This second person reads the same passage again, slowly and meditatively. As they do so, we continue to sink into the text, digesting it. Perhaps we linger on the word or phrase we heard in the first read-through of the text. Perhaps another insight presents itself to us. After another moment of silence following the reading, we may go around the room again and take turns offering heart-based reflections on how the text spoke to us, or we may simply open up the space for these reflections in a less-structured way, as participants feel pulled to speak.

Another way of describing “heart-based” here is “experience-based.” In other words, people speak from their *personal experience* of the text, saving the intellectual questions and ideas for later. Examples of experience-based reflections include what thoughts or feelings arose in the person while praying with the text, how the text spoke to them personally, how a particular phrase struck them, etc.

This process is a shortened form of group *Lectio Divina*, the full practice of which often includes three repetitions of the same passage: the first for hearing a word or a phrase, the second for listening for how God speaks to us, and the third for hearing an invitation, or how God calls or invites us to live and act. Sometimes, our group chooses to do a third reading of the same passage, but I have found that in a one-hour period, reading the selected passage twice is enough to ground us firmly enough in our hearts and personal experiences before moving on.

### *Further Resources*

Casey, Michael. *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*. Liguori: Liguori/Triumph, 1995.

# First Sunday of Advent

---

FIRST READING

JEREMIAH 33:14-16

The days are coming, says the LORD,  
when I will fulfill the promise  
I made to the house of Israel and Judah.  
In those days, in that time,  
I will raise up for David a just shoot;  
he shall do what is right and just in the land.  
In those days Judah shall be safe  
and Jerusalem shall dwell secure;  
this is what they shall call her:  
“The LORD our justice.”

Jeremiah lived from Judah’s golden age (late 600s BCE) through the Babylonian conquest and destruction of Judah (ca. 597–586 BCE). During this time, many Judeans were dispersed and exiled to Babylon or Egypt. Jeremiah himself died in Egypt. Jeremiah began prophesying while the people were in imminent danger of exile and continued after they had experienced the trauma of exile from Judah. Our text likely comes from the very end of the reign of the final Judean king, Zedekiah, and Jerusalem’s final destruction (ca. 588–586 BCE). Jeremiah promises the people’s return and the restoration of the Davidic line, the “just shoot” who will rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. This restoration will take place through the power of Israel’s God, whose primary attribute is “justice” or “righteousness” (NRSV). The “just shoot” is another expression for “messiah” or “anointed one” (from *māšah* in Hebrew, meaning “to anoint”), and was a political term for kings. The word “messiah” slowly developed into a purely religious term. For the early Jewish followers of Jesus in the first century CE, and then for Gentile believers, Jesus was this Messiah.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14

To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.

SECOND READING

1 THESSALONIANS 3:12–4:2

Brothers and sisters:

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love  
for one another and for all,  
just as we have for you,  
so as to strengthen your hearts,  
to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father  
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. Amen.

Finally, brothers and sisters,  
we earnestly ask and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that,  
as you received from us  
how you should conduct yourselves to please God  
—and as you are conducting yourselves—  
you do so even more.

For you know what instructions we gave you through the  
Lord Jesus.

First Thessalonians is Paul’s first letter and our earliest New Testament text (ca. late 40s CE). It is a letter of encouragement to the early Christian community in Thessalonica (northern Greece). The early Christians expected Christ to return during their lifetimes. Paul urges them to remain vigilant and alert in awaiting this return, even in the face of social pressure and persecution. The reading begins as a community prayer for love and the strengthening of hearts to be perfect, or “blameless in holiness,” as the people await the “coming” (Greek *parousia* or “presence”) of Christ. Paul then issues ethical instructions. He reminds the community to conduct themselves (literally “walk”) in a way that is pleasing to God with the goal of obedience to God. The final reference to “instructions” refers back to earlier instructions in the letter.

GOSPEL

LUKE 21:25-28, 34-36

Jesus said to his disciples:

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,  
and on earth nations will be in dismay,  
perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

People will die of fright

in anticipation of what is coming upon the world,  
for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

And then they will see the Son of Man

coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

But when these signs begin to happen,

stand erect and raise your heads

because your redemption is at hand.

“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy

from carousing and drunkenness

and the anxieties of daily life,

and that day catch you by surprise like a trap.

For that day will assault everyone

who lives on the face of the earth.

Be vigilant at all times

and pray that you have the strength

to escape the tribulations that are imminent

and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Today we begin a new liturgical year with the Gospel according to Luke. His is a unique story of Jesus that includes Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, and the particular traditions of the Canticles of Mary (*Magnificat*) and Zechariah (*Benedictus*) that are so precious to the church. According to tradition, Luke was a physician and a Gentile who shared a body of sources about Jesus with Mark and Matthew. Luke was also a gifted writer. Although he tells the same basic story as Mark and Matthew, Luke emphasizes God’s compassion for the most marginalized members of society, including key stories about women, tax collectors, the poor, the sick, the oppressed, and even the Pharisees, who all interact with Jesus more prominently in this Gospel than in any other. For Luke, Jesus’s story is a natural continuation of the story of the people of Israel. Because

the beginning and end of every liturgical year focus on the end times and the importance of vigilance, we begin the year deep into the Gospel with remarkable imagery of powerful signs in the natural world that point toward the end times. These signs are not cause for fear but for celebration: the disciples' redemption is near. They are to be ready and awake.

### Ponder

The name of Israel's God is mystical, unknowable. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God responds enigmatically when humans ask for God's personal name. (See, for example, Exodus 3:13-14, where Moses asks for God's name, and God responds, "I am who I am.") Yet in our first reading, the prophet Jeremiah names God "our justice [righteousness]." Jeremiah names this God "Justice" to give hope to a people who are living through traumatic experiences. This God, Justice, will ultimately have the last word over the pain of current historical situations. What does it mean to us as Christians to know that our ultimate hope, in the midst of our own pain and historical crises, is rooted in God's name as Justice?

---

The early Christian community lived in a state of urgency and hope, believing the "end times," or eschaton, would come in their lifetimes. This did not happen. Yet God's time is not linear. Our readings and the beginning of this liturgical season invite us to wake up yet again, like the early Christians, and reflect on what the "end times" mean for us. Each of us will have our own personal eschaton or death. Ongoing catastrophes, immense tragedies, and painful conflicts in this world remind us—as they did for the early Christians—that this life is fleeting and delicate. The Gospel calls us to be watchful and alert, while Paul exhorts us to strengthen our hearts. How do we practice being present now, while remaining alert to what has not yet fully come?

# Second Sunday of Advent

---

FIRST READING

BARUCH 5:1-9

Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery;  
put on the splendor of glory from God forever:  
wrapped in the cloak of justice from God,  
bear on your head the mitre  
that displays the glory of the eternal name.  
For God will show all the earth your splendor:  
you will be named by God forever  
the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship.

Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights;  
look to the east and see your children  
gathered from the east and the west  
at the word of the Holy One,  
rejoicing that they are remembered by God.  
Led away on foot by their enemies they left you:  
but God will bring them back to you  
borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones.  
For God has commanded  
that every lofty mountain be made low,  
and that the age-old depths and gorges  
be filled to level ground,  
that Israel may advance secure in the glory of God.  
The forests and every fragrant kind of tree  
have overshadowed Israel at God's command;  
for God is leading Israel in joy  
by the light of his glory,  
with his mercy and justice for company.

The book of Baruch was written in Greek in the second or first century BCE, though it is set during the events that led up to and followed the exile to Babylon in 586 BCE. Our reading draws from a long "Poem of Consolation" (4:5–5:9) that begins by calling the people to take courage. Throughout the poem, the author interweaves quotes from the book of Isaiah to describe the events after the exile when Jerusalem, the Holy City, will be renamed and become a physical

manifestation of God's glory and throne (see Isa 40:3-4, 9-11; 62:1-12). Judeans will return to the Holy City from where they have been dispersed across the known world while God leads them in mercy and justice. The imagery from this text, and especially the citations from Isaiah, link directly into our Gospel reading.

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RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

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SECOND READING

PHILIPPIANS 1:4-6, 8-11

Brothers and sisters:

I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you,  
because of your partnership for the gospel  
from the first day until now.

I am confident of this,

that the one who began a good work in you  
will continue to complete it  
until the day of Christ Jesus.

God is my witness,

how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer:

that your love may increase ever more and more  
in knowledge and every kind of perception,  
to discern what is of value,  
so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,  
filled with the fruit of righteousness  
that comes through Jesus Christ  
for the glory and praise of God.

For the next two weeks, our second reading will come from Philipians. Paul wrote this letter to the community at Philippi while he was imprisoned (1:7; perhaps while under house arrest in Rome, ca. 61–63 CE). Today we read Paul's opening prayer of thanksgiving. He writes confidently that God will continue to "complete" or make whole the community's "good work" or ethical conduct until Christ's return. He expresses faith in how the community continues to progress and grow in union with Christ. This growth brings wisdom,

which is grounded in a deep understanding of Christ's death and resurrection. The final verse reminds readers that all righteousness comes from God, is rooted in God, and manifests fully in union with Jesus Christ.

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GOSPEL

LUKE 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,  
when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,  
and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee,  
and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea  
and Trachonitis,  
and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,  
during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,  
the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in  
the desert.

John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan,  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,  
as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*A voice of one crying out in the desert:*

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight his paths.*

*Every valley shall be filled*

*and every mountain and hill shall be made low.*

*The winding roads shall be made straight,*

*and the rough ways made smooth,*

*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

Our Gospel reading introduces us to John the Baptist and sets the stage for next Sunday, when we will focus on John's ministry. The text begins with a careful dating scheme that includes a number of important religious and political leaders from the end of the first century BCE through the beginning of the first century CE. Tiberius Caesar was the second Roman emperor who reigned between 14 and 37 CE. Pontius Pilate served under him as governor of the province of Judea between 26 and 36 CE. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee as “tetrarch” (meaning “ruler of a quarter”) until his death (ca. 4 BCE–39 CE), while his half-brother Philip ruled the area north of Galilee until his death in 34 CE. Lysanias was a ruler of Rome from 25 CE to 30

CE. Annas was high priest between 6 CE and 15 CE, until the Romans deposed him; he was followed by his son Eleazar, then by his son-in-law Caiaphas between 18 CE and 36 CE. This dating may not be exact for situating John's ministry, but it is significant. It is a scathing critique of the political and religious establishment around the time of Jesus. The word of God bypasses all these important figures for John, who comes to proclaim a symbolic "baptism of repentance," or spiritual cleansing. This cleansing signifies the forgiveness of sins and the people's return to God. John quotes from Isaiah (40:3-5) to announce the coming of the Messiah.

### Ponder

In our first reading from Baruch, God leads Israel home from exile in "mercy and justice." Mercy and justice: these divine attributes radiate through the reading. God transforms Jerusalem from a grieving widow into the manifestation of divine glory. God remembers the people and brings them home from where they have been banished and displaced. As Baruch promises his readers, he also promises us divine mercy, justice, healing, and restoration. Similar to Baruch, Paul promises the Philippians that God will continue to "complete" or transform them. As we prepare for the coming of Christ, how do we need God's transformation? In what ways do we long to be healed?

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The Gospel presents us with two paths to walk: the way of our current society, with its dominant power structures, and the way of God's salvation. Now as in John's time, we can choose either path. We can view the current system and all of its problems, inequalities, and sufferings as true and entrenched reality, thus orienting ourselves to live passively according to that vision. Or we can orient ourselves toward a different reality: the promise that we will all see the "salvation of God." This second orientation calls us to continual conversion and hope. This Advent season, which orientation are we choosing in our minds, hearts, and actions?