

# Advent Cycle B



## Week I

### Introduction

The readings of the first week emphasize several themes. First, the people of God are waiting for the return of the Lord. There is a great yearning, a longing for his return. The second theme is trust: God, the second person of the Trinity, has promised that he will return, and he is faithful to his promises. That trust is strengthened by grace, God's very life in our souls. Finally, it is imperative that we keep alert, for we do not know when the time will come.

In the Old Testament, Isaiah addresses a community that had started out with great hope and had once again become mired in sin. They are longing for the Messiah to put things right once and for



all. But they continually struggle with sin and rebellion against God as they wait. Paul addresses a community of Christians in Corinth who have accepted Christ but are still struggling to understand what that means, both theologically and in the way they live their lives. Mark addresses a community in Rome living in tumultuous times, and they expect, perhaps, the Second Coming to be very soon, so there is a heightened sense of expectation in their community.

All three readings point to the coming of the Messiah and show us the proper response to this imminent and inevitable event. First, examine your relationship with God and make sure you are living in accordance with His will. Second, trust in God as you wait for his return. Finally, keep alert!

## **Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7**

You, LORD, are our father, our redeemer you are named forever. Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for, such as they had not heard of from of old. No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for him. Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways! Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind. There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you; for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us up to our guilt. Yet, O LORD, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.

## **New Testament Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

Brothers and sisters: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge, as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

## **Gospel Reading: Mark 13:33-37**

Jesus said to his disciples: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. Watch, therefore; you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"





## Points to Ponder

### Isaiah 63: 16b-17, 19b; 64: 2-7

Isaiah is one the four “major” prophets (the others are Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel). They called “major” because their works are the longest (the 12 prophets with shorter works are called the “minor prophets”), but it can be argued that of all the prophets of the Old Testament, Isaiah is the most influential on the works of the New Testament and on Jesus himself. Isaiah is quoted explicitly 90 times in the New Testament, and Jesus quotes Isaiah many times and begins his own ministry by reading from the book of Isaiah (Lk 4:16-30) to announce the coming of the kingdom of God.

Most scholars suggest that the book of Isaiah is divided into three time periods. “First Isaiah” (chapters 1-39) was an 8th century BC prophet. We are told (Is 1:1) that he prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. These kings ruled between 785-698 BC. Isaiah began to prophesy “the year King Uzziah died (Is 6:1)” —around the year 742 BC. It is clear that he had a long ministry, lasting nearly 50 years. “Second Isaiah” (chapters 40-55) was likely written in the 6th century during the Exile, and “Third Isaiah” (chapters 56-58), from which today’s passage is taken, was written in the post-Exile.

Other scholars have pointed out, however, that regardless of whether there were “three Isaiahs” or not, there is great theological and ideological unity in the whole book, and the final editors suppressed any historical settings especially for chapters 40-66 to strengthen that theological unity.


So, while it may be true that the author of our passage today was writing to a community who had returned from Babylon with high and unfulfilled hopes of reestablishing their former life, it is even more important to see that their condition is a universal one and, therefore, the passage is of great significance to any of us who are meditating upon it. In this light the passage addresses a community that feels abandoned by God, yet it is of their own doing. As individuals we too can feel abandoned by God, and this passage inspires us to look at our own complicity in the situation in which we find ourselves.

Isaiah begins by reminding us that God is our Father. What does it mean to call God Father? It recalls the covenant relationship that God has made with his people. A father cares for and protects his children, as God did in the wilderness at the time of the Exodus, as God did during the Conquest at the time of Joshua, and as God did during the time of the monarchy. Despite the repeated failings of the people of God, God himself was faithful and true. Even after allowing the punishment of the people of God, God remains faithful and true.

Isaiah then laments that the people of God have once again strayed from God’s protective care and God feels far away.

In our own lives, there are or will be periods when we feel that God is far away and is no longer caring for us. But as Isaiah points out, it is we who have wandered far away from God and thus can no longer hear him. God does not “make us” wander, but God allows us to wander because God has given us free will. In order to have the free will to love God we also must have the free will to reject God, and like the ancient people of Israel we often do. Isaiah pleads with God to “return” to his people because they are the “tribes of his inheritance” (once again invoking covenant language), and as baptized Christians we who are “led by the Spirit of God are children of God...and if children, heirs” (Rom 8:14, 17). We too have a covenant with God. God is our Father in an even more intimate way than he was with Israel. When we “feel” far away from God we must remind ourselves that regardless of how we “feel” we are in fact in a covenant relationship with God, and it is to that relationship that we must return.





Isaiah longs for God to once again lead his people in an active way but also desires that God meet the people “doing right” and “mindful in (their) ways.” Alas, Isaiah sees that the people are NOT doing right. Indeed their “good deeds are like polluted rags;” their guilt “carries them away like the wind,” and no one calls upon God’s name.

In other words, Isaiah is acutely conscious of the covenant relationship that God has established with his people and that God wills it to continue. The people themselves have been too distracted by sin or by life itself to remember the covenant. The consequence of forgetting God is that the people of God are “delivered up to their guilt.” They find that “God is far away.”

Isaiah offers a solution to the problem of this lack of relationship: remember that God is our Father. Return to the relationship with him. Proper relationship with God is one of docility. God is the potter, and we are the clay. Clay does not tell the potter how it wants to be shaped or what kind of life it demands or expects. Clay allows itself to be formed by the potter. Docility is the opposite of rebellion and sin.

### **1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

Most readers are probably familiar with St. Paul. He was born a Jew in Tarsus, a member of the tribe of Benjamin and zealous for the Law (Torah). He was well educated and was trained in Jerusalem by Gamaliel, a prominent rabbi of the times. He was highly offended by the “Way” that Christ’s followers practiced, finding it blasphemous. And according to Acts 8:1, Paul (as Saul) was present at Stephen’s martyrdom. He “laid waste” the church in Jerusalem and dragged off men and women to prison (Acts 8:3).

While on his way to Damascus to round up more followers of the “Way” to return them to Jerusalem for trial Paul encountered Christ in a most dramatic way (Acts 9), and he was immediately converted. He became a zealous teacher, preacher, and theologian of the “Way,” just as he had been zealous for the Torah. Paul was a bold and fearless preacher, so bold and fearless that he fomented the wrath of his opponents, and they frequently responded to him violently (Acts 13-14).

According to Acts 18, around 52 AD, Paul founded the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey. Silas and Timothy came to help him, and he made friends with Priscilla and Aquila. He made many converts there among the Gentiles, and although his time there was not without difficulty (Acts 18:12-17) he stayed a year and a half.


It was obviously a church community with whom he had a good relationship and a great deal of affection. He did not hesitate to correct them in their faults, both those of theology and practice, and because of issues that had arisen within the Christian community, Paul wrote to them around 57 AD.

Today’s passage is part of the greeting with which Paul begins the letter. (It is a good idea to read verses 1-2 along with the passage in the lectionary).

Typically, ancient letters begin with a greeting by identifying the sender and the recipient. Paul follows the form and identifies the recipients (1 Cor 1:2) as “those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.” Paul is going to be addressing some thorny issues in the letter, and right away reminds the Corinthians who they are: those who have been sanctified through their relationship with Christ. They are also not alone. They are one church, one community, and part of the larger community—the entire Body of Christ.

He goes on to offer the greeting (1 Cor 1:3): “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

What is striking, especially after having meditated on the previous passage from Isaiah, is the covenant language invoked by Paul. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are in relationship with God



the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. The relationship with God the Father (expounded upon in greater detail in Romans 8) is taken as a given here. God our Father protects and cares for us, and we in turn have a filial duty towards him. The gift of that relationship is grace, God's very life in our souls and peace.

Paul talks about peace in several letters and describes peace as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). True peace can only be found through our relationship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Paul then goes on to give a beautiful thanksgiving for the Christians of Corinth. Because God has given them grace they have been enriched in every way. They have been given everything they need to progress in the spiritual life as they “wait for the revelation of our Lord, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord” (1 Cor 1:7-8).

“The day of the Lord” is the final day when Christ will come in glory to judge the living and the dead.” Paul ends his thanksgiving with the reminder that this is what Christians expect and are waiting for. The covenant promise is that God is our loving and merciful Father, and we have an obligation as part of the covenant. We are called to follow his commandments. The grace we are given will enable us to do so if we cooperate with it so that we may be found “guiltless” on that judgment day. Faithful members of the covenant have nothing to fear on the Day of the Lord.

### **Mark 13:33-37**

Today's reading is part of a section of Mark known as the “little apocalypse.” Each synoptic Gospel writer has a similar chapter (see Mt 24-25 and Lk 21), and each year in the lectionary the Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent is taken from this discourse.

The chapter begins with Jesus predicting the destruction of the temple. He is sitting on the Mount of Olives “opposite the temple” while he speaks. The Mount of Olives is associated in the minds of Jesus and his apostles with the end times because of a prophecy in Zechariah (Zech 14:1-4). His apostles ask him when this will happen, and Jesus tells them that there will be wars, famines, persecution, and false prophets, but these are “just the beginning.” When the “desolating abomination” is standing “where he should not” then everyone should flee to the mountains. Sometime after that tribulation the Son of Man will appear, and the judgment will occur. Today's section of the “little apocalypse” contains a warning. In verses 32-33 Jesus says, “Of that day or hour, no one knows,” so “be watchful! Be alert! For no one knows when the time will come.”

Our passage that the Church chooses for our meditation today contains a tension: the end is coming, so be alert, but you do not know when the time will come. How does one conduct one's life within this tension?

Jesus offers a short parable to help his disciples better understand this teaching. It is like a man who is traveling abroad and has put his servants in charge, each with his own task. They must faithfully attend to their tasks, for they should not want their master to come home and find them sleeping. So keep awake and alert!

I am reminded of a perhaps apocryphal story about St. Francis. Apparently during his lifetime, one of the periodic predictions of the imminent end times arose, and a confrere who heard of it went anxiously to St. Francis wringing his hands and saying, “Oh brother, they say the end of the world is near. What are you going to do?” St. Francis who was working in his garden stood up and thought a moment and said, “I am going to continue to hoe my garden.”

To live within the tension between “the end is near” and “you do not know when” requires that we

know we who are: children of God our Father in covenant relationship with him. It requires that we, through prayer, acquire an understanding of God's purpose for our lives and that we faithfully live out that purpose so that when he does return he finds us "awake" and not asleep.

### **Tying It All Together**

We, the disciples of Jesus, are also God's servants. As servants, we are obliged to obey our master. As we have already learned, God is not our master but our Father. We obey our father not merely out of obligation but out of love. To follow God's commandments and perform the task to which God has appointed is a joy not a burden for those who have the "peace that passes all understanding" (Phil 4:7), to those who have been given grace. As Isaiah reminds us, our relationship with God can be sullied and even destroyed by our sins but an adopted spirit of docility can alleviate this destruction. Perhaps "docility" might best be understood as being like a little child to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs (Mt 19:14). To be a little child is to rest gently in our Father's arms, trusting in him to care for us and love us even though we have imperfections and faults.

### **Catechism Connections**

- To learn more about God's preparation for the coming of the Messiah see CCC 522.
- To learn more about the holiness of the church see CCC 823-827.
- To learn more about living during the end times see CCC 1048-1049.
- To learn more about the Last Judgment see CCC 1038.

### **Rome to Home**

The Church, whose mystery is being set forth by this Sacred Synod, is believed to be indefectibly holy. Indeed Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is praised as "uniquely holy," loved the Church as His bride, delivering Himself up for her. He did this that He might sanctify her. He united her to Himself as His own body and brought it to perfection by the gift of the Holy Spirit for God's glory. Therefore in the Church, everyone, whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." However, this holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others; in a very special way this (holiness) appears in the practice of the counsels, customarily called "evangelical." This practice of the counsels, under the impulsion of the Holy Spirit, undertaken by many Christians, either privately or in a Church-approved condition or state of life, gives and must give in the world an outstanding witness and example of this same holiness.


*Lumen Gentium 39*





## Study Questions

1. What does it mean that God is “Father” to the Jews and to Isaiah’s community?
2. How is the concept of God as “Father” enriched and deepened for Christians?
3. According to Isaiah, what are some reasons that God might feel far away from us?




4. According to Isaiah, what are some ways we can repair our relationship with God?

5. According to Paul, why are we “heirs” along with Christ. Paul says the relation between us and God has an obligation attached to it. What is our obligation as Christians in order to be considered heirs of the kingdom? (See Rom 8:14-17)

6. What significant event is Jesus’ peace connected with in John 20:21-23?





7. In his letter to the Corinthians, what is the “day of the Lord,” referred to by Paul? According to Mark, what should our attitude towards the end times be?

8. Why is the mention of the Mount of Olives significant in Mark 13? According to Mark, what should our attitude towards the end times be?

9. Why do we say the Church is “indefectibly holy”? (See Rome to Home)

## Voices of the Saints

“In tribulation immediately draw near to God with confidence, and you will receive strength, enlightenment, and instruction.”

—*St. John of the Cross*

### Questions for Reflection

1. Consider the times that God has felt “far away.” What were the circumstances in your life at the time? What might some of the reasons for this feeling have been?
2. During these times, what steps did you take to come closer to God?
3. Isaiah says sin causes this feeling of separation from God, but St. John of the Cross, among others, talks about “the dark night of the soul” when the feeling of abandonment is for your spiritual growth. Have you ever experienced this?