

exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF JANUARY 2019

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OPENING PRAYER

God of Alpha and Omega, we view our fresh calendars and their clean pages in the spirit of humility. What will we write on the hours of the year ahead? Guide us in wisdom, endow us with courage, and keep tenderness in our words, our touch, and our look. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

January 6 | LECTIONARY 20 SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 60:1-6

Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance.

Hanging a fresh calendar on the wall can feel like a benediction. The old year—with all those scribbled appointments and plans that may or may not have been realized, all the birthdays for which we may have remembered or failed to send a card—is in the recycle bin. We get a clean page, all of us, to write on. On January 1, we can make the new year anything we want it to be.

That theory gets its first test on January 2, when we rise to assess how the year is going so far. Did our resolutions make it to day two? Has anything changed besides the calendar? If it's any consolation, human history transforms itself even more slowly and painfully than individuals do. Each generation hopes that nations will come into the light, that world leaders will choose to shine with benevolence, wisdom, and hopeful ideas to support the common good. We hope for heroes, for breakthroughs, for justice and peace, equality and freedom. These are still goals worth

praying for—and choosing for.

» *Skip the personal resolutions. Write a list of Hopes for the World in 2019. Consider what you can do to make our common dreams come true.*

SECOND READING

EPHESIANS 3:2-3A, 5-6

You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace given to me for your benefit.

"What's mine is yours." We say these words of deep hospitality only to those whom we particularly choose to honor. With these words we give the chosen few access to our home, our table, and all of our stuff. St. Paul took that hospitality to the extreme when he said all he had was God's gift to him—for the sake of the Greco-Roman world. Paul handed over the balance of his life to the world he knew as its divinely appointed missionary. That's some offer.

As a young man, Paul had despised the troublemaking Christian movement that threatened to change the obligations of Jewish religion as he understood them.

His zeal drove him to hunt down the followers of Jesus to their death. Then he encountered the presumably dead leader who started it all on the way to Damascus. Meeting Jesus spun Paul's zeal 180 degrees. Rather than extinguish Christianity, Paul would become its herald. Rather than kill the Church, he would give his life to spread it far and wide.

» *Who gave you the gift of faith, and who has nourished it? To whom have you shared your faith, so that what's yours could belong to others too?*

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 2:1-12

Magi arrived in Jerusalem saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews?"

They are so innocent, these wizened elders from the east. They spend their lives amid dusty papyrus, pouring over star charts and adding to the tiny record of human understanding with their observations. Then, one day a star appears that has special significance

for them. They vow to track it down and learn its secrets. So they pack up and go, eventually winding up on a desert road heading toward the largest city in the star's direction: Jerusalem!

"Where's the new king?" they ask—of the present king. This was not a politically astute inquiry, but the magi are not men who concern themselves with the halls of

power. Their well-traveled beat is learning; the question makes perfect sense to one who respects truth for its own sake. This does not describe Herod, who cares only about maintaining control. This saga could have ended in disaster, for the newborn king, and for the wise men who knew about him. Happily, wisdom arrives in dreams to dreamers, who depart another

way. The new king remains hidden and safe. For now.

» *How much do you value learning? What sources do you draw from? Has learning ever involved risks for you? How often do you entertain the danger of a new idea?*

January 13

LECTIONARY 21

FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 40:1-5, 9-11

Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by a strong arm.

Most of us don't expect miracles to come into our world and solve all our problems. The more optimistic among us, and those with a firm work ethic, imagine that diligence and dedication may reap great rewards if we just apply ourselves to the tasks we face. Others shake their heads and say no, nothing can be done, our geese are cooked and we are condemned to keep on eating them.

Somewhere above both these attitudes is the stance of faith. Remember: faith is not about holding certain facts about God to be true. It is about engaging a relationship of trust and loyalty to God above all others. Faith means acknowledging the present reality, with all of its cruel and jagged details. Faith doesn't pretend suffering and injustice away by focusing its gaze resolutely upward. Rather, faithful people see right through the present hour's brokenness all the way to the once-and-future realm of God's loving creation. And then they roll up their sleeves and get to work preparing the way.

» *Do you tend to be more hopeful or more fatalistic about the condition of the world around you? How does your faith prompt you to engage the future?*

SECOND READING

TITUS 2:11-14; 3:4-7

The grace of God has appeared, training us to live temperately, justly, and devoutly.

"Temperance" is a word you don't hear much nowadays. If it's used at all, it mostly refers to the era when alcohol was legally banned, which led to a season of great profit for bootleggers. Temperance is actually one of four cardinal virtues, along with prudence, justice, and fortitude. Second-century Clement of Alexandria first culled these four from the Book of Wisdom, and fourth-century Ambrose gave them the name cardinal ("hinge") virtues.

The temperate life is about cultivating a sense of equilibrium and proportion when it comes to wants, passions, and property. Most of us could list five things right now that we'd really love to possess or do. If we fuel our days with obsessing about these things, it will lead to dissatisfaction, coveting, envy, and even worse behaviors like cheating, stealing, or violence. The temperate life acknowledges that window-shopping or fantasizing is the trailhead to a darker path. Control the appetite, or it will control you.

» *Do you consider yourself a moderate person? When has a lack of self-control led you to do or seek things you regretted later?*

GOSPEL

LUKE 3:15-16, 21-22

The people were filled with expectation, asking whether John might be the Christ.

Imagine living in an occupied country, in which one group of people is obliged to bow to the laws, culture, and government of another. Even the religion of foreigners is increasingly pressed on them.

Wouldn't it be difficult to hold onto hope? And, if someone came along who sounded like he was divinely appointed to come to save the situation, wouldn't you be curious despite your doubts?

John the Baptist had a thunderous authority that led multitudes to track him down in the wilderness, hear his message, and seek his baptism. Some became his followers, who believed in John so passionately that early missionaries of the Church would run into pockets of disciples of John a century after his beheading. John spoke like the Messiah some Jewish teachers had been preparing for. He was strong, bold, frank, and decisive. John seemed entirely unconcerned about offending worldly powers like Herod or even the Romans. Wouldn't you have worn a button for John?

» *John the Baptist was so compelling that, even when he pointed to Jesus, some folks preferred John. When have modern preachers become more popular than their message?*

WEDDING CATASTROPHE, AVERTED

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 62:1-5

You shall be called "My Delight," and your land "Espoused."

Isn't it great to be loved? To belong as someone's child, to be chosen as the beloved, or to be named the special friend out of a world of possible alternatives? It's like getting top billing at the box office or having your song climb to #1. Being chosen can lead to Sally-

SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-11

Gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another, mighty deeds; to another, prophecy...

Receiving a gift is always a lovely moment. It doesn't matter if it's a flower or a box of chocolates, a book or a pair of pajamas. I even enjoy it when TIME magazine sends me another cheap battery-powered clock as a renewal gift. It's just great to get

GOSPEL

JOHN 2:1-11

The mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

Every wedding party experiences its own crisis. I knew a woman who flew to Alaska to marry her fiance. She brought her packed gown to a cleaner for a late-hour press. The cleaner's shop was closed on her wedding day, when she went to pick up the dress. Yikes! No dress! Meanwhile the florist, fearful the flowers would not stay fresh, put them in a freezer overnight. They turned black. Then the couple's ride to the church failed to appear. Finally, as they arrived belatedly to the church, the guitarist started to play the opening song, and broke a string. No matter: they got married anyway.

A shortage of wine at a wedding in Cana was a social disaster in a culture that expected days of partying at the marrying families' expense. Jesus fixed it using the Messiah Shortcut. The fix was so fast, not all of the well-lubricated guests even noticed. But the headwaiter noticed. This second batch of wine was better than the first. It was amazing, in fact! Why was it served so late? Because in the kingdom, the last is always first.

» *No dress, no wine, no problem with Jesus. I belonged to a church that failed to get its shipment of palms in time for Palm Sunday. They used pine branches. How has Jesus supplied your lack in time of need?*

GOD LOVES YOU. GOD CHOOSES YOU. GOD WANTS YOU, MORE THAN ANYTHING.

GOD WANTS YOUR HAPPINESS, GOD DESIRES YOUR FREEDOM, GOD SEEKS YOUR ETERNAL COMPANIONSHIP.

Field-at-the-Oscars Syndrome: "You like me. You really like me!" Discovering that we're loveable is the champagne of life.

So put this in your fluted glass: God loves you. God chooses you. God wants you, more than anything. God wants your happiness, God desires your freedom, God seeks your eternal companionship. If you've ever been desolate or forsaken by others, that won't happen with God. God is the one whose love you can count on. God has been in the business of loving you since before you were in your mother's womb. And if you don't know what that kind of total devotion is like, get ready to find out.

» *Whose love has taught you about the kind of commitment that lasts? Whose tenderness has invited you to become a real lover yourself?*

something, to be treated like you matter!

God sends a present to the early Church, which Paul quickly unwraps. But it's more than just a gift for Paul: it's a box full of gifts for everyone in the room! And what a collection of wonders: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, mighty deeds, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues, and interpreting what this "language of the angels" means. Paul insists that everyone in the room gets something from the box.

Obviously this invites us to consider the question, as baptized and Spirit-filled Church members: what's in the box for us? Are we using the gift that's been given? Or are we afraid to take it out of the box and to find out who we become if we let it escape?

» *Consider Paul's unwrapping of the spiritual gifts. Has one of these been demonstrated in your life? If you're not sure, seek guidance in discerning your gift.*

WORDS HAVE POWER

FIRST READING

NEHEMIAH 8:2-4A, 5-6, 8-10

All the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.

This was not the occasion the priest had hoped it would be. Ezra stood up tall on a high platform built for this purpose: to present the complete reading of God's beautiful guidance to the Jerusalem community. They had spent a generation in exile. Now they were home, or at least their adult kids were. This was the perfect time to remind them of what it meant to share in the privilege of being God's special people! Ezra cleared his throat, and read the law. The whole law. All day long.

Meanwhile, the people cried their eyes out. Any of us captured by an overzealous homilist knows how they felt. Yes, it's a beautiful law, a wise law, a perfect way for a community to conduct itself. But for heaven's sake, stop already! It's too much at once. We just can't do all this, absorb all this. We're overwhelmed. We've blown it far too many times, judging by the sound of it. Ezra, not so clueless after all, finally decides to throw a party. This is how you teach folks what it means to be God's special people!

» *Every Sunday, Jesus has us over for supper—and hopes to teach us something. How do Word and Sacrament teach the same vital truth?*

SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-30

If they were all one part, where would the body be?

Discernment is Paul's big theme this month. How do we each play a role in the body of Christ? There are no pew-sitters in Paul's assembly. There are no pews, in fact. Everyone sits around the Lord's table with equal opportunities to serve the rest. So how do you and I discover ourselves in the body of Christ these days?

Don't be surprised if your answer changes every time this reading comes around, which is about once a year. I started out life as an obvious ear, a good listener. That evolved into being a shoulder to cry on, and an arm to share a quick hug. In time I was called upon to be a pair of hands at the keyboard, pounding out a message. Then I was invited to be a voice, teaching and leading retreats. My ultimate goal is to one day be worthy to be a heart, beating with the fiery love of Christ. But until then, I'll cheerfully play any part that's in need of a taker. As Paul says, even the humblest part has honor and is vital to the whole.

» *Trace your journey so far through your membership in the body of Christ. What roles have you played and which may await you next?*

GOSPEL

LUKE 1:1-4; 4:14-21

"Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

Words play a distinct role in the story of Luke's gospel—not to mention, Luke's *other* book, the Acts of the Apostles. In Luke's vision, both books are about the journey that God's living word, Jesus Christ, takes: first, from heaven to earth; next, from Galilee to Jerusalem; and finally, through the actions of the apostles, from Jerusalem to Rome, the heart of the known world. God's word has to get to Rome for it to be fulfilled, in Luke's mind, because Rome is the biggest and most visible stage in his generation. We might add that Rome remains a pretty big stage for the Church today.

Luke acknowledges the "ministers of the word" who brought the gospel to him in preaching. Then came writers of the word who penned their own accounts: first Mark, and then Matthew, and possibly others whose attempts were less complete. Luke decides in the end to do his own investigation and to write his own version. And isn't it true that we all need to take up this investigation of faith for ourselves and not rely on what others have told us?

» *How many people brought you the gospel before you finally heard it for yourself? How do you bring the gospel to others?*

LET US PRAY...

God of surprises, you delight in making all things new. Confound our expectations by proving your love to be larger than this world's cruelty, your peace deeper than our violence, and your power stronger than every worldly boast. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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