



# Youth Engaging Scripture

**Diving** into the Sunday Gospels  
Includes Cycles A, B, and C

**Dennis Kurtz**

Saint Mary's Press®

# Dedication

I dedicate this book to all young people thirsting to know more about the word of God . . . that in seeking you will invite God's word to be the light on your pathway of life. May God open your ears so you are able to hear God's word anew and in profound ways. I pray that the word of God is always a sweetness in your mouth: "How sweet are your words to my taste, / sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalm 119:103).



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## Introduction

Research has shown that Catholic teens do not frequently read the Bible. A Gallup study in the early 1990s showed that only 20 percent of Catholic youth, compared with 60 percent of Christian youth from other denominations, claimed to have ever read the Bible on their own (*The Religious Life of Young Americans* 1992, page 46).

Then in 1996, a study from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reported that 75 percent of Catholic youth who completed their survey responded that they never or very infrequently participate in a Bible-study group. Fifty-seven percent of the youth surveyed said they never or very infrequently read the Bible (Bryan Froehle, *New Directions in Catholic Youth Ministry*, page 6).

The 2005 book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* reports that only 17 percent of Catholic youth said they have been a part of a Scripture study group (Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, page 48).

These studies clearly frame the challenge regarding Bible literacy with Catholic youth. The CARA report put forth the following challenge: “Catholic youth ministry needs to be more persuasive in helping participants understand that reading the Bible is important for growing in their faith” (*New Directions in Catholic Youth Ministry*, page 5).

## The Origin and Purpose of the Reflections in this Book

The reflections in this book were originally published in weekly e-newsletters that were sent to teen peer leaders of small Bible-sharing groups that were a part of the YES! Youth Engaging Scripture Initiative. This initiative had its genesis in the commitment of Saint Mary’s Press to bolster Bible literacy and the practice of Bible reading among Catholic youth. Both the youth and the adult mentors of the YES! project found the weekly e-newsletters extremely helpful in providing good background for the Sunday Gospel readings. These reflections are now available to you in this resource. *Youth Engaging Scripture: Diving into the Sunday Gospels* is a collection of reflections on the Sunday Gospel readings for years A, B, and C of the lectionary, as well as on various feast days and solemnities often celebrated on Sundays. The reflections help teens immerse themselves in the Scriptures and learn how God’s word is relevant in their everyday lives.

## Who Is This Book For and How Can It Be Used?

This resource seeks to help parish youth ministers, catechetical leaders, high school teachers, campus ministers, and parents assist youth in diving deeper into the Sunday Gospel readings on a weekly basis. The desired result is to form within Catholic youth a practice of praying the Bible, studying the Bible, and living the Bible. This book serves not only as a resource for peer leaders of YES! groups but also as a resource for the many opportunities when catechetical and liturgical leaders, in both schools and parishes, are looking to help teens dive deeper into the Sunday Gospel readings. Teens can use this resource individually or for group Bible sharing.

Each two-page reflection explores the scriptural context of the Gospel, using these three reference points:

- The *Context Connection* sets forth the context of the particular Gospel reading, providing information to assist the individual in understanding the cultural and historical background of the Gospel reading.
- The *Tradition Connection* provides information to highlight Catholic teachings connected with the particular Gospel reading, thus creating a connection for the reader between the Scriptures and Catholic Tradition.
- The *Wisdom Connection* gives the individual insights into what the Gospel reading meant for the original Christian community it was written for and what it might have to say to the Christian community today.

## ***Lectio Divina*: A Method for Diving into the Scriptures**

Using a modified process of *lectio divina* is helpful to maximize these reflections on the Sunday Gospels. *Lectio divina*, an ancient practice of reading and reflecting on the word of God, helps us come into union with God. It is in the Scriptures that we can come to listen to and hear the voice of God in our lives today. The process of *lectio divina* is very different from the speed reading we apply to newspapers and books. *Lectio divina* employs a style of reverential reading and listening. We gently listen to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for us today.

Pope John Paul II asked youth to give particular attention in their lives to reading and studying the Sacred Scriptures when he said:

In your groups, dear young people, multiply the occasions for hearing and studying the word of the Lord, especially through the *lectio divina*. You will discover the secrets of the Heart of God and will derive profit for discerning situations and transforming reality. Guided by the Holy Scripture, you will be able to recognize the Lord's presence in your daily life. ("Message of the Holy

Father to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the XII World Youth Day," number 6)

In preparation for reading the Sunday Gospel, use this process:

1. Read the Scripture passage, initially listening with the ears of your heart for a particular word or phrase that speaks to you.
2. Read the Scripture passage a second time. This time ask yourself how the Scripture passage is touching your life or connecting with what is happening in your world.
3. Read the Scripture passage a third time. This time reflect on what this Scripture passage is calling you to do or be today. These questions may be helpful: How is God challenging me? Is there a good thing God is calling me to do? Is there a harmful thing God wants me to stop doing? What is the next step I need to take?
4. In closing, offer a prayer, praying for the issues and concerns that surfaced during your reflection on the Scripture passage and ending with the Lord's Prayer.

This modification of *lectio divina* provides a process that is faithful to the traditional *lectio divina* process but is appropriate for teens today.

## Some Closing Thoughts

*Youth Engaging Scripture: Diving into the Sunday Gospels* is a tool to assist in the ongoing desire of having Catholic youth fall in love more deeply with the word of God. Having teens dive in and explore the Sunday Gospels by using the reflections in this book will lead them to a more profound appreciation of the depth and breadth of the Scriptures. Because the Gospels tell the story of Jesus Christ, reflecting on them can help young people think like Christ.

# CYCLE A





# First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:37–44

## Context Connection

The Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent speaks about being prepared for the Second Coming of the Son of Man: “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Matthew 24:44). A commonly held belief of the early Christian community was that the Second Coming of Jesus would happen in their lifetime. When Matthew was writing his Gospel, around AD 85, many of the original disciples had died, and the next generation was wondering when this event was going to happen. Matthew uses various examples to show the importance of always being prepared, stressing that Jesus will come in God’s time and that he will return in the ordinary events of life. In the days of Noah, Noah listened to God and was prepared, while others were simply engaged in the ordinary things of life: “They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage . . . so too will be the coming of the Son of Man” (24:38–39). People will be doing ordinary things—men will be working in the fields, and women will be preparing grain for baking bread. One will be prepared spiritually to greet the Son of Man and another will not know him. Matthew gives these words of advice: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (24:42). The emphasis here is to be spiritually ready—to be spiritually awake—so that you will recognize the Lord when he comes. Matthew further stresses this point using the example of a thief in the night, saying that if you knew when a thief was coming to rob your house, you would be awake and ready. However, we do not normally know when a thief is coming, and we have no way of knowing when the Lord will come again. Therefore, the only way to guarantee that we will recognize Jesus is to always be spiritually ready—because he is coming again.

This Sunday’s Gospel invites today’s Christian community to wait patiently for the return of Jesus, just as the Jewish people waited patiently for the coming of the Messiah. The season of Advent prepares us for Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus—the coming of the Messiah. As Christians, we are reminded that we are also engaged in a new Advent—waiting patiently for Jesus to come again. Therefore, the proper attitude is one of watchful patience and vigilance. The Second Coming of the Son of Man is a mystery known only by God the Father, the



one who truly knows the future. This call to be prepared requires that we live fully in the moment, treating every moment as if it were the last moment.

## Tradition Connection

During Mass, after the words of consecration, the celebrant invites us to proclaim the mystery of faith. The assembly responds in unison that Christ has died, is risen, and will come again. When we pray the Nicene Creed, we also say that we believe Jesus will come again in glory.

Our prayers express longing for the time when Jesus will come again, because we live in an in-between time. It is a time of waiting and preparation, but it is also a time to give witness to our faith through our actions (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], number 672).

Through the centuries, the Church has pondered when Jesus will return. The response has always been the same: only God knows for sure. That has not stopped humans, at various times throughout history, from trying to predict the date of Christ's return. As Catholics, we believe that trying to predict the precise day and hour of the coming of Christ is really missing the point. The point of the Gospel is that we should live every moment of every day like it could be our last.

The early Christians did not fear the return of Jesus but, rather, joyfully awaited it. The return of Jesus will be the advent of a time of great and sudden upheaval for good. It is a time we wait for with hearts filled with elated longing.

## Wisdom Connection

Matthew wants his audience to know that when Jesus comes again, he will come in the midst of our ordinary daily activity—whether at work, at play, or at celebration. If we recognize Jesus's presence in daily life now, then we will recognize him when he comes again.

The Second Coming of Jesus will usher in a new era, a time of good. The prophets write of this era as a time when nations will lay down their weapons of war and bitter fighting will end. Poor and oppressed people will be free of their burdens, and gentle, peace-loving people will inhabit the earth. This drastic change for good is attributed solely to God's actions. No human being will be able to do this alone. However, we can model Jesus's example of how to live by loving God completely and by loving our neighbors as ourselves. The Scriptures call us to prepare by living God's goodness now—to live as if Jesus has already returned.



# Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3:1–12

## Context Connection

In the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent, Matthew introduces us to John the Baptist, a preacher who calls the Jews to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”(3:1). Matthew tells us that John preached in the desert or wilderness of Judea. This area is located east of Jerusalem and slopes down to the Dead Sea. Matthew draws attention to John by connecting him with what the prophet Isaiah speaks of when he says, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (3:3). Matthew also makes connections between John and other Old Testament characters: “Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist” (3:4). This would have recalled for the Jews similar references to Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8), as well as Samson and Samuel. These individuals represent the Old Testament tradition of the revolutionary mode of renewing society through resistance to injustice. John’s message is one of radical conversion of the whole person to the will of God. This is symbolized by a baptism of total submersion in the waters of the Jordan River.

Matthew furthers his point by introducing us to the Pharisees and Sadducees. Matthew holds a lot of contempt for the Pharisees and Sadducees throughout his Gospel. He calls them a brood of vipers. Vipers are a genus of snakes, often used in the Scriptures to represent evil. In comparing this group of Pharisees and Sadducees to vipers, Matthew wants his audience to always be on guard—not allowing their deception to deliver a fatal blow. By calling them a brood of vipers, Matthew is also calling into question the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ honor. In Jewish society, honor is associated with birthright. But how could these individuals have honor if their paternity is associated with snakes? Matthew’s Gospel has more to say about the Pharisees and Sadducees, none of which is flattering. John talks of his baptism as one of repentance that produces good fruit. The true sign of conversion is in a person’s actions, not in her or his heritage. Even those who claim to be children of Abraham will not be counted among the saved if they are not repentant and if their actions do not demonstrate sincerity of heart and a total turning toward God. For John, baptism is a symbolic action signifying that a conversion of heart has taken place. God’s power surpasses the laws of natural lineage. John stresses that baptism speaks of an interior change that bears its witness through good actions: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance” (3:8).

This Sunday's Gospel ends with Matthew's showing clearly that even this great preacher, John the Baptist, is subordinate to Jesus. The one who is to come, Jesus, will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Baptism that Jesus offers will have consequences for the Final Judgment.

## **Tradition Connection**

When we pray the Nicene Creed, we acknowledge that Jesus will judge the living and the dead when he comes in glory. This is called the Final Judgment, or the Last Judgment. It will occur when Jesus Christ comes again. The Last Judgment will be a judgment of the whole human race. The image of the Final Judgment that Matthew uses in this Sunday's Gospel is the farmer's winnowing the grain to separate the chaff from the kernels, or fruit of the grain. Later on, Matthew uses profound scriptural images to define in greater detail the Final Judgment (see 25:31–36). Every person will be held accountable for his or her actions. Those who live as Jesus lived—performing the corporal works of mercy—will be welcomed into God's eternal Kingdom. Those who do not follow Jesus's example will be sent into eternal punishment.

The Final Judgment will come at the end of the world; however, as Catholics, we believe that each person, at the moment of death, has a particular judgment (see CCC, numbers 1021–1022).

## **Wisdom Connection**

Matthew's Gospel calls Christians to embrace the radical conversion that was preached by John the Baptist and Jesus. This conversion is made manifest through the fruit of one's good deeds. John the Baptist is held up as a great prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. However, his greatness is secondary to that of Jesus the Christ. Christians who have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and allow their Baptism to be made evident in the world through good deeds will be like the grain at harvest. Just as the grain, the good fruit of the harvest, is gathered into barns after it is winnowed, so the faithful followers of Jesus will be gathered to Christ at the Final Judgment.



# Third Sunday of Advent

Matthew 11:2–11

## Context Connection

John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus because he is unable to go himself. John has been arrested by Herod Antipas and imprisoned in the fortress at Machaerus. We are first informed of John's arrest in chapter 4 of Matthew (verse 12). John instructs his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (11:3). John wants to know if Jesus really is the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus gives an interesting response: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (11:4–5). These acts of healing, which Jesus performs, are recorded in chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew and foretold in Isaiah 29:19, 35:5–6, and 61:1. Jesus gives this answer to John's disciples, and they take it back to John in prison.

Then Jesus addresses the crowd that is gathered around him—many who may have been followers of John but since John's imprisonment now follow Jesus. Jesus asks them, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?" (11:7). He suggests that they did not go out to see a reed blowing in the wind nor a person dressed in fine clothes, but that the crowd went out into the wilderness to see a great prophet, John the Baptist. John is an unbending prophet, no reed blowing in the wind. He is a person who clearly understands the call for repentance and for living a life of values consistent with the law of God. John dresses as a prophet. His clothes are basic and without refinement—in contrast to the fine garments of the members of the court of Herod Antipas.

Jesus affirms the crowd for going into the wilderness to see the prophet: "Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you'" (11:9–10). This quote evokes the writings of the prophet Malachi (3:1, 4:5). It compares John to the great prophet Elijah, who is to return to earth as a sign of the coming of the Lord, the Messiah. Jesus acknowledges that John is the greatest of all the prophets, but adds that it is the Son of Man who is the fulfillment of John's message. Jesus is the one who will usher in a new era in salvation history and establish God's Kingdom on earth.

## Tradition Connection

The *Catechism* speaks of John the Baptist as a forerunner of the Lord, whose role is to complete the work of preparing the people (see number 718). For Catholics, John is the last of the great prophets of the Old Testament. He is the one who points directly to Jesus and helps us recognize Jesus as the Messiah. John comes from a long line of prophets, beginning with Elijah. He is the last prophet through whom the Holy Spirit will speak. Matthew helps us recognize Jesus as the Messiah by pointing out Jesus's power to heal. These healings are signs that the prophets, especially Isaiah, say will help us recognize the Messiah when he comes (see CCC, number 549). We believe that Jesus's death on the cross and his Resurrection from the dead are final proof that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God the Father. Jesus's death on the cross firmly established the Kingdom of God (see CCC, number 550).

## Wisdom Connection

Matthew wants Jesus's followers to understand the true identities of John the Baptist and Jesus. John is the one the Old Testament, particularly through the prophet Malachi, speaks of as the messenger who will prepare the way before the Lord, the Messiah. John is the last of the great prophets of the Old Testament. He is the one who, through his preaching and baptism, makes ready the people of Israel for the coming of the Messiah.

As for Jesus, Jesus is the Christ—the Messiah. When John's disciples ask Jesus if he is the Messiah, they do not receive a direct answer; rather, Jesus tells them to examine what they see and hear about Jesus and then draw their own conclusions. Jesus points John's disciples to Isaiah's vision of a healed and redeemed humanity (35:5–6). This passage, from the first reading for the Third Sunday of Advent, serves as proof that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

The Messiah comes as a Savior who empowers and strengthens the weak, making them strong so they can live new lives of redemption in God. The Savior comes and brings healing to a world sick with sin.



# Fourth Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1:18–24

## Context Connection

The Gospel of Matthew gives us most of the information we have about Joseph, the adopted earthly father of Jesus. In the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Joseph is described as *righteous* (1:19), a term sometimes translated as “just.” Matthew wants us to understand that Joseph is a religious man steeped in Judaism and that he is also a descendant of King David (see 1:1–17).

Matthew’s story of Jesus’s birth is told through the experience of Joseph rather than of Mary, as in Luke’s account. Matthew tells us that Joseph and Mary are betrothed, and not yet married, when Mary becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

The Jewish custom of marriage then was very different from marriage customs in the United States today. Marriages were arranged by the elders in the family. The betrothal, where two individuals are set apart for each other, was the first step in the marriage process. The young man and young woman were considered husband and wife from the time of betrothal, even though they each remained living in their parents’ homes. The wedding ceremony was complete when the groom took the bride into his home or that of his parents.

During this in-between time, Joseph becomes aware that Mary is “found to be with child” (1:18). Because the marriage has not been consummated, Mary is presumed guilty of adultery. Joseph has a couple options, according to Mosaic Law. He can publicly expose Mary’s infidelity by returning her to her father, where she will be stoned to death, according to Deuteronomy 22:23–24. Joseph’s second option, the one he plans to execute, is to quietly dismiss Mary through a formal divorce; however, before the divorce takes place, Joseph has a dream in which an angel appears and says, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (1:20). Luke uses these same words of assurance to tell of the angel who appears to Mary to announce that she will conceive a child: “Do not be afraid” (Luke 1:30). In the dream, Joseph is told to name the child Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). This is a Greek form of the Hebrew name Yeshua or Yeshu, meaning “God saves.” Yeshua originates from the name Joshua, which means “Yahweh helps.”

Joseph’s dream puts to rest his fears by revealing that this child is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph completes the marriage ritual by taking Mary into his

home: “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife” (1:24). In all his decisions, Joseph acts as a noble and honorable person.

## Tradition Connection

Saint Joseph models for all of us, but in particular for all men, how to live a life of honor and faithfulness to God. For Catholics, Joseph is a patron of virtuous living. Although God is Jesus’s true father, Joseph fulfills that role in daily life. He loves Jesus and treats him as his own son (see Luke 4:22). He provides for the safety of his family (see Matthew 2:13–14) and teaches Jesus his trade (see Mark 6:3). There are no more references to Joseph in the New Testament after the family’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem (see Luke 2:41–52), so he may have died before Jesus began his public ministry. Joseph is known as the patron saint of fathers and workers and as the patron of a happy death (see CCC, number 1014). Dying in the loving arms of Jesus and Mary would indeed be a happy death.

## Wisdom Connection

For Matthew, the story of Jesus’s birth concludes the genealogy listed in chapter 1, verses 1–17. It is definitive proof that Jesus is a member of the Davidic line through his earthly father, Joseph. From the opening verse of his Gospel, Matthew declares Jesus as the Messiah: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way” (1:18). By the using the word *the*, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the one true Messiah that has been long awaited. Matthew concretizes this further by giving proof of Jesus’s ancestry—as a Son of David through Joseph.

We believe God breaks into the human experience to make God’s will known. Jesus is a living sign and gives witness to this when he takes on human form. What does it mean that God became human? It tells us that God found goodness in a world that is sometimes steeped in despair. It means that God does not look down on the human body as something weak but rather as a means for salvation to enter the world.

Matthew also holds up Joseph as a noble person—a model of a just person—one who is willing to place his trust in God even when everything around him points in a different direction. For Joseph and for all Christians, the key words to remember are, “Do not be afraid” (1:20).

# Acknowledgments

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The quotation on page 323 is from “Declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the Unicity and Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,” number 22, at [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html), accessed October 14, 2006.

The quotation on pages 363 is from *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium, 1964)*, solemnly promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, number 59, at [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), accessed October 14, 2006.

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## Endnotes Cited in Quotations from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

1. Cf. *Jn* 16:28.
2. Cf. *1 Cor* 12; *Jn* 15:1–4.