

exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF JANUARY 2020

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OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray...God of beginnings, open our eyes to the opportunities you present to us in this new year of grace. Open our ears to hear your summons in the cry of the poor. Open our minds to new possibilities, fresh ideas, greater wisdom. Open our hearts to love one another as you have loved us. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

January 5 | LECTONARY 20ABC
SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

FOLLOW THE RISING STAR

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 60:1-6

Upon you the LORD shines, and over you appears God's glory.

Do you consider yourself a radiant being? Many of us will humbly protest, not wishing to appear boastful or assuming. Yet in God's eyes, we're radiant. Thomas Merton appreciated this in his famous Louisville epiphany, when he saw all the people walking around the streets shining like the sun. Some seers describe an aura emanating from our bodies that differs in color according to the condition of our souls. Artists throughout history have translated that idea into the haloes of saints. They even invented the *mandorla*, an almond-shaped full body halo like the one framing Our Lady of Guadalupe and also traditionally enclosing Jesus in iconography. The *mandorla* is meant to suggest a being that transcends time and space.

Some days you and I don't manage to transcend our own bad moods. But if you seek the simple way of holiness available to you every day, don't be surprised if a *mandorla* is in your future. In the meantime, shine on!

» *Have you known people who seemed to shine with a light that comes from within? How can you stoke "this little light that is yours?"*

SECOND READING

EPHESIANS 3:2-3A, 5-6

The mystery was made known to me by revelation.

Our eyes naturally follow the light. When we move through a dark room, instinctively we seek out whatever moonlight or streetlight or LED markers we can trace across the space to guide our steps. Like those rows of floor lights the flight attendants always promise will come on in case of an emergency, we need guiding lights, or we're sure to stumble in the dark.

Revelation is another way to describe the light that's sometimes available in dark situations. We don't know what to do, scratching our heads and weighing the options. Then suddenly, the path before us clarifies and straightens, and we make a firm choice to walk it. Revelation, which literally means to lift a veil between the seen and unseen, is

something better and more far seeing than just another helping of useful information. It also gives us confidence that, even when walking in the dark valley or the shadow of death, all will be well. When St. Paul encountered the risen Lord on the Damascus Road, he didn't get answers to questions. He got direction for his life altogether.

» *Even if the information doesn't change, have you ever found an unexpected way to the solution to a problem?*

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 2:1-12

"We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage."

The image of a star tiptoeing across the heavens, beckoning watchful astrologers to follow in its wake, is a lovely metaphor for the journey we each must take to wisdom. Most of us don't look for answers in the night sky anymore. We seek understanding by studying history, by attending to the signs of our times, by listening to experts, and perhaps by taking all that we

learn to prayer and contemplation.

From there, we may feel the prompting, a tug that requires us to speak or take action in a way we would not normally choose. So we move tentatively in this new direction. The light we're following bids us to be more courageous, or more generous; to take less offense, or to show

more compassion. Little by little, as we inch toward our wiser selves, we find our hearts widening, our egos demanding less attention and satisfaction. Wise folk find it easier to surrender themselves to mystery, to bow down before One who is mightier. Homage is not a posture readily assumed by the arrogant and the ignorant.

» *Bowing, kneeling, prostrating. These religious gestures imitate with the body the manner of the spirit. How do you show homage?*

January 13

LECTIONARY 21A

FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

THE HIDDEN DAYS ARE OVER

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 42:1-4, 6-7

I formed you, and set you as...a light for the nations.

I don't know the statistics for how many of us love to be seen versus how many prefer to go unnoticed. I've spent my life in the latter category. If I could have a superpower, I'd choose invisibility. Just doing my job and earning my keep is enough. Yet at certain points in even the most hidden life, the time to stand up and be noticed arrives. Even the shrinking violets among us will be obliged to shout, march, and make our position known.

The servant of Isaiah's oracle—was it Isaiah himself, or his little nation of Judah?—is summoned from obscurity to be a light to the nations. Normally, servants are supposed to glide in and out of a room without disturbing their employers. They come, perform their duties, and vanish. But the servant of God disturbs plenty in the performance of his or her responsibilities. The servant comes to proclaim freedom for captives, healing for the sick, hope for the despairing, justice for the oppressed. You better believe this will be noticed—and not always in a way that brings applause.

» *When have you felt obliged to buck protocol and make your presence felt?*

SECOND READING

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 10:34-38

Peter proceeded to speak to those gathered in the house of Cornelius.

Let's talk about the total weirdness of Acts Chapter 10. Cornelius was a centurion. Like the title suggests, he's a soldier who commands one hundred men. So Cornelius is a leader in the Roman army and no one to mess with. Assigned to Caesarea in occupied Palestine, he keeps order among the Jews there. And he finds himself attracted to their religion. He becomes a "God-fearer," one who stands at the edge of Jewish services and, to the limited extent allowed, participates.

Peter's a Jew. He got some serious religion following Jesus and is now the virtual head of a new Church. Like most believers of the Way, Peter's a faithful Jew. Jews don't enter the homes of Romans at the risk of uncleanness. So what's Peter doing in Cornelius' house? Preaching the gospel, no less! And Cornelius is buying it. You have to read all of Chapter 10 to understand why this is happening. Peter had no idea when he woke up that morning that he'd be doing this outlandish thing today. The Holy Spirit always invites us to stretch our normal boundaries.

» *Most conversations between centurions and Jews took place during an arrest. Which "enemies" might the Spirit invite you to talk to?*

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 3:13-17

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Even heaven couldn't keep quiet about the identity of Jesus. Divine lineage and approval thundered out over the scene at the Jordan. The hidden days of Jesus were over the day he stepped into that river for John's baptism. Could the same be said of us? Did our private lives end the day we took up the identity of Christ?

That would be an optimistic assessment for many of us. The truth is, we like living our private little lives that are built around acquiring things that give us comfort and security. Taking up the identity of Christ is something we may prefer to keep in a drawer, along with our baptismal certificate, medals from science fairs, and letters from old lovers. These are markers of past achievements and once-significant relationships. But they belong to the past and have little to say about who we are right now. Would we be willing to take that certificate out of hiding and hang it on the wall? Are we willing to be public in our Christianity, witnessing to its values and priorities in the kind of life we live?

» *Does your life as a believer differ significantly from how you would live without faith? In what ways?*

YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 49:3, 5-6

You are my servant, Israel, through whom I show my glory.

These pitches arrive in the daily mail: “You have been selected...” Sometimes you’re being favored with the opportunity to take a survey—oh, and to send a donation, while you’re at it. Sometimes it’s a promise that you’ve already “won” something. But you’re not going to get it until you undergo herculean efforts that will not be worth the price of the gadget. Being selected in this presorted way is no prize at all. It just reinforces how incredibly special the average consumer is not.

When it’s God who comes calling, it’s another matter entirely. Our selection for the divine purpose is heightened and our opportunities unparalleled. After all, God is choosing us to serve a particular generation, in a precise location, at a time in history with specific circumstances and needs. No one else has our reach, our skills, or our influence. We shine our light on this corner of the world, touching the lives of those around us. As Joan of Arc said, “I was born for this.” For what purpose were you born?

» *Consider your top ten achievements. Do these spell out your purpose?*

SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-3

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...

You have to marvel at the clarity that Paul exhibits in every sentence of his letters. He never says, “I can’t say for sure,” or “This could be one way of looking at the situation.” No, Paul is always dead sure of everything, clear-cut in his identity and his goals. He even freely admits when he’s been dead wrong with the same heavy certainty!

So his letters don’t begin with: “Hi, it’s Paul. You remember, the guy who’s doing his best to follow Jesus?” Instead, across thirteen letters, Paul starts off by claiming his apostleship nine times in the first sentence. He’s a slave of Christ or a prisoner for Christ four times. He claims to operate by the will of God four times. He also serves at the command of God, or not by the authority of human beings, once each. He also views himself set apart from the gospel. All in the first sentence. Maybe this is just what happens when a Pharisee becomes a disciple of Christ. Paul is all in. But it does make me wonder: what would it take to be all in like Paul?

» *Are you “doing your best to follow Jesus”? Or are you “all in” as an apostle, one sent by God to do the will of God?*

GOSPEL

JOHN 1:29-34

“The reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known.”

Prophets talk this way. They know who God is and what God wants. They know who they are and why they are here. Prophets have an inner sense of fulfilling a destiny that’s wrapped up in their DNA. It’s as if they can do no other. A lot of the rest of us flop around like fish on a pier, seeking some route to an agreeable body of water in which we can breathe freely. Any water will do, so long as it comes about as quickly as possible. We’re not too particular about the details of our survival, just the thing itself.

John the Baptist isn’t that kind of fish. He swims the ocean of certainty known to Paul. John knows he’s selected not to be the Christ, but to be the forerunner. His showy baptisms are merely a sign of something more brilliant and significant ahead. John has no vocation crisis, no desire to climb a ladder to get ahead in his career. He has one job: to spot and announce the one who is to come. Then he earns his grisly retirement with confidence. We may be glad not to be John, but we have to be grateful he took the job.

» *Consider those who are killed in the service of their calling: aid workers, soldiers, journalists. What risks are you willing to take to answer your call?*

LIGHT COMES TO THE LAND OF GLOOM

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 8:23-9:3

Anguish has taken wing, dispelled is darkness.

Sometimes it seems Isaiah wasted his talent on prophecy. He should have been writing allegorical novels like *Light Comes to the Land of Gloom*, and *The Wolf Stays at the Lamb’s House*.

Prophecy fans, however, are grateful Isaiah answered the call. While few heed the prophet’s words in time, the warning stays on record for future generations to ponder and learn from.

This particular prophecy is not a warning, but rather an exciting promise. Anguish is out, and darkness is done! Light shines ahead and we can get there from here! The burden we carry is about to get smashed! If more prophets wrote in this vein, perhaps more people would pay attention. Because we all endure nights of anguish, seasons of darkness, and decades of burden. We'd like to know that the Land of Gloom is not an endless terrain, and the rule of anguish can be broken. People walking in darkness yearn for that great light. Keep your eyes open. It's coming.

» *What kind of darkness, what sort of burdens, accompany you this season? Where do you see signs of light ahead?*

SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-13, 17

I urge you...that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.

Looking for signs of light? Look toward unity. In the realm of division, darkness contributes to a deeper darkness. People seeking conflict are sure to find it, or to create it where there was none. We all know folks who are ever spoiling for a fight. It can be hard to resist throwing the second punch, but remember what Jesus said about turning a cheek. Do we believe love really is stronger than death? Then our

love can certainly be more embracing than the hate of the haters.

Unity in mind and purpose is a wonderful creed for marriages and families. And for businesses, parishes, classrooms, exercise classes, religious communities, sports teams, book clubs—just about anything you can think of goes better when wills are united in spirit and goals. The spirit of contention is popular. Aggression is all the rage these days. Being the peacemaker may seem, by contrast, rather colorless. So dare to be dull. Become famous for your reconciling nature. Let them say of you that, in your presence, everyone found welcome.

» *Think of the “other side” of some polarizing issue. What values do such groups share that could bring them together?*

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 4:12-23

Jesus went around all of Galilee, teaching, proclaiming the gospel, and curing disease.

1) Teaching a new way of approaching religious values. 2) Proclaiming a social message of challenge and hope. 3) Healing the sick and eradicating disease. Of these three activities Jesus performed, which one is most likely to make people mad? And which one is most likely to be welcomed and celebrated?

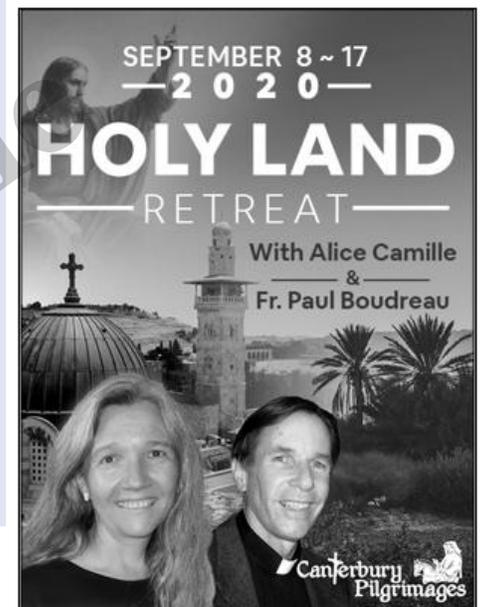
You might imagine that a ministry of healing would be received as the most harmless thing Jesus did. It wasn't. Everything Jesus said and did ran into the same stubborn obstacle: authority. Who was he to say and do these things? What did it say about the powers that be that this shabby person from Galilee was bringing such ideas and abilities to the population? And if he was doing this without official authorization, how did they know he didn't operate under the power of darkness? Even when light comes to the Land of Gloom, not everyone will recognize or welcome it. But as Jesus says, while the agent may be uncertain, the fruits never lie.

» *When have you seen good fruit come from “unacceptable” sources? What criteria do you use to determine the goodness of a cause?*



LET US PRAY...

God of challenge and change, you summon us to ongoing cycles of repentance. Your kingdom is always coming, always issuing its gentle invitation to see more clearly and love more deeply. We believe the time is coming when the last will be first, the mighty cast down and the lowly uplifted. Steel us to serve your justice by standing with the sorrowful and speaking for the voiceless. *Amen.*



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