



First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:37–44

Context Connection

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

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

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

Tradition Connection

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

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

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

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

Wisdom Connection

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

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



Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3:1–12

Context Connection

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

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

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

Tradition Connection

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

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

Wisdom Connection

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



Third Sunday of Advent

Matthew 11:2–11

Context Connection

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

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

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

Tradition Connection

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

Wisdom Connection

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

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

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



Fourth Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1:18–24

Context Connection

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tradition Connection

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

Wisdom Connection

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

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

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



Sunday Within the Octave of Christmas

The Feast of the Holy Family

Matthew 2:13–15,19–23

Context Connection

Matthew continues to use in chapter two of his Gospel the pattern he established in chapter one: an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, the angel gives Joseph a command and explains why he should obey, Joseph carries out the command, and the narrative closes with a quote from the Old Testament.

The angel commands Joseph, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him” (2:13). Joseph does as the angel tells him, fleeing by night to Egypt with Jesus and Mary. Matthew concludes by saying, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘out of Egypt I have called my son’” (3:15). This quotation from the prophet can be found in Hosea 11:1. This Sunday’s Gospel does not include verses 16–18, the account of Herod’s massacre of boys two years old and younger. At this time in history, Egypt was a place of exile for many individuals from Israel. Most of them were waiting for the death of Herod so they could return to Israel. As a carpenter, Joseph would have been able to find work quite easily in Egypt.

The time of the Holy Family’s exile in Egypt is short—just a couple years, until Herod dies. Once again, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream to let him know that Herod has died and that Joseph and his family can return to Israel. Upon the death of Herod, the Romans split Herod’s kingdom among his three sons. Herod Antipas, whom Jesus later refers to as “the fox,” is given Galilee and Perea. When Joseph “heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee” (2:22). Archelaus’s reputation was similar to his father’s—he is cruel and quick to suppress any challenge to his throne. After only a short time as king, Archelaus is dethroned by the Romans and the Romans replace the role of king with that of governor, one of the most famous being Pontius Pilate.

The Holy Family settles in Nazareth, a small town in the Galilee area: “There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean’” (2:23). This is why

Jesus is associated with Nazareth and why he begins his public ministry in Galilee.

Tradition Connection

Jesus shows us the importance of family by choosing to be born into the family of Joseph and Mary. The Catholic Church, in recent writings, places emphasis on the importance of family by referring to it as the domestic church. The family is considered a sacred community where parents, by word and example, are the first evangelizers of their children. Their vocation, as parents, is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus's love to their children through their words and deeds.

The Christian family has an important place in the Church and in society. In the family, we learn moral values and we begin to honor God (see CCC, number 2207). It is in the family that we come to know how to care for others, to be other-oriented. This understanding of self-giving, one that Jesus models in the Gospels, should be the cornerstone of family life (see CCC, number 2208). Authentic family life naturally spills over its own boundaries and impacts everyone that comes into contact with it.

In choosing to be an active member of the family of Joseph and Mary, Jesus heightens the dignity of family life.

Wisdom Connection

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the new Moses. Early on, Matthew wants his readers to understand that the future promise of the People of God rests with Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, who has been called from Egypt to live, work, and die in the land of God's own people. God is acting through Jesus, as God did through Moses, but in a new way, to bring about the salvation of all people.

Through the genealogy listed in chapter one, Matthew demonstrates continuity between Jesus and the Jewish tradition. Then in chapter two, Matthew directs our attention to how Joseph's actions, guided by the angel, fulfill what the prophets had spoken. The history of Jesus and Christianity is grounded in the Old Testament. The New Testament does not make the promises of God to the Israelites obsolete.



The Epiphany of the Lord

Matthew 2:1–12

Context Connection

This passage from Matthew is familiar to many of us, but a closer look is important because many traditions have embellished the story over the years. Matthew tells of “wise men from the East” (2:1). In the New American Bible, the word *magi* is used instead of *wise men*. Matthew does not give us the number or the nationalities of those wise men. They are not kings but people educated in astronomy and astrology.

Through their careful observance of the nightly sky, the wise men (the magi) have discovered a new star, which they interpret as a sign of the birth of a new king or a significant leader. They begin to follow this star, but they lose sight of it, so they ask King Herod, appointed as King of the Jews by Rome, to help them locate the newborn King of the Jews. The king’s advisors say the answer is in the Sacred Scriptures of the Hebrew people—probably in Micah 5:1–5. These educated Gentile men from the East have to rely on the sacred word of God to guide them to Jesus, the King of the Jews. King Herod, a Jew himself, does not accompany the men from the East to worship the newborn King of the Jews. One wonders if this is Matthew’s attempt to show the readiness of many Gentiles to accept Jesus as the Messiah and the reluctance on the part of many Jews. Nonetheless, the faith of the Gentile wise men from the East stands in contrast to the cynical cunning of Herod.

A short distance from Jerusalem (Bethlehem is only five miles to the south), the star reappears, showing where the child is. When the wise men see this, “they were overwhelmed with joy” (2:10). They pay homage to the new king and present gifts to accent the greatness of the child and his future good works. Both frankincense and myrrh have medicinal qualities—fine gifts for the healer Jesus is to become. And as for gold: are we willing to give the best of our personal treasures to develop Jesus’s Kingdom on earth?

King Herod is an Idumean whose ancestors were forcibly converted to Judaism around 134 BC. Therefore, Herod’s Judaism is suspect by orthodox Jews. Herod naturally fears all Jewish messianic movements as threats to his political power. After learning in a dream that Herod intends to harm the child, the wise men return home without giving Herod information about the exact location of the child.

Tradition Connection

This Sunday we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany of the Lord. The *Catechism* defines *Epiphany* as “the feast which celebrates the manifestation to the world of the newborn Christ as Messiah, Son of God, and Savior of the world” (page 876). Epiphany is about the world coming to know the true identity of Jesus.

The story of the Epiphany has been embellished over the centuries. In the fifth century, the three kinds of gifts that were given gave birth to the tradition of three wise men. By the eighth century, each wise man had a name: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. In some parts of the Christian world, Epiphany is celebrated on its traditional date of January 6, and people exchange gifts then rather than on Christmas Day. In other places, house blessings include writing on the door lintel the first letters of the wise men’s names in the middle of the current year. So, for example, the blessing for the year 2007 would look like 20+C+M+B+07. The letters also stand for the expression *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which is Latin for “Christ, bless this home.”

It is important to realize that Jesus continues to reveal his true identity as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of the world.

Wisdom Connection

Matthew gives us a couple wonderful insights in this passage. He shows that for the wise men, and for us, knowledge is important, but the wisdom found in the Scriptures is essential in coming to know and experience God.

This Sunday’s Gospel also shows that there are different paths to faith. Let’s compare the wise men with the shepherds in the Gospel of Luke. The wise men dedicate their entire lives to acquiring knowledge so that when the star appears, they know to follow this significant sign, even though the journey is hard. Near their journey’s end, they have to seek further knowledge to finally find Jesus. On the other hand, the shepherds are not educated, but they know what their senses tell them, in the way people close to the earth know. So when the angels appear to them, the shepherds accept what they hear and go to see for themselves.

For some people, coming to faith in Jesus is a process that includes studying and taking a long, challenging journey. For others, the journey is short and direct. Both paths are valid ways to come to know and believe in Jesus the Christ.