

YEAR

A

Breaking Open the Word

AN OCIA GUIDE TO SUNDAY SCRIPTURE

MARY KATHARINE DEELEY

Imprimi Potest: Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSsR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists
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The process by which adults are initiated into the Catholic faith throughout the United States is now called the OCIA—the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults. "Order" is a clearer translation of the Latin term for the process formerly known as the RCIA—the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. People preparing for baptism and reception into the Church celebrate several rites as part of the order to which those rites belong—an order whose mission is to journey in the faith. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted the name change in 2021, with American dioceses introducing the name thereafter. For more information, please contact your local diocese.

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Overview

What is Breaking Open the Word?

The *Lectionary for Sunday Mass* forms the basis for the OCIA process. This is appropriate because the Scriptures tell the story of the faith experienced by the people of God: the relationship between the Chosen People and Yahweh, and the relationship between the early Christian community and Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. As we reflect upon these faith stories, our own stories of how God has affected our lives become more clearly perceived and articulated. The Scriptures convey the stories of a community. So it is fitting that the catechumens and candidates gather in community to break open God's word and apply it to their own lives in the here and now.

In their reflections and linking of the Scriptures to their lives, the early Christians began to develop official summaries and teachings about the meaning of their communal religious experiences. Since these doctrines and dogmas were born of theological reflection grounded in Scripture, the Church now links these teachings to Scripture in the OCIA process. Therefore, the sessions begin with Scripture reflection and move toward an encounter with Catholic belief. The community hands on its traditions and beliefs primarily through the Sunday liturgy, and that also is the most opportune time for the community to form the catechumens and candidates. Beginning with the period of the catechumenate, it is urged that they be dismissed from the liturgy following the Prayers of the Faithful to reflect together upon the word of God and the teachings of the Church.

Breaking Open the Word—available for each of the three liturgical years (A, B, and C)—contains all the readings for every Sunday of each year. The readings are arranged so there are twenty-eight weeks between the first Sunday of Advent and Pentecost and twenty-eight weeks between Trinity Sunday and Christ the King. Commentaries written by Scripture scholar Mary Katharine Deeley, follow the readings and are introduced with titles.

How to use Breaking Open the Word

Breaking Open the Word is designed to be useful for all team leaders of Christian-initiation groups—adults and adolescents—and it serves as an excellent resource for participants in adult-initiation classes. Additionally, it holds value for individual use, separate from Christian initiation, whether you are planning homilies, involved in small-group faith sharing, or searching for enrichment and knowledge through the Sunday readings.



Relevant *Journey of Faith* lessons are listed at the end of each reflection. These include lessons related to the theme, as

well as at least one lesson that ties most closely to the Scripture readings. Incorporating these lessons ensures that you cover all the lessons in *Journey of Faith* during the liturgical year. Sundays between the first Sunday of Advent and the eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time refer you to lessons from the *Journey of Faith* Catechumenate packet; Sundays between the first Sunday of Lent and Easter refer you to lessons from the Enlightenment packet; Sundays between the second Sunday of Easter and Pentecost refer you to lessons from the Mystagogy packet. Because the twenty-eight weeks between Trinity and Christ the King may be used either for continuing Mystagogy or for beginning a new group of inquirers (or both), all the Sundays between Trinity and Christ the King refer you to both the Mystagogy and the Inquiry packets.

The commentaries, themes, and prayers contained in this book are aids for preparing you to lead inquirers, catechumens, candidates, and neophytes. Please familiarize yourself with these resources to better anticipate and stimulate questions and discussions. Leading others to Christ is the most important work you will do in your life; your personal preparation for such significant and rewarding work can never be adequately emphasized. *Breaking Open the Word* is a valuable resource for this type of work.

Included in Breaking Open the Word

- Readings for all Sundays of liturgical years A, B, and C, Advent through Christ the King
- Readings for the Easter Triduum
- Readings for those occasional Sundays that supersede Ordinary Time Sunday readings
- Scripture commentary for every set of readings
- Discussion and/or reflection questions for every set of readings
- Readings are cross-referenced to the catechetical lessons
- A brief collection of short gathering prayers and dismissal prayers for each phase of the initiation process
- A thematic index

All readings are from the Lectionary for Mass for use in the dioceses of the United States of America, second typical edition © 2001 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC.

Suggested Agenda for a Sunday Session

- | | |
|------------|---|
| 30 minutes | Liturgy—all gather in church. Dismissal after the Prayer of the Faithful. |
| 10 minutes | Refreshments and settling in. |
| 15 minutes | Prayer and reflection—Where are we at this moment? |
| 45 minutes | Reread, reflect upon, and share the readings of the day—either all or one chosen for this session. Spouses and sponsors may join this session after Mass. |
| 10 minutes | Evaluation and prayer—How are we going to live the Scriptures this week? |

Note: During Precatechumenate (Inquiry) or Mystagogy, this format may be adapted for either a Sunday morning after Mass or for a weekday evening session.

First Sunday of Advent, Year A

READING 1, ISAIAH 2:1–5

This is what Isaiah, son of Amoz, / saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. / In days to come, the mountain of the LORD's house / shall be established as the highest mountain / and raised above the hills. / All nations shall stream toward it; / many peoples shall come and say, / "Come, let us climb the LORD's mountain, / to the house of the God of Jacob, / that he may instruct us in his ways, / and we may walk in his paths." / For from Zion shall go forth instruction, / and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. / He shall judge between the nations, / and impose terms on many peoples. / They shall beat their swords into plowshares / and their spears into pruning hooks; / one nation shall not raise the sword against another, / nor shall they train for war again. / O house of Jacob, come, / let us walk in the light of the Lord!

PSALM 122

READING 2, ROMANS 13:11–14

Brothers and sisters, you know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed; the night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and lust, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.

GOSPEL, MATTHEW 24:37–44

Jesus said to his disciples, "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. In those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark. They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away. So will it be also at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.

Be sure of this, if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come."

An Invitation to Light

Something is coming. As we again begin the liturgical year, this time in year A, the three readings of this first Sunday of Advent turn our hearts from the glory of Christ the King to the anticipation of the light that is yet to come. From Isaiah's vision of the word of God to Paul's exhortation to wake from sleep to Matthew's admonition to be prepared for the unexpected appearance of the Son of Man, we are suddenly shaken out of any complacency. Something is coming and we are at once comforted and challenged.

The Mountain of God

God spoke, and Isaiah saw God's words as a vision. Indeed, God's words were so powerful that many of the prophets saw what they heard and spoke about the message as if it were happening in the present. In this prophecy, Isaiah sees the mountain of the Lord being established. This vision of the exalted mountain of the Lord, along with the city of Jerusalem, is a frequent representation of the "Day of the Lord," which is the day when the reign of God sweeps over the whole earth. For the faithful, this is a glorious moment when all the inhabitants of the earth gather at the mountain of God. Often there are descriptions of feasting (see Isaiah 25:6–8) and here divine peace is restored between people. In Isaiah 11, that peace also includes the animals who are able to be at rest with their natural enemies.

The Day of the Lord was also a day of judgment. The enemies of the Lord would be destroyed even as the faithful enjoyed the peace of God. In fact, this passage comes after Isaiah's description of the sins of Israel, and he compares them with Sodom and Gomorrah. The vision of the mountain of God is both a warning and an invitation to join all the faithful as they journey to God.

Salvation Is Nearer Now

Paul's invitation to us is couched in terms of night and day. Our awakening involves throwing off the works of darkness (things that separate us from God) and instead putting "on the 'armor of light'" (Jesus Christ). Paul tells us clearly, "You know the time," and we do. The first Sunday of Advent begins the time for preparation.

A Thief in the Night

Jesus' invitation to the light is a little more unsettling than the other two readings. There is no comforting mountain of God or gathering of people; nor is there

Paul's caution to make something better of ourselves. There is simply a warning to stay awake because the Son of Man will come in the night when we least expect it. For Matthew, the world was already a dark place, and he might well have been tempted to simply burrow under the covers with his eyes shut. The first-century Christians faced many challenges, including persecution and the corruption of the Roman authorities who had just destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. But Matthew urges us to stay awake because no one else, including the Roman authorities, will expect the coming of the Lord. If we are ready and waiting, the Lord will gather us in.

Good News for All of Us

The beginning of a new year is exciting. We are starting over. We can make better choices or choose different paths. We can reconnect with God in a deeper way than we did the year before. The question is, what inspires us to move forward and do these things? The readings of this first Sunday of Advent at the start of a new liturgical year offer some suggestions. The Day of the Lord holds the promise of a righteous judgment and lasting peace for the believers who gather to learn the way of the Lord. We begin by casting off anything that keeps us from God and putting on what gives us light. And finally, we stay awake even in the darkest hours, for the Lord will not disappoint. He will come.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- *What are the feelings you have when you are expecting something or someone to come? What if that someone was God?*
- *What are some attitudes, behaviors, or ways of thinking that keep you from growing deeper in faith?*
- *How will you use prayer in your effort to live a life that reflects the light of Christ?*

Related Journey of Faith Lesson

Q10, "The Church Year"

Themes

Preparedness

C2, "The Sacraments, An Introduction"

C6, "The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation"

Reign of God

C10, "The People of God"

Q4, "Who Is Jesus Christ?"

Relationship

C11, "The Early Church"

C14, "The Dignity of Life"

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A

READING 1, ISAIAH 11:1–10

On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, / and from his roots a bud shall blossom. / The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, / a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, / a spirit of counsel and of strength, / a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD, / and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD. / Not by appearance shall he judge, / nor by hearsay shall he decide, / but he shall judge the poor with justice, / and decide aright for the land's afflicted. / He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, / and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. / Justice shall be the band around his waist, / and faithfulness a belt upon his hips. / Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, / and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; / the calf and the young lion shall browse together, / with a little child to guide them. / The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, / together their young shall rest; / the lion shall eat hay like the ox. / The baby shall play by the cobra's den, / and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair. / There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; / for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD, / as water covers the sea. / On that day, the root of Jesse, / set up as a signal for the nations, / the Gentiles shall seek out, / for his dwelling shall be glorious.

PSALM 72:1–2, 7–8, 12–13, 17

READING 2, ROMANS 15:4–9

Brothers and sisters, whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name."

GOSPEL, MATTHEW 3:1–12

John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said, "A voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" John wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Prepare the Way of the Lord

We do a lot to prepare for Christmas. We try to find or make the right present. We ready the house for guests with special details and decorations. Advent calendars tick off the days until Christmas comes at last. For many, the season is filled with good cheer coupled with a little stress that goes with getting everything done. But our anticipation fills the days with prayer, laughter, and good food which keeps us going. The Israelites undoubtedly experienced many of those emotions as they waited for God's promise that there would come a day of justice and peace for the whole earth. Their suffering at the hands of conquering nations and the oppression of the poor by the rich made that vision a gift of God and gave them hope.

A Time of Peace

Last week, Isaiah described God's judgment on the nations and God's peace on the earth. Today, Isaiah's prophecy tells of a long-awaited descendant of Jesse, who will be spirit-filled—judging the poor with justice and making fair decisions for the afflicted. Jesse was an ancestor of King David. It was from the line of David that the Messiah was to come. Isaiah also gives us a more detailed description of God's peace. Those who had been mortal enemies will suddenly live in harmony with each other; a child shall be a leader; and all the people of the earth seek out the "root of Jesse." Such words were balm for a broken world. They renewed their hope and faith in the promises of God. In later centuries, Jesus' followers would remember Isaiah's prophecy and find in it an accurate portrait of Christ the Lord.

A Time of Harmony

In the epistle, Paul invites his listeners to find encouragement and hope in the Scriptures, which are "written for our instruction." He might be referring to the faithfulness of the Israelites who waited for God to fulfill his promises. In Paul's time, the Christians were waiting for Christ to come again to usher in the

reign of God. To that end, Paul implores them to live in harmony, praising God with one voice. Paul knew that a community of believers could support any one person who was struggling with their faith. There is power in knowing that we believe something together and are all waiting as one for the Lord to come.

A Time of Repentance

While the Day of the Lord holds out visions of peace and justice, it is also an opportunity to change our hearts. It is necessary to do so to welcome Christ. Matthew introduces us to John the Baptist coming out of the desert looking like Elijah, the prophet in 1 Kings. In the Old Testament, Elijah was to announce the coming of the Lord (Malachi 3:23–24). Matthew considers John to be the Second Coming of Elijah. John's proclamation is a simple one, "Repent." We associate that word with being sorry for sin and turning our lives around. Matthew implies even more meaning. Repenting is the only way to prepare for the coming of Christ, who will destroy the wicked and gather the faithful. The message is clear. "Don't be like the wicked—change your lives now. The baptism of fire is coming."

Good News for All of Us

Visions of hope, peace, and harmony sustain us all in times of trouble and unrest. We want things to get better; we work toward that end. The twin commands of "love God" and "love your neighbor" are good starting points. True repentance, though, requires the ability to name our sin, bring it to the Lord (and the sacrament of reconciliation), and ask for the grace of forgiveness and the willingness to start over. This remains one of the best ways that we can prepare the way of the Lord.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- *Of all the things your family does to prepare for Christmas, which is the most meaningful to you and why?*
- *Imagine that your heart and soul, mind and body are the focus of your preparations for Jesus. What are the important ways you can prepare for the coming of the Lord?*
- *What hope sustains you in times of trouble?*

Related Journey of Faith Lesson

C3, "The Sacrament of Baptism"

Themes

Authority

C9, "The Sacrament of Holy Orders"

C13, "Christian Moral Living"

Ecumenism

C11, "The Early Church"

Repentance

C3, "The Sacrament of Baptism"

C6, "The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation"