

## Praise for *Food for the Soul*

“Peter Kreeft is a most gifted theologian, but more importantly, he is a man of faith. With this latest book of reflections on the Scripture readings for Mass, he is sharing with us the lights born of a life of prayer and faithful discipleship. It is truly an expression of what Hans Urs von Balthasar called *kniende Theologie*, ‘theology on the knees.’ In addition to the solid content, Peter Kreeft’s artfully expressed thought never fails to inspire.”

—**Cardinal Seán O’Malley**, Archbishop of Boston

“Peter Kreeft has no equal with respect to making the deepest truths shine forth with aphoristic brilliance. He is the perfect person to place in the pulpit. Kreeft on the readings for Mass is a match made in heaven.”

—**Joseph Pearce**, Editor of the *St. Austin Review* and author of *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton*

“Reading this series is like joining the masterful Peter Kreeft for coffee after Mass to talk about the readings. It’s a wonderful resource that Catholics can pick up and return to again and again throughout the liturgical year, full of wisdom from one of the top guiding lights of our era in the Catholic world.”

—**Dr. Edward Sri**, theologian and author of *A Biblical Walk through the Mass*

“Unfortunately, we have written records of only seven of C.S. Lewis’ sermons. But thank God we now have dozens of reflections from Peter Kreeft, the modern C.S. Lewis, based on the Mass readings throughout the liturgical year. Kreeft’s decades of reading Scripture, teaching students, and loving wisdom shine forth in this compendium, which deserves wide readership by priests and laypeople alike. With his characteristic wit and wisdom, Kreeft offers an invaluable resource in understanding the Scriptures proclaimed in the liturgy. I hope Kreeft’s book finds its way into the hands of every Catholic eager to better understand the readings of Sunday Mass.”

—**Christopher Kaczor**, Professor of Philosophy, Loyola Marymount University, and Fellow of the Word on Fire Institute

“More than a help, this book is a gift to the Church, and the gift is an encounter with Christ, the Word. Not only for priests—although I encourage this book to be used by priests and hopefully also in seminary formation—this book is also for laity and religious. It is for anyone who is seeking to know God more profoundly through prayer and reflection on his Word, helping us in our journey to know him and discern this message of love.”

—**Sr. Josephine Garrett**, Sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth

“Preaching is among the most important tasks of the Church. It is the premiere form of catechesis for the average parishioner and a surefire way to inspire the hearts of God’s people. Today, the faithful are hungering for substantial homilies informed by the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition. This collection of Peter Kreeft’s biblical reflections provides Catholics with a trustworthy and insightful resource in response to this need. With his usual clarity, Kreeft guides the reader in a stirring series of reflections that will prove a valuable asset to any layperson, religious, seminarian, deacon, or priest.”

—**Fr. Blake Britton**, author of *Reclaiming Vatican II: What It (Really) Said, What It Means, and How It Calls Us to Renew the Church*

“Peter Kreeft’s reflections are challenging yet simple, piercing right to the soul with his wit, charm, and heart. If you’re wondering whether or not you need another book offering reflections on the Mass readings, I offer a resounding yes! These reflections show how deeply God loves us through the Word and the Church, ultimately reminding us of the simple fact that the point is not the homily or the prose—the point is Jesus.”

—**Rachel Bulman**, author, speaker, and Fellow of the Word on Fire Institute

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REFLECTIONS ON THE MASS READINGS



CYCLE B

PETER KREEFT

WORD  
on FIRE.

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

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Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by Katherine Spittler,  
Cassie Bielak, and Clark Kenyon

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First printing, October 2023

ISBN: 978-1-68578-034-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021922577

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## INTRODUCTION

### Why this book?

Because one of the things we Catholics can learn from Protestants is to sing, from experience and from the heart, this old hymn by Edwin Hodder:

Thy Word is like a garden, Lord, with flowers bright and fair;  
And everyone who seeks may pluck a lovely cluster there.  
Thy Word is like a deep, deep mine; and jewels rich and rare  
Are hidden in its mighty depths for every searcher there.

Thy Word is like a starry host: a thousand rays of light  
Are seen to guide the traveler and make his pathway bright.  
Thy Word is like an armory, where soldiers may repair  
And find, for life's long battle day, all needful weapons there.

O may I love Thy precious Word, may I explore the mine,  
May I its fragrant flowers glean, may light upon me shine!  
O may I find my armor there, Thy Word my trusty sword,  
I'll learn to fight with every foe the battle of the Lord.

### Who is this book for?

I wrote this book for three classes of people: enterprising priests, lazy priests, and laity.

It's for enterprising priests who want a "homily helper" that does to their homilies what "Hamburger Helper" does to boring hamburgers.

It's also for lazy priests who want to use my poor brains instead of theirs. I'm practical enough to know that this second category is pretty large. Laziness affects all of us, and we laity don't hold it against you priests very much. So

I think it's okay to take the easy way out and simply draw from my words, though I think it's much better for your people to hear your own words rather than mine. Besides, they're not even very original. Their origin is not in my mind but in the long and deep tradition of the Church. The Church is in the business of farming. Her words are seeds, meant for scattering on many mental soils. Whoever you are, dear reader, both of us are only links in the chain of God's mail delivery.

And this book is also for a third class of people: for the laity who are hungry for more of "the bread of life."

### **What is a homily?**

Protestants have sermons; Catholics have homilies. One difference between them is that sermons are usually doctrinal or topical, while homilies are biblical. They are supposed to be expositions of the biblical texts assigned for Mass, which are the good soul-food that Mother Church puts on the plate of our high chair each Sunday at Mass. (Do you resent that insult? Most two-year-olds do. That just shows how old you are.)

A homily is to the Bible what a slave is to his master, what money is to the things that money can buy, or what ears are to hearing. Its whole, single, simple purpose is to "break the bread" of the Bible as the Mass breaks the bread of Christ's Body. Both the Bible and Christ are called the "Word of God." The Bible is the Word of God on paper; Christ is the Word of God in flesh, and on wood (the wood of the cross). Paper is made out of wood; wood is not made out of paper.

The purpose of a homily depends on the identity of the Bible, which is the master it serves. There are two radically different answers to the question of what the Bible is. Nonbelievers (some of whom call themselves Catholics) believe it is man's words about God; believers believe it is God's Word about man. Believers call it "the Word" in the singular because it is a singular book, the only one that has the authority of divine revelation.

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Nonbelievers see the Bible as human wisdom about God; believers see it as divine wisdom about man. They differ not about the book but about the author. Obviously, men wrote it, but were they God's instruments or not? If so, it has "author-ity" from its primary Author. Like Christ, it has two natures: human and divine. It is the Word of God in the words of men. Fundamentalists deny its human nature and modernists deny its divine nature, just as in the early Church, Docetists denied Christ's human nature and Arians denied his divine nature.

Both Protestants and Catholics believe that the Bible is divine revelation, but Protestants believe that it is the only infallible divine revelation. (If it's divine, it has to be infallible; God may be mysterious and obscure but he makes no mistakes.) Catholics believe that there is also a divinely authorized Church that is to the Bible what a teacher is to a textbook and that the New Testament is part of a larger and earlier Sacred Tradition ("tradition" literally means "hand down"), which Christ handed down to his Apostles, and that he gave them his authority to teach in his name and to appoint their successors (the bishops) through whom they passed on this authority to future generations. The Bible itself says that. Thus, faithful Catholics always interpret the Bible according to the Sacred Tradition of the Church, and vice versa.

A Catholic homilist, then, serves four masters: (1) God, (2) God's Christ, (3) Christ's Church, and (4) the Church's Bible—the Bible because of the Church, the Church because of Christ, and Christ because of God.

Catholics do not skip the third link in that chain—the Church. As St. Augustine said, "I would not believe the Bible unless I believed the Church." For the apostolic Church was the Teacher that (1) authored (wrote) this Book, (2) authorized it (the word "author" is in "authorize"), (3) defined its canon (why these twenty-seven New Testament books and not others?) and (4) continues to interpret it, to break its bread and feed it to us. That is why Catholic homilies are always founded on the Bible.

## Homily helpers

Another more obvious difference is that sermons are long (typically between fifteen minutes and an hour), while homilies are short (typically between three and ten minutes). Yet Catholics complain more about their priests' short homilies than Protestants do about their preachers' long sermons. The reason is obvious: homilies are almost always boring. They put us to sleep instead of waking us up, surprising us, shocking us, or challenging us. They are full of platitudes. They are sometimes also insults to our intelligence. They do not tell us anything we did not already know, feel, believe, or appreciate. They make the Church Militant sound like the Church Mumbling. They make the Mystical Body of Christ look like Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. They make Jesus sound like Joel Osteen or Oprah.

But they do have a certain power: they are effective sleeping pills. And unlike other sleeping pills, they cost nothing and are always safe. In fact, they are excruciatingly safe.

Preaching is one of many things we Catholics can learn from Protestants of the old-fashioned kind. (I do not waste my wind on the windy ones, the worldly ones who are so current that they swim with the current, not against it, like dead fish instead of live ones, and who identify religion with the platform of either political party—worshiping either the elephant or the donkey.)

One reason Protestants usually preach better sermons is that they usually know the Bible better than Catholics do. They love it and revere it and are passionate about it. The cynical Catholic's explanation for this is that that's all they've got: *sola scriptura*. No infallible creeds, no ecumenical councils, no authoritative Sacred Tradition, no Mystical Body, no Real Presence, no Mass, no canonized saints, no mystics, no attention paid to Mary or to the angels, no pope, no purgatory, no seven sacraments, no icons, no incense, no holy water, no exorcisms, no Latin, no Gregorian chant, etc. Protestants find Catholicism far too fat. Catholics find Protestantism far too skinny. But though their religion is skinny, their sermons are fatter. Imagine a Mass that ended

## Introduction

with the homily, that had nothing more substantial or supersubstantial than the homily. The homily would have to be bigger and better. But, of course, to a Catholic, that Protestant service would be like an egg without a yolk, or a target without a bull's-eye.

Okay, so somebody should improve our homilies. Somebody should market a “homily helper” to do to homilies what Hamburger Helper does to hamburgers.

But why me? I'm an absent-minded philosophy professor, not a priest or a deacon. I have never preached a homily in a Catholic church. I do not teach biblical theology or homiletics. I am not professionally qualified to write this book.

But I know, from observation, how many people fall asleep during homilies; and I know, from experience, how many Catholics are exercising heroic charity toward their priests in being polite and patronizing and pretending as they endure their mild weekly purgatory.

There are some priests who are very good homilists, but they are very rare. My parish priest preaches excellent homilies, but that is because he was trained and ordained as a Protestant (Anglican) before he became a Catholic.

So the need is clear. How much this book can help, if at all, is not clear. But just maybe it can. And the situation can't get much worse. My friend actually heard an Easter homily in which the priest said that the message Christ was trying to get across to us from the pulpit of the cross was “I'm OK, you're OK.” This is not a joke from *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.

### For priests only

If you are a priest, I have one and only one piece of advice for you if you plan to draw from these words of mine. As someone who is not a shepherd (a priest, a deacon, or an expert in homiletics) but just one of the sheep, here is my primary bleat to my shepherds. It does not matter what we think of you, whether you are a good speaker or not, intelligent or not, eloquent or not, or even whether or not you are wise and competent in anything else in this world. The one and

only thing that will give your homily power is your heart's passion, your love, both of Jesus Christ the shepherd and of us his sheep who desperately need him in our lives.

We're not impressed by your head or your mouth or your hands, but we can't help being impressed by your heart. And you can't help showing it; you can't help wearing your heart on your sleeve. You can't fake your heart, as you can fake your head or your hands. You can't give us what you don't have yourself. If you don't believe this stuff, stop pretending and go back to the school of prayer and ask God for the gift of faith to believe it. If your hope is dim and dull and sleepy, go back and ask God to put that hope in your heart so you can give it to your people. If you don't have a passionate, all-consuming love for Jesus Christ the good shepherd and for every one of his needy, bleat-y sheep, go back and ask God to light a bonfire in your heart. We can be fooled by fake light, but we can't be fooled by fake heat. We can tell how much you mean every word you say. We're still little kids that way. We have surprisingly good baloney detectors. We can read our spiritual fathers just as we can read our biological fathers. Let us see your heart. Don't be afraid or embarrassed. We're not your judges—God is. If you're afraid to be embarrassed in front of us now, you're going to be embarrassed in front of him at the Last Judgment.

The heart of your target as a homilist is the heart of each person who hears your homily. God aims at the heart, which is the center of the soul and the source of its life just as the physical heart is the source and center of the life of the body.

So your homily should be heart to heart. "Heart speaks to heart"—that was St. John Henry Newman's personal motto because he knew it was God's. (But as Newman knew well, that does not decrease the importance of the mind and intelligence but increases it. The mind is the heart's closest counselor.)

Christ is the one who sews hearts to God and to each other. Therefore, like the Scriptures they "unpack," homilies should be centered on Christ. If there is one thing we Catholics need always to be reminded of by Evangelical Protestants, it is Christocentrism. And since Christ is both the historical Jesus



## *Introduction*

and the eternal “Logos,” the “Word” or “language” of God, the light of truth who “enlightens everyone” (John 1:9), Christians defend the “logocentrism” that “deconstructionists” denounce. Their logophobia is really a Christophobia.

Scripture uses the term “Word of God” both for itself and for Christ. The Bible is the gold mine and Christ is the gold. Therefore, St. Jerome says that “ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” Christ is the central point of Scripture and also the “big picture” or frame surrounding it. So if homilies are to be faithful to the scriptural bread that they break open, Christ must be both the center and the surrounding frame for every homily. They are to be looked along, not looked at. They are pointing fingers, words of men that point to the Word of God.

### **The content of the book**

Some of these reflections try to connect the different readings for each Sunday Mass—the Old Testament reading, the epistle, and the Gospel—and some do not. The readings were put together, in the mind of the Church, for a reason. However, to be perfectly frank, sometimes the reason and the connection is not clear, at least not to me. So I don’t always “push the envelope” and strain to see a unity I don’t really see very well. But even then, the main point of each of the separate readings is clear, and one arrow is enough to pierce a heart.

The reason God sent his Son into our world, the reason he founded his Church and instituted the Mass, the reason for everything he has done for us, is to consummate our spiritual marriage to him: a living, personal, joyful, faithful, hopeful, and love-full relationship with God that is totally encompassing, both individual and social, both private and public, both body and soul, both invisible and visible, both spiritual and sacramental, both through hierarchy and through equality, both intellectual and moral, both rational and mystical, both in this world and in the next. That is the reason for everything he has done, from banging out the Big Bang to my writing and your reading these tiny little pops that are its remotest echoes.

*Food for the Soul*

Use them, choose them, and lose them as you will. Some will “work” better, some worse. My words as well as my ideas are given to you for God’s glory, not mine or yours.

ADVENT



# FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

## FIRST 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.

---

(I am going to offer two reflections, not just one, on this passage. You can use either or both, in either order. The first centers on the most pressing problem of our lives, if we are believers—namely, the problem of evil: Why does the good God allow so much evil? The second is less philosophical and more “pastoral” and textual.)

### **Reflection 1**

Twice the prophet Isaiah calls God our Father. What does that mean?

Everything true of a father is true of a mother also. A father, with the cooperation of a mother, procreates children. Procreation is part of God’s image in us, since God is our Creator. He gives us our very existence.

A father gives more than just existence. A builder gives existence to a building, and an author gives existence to a book, but a father (and a mother) gives something more: life. God gives us life.

A father gives us not just any kind of life but *human* life, human nature. Human fathers give their children human life, and that is an image of the fact that God gives us a human and finite share in his divine life, through Christ, so that we become adopted children of God by faith and Baptism.

A father gives his children protection and care and guidance and wisdom and education and time. He shares his lifetime with his children.

A father loves his children. What is love? Love is the gift of your very self to another. What is the clearest proof of love? The proof of love is sacrifice. God the Father sacrificed the dearest and most precious thing he had for us, to save us from sin and eternal death: his own infinitely beloved Son.

Human fathers, and all these gifts that they give to their children, are all imperfect. But God is perfect.

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Why, then, in light of this amazing and wonderful fact that the perfect God is our Father, are we in such dire straits? Why does such a good and perfect God allow us to harden our hearts to him? Of course, he does not himself harden our hearts—none of his works are evil—but he does allow us to harden our own hearts, so that we no longer fear him.

“The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord,” says the Bible in many places (see Prov. 9:10). That fear is not servile fear, a slave’s fear of cruelty from a wicked master whom he hates, but filial fear, a child’s fear of disappointing his good father whom he loves.

So if the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, why does God not give us the grace to fear him more? He *could*. Grace is a gift. It is freely given. It is not automatic and necessary, like our essential nature. We cannot ever *not* have human nature, but we can and do often *not* have divine grace—and then, in contrast, we do have it when God gives it, but not before. The question, then, is why not before? Why not always? Why not perpetually?

God does not lack the power to do that. Isaiah confesses that God is the potter and we are the clay, the work of God’s hands. He is omnipotent. Why are the clay pots all crackpots? God does not make crackpots. Why does he let us crack? Why are our best deeds like polluted rags? God is not a polluter.

The origin of evil is our own free choice, of course, not God. God chose to create children, not robots, and the children rebelled, and continue to rebel. But when Isaiah asks God why he allows us to sin, he is not asking that question as a philosopher or theologian wondering how to rationally reconcile God’s infinite power and goodness with human sin. He knows that we, not God, are the ones who choose to sin. He is not philosophizing; he is praying—and he is both confessing and complaining, and agonizing over our sins. He is not *wondering why* God does not “rend the heavens and come down” and fix things: he is asking him to *do* that. He is praying, not philosophizing. He wants a miracle, not an answer. And he will get what he is praying for, but in God’s good time: he will get Jesus Christ, the incarnate Savior. He will get more than an answer: he will get the Answerer. That’s the

reason Job was satisfied in the end. God didn't give him answers: he gave him himself.

But we do need an answer to the great question of why God allows so much evil in his world, both physical evil and moral evil, both sufferings and sins. His power is so great that he could minimize or even eliminate both. Why doesn't he?

We need *three* answers to that question, not just one: one in our heads, one in our hearts, and one in our hands. That is, we need an answer in our thought, in our faith, in our theology; and also one in our will, in our choices, in our loves; and also one in our actions, in our deeds. In other words, one in light, one in love, and one in life, the three things we need the most.

The answer in thought is that God is all-wise, and he knows what is best for us, and he makes no mistakes. He knows that, given what we are—always somewhat foolish and sinful and selfish—it is best for us to learn from experience, to suffer and even to be allowed to sin, so that we can profit from our failures even more than we could profit only from our successes. God always knows and wills the greatest good for us, although we don't usually see this, because we are not God. (Duh!)

That is the answer to our heads. The answer to our hearts and our wills is even more important than the answer to our heads and our minds. God cares most of all for our hearts. He gives truth to our heads, gives us divine revelation, not just for our heads but also for our hearts, not just to satisfy our curiosity but also to instruct our hearts. Our hearts have an even greater need of truth than our heads do. For our hearts are the heart of the matter. For the heart is where love comes from, and, as St. John of the Cross said, "In the evening of our lives, we will be judged on our love." And the reason for that is that we will be judged by the God who *is* love, as St. John the Evangelist said, in perhaps the profoundest sentence ever written. Because God, our judge, is love, we will be judged according to our loves.

Our hearts are essentially our wills, not just our feelings. Our feelings come *to* us, passively, but our choices come *from* us, actively, by our free will. We are



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not responsible for our feelings, but we are responsible for our choices. Our choices are free.

But they are not wholly free, because we are addicts. We are not all alcoholics, but we are all sinaholics. We are addicted to our own selfishness. We love to sing “I did it my way.” So one of the things we do with our free will is forge the chains of our own slavery to sin with the strength of our freedom. The other thing we do with our free will is the opposite: we freely choose freedom by choosing God’s way. God gave us this terrible power to freely choose either slavery or freedom, either “My will be done” or “Thy will be done.”

So the central answer to the problem of evil is in our own will, our free will. Our wills are freer than our minds. Our minds can’t not-know that  $2 + 2 = 4$  or that the sky is blue, but our will can not-love, can refuse love and refuse God and prefer selfishness to love.

The answer to the problem of evil is in three places: in our heads, our hearts, and our hands. We have more power over our hearts than over our heads, but we have the most power over our hands. In fact, what I have called “the answer in our hands” is literally *in our hands*. God has put the solution to the problem of evil in our own hands. We can “solve” the “problem of evil” most adequately not just by thinking and choosing but above all by *doing* good, by doing God’s will, by becoming saints.

Our hands move in obedience to our hearts (that is, our loves, our desires, our wills); and both our hearts and our hands can act only on what they know from our heads (that is, on what we know or believe). So the foundation and beginning of the answer to the problem of evil must be in our heads, and the center and heart of it is in our hearts, and the final and definitive answer to the problem of evil is in our hands.

We need three things, the three things Christ is: light, love, and life. These correspond to the needs of our heads, our hearts, and our hands: light for our heads, love for our hearts, and life for our hands. The light must come first because nothing can be freely loved with our hearts or lived with our hands without light for our heads, our minds. The answer in our hearts must come

next, and centrally; that is the answer in love. But the answer in our hands must come last, and that is the answer in our lives. The final answer to the problem of evil is in our own hands. It is to become saints. Saints are the solution to the problem of evil. Be one!

## **Reflection 2**

Isaiah speaks like a young child to God as his father. A child trusts his father. (By the way, I say “his” and “he” instead of “his or hers” and “he or she” just as every single person who wrote or spoke the English language did for hundreds of years, not to exclude women but to exclude a superfluous “or she” after each inclusive “he,” or a dehumanizing “it.”) A child trusts his father but does not wholly understand him. That’s why he has to trust him (or distrust him—that is the child’s basic choice): precisely because he does not understand him. And we are always children in relation to God. We grow, but we never grow equal to God. Even in heaven, when we see him face to face in the beatific vision, there will still be the child’s trust in his always infinitely wiser Father.

A child needs especially two things from his father: wisdom and help. Freud, the founder of modern psychology, who was an atheist, said that we invented God because all children need these two things—wisdom and protection, deliverance from ignorance and deliverance from fear and suffering—and when children realize that their father, who supplied these two things throughout their childhood, will die, they invent an invisible heavenly Father because they cannot live without hope that these two things will still come to them from somewhere. Freud was totally wrong about God, but he was not totally wrong about human psychology and human needs. We cannot live without hope.

So Isaiah says to God, in his prayer, “You, LORD, are our father, our redeemer” (that is, our savior, our helper, our hope). Yet he goes on to say, “Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?” Why does our Father let us wander so far away from him in our hearts and lives?

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God, of course, does not do anything evil, and hardening any heart is an evil work, so God does not harden anyone's heart. But he does allow us to harden our own hearts. And Isaiah complains about that to God. He says, in effect, Why don't you stop us? Why don't you interfere? Why don't you give us more grace? More miracles? Why don't you appear to us miraculously, as you did to our ancestors, when you saved your people from their slavery in Egypt by miracles—the ten plagues, and the pillar of fire, and the pillar of cloud, and the parting of the Red Sea, and the manna in the wilderness?

So Isaiah pleads to God to “return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage.” His complaint is a good one! It stems from faith. He says to God, We are your children, your own people, your special, personal heritage. Why do you seem to be neglecting your children?

Isaiah is not asking “Why?” as a philosopher or a scientist would ask “Why?” He is not looking for an explanation; he is looking for a miracle. If you or someone you dearly love is dying, what you want from your doctor is not an explanation of what they are dying of! You want a cure, or at least a medicine that will actually help, not just an explanation of why the doctor is not giving you a cure or a medicine. Isaiah is not complaining about his head; he's complaining about his heart. His heart is broken by God's absence, and he asks God to break the heavens themselves and come and save him: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, while you wrought awesome deeds.” Isaiah knew that God did that in the past. He saved Israel from slavery to Egypt, and now Israel faces slavery from her Babylonian conquerors. Why isn't God fixing that?

And there is a far worse slavery that Isaiah complains about than slavery to Babylonians: slavery to sins. When the horrible sin of slavery polluted America, the slave masters were in a far worse slavery than the slaves, because the slaves' souls were innocent and pious, and full of faith and hope, while the masters' souls were full of pride, contempt, and arrogance. They were the real slaves: slaves to their own desires. The slaves were interiorly free, free of need for the masters, while the masters were interiorly enslaved, enslaved to their need for their slaves.

Isaiah confesses that Israel has sinned and deserves her punishment of defeat in war and captivity in Babylon, so he is not complaining about God's just punishments. He is not asking God why he allowed the Babylonians to justly punish the Jews but why he allowed the Jews to sin and deserve those punishments. He says, "Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful." God is rightly and justly angry—the lack of rightful anger at sins and injustices is itself unjust and sinful, and God has no sin, and so God is therefore rightly angry.

Isaiah confesses that "all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags." We had some good deeds, but even in our good deeds we had mixed motives, bad motives, polluted motives.

He says, "We have all withered like leaves." Sin does harm not only to others but to the sinner: it withers his soul; it takes the life out of his soul; it detaches his soul from God, as the cold autumn wind detaches a dead, withered leaf from a living tree. He says, "Our guilt carries us away like the wind." *Living* leaves are not carried away by the wind because they are stuck onto the living tree. But once the leaf dies to the living sap of the tree, it becomes withered and passive, the victim of the wind. The leaf here is us, and the tree is God, and the sap is the very life of God in the soul, and the separation of the leaf from the tree is sin, and the wind is all the other forces in the world that become our Lords and masters, that move our souls once they are separated from God: forces like the media, or our own hates and prejudices, or "the spirit of the times," or ideologies, or our own hunger for money, sex, and power, greed and lust and pride.

So Isaiah is not bargaining with God and not complaining that God is unjust or unfair. He is confessing the terrible truth that God's abandonment of Israel to defeat is fully deserved. He says, "You have . . . delivered us up to our guilt." Guilt is not a mere feeling, any more than faith or hope or love are mere feelings. Guilt is a fact. The prisoner does not have the right to complain to the judge about a verdict of guilty that he doesn't *feel* guilty.

Guilt is a truth. But it's not the whole truth. There's a "but," and it's a big "but." (I don't know whether or not Isaiah was fat, but I know he had a big

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“but.”) Here it is: “But you are our father, LORD” (GNT). The father of the prodigal son is still the son’s father and still loves him, even after his son left him. He did not imprison his son and prevent him from leaving him and going into the far country to make some horrible mistakes and suffer their consequences. He allowed it. He did not approve it, but he allowed it to happen—because the son was not a robot or a machine or a possession but an individual with free will. The only way the son could learn the hard lesson was by experience. He had to repent and return of his own free will. The father could have forced his son’s *body* to come home—he could have sent soldiers out to capture him—but he could not force his *soul* to come home. Even God cannot force a choice of our free will. God does not take back his gift of free will even when we abuse it.

Yet God is in control all the time. Isaiah says, “We are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.” All of history is his-story, and all of us are part of his story, and this divine author, this storyteller, knows every detail of what he is doing. But we do not. That’s why we have to live in hope and faith and trust.

But the redemption comes. God acts. In his good time, he comes and redeems us. That is what we will celebrate on December 25. Now, in Advent, we stand with Isaiah in the darkness and wonder why God does not come sooner. We will get our answer, but only in God’s good time.

And when we get the answer, when he does come, it will be far greater, far better, than we could have hoped or desired or imagined. It will be “what eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart” (1 Cor. 2:9). It will be God himself, God incarnate, God in the flesh giving us his own flesh and blood, his own life, for our salvation.

Today we celebrate both our present Advent and our future Christmas. We celebrate Advent with Isaiah as we confess that we stand in the same sin and darkness as ancient Israel. But our Advent is not just a complaint but also a celebration, because we stand in hope. We also celebrate our hope for Christmas today. In fact, Christmas will come to us sooner than December 25. It

will come to us in the Mass, which is the answer to Isaiah's prayer, when God literally rends the heavens and comes down, when the Son of God descends into the darkness of our sinful world and even into our death, and then rises to dispel our darkness and destroy our death and swallow our sins.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19 \_\_\_\_\_

**R. (4) Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.**

O shepherd of Israel, hearken,  
from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.  
Rouse your power,  
and come to save us.

Once again, O LORD of hosts,  
look down from heaven, and see;  
take care of this vine,  
and protect what your right hand has planted,  
the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

May your help be with the man of your right hand,  
with the son of man whom you yourself made strong.  
Then we will no more withdraw from you;  
give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

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What today's Psalm asks God for is the same thing Isaiah asked for in today's Old Testament reading, and it is also different: it is something more.

Isaiah prayed, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,"

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and the Psalmist prays, “From your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth. Rouse your power, and come to save us.” They are asking God for the same thing—his presence, his power. But there is a difference: the Psalmist adds something very important to this basic prayer. He goes on to say, “Give us new life, and *we will call* upon your name.”

In other words, he prays: Please send your grace into our lives not only from without but also from within; not only from you yourself, acting unilaterally, but also from us, acting in cooperation with your grace. Save us not only from our captors, the Babylonians, our enemies, but also from our far worse enemies, ourselves, our sins, the enemy within.

God responds to that prayer because God inspired that prayer. What principle is God teaching us by those words “give us new life, and we will call”? The principle is that divine grace, supernatural grace, does not bypass human nature, or substitute for it. Grace turns nature on, not off. And especially human nature. And since human free will is an essential dimension of human nature, divine grace turns our human free will and free choice on, not off. The more grace, the more nature. The more grace, the more freedom. The more God, the more us. It’s like the relation between light and colors: the more light there is, the more each color shines.

The principle is clear, but the practice is paradoxical. The Psalmist, in praying, is turning to God. That is what prayer essentially is: turning to God. And he is turning to God to ask for something. For what? That God would turn to us, and “take care of this vine, and protect what your right hand has planted.” All right, but what is the Psalmist asking God to do to the vine or the vineyard, which of course is God’s people, us? He is asking God to turn us to him: “Give *us* new life, and we will call upon *your name*.” So he is turning to God to ask God to turn to us and turn us to turn to him!

So he is answering his prayer in the very act of praying; he is getting exactly what he asked for in the very act of asking for it. He is asking God, as the disciples asked Christ, to teach us to pray. And that very asking is prayer. So

we get the answer to our prayers, or at least the beginning of that answer, by the very first act of praying.

And that very first act of ours, that very first turning to God in prayer, was itself inspired by something that came before it: by God's own act of grace that inspired our asking for grace. God's action, God's grace, comes first, not second. Then it turns on our human nature and our free choice, the choice to pray. God's will activates our will. And that thing that we will, what we pray for—what is that? God's grace. God's grace to do what? To turn our hearts to him, to turn our hearts and wills from sin to sanctity, from selfishness to godliness.

What comes first *in our experience* is our need, our desire, our love, our heart, our will. We will to pray: that's why we pray. So our will to pray, our desire to pray, our desire to be in God's presence, is the first thing, *for us*. And God's response to our prayer seems to be the second thing, *for us*. Jesus says to us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7). First ask, then receive. And yet in fact, in reality, it is always God who comes first, who first inspires that thing that seems first to us—namely, our desire to pray. We cannot take credit for that; we do not act first—God does. If we are the question and God is the answer, the answer always comes before the question. If we are the need and God is the supply, the supply always comes before the need.

There is an old Protestant hymn that expresses that paradox. It goes like this:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.  
It was not I that found, O Savior true,  
no, I was found of thee.

It's tempting for us to use that fact as an excuse for not praying: "I guess God just isn't inspiring me to pray today. It's all up to him, after all." No it isn't! It's all up to you, because the very first thing God did to you is give you



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free will, free choice. And when God does move you, he will not move you *instead of* yourself, or in spite of yourself. He will move you to freely move yourself. The time to give God all the credit for your prayers and good works is *after* they are done, not before; when they are past, not future; when they are actual, not just potential. Trace your good works back far enough and you will see the face of God. But you can do that tracing only after you do the works and prayers. Only after you freely do a good work can you honestly thank God for having inspired it.

The principle is that we simply cannot divide up the responsibility between God and ourselves and say that God does 50% and we do 50%, or God does 100% and we do 0%, or we do 100% and God does 0%, or even that God does 99% and we do 1%. God does 100% and so do we. It's not like procreation, where the man and the woman each contribute half the chromosomes. It's more like writing, where the hand and the pen each do all the writing, not half. We do not do any of the writing without the pen, and the pen does not do any of the writing without us. Pens without hands don't write, and neither do hands without pens. We can't do it without God, and God won't do it without us.

Actually, that analogy of the hand and the pen is not totally correct because sometimes God does do his work without us, when he performs miracles. And miracles really happen, and are much, much more common than we think, especially if we are so foolish as to get all our information from our secular media. I think most of the people reading this can honestly say that they have received at least one miracle in their lives, one clearly supernatural intervention of God. But usually God uses human agents, as we use pens or pencils.

The clearest example of the 100%/100% principle, the principle that there is no dividing up a good between divine grace and human nature, divine grace and human free will—the clearest example of that is Jesus Christ, who is 100% God and 100% man, wholly divine and wholly human. Everything he did, including being born of Mary (also by her totally free cooperation) and living and dying and resurrecting and ascending to heaven—all these things were done by God *and* by man. Christ is one person, not two—one that is divine

and another one that is human. Everything he does is done by man, and everything he does is done by God. In him, God and man are totally united.

There are two authors of every book in the Bible: man and God, the human author and the divine author—for example, Isaiah and God, or David and God. And the divine author knows and intends much more than the human author understood at the time. This Psalm has a prophetic reference to Christ, which was, of course, not clearly understood by the Psalmist one thousand years before the Incarnation. But divine providence arranged for the Psalmist to write these words, which we today can see as clearly predicting and foreshadowing Christ, when the Psalmist prays for “the man of your right hand” and “the son of man whom you yourself made strong.” God the Father is the eternal source and strength of God the Son, and since the Father holds nothing back, but gives all of himself, God the Son eternally possesses all the attributes of divinity in himself.

Like Christ, the Bible is also fully human and fully divine. Both Christ and the Bible are called “the Word of God.” The Bible is the Word of God in the words of man. Christ is the Word of God in the flesh of man: “the Word was made flesh.” Both Christ and the Bible are 100 percent divine and 100 percent human.

The same is true of our prayers. They are truly done by us and by God. They are done by us because they are done by our free choice, for which we are truly responsible. And they are really done by God, whose Holy Spirit is the one who moves us and inspires us and turns us to pray. So we must pray as if it all depended on us, because it truly does, and also we must pray as if it all depended on God, because it truly does.

We are totally dependent on God. Christ tells us, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Yet we are also totally responsible for our choices, including our choice to pray or not to pray, to love or not to love, to sin or not to sin. Because when God moves us, when he shines his light on us, we ourselves shine. When we look back on any good we have done, we must look

beyond ourselves to God, because he is really there as the first cause of every good, including our own good choices.

Ultimately, everything is divine grace, especially our choosing to pray for divine grace. Everything is God's grace, but that does not mean that nothing is our choice, because grace turns our free will on, not off.

The truths we've been exploring here are not easy to wrap our minds around. But we don't have to understand it to do it. You don't have to understand the chemistry of water before you can drink, or the physics of electricity before you can turn on a light, or the astronomy of the sun before you can enjoy its light and heat. But we do have to act—to drink, or to flip the switch, or to go out into the sun. If we waited until we understood the science of hydration before we drank, we'd all die of thirst. That's how foolish we are if we don't pray because we don't really understand how it works. Because our souls are like plants, and prayer is their water, their very life.

So the practical point of this very complex reflection is very simple. It's a single syllable: pray.

But how? The answer to that question is this: just do it. You don't first learn it and then do it—you learn it by doing it. It's not science or technology. Don't wait until you master some spiritual technique or spiritual technology. There is no technology for faith and hope and love. Just do it. Because prayer is your soul's life, your soul's water, and if you don't drink the water until you master the chemistry, you will die.

Does a baby have to understand how to smile before he can smile? You are God's baby. God is your Daddy. Smile up at him! See him smiling down at you. That's prayer. So just do it already.

## SECOND READING

I 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, irrefragable 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.

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We are apt to smile sleepily at these familiar phrases, thinking subconsciously: That's nice. That's appropriate. That's churchy language. That puts a sleepy smile on my face and closes my eyes and my mind. The words are like a magic formula, like a password: God, Lord, Jesus, Christ, grace, peace, fellowship. And vague, old-fashioned words that we don't use much any more like "testimony" and "confirmed"—the words are not supposed to make you think. It's a sleeping pill. It works like counting sheep to go to sleep. It works because it's so boring: a kind of comfortable buzz, like a sound machine.

Let's do something different, something dangerous. Let's actually look at the words to see what they mean. Let's make the radical assumption that they're supposed to wake us up instead of putting us to sleep.

In this passage, St. Paul mentions several gifts of God—in the past, in the present, and in the future.

First, he says that we have God's grace. "Grace" means "a gift that is given freely because it's not owed by the giver and not deserved by the receiver."

Our very existence is a grace from God. God freely chose to create us. He did not owe us anything at all, because we did not *exist* before he created us. We could not deserve to be created because only something that exists can deserve anything.

And our redemption, our salvation, is also a gift, because we did not deserve that. No one deserves to go to heaven or to share God's own supernatural life. We are all fallen and foolish, selfish and stupid, sinful and shallow. No matter

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who you are, that's the one thing we all are, the one thing all human beings have in common. If you think you're not that, then that proves that you are. There are only two kinds of people: saints, who know they're sinners, and sinners, who think they're saints; the wise, who know they're fools, and the fools, who think they're wise.

Another thing St. Paul tells us is that God is the origin of our peace. Peace with God is another name for salvation.

What, exactly, is peace? It's not just the absence of war. We can be at peace within even if we are fighting a war without—if it is a good and just and necessary and honorable war—because peace means first of all peace with God, peace with God's will, peace with what God wants us to be, our true selves, not split in half with one half of us saying yes to God and the other half saying no.

Thomas Merton wrote, "We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God." Just think about those very simple words for a while and you will see that they are true. Saints are happy, and happy people don't fight wars with other people. The three kinds of peace always go together, as do the three kinds of war. Merton's formula is true by definition of the three words in it, like "two plus two equals four equals half of eight." "Saints" *means* "people who are at peace with God," and "happy people" *means* "people who are at peace with themselves." That's why saints are happy. And peaceful people don't fight wars with other people, either individually or collectively. They know who their enemies are: not flesh and blood but evil spirits and evil deeds. Our worst enemies are always our own sins.

Another thing St. Paul tells us is that God has given us every "spiritual gift." God gave us the three most important gifts in the world: faith and hope and charity. God gave us seven sacraments that give us grace in life's seven different stages or areas or vocations. God gave us his wisdom in the Bible and in the Church. He gave us truth and goodness and beauty in our theology and morality and liturgy, our creeds and commandments and Catholic culture. God gave us souls with the power of reason to know the true and the power

of conscience to know the good and the power of wonder and appreciation to know the beautiful. God gave us saints and angels surrounding us to help us. God gave us families and friends—they, too, are God’s inventions. The family is his invention of the “pay it forward system.” We can’t possibly pay back the gifts our parents have given us, so we pay it forward to our children. Even the material universe is God’s spiritual gift because the universe is both the greatest masterpiece of art and the greatest masterpiece of science. And above all we have Jesus Christ, the fullness of all these gifts of God because he is God himself in the flesh. And Christ has given us his whole self, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, on the cross for our salvation and in the Eucharist for our sanctification and glorification. That’s a pack of gifts that makes Santa’s sack look like a lump of coal.

If we are Christians, we already have all these gifts. And we have even more gifts to look forward to in the future. And that’s the gift of hope. St. Paul mentions three aspects of our hope.

What do we hope for? First, and most fundamentally of all, we “wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ”—that is, his second coming in glory and triumph. We await not just more of the gifts but more of the Giver.

What we know now about Christ is only a tiny part of what he is. He revealed much more of himself in the New Testament than in the Old, but he will reveal even more in his second coming, which will make even the New Testament look as incomplete as the Old Testament looks to us now. He says, “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). All things! New heavens and a new earth. New truths, new joys, new loves, new relationships, new understandings, new *everything*. It will be like being born into a larger world, one that will make this universe look like a confining little womb. It has not been revealed yet, so it can only be described in terms of what we do *not* yet know. In St. Paul’s words, “What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

And as we wait and hope for this glorious future, God gives us another gift

in the present—namely, his faithfulness and firmness to keep *us* faithful and firm and “irreproachable.” We need to be faithful to this hope, and we can do that only because God is faithful to his promise.

The gift of hope for the future makes Christians the most progressive people in the world, and the gift of fidelity makes Christians the most conservative people in the world. Hope is like a spreading sail that catches the wild winds, and fidelity is like a strong, secure anchor that keeps the ship safe. We need both in this life in order to reach the next. Christians are both more radically progressive than any political progressives and more radically conservative than any political conservatives.

Another gift of God that St. Paul mentions is the perfecting of our “fellowship,” or friendship, both with God and with each other. That’s the most important gift of all: not just a whole new, perfected world, or even the new, perfected self, but new, perfected relationships, new and perfected loves, friendships, fellowships.

That love and friendship is the meaning of life, after all, and we all know it, deep down. Our world is important, but our selves are more important, and our loves are the most important of all. There’s more happiness between two lepers in love in Kolkata than there is between two millionaires fighting in a posh resort in Hawaii.

You see, Scripture is like an enormous old treasure chest. There’s more there than appears on the surface. But you have to open it and dig into it.

## **GOSPEL**

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!’”

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You can almost hear the exclamation points when Jesus says, “Watch! Be watchful! Be alert!” But watch for what?

Watch for him. He is the Lord—the active Lord, who does not sit and wait for us like a book on a shelf but actively hounds us, like the Hound of Heaven, seeking us like the shepherd seeking his lost sheep.

But when and where does Jesus come?

In three different times. He comes to earth in his first advent, his first coming, the Incarnation. That is what we celebrate now. The Incarnation really happened nine months *before* Christmas, on March 25, when Mary said yes to God’s angel and Christ was conceived in her womb. Our Lord was “born of the Virgin Mary” but “conceived by the Holy Spirit.” But we celebrate Christmas nine months later because that is when he appeared to the world, when he was born.

He will come a second time, at the end of the world, the end of time, the end of history. This is his “second coming,” and it will end all time and all chances to repent and be saved. He gives us plenty of time between his first coming and his second, but everything in time has to end eventually. Only eternity has no end.

He will come to the whole world at the end of time, the end of the world; but he will come to each one of us at our own death, which is for us the end of our world and our time. So when Jesus says, “Watch!” he is not just speaking to the last generation, the generation that will see his second coming, but to all generations. He himself says that explicitly: “What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”

But Jesus also comes to us in a third time, the present. He comes to us many times each day. He comes in each opportunity to choose him, to love him, to do his will by doing good to others, by sacrificing self-will for his will.

He comes in many disguises. For instance, right at this very moment, he is coming to us in a form that does not look very special: in the opportunity



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to honestly face him and confess that we have missed many opportunities in the past to welcome him, and to confess that we know that he sees us now and knows everything about us now and is offering one more opportunity to say yes to his will with our whole heart and our whole mind and our whole soul and our whole strength, which includes our whole body and its actions, no matter how tired we are, and no matter how unholy we feel, and no matter how bored we are by these unoriginal words that you have probably heard many times, and no matter how much we feel like going to sleep and turning away from him and switching off the light of the world who is Jesus.

I know that's what you are thinking because that's what I'm thinking too. I'm thinking: Jesus, if I could see you in your heavenly glory, as Peter, James, and John saw you on the Mount of Transfiguration, I would not be tired or bored. I would thrill to your glory. But I *see* no glory now and *feel* no glory now.

And Jesus is saying to me, in response to that—he is saying this to me right now in my own conscience, as he is saying it to you too—You know I am here. Even though you do not see me or feel me, you know I am here. You see me with the eyes of faith, not feeling. It doesn't matter what you feel. It matters what you believe and what you love. Don't feel guilty about not feeling holy. I don't usually come into your life through the door of feeling. But I always come through the door of faith, your free choice to believe in me and trust me and love me no matter what you feel.

Would you rather have the *feeling* of my presence but not my *real* presence, or would you rather have my real presence even without the feeling of it? My presence is me; your feelings are you; what do you most want, me or you? Who is your Lord, me or you?

That's how Jesus comes to each of us many times every day. And he is very patient and does not expect us to catch the football he passes to us every single time he throws it. But he does expect us to try—to reach out and try to catch it, in faith. He is very hard to satisfy, but he is very easy to please. That is a good description of a good father, and Jesus is the full revelation of God the Father.

But he is not the Godfather. The Godfather makes you an offer you can't

refuse. God the Father makes you an offer you can refuse, and you do, again and again. But not every time. Not when you pray.

Jesus summarizes the point of today's Gospel in a single word: "Watch!" And he identifies his audience with the single sentence that comes right before it: "What I say to you, I say to all."

He expanded this point, this one-word lesson, in his parable of the five wise virgins who watched for the coming of the Bridegroom and the five foolish virgins who did not, and who had no oil for their lamps. The point is put with power and beauty in a nineteenth-century translation of the Greek Orthodox hymn "Behold the Bridegroom Cometh":

Behold the Bridegroom cometh in the middle of the night,  
And blest is he whose loins are girt, whose lamp is burning bright;  
But woe to that dull servant whom the Master shall surprise  
With lamp untrimmed, unburning, and with slumber in his eyes.  
Do thou, my soul, beware, beware, lest thou in sleep sink down,  
Lest thou be given o'er to death and lose the golden crown;  
But see that thou be sober, with a watchful eye, and thus  
Cry, "Holy, holy, holy God, have mercy upon us!"  
That day, the day of fear, shall come; my soul, slack not thy toil,  
But light thy lamp, and feed it well, and make it bright with oil;  
Who knowest not how soon may sound the cry at eventide,  
"Behold the Bridegroom comes! Arise! Go forth to meet the bride."  
Beware, my soul; beware, beware, lest thou in slumber lie,  
And like the five, remain without, and knock, and vainly cry;  
But watch, and bear thy lamp undimmed, and Christ shall gird thee on  
His own bright wedding-robe of light—the glory of the Son.

"Beware" does not mean "Be in fear." It means "be aware," "be awake," "be awatch." Be ready. For he is surely coming. He is coming for *you*.

## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

### FIRST READING

ISAIAH 40:1-5, 9-11

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Comfort, give comfort to my people,  
says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her  
that her service is at an end,  
her guilt is expiated;  
indeed, she has received from the hand of the LORD  
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!

Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!

Every valley shall be filled in,  
every mountain and hill shall be made low;  
the rugged land shall be made a plain,  
the rough country, a broad valley.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together;  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Go up on to a high mountain,  
Zion, herald of glad tidings;  
cry out at the top of your voice,  
Jerusalem, herald of good news!  
Fear not to cry out  
and say to the cities of Judah:

Here is your God!  
Here comes with power  
the Lord GOD,  
who rules by his strong arm;  
here is his reward with him,  
his recompense before him.  
Like a shepherd he feeds his flock;  
in his arms he gathers the lambs,  
carrying them in his bosom,  
and leading the ewes with care.

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When we hear the sound of these beautiful words, we cannot help remembering the sounds of Handel's *Messiah* that showed us their beauty by setting them to music. It is almost impossible to invent music that does justice to those words, but Handel did it. If you've never heard the *Messiah*, drop everything and listen. It's for everybody. If you love Jesus Christ, it's dangerous to really listen to Handel's *Messiah* because when you do the plumbing in your eyes will suddenly leak.

The words are beautiful because they announce the Gospel, the Good News, the best news we have ever, ever heard: that God's power and love have opened the door to heaven and shut the door to hell for all who trust him and love him and accept his incredible gift of himself. The good news is that God has done the best thing anyone ever did in all of time; that he has overcome the worst thing anyone ever did in all of time: our sin, our rebellion, our "no" to him. In the words of Edwin Markham's famous little poem "Outwitted," we drew a circle that shut him out, but he drew a circle that took us in. Here are the four little lines of Markham's poem. I think he meant it to be spoken by God:

He drew a circle that shut me out—  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the will to win:

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We drew a circle that took him in!

J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, says of the Gospel that “there is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true. . . . But this story has entered history. . . . This tale is true. . . . The Gospel has not abrogated legends [myths], it has hallowed them.” C.S. Lewis called it “myth become fact.”

Jesus says, in the book of Revelation, “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). St. John, the writer, puts these words in the context of Christ’s second coming, when he will complete his redemption of the world in glory; but Mel Gibson, in *The Passion of the Christ*, put these words in Jesus’ mouth on the *via dolorosa*, the Way of the Cross, as Jesus, whipped and tortured and almost dead, is carrying his cross to Calvary, and his mother, Mary, in agony, asks him why he has to do all this, and he answers her: “See, mother, I make all things new.”

Jesus began the world’s greatest work in his first coming, and he will complete it in his second.

And that work is total. All obstacles will be overcome. “Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low.” The valleys of despair and the mountains of pride will both disappear. Nothing will be the same after the tsunami of God’s love fills the whole world with life as Noah’s flood filled it with death. Nothing can stand against God, in the end, any more than a flea can stand up against a tornado, or an ice cube can hold out against the sun.

Reread this beautiful prophecy of Isaiah three times, once for the past, once for the present, and once for the future. Read it first in light of the first coming of Christ, the Incarnation. These words may have been among the actual words the angels sang to the shepherds on the first Christmas Day. Read it second in light of Christ’s coming into your life today, at this very moment. The angels may be speaking these words to you today as an invitation to open all the doors of your heart and all the doors of your life to Christ. For they are *his* angels, after all! And read it a third time in light of Christ’s glorious second coming at the end of the world and at the end of your life, as the words he will speak to you, or his angels will speak to you, as your welcome to heaven.

The Gospel is your invitation to that wedding feast—to *your* wedding feast, to your own spiritual wedding to him. He is proposing marriage to your soul: he longs to give you nothing less than eternal, infinite, incomprehensible, unimaginable, unending joy. Be sure you RSVP to him with a yes. Say that most powerful of all words, the word that Mary said to his angel: “Yes. *Fiat*. Let it be done. Be it done unto me according to your word.” Pray to your heavenly mother that she teach you how to say that word to God.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 85:9–10, 11–12, 13–14 \_\_\_\_\_

R. (8) **Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.**

I will hear what God proclaims;  
the LORD—for he proclaims peace to his people.  
Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him,  
glory dwelling in our land.

Kindness and truth shall meet;  
justice and peace shall kiss.  
Truth shall spring out of the earth,  
and justice shall look down from heaven.

The LORD himself will give his benefits;  
our land shall yield its increase.  
Justice shall walk before him,  
and prepare the way of his steps.

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(There are two reflections here, on two separate parts of this Psalm. They can be combined, but they do not have to be.)

## Reflection 1

The Psalm for today praises those who “fear” the Lord; and the Bible often repeats the principle that “the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord” (Prov. 9:10). But the critics of religion use this as an argument against it: the argument is that religion is based on fear, which is a bad thing, or at least a very primitive thing, and turns believers into slaves, with God as their slave master.

I want to explore what David the Psalmist says about this “fear”: what it is and what it produces as its effects in us, its fruits. The most practical man who ever lived once said, “By their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7:20).

There are two kinds of fear: servile fear and filial fear. Servile fear is the fear of a slave to his master, of a victim to his victimizer, or of an unfree citizen to a tyrant. It is the fear of being harmed and being made unhappy in some way. Filial fear is the fear of a *filius* or *filia*, a son or daughter, to his or her parent. It is the fear of harming the parent, who is loved and respected; the fear not of receiving unhappiness but of giving it. That fear is based on love.

When the Bible praises “the fear of the Lord,” it is the second kind of fear, filial fear, that it praises, not the other kind, the servile fear. In fact, servile fear is a heresy, because it assumes that God is a slave master and a tyrant; that we are his victims and he is the victimizer. The God of the Bible, the God of the Church, the God of the saints, is the exact opposite of that. We are *his* victimizers, and he is our victim. We did not sacrifice our body and blood for him; he did that for us. His sins did not put us on the cross; our sins put him there.

This good fear of the Lord, this fear of disappointing our heavenly Father, this fear that is based on love, has good fruits. Three of those fruits are mentioned by the Psalmist in this passage. They are, in three words that rhyme, “hear,” “near,” and “here”: he invites us to “hear” him; he is “near”; and his glory is “here,” “dwelling in our land.”

The Psalm begins with the words “I will hear what God proclaims.” Notice that hearing is an active choice of the will. When a loud machine, like a leaf blower, interrupts your concentration, you have no free choice to hear it or

not; but when another person tells you something personal, you must *choose* to hear it in your heart, and you can choose to refuse to hear it. That's true no matter what it is: trivia, gossip, praise, blame, forms of love, or forms of hate.

Whatever we choose by free choice of the will, we must have some reason for, some motivation for. So let's look for that motivation. *Why* does the Psalmist choose to hear the voice of God? Because God proclaims peace, peace in three places: peace above us, in his relation with us; and peace within us, that comes from that peace above us; and peace around us, that comes between us and others, who are our spiritual siblings, God's other children.

The Psalmist next mentions a second reason for fearing God: that "near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him." The fear of the Lord does exactly the opposite of what its critics say it does: it does not push God away from us and us away from God but brings us nearer, closer, willingly closer, voluntarily closer. No one voluntarily wants to get closer to an abuser, a tyrant, or a slave master.

But this effect of nearness to God is not imposed but chosen. It is a gift of God, and gifts must be freely given and freely received. God's gifts are always freely given, and they are intended for everyone. But not everyone gets them because not everyone freely chooses to believe in them and receive them. God's graces and mercies and love and forgiveness are "near" only to those who "fear," those who choose this holy fear, which is a form of love.

What form of love is this "fear of the Lord"? It is adoration. It is far deeper than "respect." We "respect" even harmful things like hurricanes and polar bears, and neutral things like money. The fear of the Lord is more than respect. It is awe and adoration, wonder and worship. That is a kind of love, in fact the highest kind of love, though it is not a kind of easy, cheap, cozy, comfortable love. Love takes many forms. Adoration is the highest.

Finally, the Psalmist proclaims that the God who is the object of this holy fear is not only near but already here. The glory of God, says the Psalmist, is "dwelling in our land." It is not only true and good and beautiful but *glorious*: gloriously true, not trivially true; and gloriously good, not conventionally good;



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and gloriously beautiful, not just comfortably beautiful. For God's greatest glory is his love, a love that is so beautiful that it breaks your heart. But if we do not have the basic attitude of "the fear of the Lord," we do not hear the glory of the Lord; we do not see that it is so near that it is already here.

This "glory" that the Psalmist speaks of is a frequent theme in Scripture. Both the Old Testament and the New use the word "glory" hundreds of times. It's a word we hardly ever use anymore. Pity us, because if we don't use the word, that means we don't know the reality that it names. How do we see it? How do we return to it? By "the fear of the Lord." The Psalmist sees God's glory not just in heaven but also here on earth. He calls it "glory *dwelling in our land.*" He sees patches of God-light in the dark woods of our human experience. He has the eyes to see it, which are the eyes of faith and trust, the eyes of an unusually wise child who trusts his parents and therefore sees love even in their laws and even in their refusals of his foolish requests and even in their just punishments of his sins.

God's glory will be manifested to us in heaven in a form we cannot even imagine now. We probably could not endure it if we saw it now. We need dark glasses to look at the sun without going blind. But even now we see God's glory in a thousand different visible forms: in the light of the day and in the darkness of the night, in nature and in history, in others' lives and in our own, in our talents and in those we admire in other people, and in a providence that divinely delivers us from dozens of dangers and diseases and darkneses—and even damnation.

God's definitive revelation of his glory is his Son. His angel told Joseph, "You are to name him Jesus (which means "Savior"), because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Jesus saves us from many things, but above all from the three worst things of all, sin and death and hell. He shows us the glory of God in the opposites of sin and death and hell: sanctity instead of sin (he turns sinners into saints), and resurrection to eternal life instead of death, and heaven instead of hell.

Who is this God whom we "fear"? It is Jesus. When we see him, we see the face of our heavenly Father.

## Reflection 2

There is a verse in today's Psalm that is puzzling when we first look at it and rewarding when we think more deeply about it. (Those are the two reactions we get to many passages of Scripture. The first, the puzzle, always turns into the second, the reward, if we persist and dig more deeply into the rich soil of the Scriptures. There are many hidden treasures there as well as treasures on the surface.)

The verse says: "Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss. Truth shall spring out of the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven." What does that mean?

It means what its author meant it to mean. And Scripture has not just one but two authors: the divine author and the human author, whose humanity and human limitations were providentially used by the divine author as his instruments. So we can always ask those two questions about any passage of Scripture: "What did its human author mean us to learn from it?" and "What did the divine author mean us to learn from it?"

What God means is always more than what his human instruments meant because God always knows and means far more than we do. And the most important application of that principle is how we as Christians understand God's Old Testament revelations as hints and prophecies and foreshadowings of what we see as their total fulfillment in Christ. Because we live after the Incarnation, we are able to see Christ in many places in the Old Testament Scriptures. The whole purpose of the Old Testament is to set up Christ, to point to Christ, to prepare the way for Christ, who is the final and definitive and perfect divine revelation. He is a divine person, who has no limitations and who knows everything; but he was written about by many human persons, who all have human limitations and who do not know all that God knows. Christ is "the Word of God," but he is written about in the words of men. He is the one single Word of God in the many different words of many different men who wrote the Scriptures. So the Bible is like Christ in that way: it has two natures, human and divine.

That's why we should read the New Testament in light of the Old and the

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Old Testament in light of the New. The title “Christ” means “Messiah,” or “anointed one,” or “promised one,” and so we look at him when he appears in the New Testament in terms of the Old Testament promises and prophecies; but we also look at the Old Testament prophecies in terms of Christ as their fulfillment.

So what does God mean when he inspires the Psalmist to write, “Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss”? And how is Christ the answer to that question?

To understand that answer, remember that there are two absolute goods, two absolute values, two things we should never compromise. They are truth and goodness, the object of our mind and the object of our will, the mental ideal and the moral ideal. No one wants to be in error and darkness, even if they are so wicked as to want others to be in error and darkness; and no one wants cruelty and injustice done to them, even if they are so wicked as to want that done to others. We all want to know the truth, and we all want both the good of justice and the good that goes beyond justice—namely, love and kindness and mercy and peace. Justice fights a just war against injustice, but kindness and mercy seek peace rather than war.

Our ongoing problem is that these two things seem very different and often seem at odds with each other. Truth is impersonal and hard and unyielding, like a rock or a bone. Kindness is soft and compassionate, like flesh. Our bodies need both bone and flesh, and in our bodies there is cooperation, not competition, between the hard bone and the soft flesh; but in our minds and in our souls we often see competition and contradiction between the hard bones of truth and justice on the one hand and the soft flesh of mercy and peace on the other hand, between the hard virtues and the soft virtues.

Justice fights against injustice. Peace wants to end fighting. So justice and peace seem to be opposites, and so do justice and mercy. Justice demands payment of just debts; mercy does not demand payment and forgives debts. Justice cannot simply forgive and forget, and mercy cannot simply forget justice. Justice has a strong claim: the claim of moral truth, objective truth. Mercy has a

strong claim: the claim of personal love, subjective love. We cannot ignore either claim, but they seem to contradict each other, like the two sides of a seesaw.

We tend to specialize in virtues, to practice one set at the expense of the other set. Our ancestors were probably much stronger on the hard virtues than we are, virtues like courage and honesty and justice and honor and heroism. But they were not as strong on the soft virtues as we are: kindness and mercy and sensitivity and compassion and forgiveness. By our standards, they were more unfeeling and cruel than we are; but by their standards, we are more self-indulgent and decadent and soft and spoiled than they were.

The Psalmist prophesies that these two opposing goods will meet and kiss and reconcile with each other; that the opposition between them will be overcome. Notice that he speaks in the future tense, not the present. This reconciliation is a prophecy. In fact, it is a messianic prophecy. It came true only in Christ. When? Most especially on the cross, when he did the most important deed ever done, saving us from sin and death and hell by offering his own body and blood to God.

Why did he have to do that? For two equally necessary reasons: to satisfy God's love and to satisfy God's justice. He paid for our sins, and that was love, but it was also justice. God is just, so he could not simply say: "Forget justice! Throw justice and truth out the window. I just snap my fingers and pardon you all. It doesn't matter that Hitler tortured and murdered six million of my beloved children. He can go to heaven side by side with the saints that he murdered." God can't do that because it isn't true; it isn't true to what-is—namely, that evil exists and evil is not good, and no one but a blind fool can pretend that good and evil are the same and treat them in the same way. And God is not a blind fool. He cannot lie. Justice and truth, especially moral truth, are his very nature, his very unchangeable essence.

But love is also his essence, and love demands kindness and compassion and forgiveness and mercy; and mercy goes beyond justice. For us, it's an either/or: if we are just, we punish the criminal; if we are merciful, we revoke the just punishment. If we are just, we flunk the failing student, because it is true

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that he failed; if we are merciful, we pass him, because we love him. If we are just, we demand repayment of the debt for stolen goods; if we are merciful, we forgive the debt.

But we can't *merely* forgive the debt, because when we forgive a debt, if no one pays it, the victim suffers. If I'm the president, and I forgive a criminal for robbing the treasury of millions of dollars in owed taxes, every citizen is cheated because that money has to be repaid out of their innocent pockets. And if I'm the victim of a robbery, and you robbed me, and I forgive your debt to me, I still have to pay my creditors out of my own money, so I'm the loser. Forgiving a debt isn't like waking up from a bad dream, from something that isn't true. The debt is true. If *you* don't have to pay it, somebody else does. If somebody else doesn't, you do.

So what God did in Christ is forgive our debt to him, thus satisfying mercy; but he paid it himself on the cross, thus satisfying justice. The judge declared that the convicted criminal before him had to pay the price for his crime, and then the judge paid it himself.

So on the cross, God satisfied both justice and mercy by exchanging places with us. We deserved justice, not mercy, but we got mercy instead of justice. He paid our fine himself. He set us free by freely choosing to take our place—like St. Maximilian Kolbe, the saint and martyr in Auschwitz who volunteered to take the place of the man who had to be executed.

So Christ reconciled justice and peace, truth and love, righteousness and kindness, the hard values and the soft values. And he also reconciled us to God, “vertically,” so to speak, so that the hard values of truth and justice could come out of the earth, out of Mary's human womb, as well as from heaven, and so that the soft values of mercy and forgiveness could come out of heaven, from God the Father, from the divine nature, as well as from man, from human nature. This joining of the horizontal and the vertical was like the joining of the two bars of the cross.

This joining, this universal reconciliation, could not be done by any mere human being. I can forgive you for your sins against me, but I cannot forgive

you for your sins against others. Only God can do that, because God is the only one who is sinned against in all sins.

So the second part of the quotation from the Psalm, about justice coming both down from heaven and up from earth, explains how the first part worked, the part about justice and mercy reconciling. It worked only by the Incarnation; it could be done only by the same person, Christ, being both God and man, both divine and human. The first verse says that truth, or justice, or righteousness, is reconciled with kindness, or mercy, or peace. And the next verse tells us how—by truth and justice coming from both places at once, earth and heaven, humanity and divinity: “truth shall spring out of the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven.” Justice and mercy are reconciled by heaven and earth being reconciled. Truth and love are reconciled by God and man being reconciled in Christ.

Think of a cross, with God and heaven at the top and man and earth at the bottom. Think of the hard values of justice and truth as the right half of the crossbar, and think of the soft values of mercy and love as the left half of the crossbar. Christ is where the two planks of the cross cross. He reconciles the good of the “right” (the hard bones of truth and justice) with the good of the “left” (the soft flesh of love and mercy), and he also reconciles God with man, heaven with earth. Christ is the center of all things, the place where opposites cross and combine.

## SECOND READING

2 PETER 3:8–14 \_\_\_\_\_

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard “delay,” but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and

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the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out.

Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames and the elements melted by fire. But according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace.

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(Again, I give you two reflections: one practical, one textual; one a single simple point, the other with a number of points in the text.)

**Reflection 1**

Our epistle for today is from the Second Letter of Peter, our first pope. It was written to all Christians, a circulating papal letter, the first papal “encyclical.”

The point of the passage in today’s reading is that since the entire universe, both this earth and the “heavens,” that is, the rest of the universe, is doomed to death, like our own bodies, therefore we must prepare for this inevitable and undeniable fact by becoming the kind of persons we want to be when we die and face God in the Last Judgment.

Behind this obvious point is the principle that what we choose, what we do with ourselves and our lives, must be based on our knowledge of reality, our knowledge of the facts. St. Peter begins with this most practical of all principles: “Do not ignore this one fact, beloved.” We cannot change facts. We cannot change objective truth. We can only choose to either ignore the truth or admit the truth and live according to the truth that we admit. And if we ignore the truth, we cannot plead ignorance, because that ignorance was our own fault: we created our own ignorance by deliberately ignoring the truth that we knew.

The truth, in this case, is death. Everyone and everything must die. The whole world will die, either by a cosmic catastrophe, like the sun exploding or a large asteroid crashing into the earth; or by a divine miracle; or simply by old age, when the sun becomes cold and the whole universe runs down, billions of years from now. Entropy is the scientific word for that. All energy tends to dissipate and homogenize, like a hot cup of coffee gradually losing its heat into the air around it. The old saying is half true: the only two certainties are death and taxes. You can cheat on your taxes, but you can't cheat death. You can choose to avoid your taxes, but you cannot choose to avoid your death, or the death of the whole world. You can only ignore it.

But that ignoring is not ignorance but insanity. If you ignore the fact that you are not Superman and cannot fly by jumping off a cliff, you will not, as some silly philosophers say, "create your own reality," but you will create your own unreality instead, your own death.

And if you ignore the fact that you are not God but God's creature, and therefore that you are infallibly destined to be infallibly judged by the infallibly wise God who is infallible truth—well, I have shocking news for you: you are *not* God, and therefore you are not infallible.

And if you think time will go on forever and never end, if you think that God is so patient that he will always keep giving you more and more time, more and more opportunity for repentance and conversion, more and more second chances—if you think that will go on forever, you are not only stupid: you are insane. You are not living in reality, in the real world, the world of facts rather than fancies and fictions and fantasies.

The Church is unpopular because the Church tells the truth. The Church announces the facts. The Church is an alarm clock that tells you that it is time to wake up and face the facts. God is real, and the will of God is real, and the law of God is real, and your own sins are real, and the need for you to change, to repent and turn back to God and start over again, is real. The need for you to go to Confession with a sincere and honest heart is real, as real as the fact that you will one day no longer have time to do that, the fact that one day



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will be your last day under the sun, and God will take the place of the sun and shine the total light of truth on you and you will no longer be able to hide or ignore anything at all. That is a fact, and your attitude toward that fact no more changes the fact than your feelings about the sun change the sun.

The God who you will meet when you die is pure love, but also pure truth. God's love is true love, not fake love or false love or pretend love or any kind of love that ignores the truth.

There are two false gods that many people believe in. One is the god who is truth but not love, and the other is the god who is love but not truth.

The god who is truth but not love is like a cold scientist. He is impersonal, like "the Force" in *Star Wars*, or like the light from the sun. He is like a judge in court. He simply announces the truth about what you deserve. He is abstract justice.

The god who is love but not truth is a sweet swamp of feel-good fantasies. He does not care about truth or justice or objective reality. He is a dream.

The true God is neither abstract, impersonal truth and justice nor a dreamy feeling or fantasy. The god of truth without love has a mind but not a heart, and the god of love without truth has a heart but not a mind, but neither of those two false gods has a will. Unlike both of those false gods, the true God has a will as well as a mind and a heart. And St. Peter tells us that what he wills for all of us is both truth and love together, and that's why he wills our repentance and salvation. He writes that God is not willing "that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." He wills our salvation, but he does not will salvation without repentance, because that would be love without truth. He wills salvation through repentance, because he wills truth as well as love. And so he gives us the two continuing sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist for our repentance and salvation.

I hope to see all of you frequently in both of those two sacred places. They are the two places the devil hates and fears above all others.

## Reflection 2

Jesus promised us that he would return “soon.” It has been almost two thousand years so far. Has he forgotten his promise?

No. Why not? Because, as St. Peter says in today’s reading, “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day.” Einstein was once asked what his theory of relativity meant when it claimed that time is relative, and he replied, “When you’re with the one you love, a lifetime feels like one minute, and when you’re sitting on a hot stove, one minute feels like a lifetime.”

Love does not count time by quantity but by quality, not by matter and molecules but by spirit and purpose. And since God is love, that is how God counts time. Christ tells us that he is coming again “soon” (Rev. 22:7; “quickly” in KJV). All the years between Christ’s first coming and Christ’s second coming are short, or “soon,” or “quickly,” because they are trivial compared to those two world-shattering events when Eternity touches time.

A second answer St. Peter gives to the complaint that God seems to be delaying his promise is that “he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” Once Christ comes again, the time that is measured by matter and the movements of the earth will end, and there will be no more opportunity for repentance and conversion and salvation.

And even if he does not come again for the whole world for another ten thousand years, he will come for you and your whole world and your whole life very soon. That’s why the most practical man who ever lived warned us in these words: “We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4). God gives us many second chances, but death is the end of second chances. The Bible says, “It is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

St. Peter’s third answer is that we do not know when that will be, either for the life of the whole world or for our own life. As Peter says, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief.”

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And, he goes on to say—and this is his fourth answer—then “the earth and everything done on it will be found out.” All hiding and evading will become impossible. All excuses will sink like paper boats. Every thought of our hearts will be exposed, every little secret revealed. Jesus said, “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak” (Matt. 12:36). Our souls will be stripped naked, for God is total truth as well as total love. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, “No creature is concealed from him, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account” (Heb. 4:13). St. John writes: “I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. . . . The dead were judged according to their deeds, by what was written in the scrolls” (Rev. 20:12).

What is the *sane* reaction to this fact? The *insane* reaction is denial. That’s like a man who is falling off a cliff ignoring the rocks below and merely smelling the roses on the face of the cliff as he’s falling, and planning for a good night’s sleep. The *sane* reaction is, in Peter’s words, “Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be, conducting yourselves in holiness.” The meaning of life, the meaning of every single person’s life, is to become a saint, to become one who welcomes that judgment, who is blessed and blissed by the truth of who they are, because who they are is someone who loves God and God’s other children, someone who can call God “our Father,” someone whose reaction to this prophecy is joy because “Daddy’s coming.”

Of course, we are all sinners, but if we have repented and believed, God has forgiven our sins because of Christ and has adopted us as his children; and therefore, we have nothing to fear and everything to hope for in the Last Judgment. If we have accepted him by faith and Baptism, if our hearts most deeply want not sin but sanctity, if we truly want him and what he is—namely, truth and love, justice and mercy—then that is what we will get, that is what we will find, Jesus assures us. “The one who seeks, finds” (Matt. 7:8). If we seek God, if we want God, we will find him; and if we seek ourselves apart from God, we will find that. That’s the difference between heaven and hell.

And that is why our first pope, St. Peter, tells us the good news that even though “the heavens will be dissolved in flames and the elements melted by fire,” yet “according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” This righteousness, this holiness of God, this supernatural goodness, will be terrifying only to the wicked, who hate it. It will be supreme comfort and satisfaction and happiness to us who love it.

For in the end all will get what they most deeply want, what they most deeply love. As the great saint and mystic St. John of the Cross says, “In the evening of our lives, we will be judged on our love.” That’s why it’s so important to educate our loves, to make our loves true loves, holy loves.

## GOSPEL

MARK 1:1–8

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The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;*

*he will prepare your way.*

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

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,*

*make straight his paths.”*

John the Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. John was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey. And this is what he proclaimed: “One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

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Today's Gospel reading introduces John the Baptist and his baptism by contrast to Jesus and Jesus' baptism. All four Gospels do that, and the contrast is the same: John baptizes with water for repentance while Jesus baptizes with fire and the Holy Spirit.

Both baptisms are total. The Greek word for baptism means literally "immersion" or "sinking," as when a ship sinks totally into the sea. That's why the most complete symbolism for Christian baptism has traditionally been dunking, or total immersion, although pouring water is just as effective and valid, though not as strikingly symbolic. Baptists still baptize only by total immersion, which is good, but they do not baptize infants, as all other Christians have always done, which is not good.

The whole of the Old Testament is like John the Baptist: a preparation for Christ. John is the opening band; Jesus is the main event. John is the road; Jesus is the car. John is the old paint scraper; Jesus is the new paint. John is the house cleaner; Jesus is the guest. John is spring training; Jesus is the baseball season. John is the rehearsal; Jesus is the play.

The reason all four Gospels begin with John the Baptist is that Jesus does not just pop into history like magic when God snaps his fingers. He is the fulfillment of a long preparation, throughout Old Testament history. And in John the Baptist all the Old Testament comes to a point, like the point of an arrow, and Jesus is the target of that arrow. So the Gospels first present the arrow, then the target.

John the Baptist is a prophet. Jesus says that there has been no greater prophet than John. A prophet is not essentially a fortune-teller, a predictor of the future. The word "prophet" means literally "one who speaks forth," or "one who speaks for another." Prophets speak God's word, reveal God's mind and will. And this prophet, John the Baptist, summarizes the fundamental message of all the Old Testament prophets in one word: Repent. Turn. Convert. Say no to sin and yes to God instead of saying no to God and yes to sin.

That is the first thing we need to do to be saved. That's the negative thing. And the other thing, the positive thing, is to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior

and our Lord. We accept him as our Savior by our faith and hope in him, and we accept him as our Lord by our obedience to his will, by our good works, the works of love.

These two things are mentioned and distinguished from each other in today's Gospel as two baptisms. John the Baptist's baptism is a baptism only of water; it is a baptism of repentance. It does not put God into our soul; it only expresses our repentance from sin and our desire for God to come into our soul. In contrast, Jesus' baptism is a baptism of fire, the fire of the Holy Spirit; it is a baptism of salvation. It is not just an expression of what is in us; it is a transaction, a receiving of a gift from God to us. It is not like a song we sing or a speech we make to express ourselves; it is like a heart operation, or a rescue, or a pregnancy: something objectively real that we receive from God.

It is our free choice to accept his gift, but the gift itself is a finite, human share in God's infinite, divine life. That life is not merely a "lifestyle," an ideology, a set of principles, any more than our natural human life that we get from our parents is merely a lifestyle. Jesus explicitly compares it to being born and calls it being born again, or being born from above. It's spiritual, not physical, though it's mediated by physical water and words in the sacrament of Baptism; but it's a real, concrete thing, not a thought or a feeling or an abstract set of rules or principles. It's not concrete in the way that cement is concrete—it's not made of molecules—but it's concrete in the way that you and God are concrete persons, not just ideas. It's God himself who enters our souls.

We need both baptisms. We need John's baptism of repentance as well as Jesus' baptism of faith; we need both the no to sin and the yes to God, because sin and God are like darkness and light: they cannot exist together. Sin is separation from God, and God is separation from sin. Each one casts the other one out. So we need both baptisms: we need both to turn away from sin and to turn to God. That's the literal meaning of the word "conversion": "turning." Both baptisms are conversions. First we turn away from the dark, and then we turn to the light. First we clean the garbage out of the kitchen,

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and then we eat the banquet. First we go to Confession, and then we go to Holy Communion. God provides for all our needs.