

A LONGER LOOK AT THE LESSONS

Study Guide and Leader Guide

for Pericopes as Listed in *Lutheran Service Book*

Series A

Lent 1–Easter 7

By Ken Behnken



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Contents

Introduction.....	5
Study Guide	6
Lesson 1 —First Sunday in Lent	7
Lesson 2 —Second Sunday in Lent	11
Lesson 3 —Third Sunday in Lent.....	15
Lesson 4 —Fourth Sunday in Lent.....	19
Lesson 5 —Fifth Sunday in Lent	22
Lesson 6 —Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion	26
Lesson 7 —The Resurrection of Our Lord	30
Lesson 8 —Second Sunday of Easter.....	33
Lesson 9 —Third Sunday of Easter	37
Lesson 10 —Fourth Sunday of Easter.....	41
Lesson 11 —Fifth Sunday of Easter.....	44
Lesson 12 —Sixth Sunday of Easter	48
Lesson 13 —Ascension of Our Lord.....	52
Lesson 14 —Seventh Sunday of Easter	55
Leader Guide.....	59
Lesson 1	60
Lesson 2	63
Lesson 3	66
Lesson 4	68
Lesson 5	71
Lesson 6	73

Lesson 7	76
Lesson 8	78
Lesson 9	81
Lesson 10	84
Lesson 11	87
Lesson 12	90
Lesson 13	93
Lesson 14	95

Introduction

The Three-Year Series of Scripture readings appointed for use in public worship first appeared in 1969 in the *Ordo lectionum Missae*, developed by the Roman Catholic Church. Shortly thereafter, the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) prepared a Lutheran version of this series, which was eventually included in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and, with some slight modifications, in *Lutheran Worship* (1982). *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (1993), the hymnal of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, also included a version of the ILCW lectionary.

In 1983, the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), an ecumenical study group, published the *Common Lectionary* based on the *Ordo lectionum Missae* as well as the Lutheran and various Protestant three-year cycles in use at the time. After significant field-testing, the CCT then published the *Revised Common Lectionary* in 1992, which was adopted for use in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1998 and adapted for use in *Lutheran Service Book*, the new hymnal of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

This revised edition of *A Longer Look at the Lessons* takes into account the differences between various versions of the Three-Year Series in use among Lutherans today and provides studies for the system you have designated. The studies offer guidance for personal study and prompt discussion and application of the pericopes by adult Bible study groups.

Two basic principles were followed in structuring the various versions of Three-Year Lectionary: a *thematic principle* and a *principle of semicontinuous reading*. The *thematic principle* is generally employed during the festival half-year. Readings are selected to emphasize the themes of the festivals and the seasons that surround them. The primary reading is always the Holy Gospel, and that is why it is studied first in these materials. The Old Testament Reading (or First Reading) and the Epistle are then selected to support and enhance the theme set forth by the Holy Gospel.

The *principle of semicontinuous reading* is applied especially during the nonfestival half of the Church Year (the Sundays after Pentecost). The Holy Gospels of Series A are largely from Matthew, Series B from Mark, and Series C from Luke. Readings from John are inserted in all the series, especially during the festival half-year. The Epistles also represent semi-continuous readings through particular letters. The Old Testament Readings, however, are selected thematically in relation to the Holy Gospel throughout both halves of the Church Year.

The overall purpose of assigning Scripture readings in this way is to provide an annual review of salvation history and of major Christian doctrines, as well as to read significant sections of Holy Scripture during certain times of the Church Year. Pastors have found these pericopal studies helpful as they prepare their sermons and services from week to week.

Study Guide

How to Use the Study Guide

The Study Guide has been prepared with three goals in mind. First, it provides information about the lessons and their contexts. A look at the Greek or Hebrew is sometimes included. Doctrinal emphases are pointed out, and the text is often related to other statements of Scripture. Second, it asks questions that help the group explore the texts and provoke analytical thought. Answers are to be sought first in the pericopes themselves, with other references cited for backup or expansion of the thought. Questions that explore the text are just asking “What does it say?” to focus attention. They are easy to answer—so easy that people sometimes feel uneasy about stating the obvious. Help your group understand this. Don’t spend time on these; just get a focus on what the text says and how it says it, and move on to questions that ask “What does it mean?” These require more time and thought. Let your group struggle a little if necessary; don’t be in a hurry to provide answers yourself. Sometimes, restating the question will help them move to the point. Third, the Study Guide encourages discussion and application to Christian life today by asking “What does it mean for us?” This is the essential goal of every Bible study. Give your group members time to express themselves. Encourage and accept their applications and testimonies. Don’t hesitate to share your own views and experiences, but *don’t take over*, or they will back off and wait for you to do this every time. Fill-in-the-blanks exercises focus the attention of the group on key words of the text, and they are intended to provide emphasis of their significance in a simple way.

Make use of added Scripture references—but save time by using slips of paper to assign them ahead of time to individuals who don’t mind reading aloud in your group.

Lesson 1

First Sunday in Lent

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 4:1–11

The account of our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness is the traditional Holy Gospel for the First Sunday in Lent. Jesus’ time of testing, with its forty days of fasting, prompted the development of the season of Lent in the life of the Church as a forty-day period of fasting and introspection preceding the celebration of Easter. The Sundays are called Sundays *in Lent*, and were not included in the forty-day fast, for Sundays are “little Easters” and are a time for celebrating, not fasting. The assigned lessons, however, particularly the Holy Gospels, do point to the approaching time of Jesus’ suffering and its significance for our redemption.

The time of testing in the desert followed immediately after the exalted experience of Jesus at His Baptism, when He was anointed with the Holy Spirit for His ministry.

1. Why is it significant that Jesus was *led by the Spirit* into the desert to be tempted by the devil?

Tour guides today point to a mountain west of Jericho, in the Judean wilderness, as the mount of temptation. The testing continued throughout the forty-day period. In the Old Testament, God had accomplished many significant things in “forty day” or “forty year” periods.

2. Why was it so important that Jesus face His testing immediately at the beginning of His public ministry?

Satan’s “If You are the Son . . . ,” like his “Did God actually say . . . ?” (Genesis 3:1) in the Garden, aimed at raising doubt. At Jesus’ Baptism, God had spoken from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17) and had filled Jesus with the Holy Spirit. Now, led by the Spirit into this decisive confrontation with the tempter, Jesus had to acknowledge for Himself who He is and why He was there. This is an ongoing test also for us in our lives as Christians. We need continually to acknowledge who we are, why we are here, and who’s in charge of our lives. It’s one of the values of regular participation in our congregation’s worship services.

The three temptations summarize Satan’s attacks—our being tempted by possessions, popularity, and power. Jesus, however, rejected these and chose the path of self-sacrificial love.

3. What was at the heart of the temptation for Jesus to use His divine power to satisfy His hunger?

4. What was behind the temptation for Jesus to prove Himself and gain the acclaim of the people through a spectacular display? (See Matthew 12:38–40.)

5. What basic attitude toward life was attacked in the third temptation?

The three temptations may be seen also in our lives as Christians. As we go through life, again and again we have to reaffirm our identities and our priorities. Seeing ourselves as sons and daughters of God through faith in Jesus enables us to do the following:

(First temptation) Choose to focus our lives on ___ instead of letting ___ become an overriding preoccupation.

(Second temptation) Accept God's ___ for us instead of ___ Him through our insistent self-determination.

(Third temptation) Avoid emphasizing ___ we want and have at the expense of ___ we get it.

6. What did Jesus use as His weapon in overcoming Satan and his temptations?

7. What encouragement is there for us in the fact that our brother Jesus faced real temptation and overcame? (See Hebrews 4:15.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 3:1–21

While both convey historically accurate events, the creation account of chapter 2 of Genesis differs in style from chapter 1. It is narrative, while chapter 1, with its recurring phrases telling the story of a progressive creation in six days, suggests a poem or a song. Chapter 1 praises God as the Creator of all; chapter 2 focuses on the creation of man and on man's position and purpose in God's creation. Chapter 1 calls God *Elohim*, a more general term for God, while chapter 2 identifies the Creator as *Yahweh Elohim*, "The LORD God," I AM, who established His covenant of grace with Israel. In the theology of chapter 2, we find God's intentions for mankind in His creation.

The creation song of chapter 1 describes God as bringing the creation into existence from nothing through His powerful Word, supplying the cosmic energy that is the building block of matter. Chapter 2 describes the Lord God giving the creation of man His personal touch and attention, forming the body from dust and breathing the breath of life into him. He placed man into the Garden to be its caretaker and to enjoy its bounty. But He selected one tree to be a test of man's relationship with Him. The man and his wife were given the opportunity to say a happy, willing yes to their Creator by being given also the possibility of saying no to Him. Chapter 3 describes their fall into rebellion and sin and death.

8. Who was the crafty serpent who approached the woman to tempt her? (See Revelation 12:7–12.)

9. What was the tempter attacking with his "Did God actually say . . . ?" What was the tempter attacking with his "You will be like God, knowing good and evil"?

10. The devil is the tempter, but what is clearly evident as the source and cause of the fall and its continuation in human experience? (See James 1:13–15; 1 John 2:16.)

11. How does the Genesis account immediately show the double effect of sin in human life? How is it significant that the Lord God came to the man and the woman and, with His questions, forced them to deal with what they had done and its consequences?

12. What judgment did the Lord God pronounce on the serpent? the woman? the man?

No study of the fall of man is complete without recognizing that while man changed God did not. The Lord God's judgment of Satan (the serpent) incorporated the protevangel, the first Good News of salvation.

13. What was to be the avenue by which victory over Satan would be won? Where do we see this prophecy fulfilled? (See Galatians 4:4–5.)

In the Genesis account, we are not looking only at ancient history, the creation of the first man and woman and their fall into sin. We have to look also at ourselves to understand who we are intended to be and why we are sinners.

14. How are all temptations that confront us essentially the same as the temptation that led to the fall? What constitutes the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in our own lives? How far reaching was the effect of mankind's fall into sin? How may we see that effect in our own world? How do we appropriate the victory over Satan promised in the garden?

15. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 5:12–19

Romans 5:12 is the Bible's classic statement of the doctrine of original sin: the sin of Adam brought broken relationship with God, alienation from God, and a sinful nature, a predisposition to pride and rebellion, to all humanity. Paul wrote: "And so ___ spread to all men, because ___." We see Jesus applying this truth when He said that nothing less than spiritual rebirth is needed to enter the kingdom of God (see John 3:3–6).

Paul's thought breaks off after verse 12, as our texts indicate. He moved into an excursus, comparing and contrasting Adam and Christ and their effects on humanity. He returned to his original thought and

completed it with verse 21—“so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

“Sin is not counted where there is no law” does not suggest that “sin didn’t matter then.” Instead, Paul was showing that even before the Law code was given and brought clear awareness of sin and rebellion, ___ reigned because of sin. The sinful infection that Adam brought is that severe and that universal! How the first man, Adam, who “poisoned” humanity through his willful sin, is a pattern or type of the second man, Jesus, who was God’s “antidote,” is seen in the one-affecting-the-many comparison that follows. Adam, the first man, is seen as the federal head of humanity as he brought rebellion and sin into the experience of all. Jesus Christ, the second Adam, is seen as the new federal head of humanity as He redeemed lost mankind and brought a return to God to the regenerate.

16. What did the disobedience of the one man, Adam, bring upon the many?

17. After sin and its consequences multiplied, what did the one man, Jesus, provide for the many?

18. What change of status and outlook is enjoyed by those who receive the abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness?

Lesson 2

Second Sunday in Lent

The Holy Gospel: John 3:1–17

With this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, John takes all who read and ponder it to the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus' words teach us something about ourselves, but more important, they teach us what we need to know about God and how we may have new life in Him.

19. What does it say about Nicodemus that he “was a man of the Pharisees”? was “a ruler of the Jews”? “came to Jesus by night”?

20. What had led Nicodemus to consider Jesus “a teacher come from God”? What is not stated but is implicit in the fact that Nicodemus wanted to investigate Jesus personally?

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus immediately about that which was at the heart of his concerns and his needs: rebirth, renewal at the very center of his being.

21. Why is rebirth necessary to enter the kingdom of God? (See Ephesians 2:1–5.) Why did Jesus speak of being born again “of water and the Spirit”?

To appreciate Jesus' analogy of the wind blowing where it pleases, it helps to know that in Greek the same word is used for “wind” and “spirit.” There is a play on words here: the *pneuma*, “wind,” *pnei*, “blows,” and is like the *pneumat*os, “Spirit.”

22. What does this play on words establish about this matter of being born again?

Jesus asserted His qualification to teach about heavenly things by calling Himself the “Son of Man” and saying He had come down from heaven. Jesus did not speak of Himself as the Messiah, because that title had been weighted with political overtones. He accepted and blessed His disciples' confession of Him as the Christ, but told them not to make that claim for Him as they spoke to others. In speaking of Himself, Jesus used “Son of Man,” a less emotionally and politically charged title but one that was still messianic in thrust (see Daniel 7:13–14).

23. The incident of the bronze snake in the desert is recorded in Numbers 21:4–9. In what ways was the snake on the pole a prototype of Jesus on the cross? Why did Jesus use this illustration in talking with Nicodemus?

24. The Greek *dei* means “it is necessary” and emphasized Jesus’ “so *must* the Son of Man be lifted up” (emphasis added). What are the compelling factors that made Jesus’ being lifted up necessary?

25. When did Nicodemus finally come forward to be counted among those who believed and followed Jesus?

Scholars disagree as to where Jesus’ own words end in these verses. Greek manuscripts used no punctuation marks, so such questions have to be decided on the basis of the general sense of the section. The KJV used no quotation marks, so it left the question open. The RSV ends Jesus’ words with verse 15 and sees 16–21 as John’s inspired expansion of their significance. The NIV, NEB, the English Standard Version, and the Jerusalem Bible continue Jesus’ quotation through verse 21.

26. How does the Good News come across in John 3:16’s “loved”—“the world”—“He gave”—“His only Son”—“whoever”—“believes”—“not perish”—“eternal life.”

It’s good to have this pericope include verse 17, which beautifully amplifies and clarifies this Good News. It would be even better if verse 18 were included—as it points to Jesus, and relationship with Jesus, as the either/or determining factor in life.

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 12:1–9

According to Stephen, as he began his summary of the history of the chosen people when on trial before the Jewish Council, “the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ ” “The Lord *had* told him” (emphasis added) agrees with this and attaches this pericope to what precedes it (see Genesis 11:27–32).

Abram had lived with his father in Ur of the Chaldeans. Ur was located on the Euphrates River in southern Mesopotamia—the eastern region of the Fertile Crescent that caps the Arabian Desert and extends north and west and then south to Canaan. Mighty Ur had developed an advanced civilization that was fed by its military might and its position as a hub of commerce. It reached its peak around the twenty-first century BC. Ur was a center of the moon cult and was proud of its impressive ziggurat temple dedicated to that pagan worship. Early in the second millennium BC, Ur suffered economic decline and was invaded and conquered by the fierce Amorites from the west. Many families migrated from Ur at that time—among them Terah and his family, who settled in Haran.

We are not told how the Lord appeared to Abram—only that He initiated His covenant of grace and blessing with this descendant of Shem.

27. What are the three elements in Yahweh's covenant promise to Abram?

28. What is the only contribution that Abram was to make to this covenant?

29. What is suggested by they "took all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran"?

30. What is indicated by Abram's building altars to the Lord and calling on the name of the Lord (Yahweh)?

31. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 4:1–8, 13–17

The third chapter of Romans presents Paul's great argument for righteousness through faith and not by observing laws—God accomplishing for us in Christ what the Law cannot do as it exposes our failures and makes us conscious of our sin. Paul summed it up: "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (3:28). Luther and other reformers were led by Paul's words to add an appropriate "alone" and set forth the Reformation principle "By faith alone."

Paul followed that with his pointing to Abraham as the classic example of righteousness through faith, the spiritual father of all who are made righteous through faith in Jesus.

32. What was the circumstance that led to the statement "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"? (See Genesis 15:1–6.)

Paul pointed out that it was only later that the Lord commanded circumcision as a sign of the covenant with Abraham. Circumcision was not a way for Abraham to become righteous but was a sign of the grace of God that had already brought Abraham righteousness through faith.

33. What did Paul say Abraham learned about himself and his relationship with God through all of this?

34. Paul contrasted a person's receiving wages for work with receiving a gift. What are the "wages" that we sinners earn from God through our "work"? (See Romans 6:23.) How can God turn things around and credit us with righteousness simply through faith? (See Romans 8:1-5.)

35. What do we learn about ourselves and our relationship with God through this?

36. What does any suggestion that living in obedience to laws will make you an heir of Abraham do to certainty of salvation through faith in God's promise of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ?

37. Why does the Law, when taken seriously, always bring wrath instead of relationship?

By quoting "I have made you the father of many nations" Paul reminded his readers that God had changed Abram's name from Abram, "Exalted Father," to Abraham, "Father of Nations."

38. In what sense are Gentile Christians Abraham's descendants?

39. When did Abraham experience the truth that God gives life to the dead? When does that same truth come into our life experience?

Lesson 3

Third Sunday in Lent

The Holy Gospel: John 4:5–30, 39–42

Our Lord's interaction with the woman at Jacob's well is an example of the loving concern and sensitivity that characterized His outreach with the Good News. His loving concern for the woman was all the more remarkable because she was a Samaritan and of less than savory character. His conversation moved very easily from the material to the spiritual as He revealed her deepest need. He, of course, had the advantage of knowing her circumstances and was able to "tell [her] all that [she] ever did." He evaded her attempt to involve Him in just a religious argument, and keyed in on helping her see Him as the promised Messiah. If we can combine the same loving concern with the ability to arouse in others a sense of their spiritual need also, our witness to Jesus will be more winsome.

John wrote, "He had to pass through Samaria" (v. 4). That requires an explanation. Jews often took the long way around between Galilee and Judea, crossing the Jordan to travel along its east bank to avoid Samaria altogether—especially when going to Jerusalem as religious pilgrims. The feud between Jews and Samaritans was centuries old, dating back to when Cyrus the Great let a remnant return from Babylonia to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. A Samaritan delegation offered their help. Samaritans were "cousins" of the Jews, a mixed race, the result of intermarriage with people from other nations who were settled among them when the Assyrians conquered and controlled the area. Most Samaritans knew and worshiped Yahweh, but because they were not pureblood Jews, their offer of help was refused and Samaritans were shut out of Jerusalem and its temple. Passing years hardened the animosity. The Samaritans built a temple of their own for worship of Yahweh on Mount Gerizim. The Jews despised them and their "false worship" and the Samaritans hated the Jews for their pompous superiority. On this occasion, that Jesus chose to go through Samaria is in itself not unusual. "He had to pass through Samaria" only because He had an "appointment" with a Samaritan woman and her friends.

"It was about the sixth hour"—12:00 noon—when the woman came out to get water. Ordinarily, the women of a village fetched water together in the cool of the evening and enjoyed some social interaction. She came alone at noon because, unknowingly, she had an "appointment" with the Messiah.

40. What do we learn from the fact that Jesus approached the Samaritan woman? What significance is there in Jesus' beginning by asking a favor of her?

When she reacted in surprise, Jesus offered her ___ water, which would become in her a ___. Like Nicodemus, when Jesus talked to him about being born again, the woman could not get beyond the material to the spiritual. She was mainly interested in ___.

41. How did the woman react when Jesus pointed out her immorality?

42. Why did she bring up the age-old religious argument between their peoples?

43. What did Jesus say is more important than where we worship?

Jesus avoided calling Himself the Messiah and did not let His disciples identify Him in this way because the Jews' expectations of the Messiah were politically slanted.

44. Why did Jesus readily identify Himself on this occasion?

The excited woman shared her experience with the people of the town.

45. What can we learn from the way she approached them regarding Jesus?

46. How may we and our friends hear for ourselves and know that this man really is the Savior of the world?

The Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 17:1–7

Under Moses' leadership, the Israelites were on their way to keep their appointment with Yahweh at "the mountain of God" (Exodus 18:5) called Horeb or Sinai and were passing through the Desert of Sin, the name of which was probably derived from Sinai. The Lord had sweetened the bitter water at Marah so they could drink it, and He had provided manna and quail for their food. At the oasis called Elim, they had enjoyed its twelve springs and seventy palm trees. Then their traveling from place to place led them to Rephidim, where there was no water. The Lord was testing them, but they put the Lord to the test.

47. Why was Moses the focus of the Israelites' quarreling and grumbling? What did Moses force them to see with his response to them?

48. What was Moses' recourse when he was unable to resolve the problem of the thirsty Israelites? How may our Church's leaders do this today?

49. What is significant about the fact that the rock from which water came to refresh the Israelites was located on Mount Horeb (Sinai)? What impact on the Israelites was Moses seeking by naming the place Massah (Testing) and Meribah (Quarreling)?

A Hebrew legend grew around the rock that provided water—that it became a rolling stone that accompanied the Israelites on their wanderings, continuing to provide God’s gift of fresh water. In 1 Corinthians 10:1–4, Paul played on that legend as he warned the Corinthian Christians not to put the Lord to the test with their willfulness. He suggested that the legend was partly true, but that it was a living rock who accompanied Israel and provided for their needs. It was none other than the Christ, who interacted with and sustained Israel as the Angel of the Lord—just as He was interacting with and sustaining the Corinthian Christians.

50. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 5:1–8

Bible commentators have noted the lyric quality of Romans 5:1–11. Many Christians find great spiritual impact when they memorize it and keep it in the treasure-house of their hearts. The ESV’s title, “Peace with God Through Faith,” is most fitting. Peace with God does provide the basis for a deep joy that endures through all circumstances.

51. What is the basis for our having peace with God? Why is it vital for us that Paul wrote “we have been justified through faith” and not “we are being justified through faith”?

52. What is the ultimate reason for rejoicing as we stand in God’s grace?

53. What process is God implementing in us when He allows suffering to be part of our experience? Can we really rejoice in such suffering? (See Romans 8:28.)

What Good News! “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

54. What, according to Paul, constitutes the right time for God to provide His help? (See 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.)

55. What if instead of “Christ died for the ungodly,” Paul had written, “Christ died for the good people”?

56. What does it say about God’s agape love that Christ died for us “while we were still sinners”?

In verses 9–11, Paul takes this matter of peace and joy a significant step further. He reminds us that we have been justified by the blood of Christ, that we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, and that we will be saved through His life. As a result of all this, Paul tells us, we may rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have missed the point if our Christian faith and worship and service have become a drudgery. As Christians, we, of all people, should enjoy life because we can enjoy God in Christ!

Lesson 4

Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Holy Gospel: John 9:1–41

Jesus and His disciples were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, a remembrance of God's leading of Israel through their forty-year wilderness experience to their occupation of the Promised Land. Jesus had delayed His arrival and had entered Jerusalem without awakening general awareness of His presence—though John tells us “among the people there was much muttering about Him, but for fear of the religious leaders no one spoke openly about Him.” The week of festivities had reached its midpoint when Jesus went into the temple courts and began to teach. His teaching and its influence on the crowds led to a confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders that culminated in Jesus' bold claim: “Before Abraham was, I am” (8:58). *Yahweh* means “I am.” They got the point. We're told, “They picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple” (8:59). The incident in today's Gospel followed—with its application to the religious leaders. This galvanized the religious establishment to plan their action against Jesus. His trial and execution were only half a year away.

The disciples' question about the man blind from birth was typical of Jewish thinking. It's typical of our thinking too. When something goes wrong, we look for some specific cause, for someone to blame.

57. What does Jesus' answer say about this general attitude?

58. In God's overarching plan for him, what lay behind the blind man's disability?

Jesus' commitment to the work for which He was sent as the light of the world is evident in His comments and His interaction with the blind man.

59. Why did Jesus apply mud to the man's eyes and then require that he go to the Pool of Siloam to wash it off?

60. As the Pharisees investigated the miracle, what became their major concern? Why did the young man's joyous testimony have so little impact on the Pharisees?

During the interrogation, the young man referred to Jesus as “a prophet” and was cast out by his questioners as a result. Later, Jesus found him and asked a question that took him a step further in his faith. Some Greek manuscripts have Jesus saying “Son of God” instead of “Son of Man.” The King James

Version offers that translation. If that is what Jesus said, his question was both direct and directive. But also the title “Son of Man” had definite messianic overtones (see Daniel 7:13–14).

61. Why did Jesus speak of Himself in the third person instead of by asking, “Do you believe in *Me*?” How is it that the young man was ready to say, “Who is He, sir, that I may believe in Him?”

Note that Jesus continued His formal, instructive approach with His “You have seen Him, and it is He who is speaking to you.” The Greek word for “worshiped” indicates the man did obeisance, bowing low to touch Jesus’ feet—an act that Jesus accepted from him.

62. Why are believing and worshiping always connected, also for us?

63. Jesus applied the incident to His ministry as the light of the world—including its lack of impact on the Pharisees. Why is there greater guilt for those who refuse to see the Good News of Jesus because they claim to “see clearly” without Him? Give an example of this spiritual blindness in today’s world.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 42:14–21

Isaiah II, chapters 40–55, includes four Servant Songs in which the Messiah is presented as the ideal “Israel” who will carry out God’s saving will fully. This Old Testament Lesson follows the first of the Servant Songs.

The verse preceding this pericope describes Yahweh as a mighty warrior taking the field against His enemies, enacting His judgment against a faithless people. He says, “For a long time I have held My peace”—so much so that the people thought He was indifferent to their wrongdoing, easily appeased by their perfunctory ritual religion. But now the decisive time had come, like that of a _____. Verses 14–16 are notable for their string of fifteen verbs, all in first person singular, in which the Lord sets forth His position and tells what actions He will take. Note how His “I will lay waste . . . and dry up” contrasts sharply with the pictures of promise in Isaiah 35:1–7. This was some of the favorite graphic imagery of the prophets.

The last part of this lesson is the beginning of a two-part poem that pronounces judgment but also promises redemption.

64. Who is the deaf and blind servant who is called on to hear and see?

The pericope ends on a strong, positive note with “The LORD was pleased, for His righteousness’ sake, to magnify His law and make it glorious.” As the poem continues, however, this glory of the Law only emphasizes the plight of the people under the Lord’s judgment (see 42:22–25).

65. Who is identified as the one responsible for Jacob (Israel) being conquered and plundered?

66. What does today's lesson point to as the reason for the Lord's allowing this?

Sample a little of the part of the poem that promises redemption: 43:1–8.

67. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 5:8–14

The imagery of light and darkness is frequently employed in Holy Scripture. God is described as “living in unapproachable light.” The kingdom of Satan and all who oppose God's will is called “the powers of this dark world.” In today's Holy Gospel, we heard Jesus call Himself “the light of the world.”

68. How is it that those who once were darkness now *are* light? What is to be the result of a person's being light in the Lord?

Paul described the fruit of the light as being found in all that is ____, ____, and ____. The Greek word that says “*discern* what is pleasing to the Lord” (emphasis added) means more than just “discern.” It has the weight of “test to prove genuine”—as in the testing of coins.

69. How may we “test” and “prove” what pleases the Lord?

The unfruitful works of darkness are the opposite of what is good, right, and true—things that are malicious, evil, and false.

70. In what sense are the secret sins of those in darkness “shameful even to speak of”?

71. How may those who prove in themselves what pleases the Lord expose the fruitless works of darkness for what they are? What is the desired result of exposing the fruitless works of darkness?

Scholars think Paul was quoting a familiar hymn, perhaps a baptismal hymn, in closing this section—showing the desired result of “light in the Lord” being brought to bear on the deeds of darkness and exposing them.

72. As children of light in the Lord by the grace of God, what practical steps may we take to work at living as children of light, thus testing and proving what pleases the Lord?

Lesson 5

Fifth Sunday in Lent

The Holy Gospel: John 11:1–53

Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, were Jesus' good friends. Jesus probably stayed with them when He was visiting Jerusalem. During religious festivals, the thousands of pilgrims were not allowed to stay overnight in Jerusalem—and Bethany was convenient, just two miles to the east, beyond the Mount of Olives. But Jesus and His disciples were probably in Perea, east of the Jordan River, when word reached them about Lazarus.

73. What was Jesus' immediate analysis of the situation of His friend?

Jesus' words led the disciples to expect Lazarus's recovery, but finally He told them that Lazarus had died and they were going to him.

74. How could Jesus be glad that He was not in Bethany to heal Lazarus?

75. John used the words "the Jews" to refer especially to the religious leaders. What does it say about Lazarus and his family that "many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them"?

Martha's greeting showed her disappointment that what she had hoped for had not happened, but she did not close the door of possibility. She said, "Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus encouraged her to maintain an expectant faith with His great "I am" statement. The Greek has *egō eimi*—an emphatic "I, I only, am." This is the fifth of seven times in which John records Jesus' bold use of this designation for Himself in describing His messianic ministry. Remember, "I AM" is *Yahweh*, the name by which the Lord established His covenant with Israel. Here Jesus was making the strongest claims for Himself as the source of all life.

76. How did Martha respond to Jesus' "Do you believe this?"

Also in recording Martha's confession of faith, the Greek employs an emphatic *egō* along with the verb "I have believed." Martha was bold in her faith and in her expectation. When Martha went to tell Mary, she called Jesus "the Teacher," emphasizing that He taught her and her sister alongside the men.

77. What is suggested by the fact that Mary approached Jesus with the same words her sister had said to Him?

78. Jesus knew what He was going to do. Why, then, was He so deeply moved in spirit and troubled as He saw the others weeping?

79. What do Martha's words at her brother's tomb establish as a fact?

Lazarus was clearly and fully dead. At Jesus' command, the one whose body had already begun to decompose came out of the tomb alive, validating Jesus' bold "I am the resurrection and the life."

80. What effect did this miracle have on some of "the Jews" who witnessed it?

This miracle, planned by Jesus and done in a suburb of Jerusalem, moved Him a decisive step closer to the cross and the culmination of His ministry.

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 37:1–14

Ezekiel lived in a time of international upheaval. Assyria had dominated the Middle East and had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel but was itself overthrown by Babylonia. Egypt, trying to reassert its influence over Palestine and Syria, made Judah its vassal state for a time. But Babylon's power was on the rise, and soon it became Judah's overlord. When King Jehoiakim rebelled, Judah was subdued and ten thousand of the leading Jews, Ezekiel included, were exiled to Babylonia. Zedekiah was appointed puppet-king and he, too, foolishly rebelled. The Babylonians then laid siege to Jerusalem, and in 587 BC its walls were breached and the city and Solomon's beautiful temple were plundered and burned.

Ezekiel was of a priestly line and was a man of superior intellect. He served as God's priest-prophet to the people in exile before and after the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. *Ezekiel* means "God strengthens," and that was his message to the exiles: Jerusalem's fall was inevitable, but God would strengthen the exiles to be His people where they were if they would turn to Him. The temple, desecrated by heartless ritual, was doomed, but God would dwell in their midst also in a strange land. The city and temple were destroyed and their very national identity was threatened, but the people would experience revival, restoration, and a glorious future as the redeemed and perfected kingdom of God.

Today's lesson is part of that word of comfort and hope. Because this vision of the valley of dry bones has been told in a popular spiritual song, it is probably the most widely known part of Ezekiel.

81. What promise did Ezekiel's vision hold out to the people of Judah in exile?

82. The different concepts represented by our English words *breath*, *wind*, and *spirit* were all expressed by the one Hebrew word *ruach*. How does this influence our understanding of the message of the vision?

“And you shall know that I am the LORD” is a major theme of Ezekiel. The phrase “and you shall know” or variations of it appear no fewer than sixty-five times in Ezekiel.

83. How does Ezekiel’s vision apply to us and offer guidance for our lives?

84. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 8:1–11

These are the first verses of what many Christians consider one of the greatest chapters in the Bible. Having established the vital principle of justification by faith alone, and not in any way by works, Paul turned to what life in the Spirit means for the justified. Spiritually, things become as different as light and darkness, confidence and despair, life and death. It is like leaving one room behind, the room in which self-will rules and sin separates and death is eternal, and entering a new room in which the Spirit of Christ rules and sin is covered by forgiveness and death has been swallowed in the victory of life.

85. How did Jesus describe the radical nature of this change in John 3:3–6?

According to Paul’s words here, life in the Spirit of Jesus means the following:

- “There is therefore now no ___ for those who are ___.”

- “The law of the Spirit of life has ___ in Christ Jesus from the law of ___.” In the Greek, “set free” is in the aorist tense, which indicates an act in the past with results that still apply in the present. This assures us that we have been set free once for all!

- “The ___ might be fulfilled in us, who walk . . . ___.”

86. What are the requirements of the Law? How are they fully met by our living according to the Spirit?

- “Those who live according to the ___ set their minds on ___.” They enjoy ___ and ___.

87. How does our society evidence the fact that its mind is often set on what the sinful nature desires and thus is hostile to God and does not submit to His Law? What results from that kind of mind-set?

• We have the ability to ___ because the ___ dwells in us.

88. How does 1 John 4:19 describe the essential difference the indwelling Spirit of Jesus makes in us?

89. Why is having the Spirit living in us the determining factor in our belonging to Christ? (See 1 Corinthians 12:3; Titus 3:4–8.) What living hope is ours because the Spirit who raised Jesus is living in us?

90. How can we work at growing in having our lives controlled by the Spirit of Jesus living in us?

Lesson 6

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 27:11–66

The Three-Year Lectionary brought a shift to this Sunday. Formerly it was simply Palm Sunday. Now it is suggested that Palm Sunday be a preliminary theme and move then to the Sunday of the Passion—fitting for the first day of Holy Week as we look ahead to the death of our Lord. The assigned Holy Gospel is all of chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew—too lengthy for our detailed study. Even the alternate is a challenge, but we must at least note the dramatic chain of events that led to our study:

- Jesus again predicted His crucifixion; the Council (Sanhedrin) plotted to get rid of Him.
- Mary anointed Jesus' feet at Bethany—"to prepare Me for burial" (26:12), said Jesus.
- Judas agreed to betray Jesus to the chief priests.
- Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as He and His disciples ate the Passover in the Upper Room.
- Jesus predicted that Peter would deny Him.
- Jesus agonized and prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- Jesus was arrested and tried by the Council and was condemned for blasphemy.
- Peter, under pressure, disowned Jesus.
- Judas, in remorse and despair, hanged himself.

The trial of Jesus by the Council was an illegal night session. Having condemned Him, the leaders arranged a show of legality with an early morning meeting to confirm their judgment. The Romans granted the Jews some self-government but reserved the death penalty to their own authority, so the Council had to bring their charges against Jesus before Procurator Pilate. It is that trial and the subsequent crucifixion of Jesus on which we focus. It was early morning—six o'clock. Palestine's heat encouraged an early start at work to allow time for rest and refreshment at midday.

91. What charge did the Jewish leaders bring against Jesus in Pilate's court? (See Luke 23:1–2.) Why didn't they just tell Pilate, "We find He deserves death because He blasphemed God, claiming to be the Christ, God's Son"?

Jesus responded to Pilate's direct questioning but not to the charges of the priests and elders. In *Follow Me*, Martin Franzmann says, "Nowhere is the quiet majesty of Jesus more apparent than in His Passion. Of all the men who figure in that turbulent story He is the only poised and self-possessed one. He was the Victim, His disciples noted, and yet He was somehow in control" (p. 208).

92. Why did Pilate offer the release of a prisoner and make it a specific choice between Barabbas and Jesus?

93. Only Matthew recorded the dream and warning of Pilate's wife. What was he emphasizing by including this behind-the-scenes incident in his account?

Throughout the events that led to Jesus' death, the Jewish religious leaders are shown to be the ones determined to get rid of Jesus. Pilate's offer to the crowd of a choice between Barabbas and Jesus gave them the opportunity to make the death of Jesus a demand of the people, so they influenced the crowd and orchestrated their persistent yelling for Jesus' crucifixion.

94. How did the crowd reaction bring pressure on Pilate? Who constituted this crowd that was ready to say, "His blood be on us and on our children!" when Pilate washed his hands of responsibility?

"Having scourged Jesus" reads so easily in the story that we don't give much thought to that dreadful experience. Josephus, a first-century historian, says that scourging involved two whips applied with full force from either side, with bits of bone or lead attached to the tips of the multiple lashes so that they tore the skin and mutilated the flesh, laying the back and the sides open. The victims sometimes died during the scourging. The scourging of Jesus and His mistreatment by rough soldiers was all part of Pilate's ploy to show that this poor "king" was hardly worth crucifying.

By Roman law, the conquered peoples could be pressed into service, as was Simon of Cyrene. Mark identified him as "the father of Rufus and Alexander." Evidently, he and his sons became Christians and were well-known in the Church.

95. Why did Jesus refuse the sour wine mixed with gall that would have numbed His senses to the suffering He would experience?

Matthew just mentioned some things that other evangelists recorded in detail—as if he was hurrying to the crucial point of Jesus' suffering: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Only this one of the seven words from the cross was recorded by Matthew.

96. What was happening in God's saving plan in that "eternal moment" on the cross? (See Hebrews 9:11–14.)

97. What is the significance of the tearing of the temple's curtain? (See Hebrews 10:19–23.)

98. How is the exclamation of the centurion a fitting climax to this record of Jesus' suffering and death?

99. Why was the posting of the Roman guard at the tomb significant enough to be included in the Gospel?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 50:4–9a

This is the third of four Servant Songs in Isaiah II. Some identify the Servant as the nation of Israel, but Hummel, in *The Word Becoming Flesh*, points out that in verses 10 and 11, which are usually included in the Song, “the speaker, the Servant, is clearly distinguished from the rest of Israel.” He adds, “The third Song, then, highlights the Servant’s total faithfulness to his commission, in spite of great suffering under most adverse circumstances. . . . The *vicarious* nature of the suffering is not yet so clear, but plainly we have an anticipation of and preparation for the climactic Song of 52:13–53:12” (p. 221). This third Song is the only one that refers to God as Lord GOD (NIV: “The Sovereign Lord”)—*Adonai Yahweh*—but the title is used elsewhere in Isaiah. It emphasizes Yahweh’s sovereignty over all. He is not just Israel’s Lord.

100. Why is it important that the Servant be given an instructed tongue? (See John 7:16–18.) How was the Servant to use His tongue? (See Matthew 11:1–5, 28–30.)

101. Why is it important that the Servant’s ears be wakened and opened? (See Matthew 3:16–17; 17:5; John 12:23–33.)

Unlike Israel the nation, the Servant, the ideal Israel, was One who spoke the saving Word to the weary and who was fully responsive to the will of God—even in suffering. As we read about the Servant’s experience at the hands of His enemies—the scourging of His back and the mocking and spitting—it is virtually unavoidable that we see it as a prophecy that was fulfilled in the experience of Jesus. As the climax of His saving ministry approached, He set His face like flint to what lay ahead (see Luke 9:51). He was confident that He would not be put to shame (see John 12:23–28). He knew always that the one who would vindicate Him was near and would help Him through His ordeal of suffering (see Luke 22:39–44).

102. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:5–11

This is the Epistle for the Day for this Sunday in all three series of the Three-Year Lectionary. Its lofty words describe the Lord as the Servant and, in turn, the Servant as Lord. Theologians mark this section of Scripture as a “seat of doctrine.” It describes more fully than any other Scripture the humiliation or humbling of the eternal Word according to His human nature and the subsequent exaltation of that Word, Jesus, according to His human nature to God’s right hand. Some think this poem was already in the liturgy of the Early Church as a creedal statement.

103. What is made clear about Christ Jesus from the outset?

While these words say that the One who is in very nature God did “make Himself nothing,” there is no suggestion that He laid aside His essential nature as God. He was still God also in His state of humiliation. But in obedience to the will of God for the salvation of sinners He did not, according to His human nature, fully use or always display the divine majesty He possessed according to His human nature. In His humiliation, He took on the form of a servant and lived, not in an aura of divine glory, but as a common man.

104. How far did His obedient service take the Servant? Why was He then exalted to the highest place?

105. What is significant about the fact that it is now the name *Jesus* that is above every name, the name that will prompt every knee to bow? How is it true that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord?

106. What was Paul encouraging in us by describing the willing humility of our Lord Jesus Christ?

107. How can we work at developing a similarly humble attitude?

Lesson 7

The Resurrection of Our Lord

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 28:1–10

Matthew mentions only Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary”—wife of Clopas and sister of Mary the mother of Jesus—but there may have been others who witnessed the empty tomb.

108. Why was there the element of urgency in the women’s going out to the tomb?

109. What does it say about the Gospel records that only Matthew tells about the earthquake, the angel rolling the stone away and sitting on it, and the fearful guards?

The angel’s message is basically the same in all the Gospels. First there is his invitation to ___ and ___, and then there is the instruction to ___ and ___. Both Matthew and Mark add the promise of Jesus that they would ___ Him in ___. Also, Jesus had told them of that meeting with them even before His death (see Matthew 26:32).

As the women hurried away, suddenly Jesus appeared to them. His greeting was a common one, which they no doubt had heard many times from His lips. The New King James Version appropriately renders “Greetings!” as “Rejoice!” That is truly the byword and the result of Easter.

110. How did the women react to the presence of their risen Lord? What assurance and promise did Jesus give them once again?

111. What is the significance of Jesus’ referring now to His disciples as His brothers?

The First Lesson: Acts 10:34–43

On this Easter Sunday and throughout the Sundays of Easter, the Old Testament Lessons will be replaced by readings from the Acts of the Apostles—telling of Jesus’ continuing ministry through those who were chosen to be eyewitnesses of His resurrection. Acts 10 is a breakthrough chapter in Acts. It tells of the Spirit leading Peter to awareness that Jesus is Savior and Lord not just of Jews but of all nations. Peter was given a vision that he could interpret in no other way (see Acts 10:9–23). Then Jesus immediately called Peter to a situation in which he had to apply the change of outlook the vision required. He was sent into the

home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to him and his family and friends. Peter stated his new conviction in the opening words of this First Lesson. Though the issue was not decided once for all by this vision from God, it was the first step that led to the Good News of Jesus being brought to the nations—our ancestors included.

“God shows no partiality” is an acceptable way of putting it, but the Greek really says, “God does not judge by appearance”—whether or not He likes “the looks” of a person. His judgment goes beyond outward appearance to the inner relationship of a person with Him—a new relationship that may be found, Peter said, “In every nation anyone.” Peter’s saying “who fears Him” goes beyond being afraid of God. In biblical usage, it means “revere,” “trust,” “obey.” “Does what is right” is a rather weak translation of words that literally mean “works righteousness.” It does not refer just to doing just a *few* right things but to the dedicated attitude and actions of a disciple who has caught his Master’s spirit and sincerely desires to be right with God in *all* of life.

Cornelius evidently was a “God-fearer,” a proselyte of the gate, a Gentile who had accepted the principles of Judaism and was known in Caesarea for his piety and generosity. He had been led by the Spirit to “work righteousness.” In bringing his message to Cornelius, Peter referred to the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ as “the word He sent to ____.” But in the same breath, he said that Jesus is ____.

Franzmann wrote in *The Word of the Lord Grows*, “The apostles are not religious geniuses, whose insights enrich and enlarge the accumulated religious stores of mankind. They are recipients of revelation, witnesses to a Person and an act in history. . . . They receive divine power for one purpose only, for witnessing” (pp. 7–8).

112. What was the report about Jesus that Peter presumed Cornelius and his friends had already heard? What additional Good News was Peter hurrying to tell about Jesus?

113. Why did Peter specify about himself and the other witnesses that they “ate and drank with [Jesus] after He rose from the dead”?

114. Why would Peter, in witnessing to Gentiles, point to Jesus as “the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead” instead of just calling Him “the Savior of all”?

With his “all the prophets bear witness,” Peter pointed Cornelius to the prophecies of the Messiah as *the* point of Old Testament Scriptures. And then he proclaimed that the result of the Messiah’s coming, His life, death, and resurrection, is that “everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.” In Greek, the word order is “forgiveness of sins receives through His name everyone who believes in Him.” That sounds odd in English, but this word order in the Greek placed emphasis both on the object (forgiveness of sins) by putting it first, and on the subject (everyone who believes in Him) by putting it last.

115. How does this First Lesson tie in with the Holy Gospel for this Lord’s Day?

The Epistle for the Day: Colossians 3:1–4

Easter is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus—but this Epistle takes us a step further and invites us to see ourselves directly involved in that event and its results!

116. How is it that Paul could say to the Colossian Christians and to us, “You *have been* raised with Christ” (emphasis added)?

117. A resurrection is always preceded by a death, so Paul wrote, “For you have died.” When did death and resurrection take place in our lives? (See Romans 6:3–4.)

As is typical of Paul in his letters, he was moving from doctrinal instruction to its practical application to life. In describing what has happened and what fruit it is to bear in our actions, Paul moved from the indicative to the imperative.

118. What is to be the result of our having been raised with Christ? (See Romans 6:8–14.) What does “your life is hidden with Christ in God” say to you? What is the ultimate assurance that stimulates and enables us to set our hearts on things above?

119. How does our having already died and been raised with Christ influence the practice of Christian faith in our worship?

120. How does our having already died and been raised with Christ influence the way we live from day to day?

Religious people, even Christians, can become practical atheists when they get preoccupied with everyday busyness. It seems unrealistic to tell us not to set our minds “on things that are on earth” when our daily work has to occupy a lot of our thought and effort.

121. How can we work at bringing “things that are above” into the fabric of daily living?

Lesson 8

Second Sunday of Easter

The Holy Gospel: John 20:19–31

The story of doubting Thomas was so strongly traditional as the Holy Gospel for the Sunday after Easter that it has been retained as the Holy Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter in all three series of the Three-Year Lectionary.

The Jews did not name the days of the week but identified them in their relation to the Sabbath Day. The Greek text here has “the first day with reference to the Sabbath” or “the first day following the Sabbath.” Our English “the first day of the week” is appropriate. It was the evening of Easter Sunday when the events recorded occurred.

It is not hard to understand that the disciples would make their room secure—“the doors being locked . . . for fear of the Jews.” If the authorities had been bold enough to see to the death of Jesus, it surely could have been that they, Jesus’ disciples, were in danger too. The sudden appearance of Jesus among them without knocking and entering through the door surely got their attention. His “Peace be with you” was the common Jewish greeting.

122. How did the use of this greeting by the risen Jesus on this occasion add new meaning to it?

123. Why did He then repeat this blessing as He spoke to the apostles of their commissioning as His representatives?

124. How is the commissioning of His apostles related to Jesus Himself having been sent by the Father?

125. Why did Jesus breathe on the disciples as He gave them the Holy Spirit? In what sense was this gift of the Holy Spirit preliminary to the later outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost?

126. What do we call the authority Jesus gives to those who represent Him?

This authority to forgive or not forgive is never to be used in an arbitrary way by the Church but as a pointed application of the Law/Gospel message we are commissioned to proclaim. The Greek is more expressive than our “forgive” and “withhold forgiveness.” *Aphete* means that sins are “sent away,” no longer to be held against a person; *kratete* speaks of sins being “held fast” to a person.

Thomas was unwilling to base his faith on the experience of others—and Jesus accommodated His questioning disciple. As people who live in the age of empiricism, we can understand his desire to see for himself.

127. Why was Jesus willing to go this additional step to give Thomas firsthand experience?

128. Will Jesus always accommodate questioning and skepticism on the part of His followers?

Scholars generally agree that the last paragraph of John 20 ended the original Gospel of John and that John 21 was added later, either by John or by one of his associates. John summed up his purpose in writing: “So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.”

129. How did the account of Jesus’ interaction with Thomas appropriately wrap up that purpose?

The First Lesson: Acts 5:29–42

Peter and John, going to the temple for prayer, had healed a crippled beggar at the temple gate—and had used the situation to preach the Good News of the risen Jesus to the astonished crowd. The temple guards took them into custody so the Council could investigate the situation. In their court, Peter brought bold testimony to Jesus, saying, “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11–12). The religious leaders ordered them to stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus but released them because all the people were praising God for the miraculous healing. The apostles, of course, resumed their teaching in the temple courts, were arrested again, and were reminded they had been “strictly charged not to teach in this name” (of Jesus). But Peter and the other apostles again stood firm in their bold testimony.

Peter repeated the apostolic principle: “We must obey God rather than men.” He pointedly called the elders to repentance for crucifying the One whom “the God of our fathers” raised and exalted to His right hand as Leader and Savior, and Peter assured them that God’s purpose in all of it was to “give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” The Greek text says this “cut them in two.” On Pentecost Day, Peter had told the people essentially the same thing: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” On that occasion, the Greek says they were “pierced to the heart,” and were ready to be led to repentance and faith and Baptism. In contrast, the Council, though cut by Peter’s words, just wanted to get rid of the apostles by silencing them or putting them to death, as they had Jesus.

130. How is it that essentially the same words, powered by the Holy Spirit, produce such opposite reactions in different people? (See Matthew 23:27; 1 Corinthians 1:20–25; 2 Corinthians 2:14–16.)

Sometimes in hot situations cooler heads prevail. By God’s will for His apostles, that was true in their appearance before the Council. Instead of rushing the apostles to judgment, the Council accepted the advice

of Gamaliel, a leading Pharisee and grandson of the famous Hebrew scholar Hillel, who was head of a school for the training of a segment of conservative Pharisaism. Saul of Tarsus was one of his students.

131. What was Gamaliel's advice? What was missing in Gamaliel's reaction to the situation?

Flogging meant that the apostles were stripped and, in the presence of the Council, suffered thirty-nine strokes with a rod laid to their backs. The beating was to be a warning that more awaited them should they disobey the authorities and continue to speak in the name of Jesus.

132. What made the Twelve rejoice more than their just being released from custody? (See John 15:18–21.) How did they continue to apply their principle that “we must obey God rather than men”?

133. How does this First Lesson tie in with the Holy Gospel of this Lord's Day?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 1:3–9

The Epistles for the Sundays of Easter, Series A, are from 1 Peter, providing a semicontinuous reading of Peter's Letter from Rome to Christians in Asia Minor. The Book of 1 Peter conveys profound truths for those who read and treasure it.

Their Master's crucial hour was a time of testing for all the apostles, and they all forsook Him. Peter followed to the High Priest's courtyard, but there his bravado got him in trouble. He shamefully denied his Lord—as Jesus had predicted. Jesus had said, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). Martin Franzmann wrote in *The Word of the Lord Grows*, “Because [Peter] had failed and had been forgiven, because he knew the fragility of man's resolves and the strength of divine grace, he was fitted for his task as strengthener of his brethren. . . . Peter writes to them out of the riches of the grace which he has himself experienced, out of the fullness of the glorious hope which Christ has implanted in him, to encourage them in steadfast endurance in the strength of that grace and for the sake of that hope” (pp. 219–20).

Writing to Christians beginning to feel the pressure of official persecution, Peter pointed them to just what they would need to stand up under the pressure. He praised God for supplying it: “He has caused us to be born again to a living hope.”

134. What did Peter say motivated God to give new birth to a living hope? What actualized the gift of new birth to a living hope? How does this living hope give a new perspective on all of life and death?

135. What was God's purpose in allowing the testing of their faith? As their faith proved to be genuine through this refining process, what would be the end result for them?

136. Peter, an eyewitness, was writing to people who had not seen the Lord as he had. What was the evidence of their faith and love even in time of testing?

“Salvation” carries the connotation of being healed, being made whole. The Greek for “receiving” is a present participle, indicating continuing action. Peter is telling us that we are continually being made whole as God guides and guards us through all of life.

137. How may we, as Jesus’ disciples, work at safeguarding our faith and hope as we face our testings?

Lesson 9

Third Sunday of Easter

The Holy Gospel: Luke 24:13–35

Mark referred to this incident just in passing, but Luke told the details about the two who left Jerusalem on the afternoon of Easter Sunday to walk seven miles to Emmaus. They evidently thought it was all over. Their high expectations regarding Jesus had not materialized. He had been crucified and buried. The women had reported finding the tomb empty and there was some nonsense (24:11) about seeing and hearing angels—but they had not seen Jesus. As they walked, they talked about the disappointing turn of events. In their depression, they were kept from even recognizing their risen Lord when He joined them and talked with them.

138. How did they express their disappointment and feelings of disillusionment?

The “stranger” forcefully began to explain to them that it was prophesied that the Christ would enter ___ by way of having to ___. (See John 12:23–33; 17:1, 5.) The Greek *edei* says clearly, “It was necessary!”

139. What made it necessary for the Christ to “suffer these things and enter into His glory”?

As they walked together, Jesus “interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.” These two knew Moses and the Prophets but not in the way Jesus now opened these teachings up for them!

140. What was Jesus’ purpose in giving them this lengthy exposition of Scripture? In what way do we Christians today have an advantage over the first Christians in interpreting and understanding the Old Testament Scriptures?

As they neared Emmaus, the two practiced good Jewish hospitality and invited the interesting “stranger” to stay with them because it was almost evening.

141. As they sat at the table to eat supper, how did Jesus reveal Himself to them? What was their reaction when at last they knew that the women had been right, that Jesus is alive and it was He who had instructed them along the way?

142. Why did Jesus not stay with them for a time after they had recognized Him?

143. What can we learn from the experience of the two from Emmaus for our own Easter walk with the Lord?

The First Lesson: Acts 2:14a, 36–41

“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain” is a very formal statement heavy with significance and authority. For emphasis, the sentence begins with the Greek words translated “for certain.” “Let know” is an imperative. What Peter was commanding them became vibrant with Spirit-power when he added: “That God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified!” *Kurios*, “Lord,” was used in the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament’s Hebrew into Greek, for *Yahweh*, the “I AM” name by which God revealed Himself to the patriarchs and to Moses. Those who heard Peter recognized fully that he was identifying Jesus as their covenant Lord, Yahweh, in action to fulfill the covenant. *Christos* is the Greek equivalent of “Messiah.” Placing these titles ahead of “this Jesus whom you crucified” gives them added emphasis. Peter was boldly announcing that Jesus is the Anointed One, the promised Savior-King.

144. What had Peter pointed to that had fully established Jesus as Lord and Christ? (See 2:32–35; Romans 1:1–4.)

Peter’s “whom you crucified” impacted with strong judgment against the Jewish people for their unbelieving rejection of their Messiah.

145. What was the effect of this on those who heard Peter’s words? What keeps us from just putting *all* the blame for Jesus’ crucifixion on these Jews and their leaders? (See Acts 2:23; Matthew 20:28; 1 Peter 2:24.)

“Repent” called for a change of heart and mind, a turnaround in the whole direction of life. “Be baptized” sounded the first call to Christian Baptism, the first implementation of Jesus’ instruction in the Great Commission (see Matthew 28:19). Both Greek verbs are present imperatives, calling for a continuing thrust. This was Spirit-powered New Testament preaching. It urged people to do something that was beyond their spiritual capability, something that God Himself had to bring to effect in them. But in that very urging God’s Word was active—and God’s Word is always Spirit-power to make things happen! God engages us today with the same Spirit-powered Word.

146. In Jewish tradition, baptisms were for outsiders coming into the faith or for apostates returning to the faith. What, then, was Peter requiring of them with his call to be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ”?

147. What blessings were promised to those who would repent and be baptized?

148. How extensive was the offer God was making through Peter?

149. What was the result of Peter's Spirit-powered preaching?

The number of people who received Christian Baptism on this occasion indicates something about the method used in baptizing them. The logistics involved in baptizing three thousand people in an area without a large body of water argue that the Jewish tradition of cleansing by pouring or sprinkling water on people was carried over into Christian Baptism.

150. How does this First Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 1:17–25

Peter said our Father in heaven “judges impartially.” The Greek suggests being “without respect to a person's face”—not judging just by outward appearance, by “how one likes the looks” of someone. We are to “conduct [ourselves] with fear during the time of [our] exile”—being different from those who do not know and love and serve this impartial Father. Our outlook is to be one of reverence as we stand in awe of God as God and do not divide our allegiance (see Matthew 5:19–20, 23–24, 48; Galatians 6:7–10).

151. What do “foreknown before the foundation of the world” and “was made manifest in the last times” say about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

A great majority of people in the world will say, “I believe in God.” The creation itself and man's inherent sense of moral responsibility testify to God's existence as the all-powerful and holy One to all but those who willfully choose to be atheists (see Romans 1:18–20; 2:14–15). Peter's “who through Him [Christ] are believers in God” takes us well beyond such natural knowledge of God.

152. What qualities of God were revealed in Christ that lead us beyond just acknowledging God's power and holiness to living with Him and for Him?

153. Peter told his readers that they had “purified your souls by your obedience to the truth.” What does “obedience to the truth” mean in this connection?

154. What was the result that gave evidence of what had taken place in these Christians?

When people are brought to obey the truth of God's love in Jesus Christ to the point of evidencing that truth in sincere brotherly and sisterly love for one another, Peter said that they even go beyond that to learn to practice agape love, in which they will love one another deeply from the heart.

155. How do we progress as Christians from a brotherly love for those who have become our brothers and sisters in Christ to a determined love for them that imitates God's own agape love?

156. What did Peter point to as the dynamic behind our being born again of imperishable seed?

Verses 24 and 25 call attention to different forms of God's Word, since the quotation from Isaiah is God's written Word, and the last part of verse 25 talks about God's spoken (preached) Word.

157. Which form of God's Gospel Word is to be preferred?

Lesson 10

Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Holy Gospel: John 10:1–10

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always Good Shepherd Sunday. In the Three-Year Lectionary, the Holy Gospels lead us through the chapter and its metaphors in three selections. These first verses of the Good Shepherd chapter relate to what preceded. Jesus gave sight to a man born blind and identified Himself to him as the Son of Man. As the man, with new sight and new insight, knelt and worshiped Him, Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” Some Pharisees asked, “Are we also blind?” Jesus told them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains” (9:39–41).

Speaking of the Lord as Israel’s Shepherd and of their religious leaders as shepherds was a familiar metaphor of the Old Testament (see Psalm 78:52; Jeremiah 23:1–4). When you keep the interaction with the Pharisees in mind, you readily understand the point of Jesus’ “he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way.” In their willful blindness, the religious leaders were deceiving themselves. As false shepherds, they were harming God’s flock.

158. In Jesus’ figure of speech, what is the key factor that distinguishes the shepherd from the thief? How is the true shepherd’s identity verified in his interaction with the sheep in the pen?

159. Why did the Pharisees not understand this seemingly obvious figure of speech?

In this section, Jesus did not refer to Himself as the ____ but as the ____.

160. As He referred to Himself as the door of the sheep, what was Jesus boldly saying had to happen if the people and their leaders were to be saved and come in and go out and find pasture?

Jesus’ “I am the door” is another of His emphatic “I am”—*egō eimi*—statements that are keys to appreciating John’s Gospel. Jesus’ saying “all who came before Me are thieves and robbers” is a general statement that Jesus made for impact. It was true only by comparison with God’s own Shepherd in the case of those who were faithful shepherds. Old Testament history records the service of many faithful judges and prophets and priests, but all fell short of the ideal Shepherd.

161. How was the religious establishment of Jesus’ day guilty of being “thieves and robbers”?

Verse 10 leads toward Jesus' picture of Himself as the Good Shepherd. In it, Jesus contrasted Himself and His reason for coming with the motivation of thieving false shepherds. The tense of the Greek verbs is significant. "The thief comes" is present tense, showing continuing action—he "keeps on coming" and is a constant danger because he comes to steal and kill and destroy. In contrast, Jesus said, "I came" (the emphatic *egō*)—a decisive coming that does not have to be repeated (see Hebrews 9:24–28). The lasting result: "They may have life"—a present tense with the thrust of "they may keep on having."

162. For what reason(s) might believers imagine they do not have the Shepherd's gift of life and the abundance of its accompanying blessings?

The First Lesson: Acts 2:42–47

It is significant that a description of the continuing fellowship of believers follows immediately after the account of their conversions and Baptisms. It would be hard to think of them experiencing this dramatic turnaround and just going back to life as usual. Relating to Jesus Christ, the Head, in faith always calls people to relate to one another in love in the fellowship of the Body of Christ. About the first Christians, we're told, "They devoted themselves to ___ and ___, to ___ and ___."

163. What encouragement is there in each of these for our Easter faith and life?

These first Christians immediately displayed their love of Christ in their love and concern for one another. Luke's account gives you a feeling of a "camp" or "retreat" experience, which could not have continued indefinitely. But their enthusiastic love and joy gave them favor with all and attracted others into their fellowship. Church-growth studies often refer to this quality as "the love quotient."

164. How would you rate our congregation's love quotient? What can we do to improve our practice of Christian love?

165. How does this First Lesson relate to the theme of today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 2:19–25

Peter wrote: "This is a gracious thing, when, ___, one ___ while ___." This surely related to what some Christian slaves were experiencing at the hand of their pagan masters. We, too, may be in situations in which we "do good and suffer for it."

166. What was the "secret" of Jesus' being able to suffer unjustly without retaliating, and how can we follow His example? (See Romans 12:17–21.)

As our substitute, Jesus “bore our sins in His body on the tree.” Because of His atonement, we are forgiven—declared to be righteous—assured of eternal life. But here Peter was pointing beyond justification by faith in Christ to its effect on daily living as Christians.

167. Identify the three phrases by which Peter pointed to the life-renewing results of Jesus’ suffering for us. State how each encourages us to be conscientious in our discipleship.

Lesson 11

Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Holy Gospel: John 14:1–14

Jesus and His disciples were in the Upper Room to eat the Passover. John's Gospel records their interaction during that momentous evening in significant detail, providing us with the farewell discourses of Jesus that have meant so much to Christians of every era. Jesus washed His disciples' feet, giving them yet another example of willing service to encourage their own willing service. He then pointedly predicted that Judas would betray Him and told them, "Yet a little while I am with you" (13:33). He commanded them to love one another as He loved them, and He told them, "By this all people will know that you are My disciples" (v. 35). He predicted that Peter would deny Him. The mood around the Passover table was somber—heavy with thought and concern. At that point, Jesus spoke the comforting and encouraging words of this Holy Gospel. He reassured His puzzled apostles in the best way possible, by reminding them of who He is and of why He had come into the world. We, too, find reassurance in His words.

"Let not your hearts be troubled," said Jesus. That's easier said than done—especially when facing the prospect of losing Him, as the disciples were.

168. What did Jesus say would calm their troubled hearts? What did Jesus add to "Believe in God" by saying "believe also in Me"?

169. What assurances are given to us through each of Jesus' promises: "In My Father's house are many rooms"; "I go to prepare a place for you"; and "I will come again and will take you to Myself"?

Jesus' disciples had a lot to learn. Their slowness to understand helps us as we deal with our own spiritual dullness. Their slowness to understand became a source of blessing for us because it prompted Jesus to speak more great words regarding His person and mission: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." This is the last of the *egō eimi* statements featured in John's Gospel. The Greek verb *eimi* itself means "I am." When the pronoun *egō* is added, it becomes most emphatic. "I am" related directly in the minds of Jews to Yahweh, "I AM," the name by which their covenant Lord revealed Himself. The emphasis has Jesus saying, "I, I only, am the way, the truth, and the life."

170. How do the three concepts of way, truth, and life relate to and interplay with one another?

Jesus' "no one comes to the Father except through Me" completes the exclusiveness of the claim that He is making. In our pluralistic society, exclusive religious claims are not well received. They are seen as bigotry. "God as you understand Him" allows anything and everything. "Whatever works for you" is as specific as many get.

171. What is it about Jesus Christ that makes it essential that our Christian testimony point clearly to Him as mankind's only Savior?

172. What, according to Jesus, is the way for people to know and see the Father? In what two ways did Jesus evidence in His life and ministry the truth of His claim "I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me"?

173. In what sense does anyone who has faith in Jesus do what He was doing—and even greater works than Jesus did during His ministry? How does Jesus' assurance that He will do whatever His disciples ask in His name enter into this?

174. What does it mean for your faith and your discipleship that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life?

The First Lesson: Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60

Growth brought problems to the Jerusalem congregation as it included "Hebrews" and "Hellenists." "Hebrews" were natives of Palestine and were proud of their authentic Jewishness. They spoke Aramaic and used the Hebrew Scriptures in their synagogues. "Hellenists" were Jews from other parts of the Mediterranean world and often had lived in Palestine for generations. They were more familiar with their native languages and Greek than with Aramaic and Hebrew. The Septuagint, the Old Testament in Greek, was used in their synagogues. But they were Jews. Every Jew in the Dispersion hoped to worship in the temple at least once, and some retired as permanent residents in Jerusalem. It was these Grecian Jews who had marveled at the Pentecost gift of tongues (Acts 2:5–12), and Peter had addressed both groups (2:14).

There was tension between these two kinds of Jews, and it carried over into the Christian congregation. It was the Hellenists who complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (Acts 4:32–35).

175. As they suggested organizing the group to take care of such matters, what was the concern of the apostles about themselves and their work? What does their recommendation say to us about all organizational structure in the Church and the people who implement the Church's programs?

176. What do the names of the seven chosen for this assignment suggest as an approach to solving problems in the life of the Church?

Stephen is singled out as a man full of ___ and ___. He was elected to “wait on tables” but soon became involved in the ministry of the Word. He went to the Synagogue of the Freedmen. Luke tells us that the Hellenistic Jews there “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” Failing in their arguments, Stephen’s opponents arranged for false witnesses, who accused Stephen of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God.” They testified before the Council, “[He speaks] against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” (see Acts 6:10–14).

The second part of this lesson is the climax of Stephen’s speech before the Council. He had recounted the history of Israel at some length, emphasizing the covenant through Moses and the frequent defections of Israel and their subsequent exile. Then, in talking about the temple, Stephen was aroused against the leaders before whom he stood, for whom the temple itself had become central and who had reduced the faith to perfunctory temple ritual. His words became direct and biting.

177. Of what did Stephen accuse the religious leaders with his “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in hearts and ears”? In what ways did Stephen say that these men, who prided themselves in perpetuating the traditions of the fathers, were acting “as your fathers did”? How could Stephen say these men, who had surrounded the law with 613 protective rules to assure their obedience, had “received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it”?

178. What testimony by Stephen finally led to the Council’s determination to execute him? How did Stephen imitate his Lord in his dying moments?

With this account of Stephen’s martyrdom, Luke introduced Saul, who became the apostle Paul, whose story was Luke’s main thrust in Acts. The Early Church said, “The Church owes Paul to the death of Stephen.” God’s hand was at work to provide the Church with its greatest missionary and theologian.

179. How does this First Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 2:2–10

180. Do we ever outgrow our need for the “mother’s milk” of the Gospel? What is implied by Peter’s “by it you may grow up to salvation”? (See Hebrews 5:12–6:3.)

Cornerstones were carefully prepared and placed in ancient times, for they determined the direction of the exterior lines of buildings. Peter’s concern was that those who came to Christ would mature into a holy ___, offering ___. We need to be ___ stones, properly aligned with the living ___ who is Zion’s (the Church’s) ___.

181. What added significance can you see in the fact that it was Peter who was using this analogy of a building constructed of living stones?

182. What is the result of our being a spiritual house of living stones who trust in the Cornerstone?

183. How is the either/or nature of Jesus and His Gospel shown in this lesson?

“As they were destined for to do” cannot mean that God predestined them to stumble from eternity, for He desires that all be saved (see 1 Timothy 2:1–7). It is their own disobeying the message that makes stumbling the destiny of unbelievers. It is this rejection of Christ that God foreknew from eternity.

Our society is obsessed with “self-image” and aims at fostering self-esteem in many humanistic ways. Peter points us to our true self-image and worth in God’s grace in Christ. The titles he confers were drawn from the Old Testament. “A chosen race” (Isaiah 44:1–2): “Chosen” was used in verse 4 also in regard to Christ Himself, which adds to our appreciation of the title. “A royal priesthood” (Exodus 19:5–6): As spiritual priests, we offer ourselves to the One who offered Himself for us. “A holy nation” (Deuteronomy 28:9): We are holy through Christ’s imputed righteousness; we are set apart by God for His purpose and glory. “A people for His own possession” (Deuteronomy 14:2): We are His creatures, but more than that, His creatures redeemed by the blood of Christ for life in His kingdom.

184. What function does Peter point to that validates all of these titles in our lives as Christians?

185. Why must we say, “Once [we] were not a people, but now [we] are God’s people; once [we] had not received mercy, but now [we] have received mercy”?

Lesson 12

Sixth Sunday of Easter

The Holy Gospel: John 14:15–21

The Sundays of Easter have moved us closer to the end of the period of forty days during which Jesus appeared to His apostles and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. The thrust is moving toward next Thursday, when the Church will celebrate the Ascension of our Lord and then remember the waiting in Jerusalem for the promised gift from above, the baptism with the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:3–4). Today’s Holy Gospel continues our study of Jesus’ farewell discourses with His disciples in the Upper Room. It is part of Jesus’ promise of His continuing presence with them and in them through the Holy Spirit. We rejoice to know that His promise extends also to us to bless us in the same way.

“If you love Me” calls for more than the love of affection or friendship. The Greek is *agapate*. It calls for a willed, determined love in response to the willed, determined love that took Jesus to the cross for us. Its present tense calls for constancy. It might be translated, “If you make up your mind to keep on loving Me.”

186. What, according to Jesus, is the evidence of such determined love for Him? (See 1 John 2:1–11; 4:19–5:5.)

187. How may we see a glimpse of the three-personed nature of God in Jesus’ promise to send another Counselor?

“Counselor” is the Greek *parakletos*, which means “one called to stand beside” to encourage, to strengthen, and to defend.

188. Why did Jesus call the Counselor “the Spirit of truth”? (See John 14:25–26; 15:26; 16:12–15.)

189. Why can’t “the world” see, know, and accept this Holy Spirit? (See 1 Corinthians 2:1–5, 12–14.)

190. Why did Jesus follow His “you know Him, for He dwells with you” with “and will be in you”?

Jesus was preparing the apostles for what lay ahead: His suffering and dying. He assured them He would not leave them as orphans, just on their own, but would come to them. He did this as the risen Jesus through the Counselor the Father sent them.

191. What great events lay ahead that would convince the apostles of the truth of Jesus' "I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you"?

There is a circle of blessing in our faith and life as we know Jesus and the indwelling Spirit. Motivated by the realization that Jesus, our Savior, is in the Father and in us, we make it our aim to obey His commands and show our love for Him. In turn, the Father and Jesus and the Holy Spirit love us and live in us, and we grow in the peace and hope and joy that are ours in Christ. This circle of blessing may best be appreciated when you look at its opposite—when people do not have Jesus and His Father living in them through faith in Jesus, God's commands to love Him and our neighbor are not obeyed, the Spirit of Jesus is rejected, and people spiral down into deeper unbelief, sin, and death.

192. What happens in the experience of a Christian who begins to refuse or neglect to obey the commands of Jesus?

The First Lesson: Acts 17:16–31

193. Paul "reasoned" with the Jews and the God-fearers in the synagogue. What did this always involve? He spoke also with anyone in the marketplace who would listen to him. What did he proclaim there that caused the Greeks to call him "this babbling"?

Faithful to his apostolic duties, Paul could not just sit and wait, and his aggressiveness was rewarded. He was brought to a meeting of philosophers on the Areopagus. The events that led to this opportunity, which Paul was happy to grasp, are recorded in the paragraph that precedes his speech at the Areopagus (16–21).

Christian witnesses are encouraged to meet people where they are. This establishes a common ground from which to move to a proclamation of Christ. Paul met the Athenian philosophers on the common ground of natural religion, the truths about God that are available to all. Many Greeks had intellectually rejected the crass idolatry of paganism, which deified nature and saw gods or goddesses relating to every human emotion or earthly circumstance. This is why so many Greeks were attracted to the spirituality and the higher morality of Judaism. The men of the Areopagus who listened to Paul had not become God-fearers, and Paul was not meeting them in a Jewish synagogue, but he did not lack ready ears to listen to him tell about the God they acknowledged as the Unknown God.

194. What points of natural theology did Paul present that he knew would be philosophically acceptable to his hearers?

195. How did Paul finally bring his remarks around to focus on Jesus Christ?

Paul's mentioning the resurrection of Jesus produced a mixed reaction (vv. 32–34).
196. How does this First Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 3:13–22

Peter was writing to Christians who were under threat of persecution if they did not participate in burning incense to the emperor as a personification of the divine spirit of Rome. He urged them to stand strong in their faithfulness to Jesus and told them, "Even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed"; then he added, "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled."

Peter suggested that we will be equipped for the needed decisiveness if in our hearts we will _____. The Greek *kurion ton Christon* is the confession that Jesus Christ is God. (*Kurios* was used in the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, for "the Lord God, Yahweh.") Its use in the New Testament for Jesus also proclaims His deity. *Hagiaste*, "set apart," calls on us to sanctify Him, to keep Him holy in our hearts.

197. What does it mean for us in our daily living when we "in [our] hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy"?

Jesus told His apostles that they would be brought before kings and governors on account of His name and that this would result in opportunities to be His witnesses. He told them not to worry beforehand how to defend themselves because He would give them words of wisdom their adversaries would not be able to resist or contradict. But here Peter tells Christians that part of their needed decisiveness involve their "always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."

198. How do you reconcile Jesus' assurance about the Spirit's giving words of wisdom and Peter's instruction to be prepared to witness to your faith in Jesus? How can you prepare yourself to be ready to use opportunities "to make a defense" and give "a reason for the hope that is in you"?

199. Why is it important to bring your witness with gentleness and respect, especially with regard to those who may be disinterested and even antagonistic?

200. Why are we to be willing to suffer wrong as a result of our Christian witness and not think of returning evil for evil? (See Romans 12:9–21.)

This lesson includes words that are a "seat of doctrine" for the article of faith that we state in the Apostles' Creed: "He descended into hell." Peter said that Jesus was "made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison." His descent into hell, then, really was the first display of the exaltation of the God-man after completing His saving work. He did not descend into hell to suffer for sin. He had done that once for all in the eternal moment on the cross when His Father turned from Him (see

Matthew 27:45–46). But He had said, “It is finished”—*tetelestai*, “paid in full.” Nor did He go to preach “a second chance” to the disobedient in hell (see Hebrews 9:27–28). It helps us to note that the Greek word for “proclaimed” is not *euangelizo*, “to preach Good News,” but *kerusso*, “to make a proclamation.” What Jesus did as the first step of His exaltation was to go into the camp of the enemy to make a proclamation of His complete and final victory!

201. How is the ark riding above the waters of the flood a symbol of Holy Baptism? What gives Baptism its saving power?

Lesson 13

Ascension of Our Lord

The Holy Gospel: Luke 24:44–53

In the Upper Room, on that Easter Sunday evening, there stood Jesus in the midst of His disciples. They were startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus went out of His way to let His followers know that it truly was He—the same Jesus they had known before His death. He called attention to His hands and feet, where the wounds caused by the nails were visible. He invited them to touch Him and see for themselves that He had truly risen from the dead. He ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence.

Luke's Greek text uses the word *sarka*, translated “flesh”—a word that pointedly pertained to the physical body. Paul made our salvation dependent on the truth of Jesus' resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:12–19).

There in the Upper Room, Jesus reassured His disciples that His suffering and death were all part of the saving plan. He reminded them that He had told them beforehand that everything written about Him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. This text has Jesus saying, “The Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.” The Greek text uses the little word *dei*, meaning “it is necessary.” His suffering, dying, and resurrection *had* to happen! God's saving will *had* to be done! Luke said that Jesus had “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,” especially His suffering and dying and resurrection as the climax of God's saving plan.

202. According to Jesus' words to the disciples in the Upper Room, what is the key to understanding the Bible?

203. Jesus commissioned His followers to proclaim “repentance and forgiveness of sins” in His name to all nations. Why did He tell His disciples first to stay in the city instead of telling them to get right to work with their mission? What does this say to us about our own mission of representing Jesus in our world? How may we be clothed with power from on high for our mission?

204. The reaction of those who witnessed Jesus' ascension was to return to Jerusalem with great joy and to continually bless God in the temple. Why is Jesus' ascension, His return to heaven, a source of joy and a reason for praising God also for us?

The First Lesson: Acts 1:1–11

Luke wrote his Gospel to instruct Theophilus regarding the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Theophilus* means “friend of God.” Most scholars see him as an individual, probably of some position and prominence, for in his Gospel, Luke addressed him as “most excellent Theophilus.” Some, because of the name’s meaning, think Luke used it to address anyone who wants to be a friend of God. Acts is a sequel to Luke’s Gospel. It focuses on Jesus’ continuing presence and power and direction in the apostles through the Holy Spirit. Acts is sometimes called “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus “ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father.” The apostles had been commissioned by Jesus and blessed with the Holy Spirit already in the Upper Room on Easter Sunday. In this lesson, Luke tells of Jesus giving them instructions through the Holy Spirit during the weeks that followed the resurrection.

205. Why didn’t Jesus just tell them, “You have your assignment; get to work!”

The apostles still didn’t understand the nature of the Kingdom Jesus was establishing. They asked, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

206. How are we too at times tempted to force our agenda on the Lord’s kingdom?

207. What did Jesus say His gift of the Holy Spirit would do for the apostles?

Jesus outlined the mission they would carry out for Him. Paraphrase Jesus’ words to fit our own location. As we hear Him describe its outreach, we can use adjectives to say that the mission is to be ____, ____, ____, and ____.

Jesus’ ascension came to a climax when “a cloud took Him out of their sight.” Clouds were frequently the setting for theophanies in Scripture. Witnessing this event assured the apostles again that Jesus is ____.

208. What assurance did the angels bring the wondering apostles?

Luke listed the eleven apostles and the group who waited with them, which included Jesus’ mother, Mary, and His brothers, and tells us they “joined together constantly in prayer”—no doubt praising their living Lord and asking that His promise of power in the Holy Spirit be fulfilled (see 1:12–14). In our worship life, we, too, are “waiting” for Pentecost. We still exult in Easter praise, but we recognize also our need of power in the Holy Spirit to be faithful disciples as we carry out our commission to represent Jesus in our world.

209. How does this First Lesson tie in with the emphasis of today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 1:15–23

Paul told the Ephesian Christians that they had gained a reputation for ___ in the Lord Jesus and ___ toward all the saints.

210. Does our congregation enjoy a reputation like that of the Ephesian Christians?

211. What spiritual blessing did Paul keep asking God to give them?

212. If we know we have been saved by grace through Jesus, and we even believe that in His grace God chose us in Christ before He created the world, why should we, like Paul, keep on praying for “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him”? How may we work at gaining that spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him that God wants to give us?

Paul tells us that it is when the eyes of our hearts are enlightened that we will be able to know the ___ to which He has called us, “the ___ of His ___ in the saints,” and “the ___ toward us who believe.”

213. What amazing thing did Paul say about the Christ—now exalted to God’s right hand, under whose feet God has place all things—in His relationship to the Church?

214. What equally amazing thing does he say about the Church in its relationship with its Lord Jesus as the Head of everything as it carries out the mission He has assigned to us?

Lesson 14

Seventh Sunday of Easter

The Holy Gospel: John 17:1–11

What is called Jesus' High Priestly Prayer provides the Holy Gospel for this Sunday in all three series of the Three-Year Lectionary. His instructional discourses in the Upper Room concluded, Jesus turned to prayer, praying aloud so His apostles could be strengthened by His words and by the mood they displayed.

Jesus said to His Father, "The hour has come." The hour of the culmination of His ministry, of His reason for coming into the world, of His giving Himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, was at hand.

215. How did Jesus refer to what lay ahead of Him and what it would mean for Him? (See Philippians 2:5–11; Revelation 5:11–14.) How would the glorification of the Son glorify the Father?

216. What, according to Jesus, is the key to knowing the only true God and enjoying eternal life with Him?

Having joyfully rededicated Himself, Jesus turned to prayer for those with Him in the Upper Room. "I have manifested Your name to the people whom You gave Me out of the world." God is known and revealed in part by many names in Scripture, such as ____.

217. What name for God did Jesus point to that expresses the new relationship we have with Him through faith in His Son? (See Matthew 6:9; John 20:17.)

Today's feminist movement suggests that calling God "Father" might be sexist and that we might just as appropriately call "her" "our Mother in heaven."

218. How might this influence our view of God and our relationship with Him?

219. What is the full, peculiarly Christian name for God that Jesus gave us, and what does it proclaim about God? (See Matthew 28:18–19.)

Jesus acknowledged that His disciples were a gift from His heavenly Father and said that He had led them to confidence in Him by giving them _____. It was for them that He was praying, because though He was returning to His Father, they would remain in the world with work to do for Him. He asked His Father to _____ them by the power _____.

220. What was to be a result of their being protected by the power of God's name?

Jesus based His confident request on a sweeping statement: "All Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them." This makes the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus very powerful. We are listening in as the Son of God, in His humility as the Son of Man, exults in His coming to be our Savior, and then we hear Him pray for us that we be protected and made one in Him.

221. How does our High Priest implement what He prayed for in our lives?

The First Lesson: Acts 1:12–26

222. How did the apostles occupy themselves as they waited for what Jesus promised them? Was the upper room where they were staying the same room in which Jesus had instituted the Lord's Supper and later appeared to the apostles as the Risen One?

The group in the upper room included women who had traveled with Jesus and the apostles. Only Mary the mother of Jesus is named.

223. Jesus' brothers were there. Who were they?

The Gospels tell us that earlier the brothers of Jesus had not been believers. They were convinced by His resurrection. Paul later said that the risen Jesus had appeared to James, who in time became the acknowledged head of the Church in Jerusalem (see 1 Corinthians 15:3–8; Acts 15:5–21).

The Day of Pentecost was ahead, but first came a time of preparation as the apostles and the others waited for what Jesus had promised them. They joined constantly in prayer, as we have seen. Peter "stood up among the brothers" to recommend that Judas Iscariot be replaced by someone to fill out the number of apostles. "Brothers" is used here for the first time in Acts, but later it was the standard term for the community of Christians. In Jewish tradition, it was the men who counted as the congregation in the synagogues. Today we would say "brothers and sisters."

224. Why did Peter and the others think it was important that there be twelve apostles?

Peter used two Scriptures from Psalms to validate the action as God's will. The first is from an imprecatory psalm in which David was calling for God's judgment of those bringing him distress (see Psalm 69:22–25). Peter applied it to the property purchased by the chief priests with the "blood money" (Matthew

27:6) they had paid Judas. The second is part of a psalm in which David tells what his enemies were saying about him (Psalm 109:6–8).

225. How do you feel about Peter’s appropriating of passages of Scripture and applying them out of context to the situation they were considering? What qualification was considered to be essential for nomination as the twelfth apostle?

Two men met this qualification. Their names were written on small stones and put into a clay jar. After prayer for God’s guidance, the pot was shaken until one stone flew out, bearing the name of the one God had elected. Matthias was chosen in this way.

226. Why do we not imitate the first Christians (and the Old Testament people) and make our decisions and elect people by casting lots today?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 4:12–19; 5:6–11

Peter wrote to Christians in Asia Minor who were beginning to feel the pressure of official persecution. Emperor Nero had declared Christianity to be an illegal religion. Church tradition says that later his opposition led to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome. Emperor worship was rising—an attempt to hold a decaying empire together. To refuse to acknowledge the emperor as a personification of the divine spirit of Rome meant political and economic disadvantage and even the threat of execution. Christians found themselves facing a choice between confessing “Jesus is Lord” and burning incense to the emperor as divine.

227. Why did Peter say their suffering and being insulted for the name of Christ should not surprise them “as though something strange were happening to you”? (See John 15:18–21.) Why should Christians rejoice when circumstances come to them in which they “share Christ’s sufferings”?

228. Why is it appropriate that judgment begin with the family of God?

229. What circumstance have you experienced in your life that forced you to stand up and be counted as a Christian?

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God.” Peter is not saying that God is the cause of His people’s suffering. But he is reminding us that God’s hand is involved. He *allows* circumstances, and He *uses* circumstances to _____. And Peter wants us to know that the devil can be at work in the same circumstances to _____.

230. How can we effectively resist the devil and learn to cast our anxiety on God? (See Philippians 4:4–7.) How does the fact that other Christians throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering affect us?

231. What assurance does Peter tell us we may have in all of this?

Leader Guide

How to Use the Leader Guide

Put in time and effort to make these thoughts your own. Notes in your Study Guide will help you remember them in class. If you think a point is stated particularly well in the Leader Guide, you may want to quote it, but do not use the Leader Guide continually as the last word. Your group's ideas about themes and emphases and applications may differ from those in the Leader Guide. That's okay; explore their insights. Since each study is a unit in itself, you may easily use substitute leaders. Provide them with a Study Guide and Leader Guide, along with instructions for their use, well in advance.

Each lesson in the Leader Guide begins with the collect assigned for the day. You may use this prayer or another prayer suitable for your needs to begin your study. Suggested also are the hymns and songs, listed topically in the index of *Lutheran Service Book*, appropriate for the season or day. The index begins on page 993.

Lesson 1

First Sunday in Lent

O Lord God, You led Your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. Guide the people of Your Church that following our Savior we may walk through the wilderness of this world toward the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 4:1–11

1. That it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus up out of the Jordan Depression and into the Judean wilderness to be tempted shows that this immediate confrontation with the tempter was in no way a matter of Jesus' casually flirting with temptation as other men do. Nor was it a matter of Satan suddenly setting Jesus up for the test. It was God's will that His Son be strengthened in His resolve by experiencing a time of testing at the outset of His ministry.

2. It has been experienced by many—a time of spiritual uplifting is followed by a time of spiritual testing. God's plan was to indicate immediately at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry that He, in saving His people from their sins, is the Conqueror of Satan in their place and for their sake.

God allows us to experience testing after times of spiritual uplifting so we will be kept from pride and self-reliance. The enemy is not easily defeated but will certainly be overcome when we stand firm in the Lord and in the power of His Spirit. We gain strength as we let the Word speak to us and as we respond in prayer.

3. At the heart of the temptation to turn stones into bread was the question of whether Jesus would trust His Father and willingly obey His will, which had led Him into this time of testing, or would assert Himself to satisfy His needs in His own way. That temptation was renewed after the feeding of the five thousand (see John 6:15).

4. Behind the temptation to throw Himself "trustingly" down from the temple was the idea that such a dramatic display would win Him His following and negate the need for the cross. To put ourselves into foolish and unnecessary situations and "trust God" to get us safely through them really becomes a matter of "tempting God" by expecting Him to do things our way instead of His way.

5. The basic attitude the devil attacked in the third temptation is the attitude that recognizes that God, not Satan or self, is the Lord of all, and that God's will is always good and right—though He accomplishes what is good and right in ways that surprise us, ways we don't always understand and might not choose for ourselves.

Fill-in Answers: 1st—Choose to focus our lives on God and His Word instead of letting material things become an overriding preoccupation. 2nd—Accept God's will and way for us instead of testing Him through our insistent self-determination. 3rd—Avoid emphasizing what we have at the expense of how we get it.

6. To overcome Satan, Jesus quoted God's Word—a weapon available also to us if we fill the storehouse of our memory with it.

7. Jesus won the victory for us, on our behalf. He knows what we face and will be with us to strengthen us so we can implement and enjoy His victory in our lives.

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 3:1–21

The test of obedience made man morally responsible to God and gave him free choice in the relationship. God wants willing, loving obedience. A no has to be possible for a yes to be meaningful. “Knowledge of good and evil” not only means that they would experience the consequences of evil if they ate of the forbidden fruit but also suggests that the basic test was whether they would accept God’s determination of what is good and what is evil or would insist on determining that for themselves. This insistence on deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong for us at any given time is a hallmark of today’s secular humanism. We still want to be our own gods.

The New England Primer, an A-B-C book for primary reading instruction, was the first book printed in the New World. It used the Bible as its source material.

8. The “serpent” of Genesis is the same as the “serpent” of Revelation: the devil, meaning “the tempter,” or Satan, meaning “the adversary or accuser.”

9. The tempter’s “Did God actually say . . . ?” attacked the woman’s faith in the truthfulness of God’s Word. Her addition of “neither shall you touch it” to God’s command suggests that they were already chafing under God’s limiting their freedom. It led to the devil’s saying, “You will not surely die,” boldly contradicting God’s Word, which the devil, “the father of lies,” always does in one way or another. “You will be like God” attacked the love for God for which the man and the woman were designed. It suggested and approved turning that love inward on themselves and seeing themselves as gods to decide any and all moral issues for themselves instead of letting their Creator rule them.

10. The basic source and cause of the fall and of our sin today is the desire of the heart to serve our own will instead of God’s will. That’s why the forbidden fruit looked so good and why even the deadly “desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes” (1 John 2:16) are so appealing to us. The man joined in the rebellion because he had the same inner desires the woman did—not because he felt sorry for her and didn’t want her to be alone in sin (as Mormons suggest).

11. Sin is the breaking of a relationship. Their disobedience broke their relationship with God but was evident first in a change in their relationship with each other. Guilt and shame led them to “cover up.” When they remembered God’s presence, they had to “hide” from Him too. Still today, the malady is vertical; the evident symptoms are horizontal. God’s intentions remained the same: He wanted a living relationship with man and was ready to provide it. He wanted a living relationship with man and approached the man and woman to provide it.

12. God’s judgments were these: The serpent would go on his belly and eat dust. (We don’t know if the serpent had another, more attractive, appearance before Satan used it to approach them, but a snake crawling on the ground is a continual reminder of human sin.) The woman would experience pain in childbearing and would be dominated by her husband. The man would find his labor unproductive at times because nature itself was affected by the rebellion against the Creator (see Romans 8:19–22). Finally, there would be death, the end of earthly life. (We know that God’s plans for *sinless* man excluded both spiritual and temporal death for man, and we know that *sinful* man, whether believer or unbeliever, must suffer temporal death unless God makes an exception.)

13. The protevangel pointed to the woman’s offspring crushing the serpent’s head. For all who will see it, this clearly points ahead to the coming of a Savior. The prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ—born of a woman (the Virgin Mary), born under Law (representative man) to redeem us (His death and resurrection) so we might have adoption as God’s children (salvation by grace through faith in Christ).

14. The temptations that confront us are all basically an attack on our faith in God and His Word and an attack on our letting God be God in our lives. In our lives, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is anything that stimulates sinful pride and self-will and leads us to try to be self-dependent, independent of God, determining for ourselves what is good or evil instead of accepting His Word’s judgment. Secular humanism, which puts man at the center, and secular scientism, which puts our growing understanding of the natural creation at the center, are the fruits of this tree that, more than anything else, encourage human pride today. Adam was told, “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of

your life.” St. Paul agreed that the whole creation, and our life in it, were negatively affected by human sin (see Romans 8:19–23). The powers built into creation are destructive as well as beneficial. We are subject to illness and death. We appropriate the promise of the garden as we put our faith in the woman’s offspring, God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

15. Genesis tells of the fall of the first Adam to the tempter’s suggestions; the Holy Gospel shows “second Adam,” our Lord Jesus, overcoming the tempter through His obedient fulfillment of God’s saving will and His love for His heavenly Father.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 5:12–19

Fill-in Answers: Paul wrote: “And so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

Even before the Law code brought clear awareness of sin and rebellion, death reigned because of sin.

16. The disobedience of the one man, Adam, brought death and judgment to the many.

17. The one man, Jesus, through His obedience as representative man and God’s atoning sacrifice—His incarnation, His righteous life, His suffering the consequences of humanity’s sin, His resurrection in victory—provided justification and the gift of righteousness to the many.

18. Through Adam’s trespass, death reigned; through Jesus Christ, those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness will reign. That more than states the Good News. We who once were ruled by death through the universal infection of sin will by God’s grace reign in life with Christ. We not only share His victory over death, but we will also rule in glory with Him. Our status has changed from losers to victors; our outlook has changed from despair to joy and anticipation.

Lesson 2

Second Sunday in Lent

O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 3:1–17

19. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was a member of the sect that defended Jewish traditions and, because of their concern for details, had reduced the faith to a legalistic system, which Jesus had exposed and opposed. As a member of the Council (also known as the Sanhedrin), the Jews' supreme court, he had participated in official examinations of Jesus' activity and was concerned about this unauthorized rabbi. But he could not just write Jesus off; nor did he want to identify with Him openly, so Nicodemus came to Jesus quietly, privately, to check Him out for himself.

20. Nicodemus evidently was intrigued by what he had heard of Jesus' teachings and was especially impressed by the signs, the miracles, Jesus had been doing. Implicit in his approach to Jesus was Nicodemus's desire to find out for himself if Jesus was the Promised Christ.

21. Jesus did not want to argue religious details with Nicodemus. He immediately asserted the need of inner renewal if one is to relate to God in His kingdom. Rebirth is necessary because "that which is born of the flesh is flesh." All suffer under inherent human sinfulness, separation from God—"original sin." To live with God, we need more than a coat of paint; the inner structure is rotten and must be made new. The surprise of the Good News is that this rebirth is not an impossible demand but is a gracious gift. Rebirth is by *water*, an evident reference to the "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4) administered by John the Baptist and foreshadowing the Christian Baptism instituted by Jesus. Nicodemus and all Jerusalem had access to it. Rebirth is also by the *Spirit*, working in and through the water, and is not the automatic result of the application of water, the outward cleansing (see Titus 3:4–7).

22. Jesus' analogy of wind blowing where it pleases without our causing it or influencing it says that rebirth is solely God's gracious activity.

23. The snake on a pole was a prototype of Jesus, lifted up as evidence of God's love for His people, just as Jesus was. The cure came to those who looked in faith to the snake, just as Jesus' offer of salvation is received by those who look to Him in faith. Jesus used the incident as a clear example from Old Testament history of being saved by faith in God's promise, not by carrying out religious works. This was the point of concern with which Pharisee Nicodemus would have to reckon.

24. Compelling factors: Our desperate need and God's gracious will to fill our need. Salvation required an atonement for sin that is beyond our ability to accomplish; only the offering of the God-man in our stead sufficed to accomplish what God's love intended.

25. When Jesus was lifted up in His crucifixion, Nicodemus came forward openly to assist Joseph of Arimathea with the entombment of Jesus' body.

Scholars who end Jesus' words with verse 15 generally point especially to *monogene*, "only-begotten," as typically Johannine—John used this word in his prologue (1:18) and used it again in commenting on

Jesus' words to Nicodemus. This is not a conclusive argument, for John may have adopted the word from Jesus' own use of it, though it is a concept from the Greek world, not the Hebrew world. "Only-begotten" says the Son was not a creature but was "fathered" by God and was Himself God from eternity (see John 1:1–5 and the Nicene Creed). Whether John 3:16–21 is Jesus' own words or John's expansion of Jesus' words, it is God's Word to us and is powerfully instructive about our salvation in Jesus Christ, God's only-begotten Son.

26. "Loved" is *egapesen*, which denotes a willed, determined love, a love from the lover that was not prompted by the object of the love; "the world" speaks of human sin and death; "He gave" stresses the gracious nature of God's acting to save; "His only Son" assures that God Himself has procured our salvation; "whoever" says any and all may qualify and no one is excluded; "believes" encourages a trusting acceptance of the gift; "not perish" reminds us that God has saved us from what we have earned with our sin; "eternal life" promises a continuing relationship with the One who is the source of all life.

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 12:1–9

27. The three elements of the covenant promise: (1) A land—something a nomad might dream of, a place to call his own. The test of faith was for Abram to go "God knows where." Later the promise was repeated and the Promised Land was identified (see Genesis 13:14–17). (2) A seed—Abram was to be the father of a great nation. (*Abram* means "exalted father.") This was a test, for he was seventy-five years of age and Sarai was barren. The promise was repeated for Abram's reassurance (see Genesis 15:1–6). (3) A blessing—the Lord had blessed Abram materially already as he lived in Haran and continued to do so throughout his life. But the greatest blessing was the Lord's covenant promise of a blessing for all nations through his descendants. Abram was faithful in this even through difficult tests such as being asked to sacrifice Isaac, the promised son. Once the test was passed, the promise was repeated (see Genesis 22:15–18).

28. It was the Lord who initiated the covenant, a covenant of grace and blessing. The covenant of grace was to be received in faith and responded to in obedient love. Abram could only receive and respond, not initiate. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him" is a wonderful understatement of the obedient act of faith that was Abram's "contribution" to his relationship with the Lord. Through grace, faith, and love, God made Abram the father of a nation, God's chosen people, and one of his descendants was the man through whom the Lord's blessing came to all the families of the earth. The genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 confirm that Jesus Christ was indeed a descendant of Abraham, both legally through Joseph (Matthew) and physically through Mary (Luke).

29. The text suggests that Abram had become rather wealthy under the Lord's blessing already while living in Haran.

30. That Abram built altars and called on the name of the Lord means he engaged in some formalized worship of the Lord, expressing his faith outwardly.

31. The covenant with Abram was significant to Jews and, through Jacob, Abram's grandson, also to Samaritans. Abram's building of altars also relates to Jesus' words about worship.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 4:1–8, 13–17

32. Abraham's trusting God's promise of a Seed even though he and his wife were elderly was the evidence of a faith that was credited to him as righteousness.

33. Abraham learned that he had no reason to boast before God, for he was simply the recipient of God's grace.

34. Paul's word is clear: "The wages of sin is death." God credits us with righteousness through faith in Jesus because of Jesus' obedient life and His atoning sacrifice for sin as representative man (see Romans 5:18–19; 3:21–25a).

35. In all of this we learn, as did Abram, that we have no reason to boast before God. We are saved by God's grace alone (see Ephesians 2:8–10). This surely leads us to see that others are just as "eligible" to receive this grace as we are.

36. Teaching that salvation depends on our works of the Law means the promise is not true and Christ died for no purpose. The addition of any element of works-righteousness robs Jesus of the glory He is due and leaves us uncertain as to whether we have contributed enough to our salvation through our own goodness. Only salvation by grace alone through faith alone gives us certainty of salvation and eternal security.

37. When taken seriously, the Law always exposes sin, forces us to be aware of our sinfulness and our sinning, and drives us to Christ in repentance (see Romans 3:19–23). Instead of motivating us to love and serve God, the Law apart from the Gospel arouses a sinful pride or incites rebellion in the sinner (see Romans 7:7–13).

38. That Abram became Abraham points to him not only as the physical father of a number of nations through Ishmael as well as Isaac but also as the father of all those from any nation who share his faith (Galatians 3:26–29).

39. Abram and Sarah were “as good as dead” (Romans 4:19) as far as having a child together is concerned when the promised son was conceived and born. “The LORD did to Sarah as He had promised” (Genesis 21:1) suggests that Sarah was rejuvenated so that she began to ovulate again and regained a more youthful appearance. We are Abraham’s descendants when we believe in Jesus and receive the gift of righteousness just as he did. Our being born again of water and the Spirit brings the truth that God gives life to the dead into our experience (see Romans 6:1–11).

Lesson 3

Third Sunday in Lent

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 4:5–30, 39–42

40. That Jesus approached the Samaritan woman says witnesses cannot wait for people to come to them. Some call it intentional witnessing, using everyday conversation as a setting that will through the Holy Spirit's power produce an opportunity to move beyond ordinary talk to spiritual concerns. Some say the best way to make a friend is to ask him to do a favor for you. It seems that it would be the other way around, but we feel good about doing something for someone else, while someone doing something for us may make us feel "beholden." So if you can ask a new neighbor or a new co-worker for help, you produce a situation in which he feels good about the interaction and may be more open to your intention to get beyond the circumstance to witnessing to Jesus.

Fill-in Answers: Jesus offered her living water, which would become in her a "spring of water welling up to eternal life." Her response indicates that she was mainly interested in not getting thirsty and not having to come to draw water from the well.

41. When Jesus laid her immoral life before her, she said, "I perceive that You are a prophet."

42. The Samaritan woman wanted to get Jesus' spotlight off of her and her sins. She tried to involve Him in arguing about the topic that Samaritans and Jews always argued about: Was it suitable to worship Yahweh at the temple on Mount Gerizim, or was Jerusalem's temple the only acceptable place?

43. Jesus said that the hour was coming when neither Mount Gerizim nor Jerusalem would be the true places of worship. Perfunctory religion ground out in temples was not what God had in mind at all. True worship of God is worship in spirit and truth, and that is not to be defined by time or place. God's temple really is made of living stones, those who worship in spirit and truth.

44. One-on-one, Jesus was ready to identify Himself as the Messiah—but the woman brought it up. Jesus accepted His disciples' confessing Him to be the Christ but commanded them not to tell others because the Messiah concept had been badly politicized (see Matthew 16:13–20). Generally Jesus referred to Himself with a less popular, messianic title, Son of Man (see Daniel 7:13–14).

45. In her excitement over having been accepted by the Messiah *despite* her sins, she went to tell them how He had pointed out her sin and to share the Messiah with them. Acknowledging that He knew her sins and yet accepted her, she invited them, who were also sinful, to see Jesus. And they believed, initially because of her testimony, and then because of the words of Jesus Himself.

46. The Word of God, written in Scripture and proclaimed on the basis of Scripture, addresses each of us personally, creating within us the saving faith/knowledge that Jesus truly is the world's Savior, and subsequently producing the fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22–26). As we hear these lessons read in our services, Jesus is fulfilling His promises (see Luke 10:16).

The Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 17:1–7

47. Moses was the man who led them out of Egypt into the desert. He was the logical one to blame. Because Moses was acting under the Lord's orders, he responded to them in a way that made it clear that with their grumbling and complaining they were skeptically putting the Lord to the test.

48. Because Moses was acting under the Lord's orders and knew that he himself would not be able to supply water for the people in the desert, his immediate recourse was to go to the Lord with the matter. Moses was the prophet with whom the Lord spoke face-to-face, and He responded decisively to Moses' complaint. Our Church leaders also may exercise the recourse of going to the Lord for guidance and help. The Lord has promised to hear their prayers for Christ's sake and for the benefit of His people. We do not expect God to talk to us directly in response to our prayers, but we have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus. Our means of recourse in all matters of concern involves our using the Word of our Lord to seek the Spirit's guidance.

49. The place at which water flowed from the rock is the same place where the Lord was going to renew His covenant of grace and blessing with Israel, now as a nation (see Exodus 19:1–8). This is significant in that the water was a gracious response in spite of Israel's lack of faith and their complaining about their circumstances. Later, their faith and commitment would be tested again as they were convicted of their sins by hearing the Ten Commandments. Earlier, they were questioning Moses' leadership and ready to reject him. Later, after God thundered His Commandments to His people from the mountaintop, they begged Moses to talk to them rather than having God Himself do the talking (see Exodus 20:19). Places were given names that would spark remembrance of significant events. In the instance of their thirst and the Lord's response, their testing the Lord and quarreling with Moses were met with the Lord's gracious supply of just what they needed. So both their sinful grumbling and the Lord's grace and mercy were wrapped up in their minds through the names given to the place.

50. This lesson has water flowing from rock; in the Holy Gospel, Jesus offers living water.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 5:1–8

51. We have peace with God because we have been justified by faith. "We have been justified" emphasizes that our being declared righteous by God is an accomplished fact through the once-for-all atoning sacrifice of His Son. There is nothing that we are required to add or can add; we can receive the gift only by faith. "*We are being justified*" would suggest that something more has to happen before we get to be truly right with God. This confuses justification (an accomplished fact) and sanctification (a process).

52. The ultimate reason for rejoicing is "the hope of the glory of God."

53. The process: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." We can rejoice even in suffering if we know that God is at work for our good in everything. The true good He wants for us is our having a living relationship with Him. He sometimes uses sufferings as the soil in which this true good grows—as they cultivate perseverance and character and drive us to sink our roots deeply into hope.

54. The "right time" for God's help is when we fully recognize and acknowledge that in life's important things we cannot help ourselves. It was true when Christ came to free us from the curse of sin and the Law, and it is true in our daily lives when in our weakness we lean on Him.

55. "Christ died for the good people" would always leave us in doubt as to whether we qualify, whereas it's not hard to see ourselves included among the "weak" and "ungodly" and "sinners."

56. God's agape is not in any way conditional on our goodness but is the product of His nature as God, true from eternity. He wills to love sinners and wants the best for all, even those who reject Him (see Ezekiel 33:11; 2 Peter 3:9). God *is* agape!

Lesson 4

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserve only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 9:1–41

57. Jesus' answer says that misfortune and calamity are not God's direct judgment for some specific sin but are a result of our living in a world that is "out of sync" because of human sin in general (see Romans 8:18–23). This is not to say, however, that there are not built-in consequences that result from sinful behavior—such as sexually transmitted diseases. But a Christian should not think God is punishing him for something because he happens to get sick or has an accident. God allows suffering to be part of our lives, but it ultimately is so His renewing and strengthening work can be displayed in us.

58. We don't know what caused the man to be born blind, but in God's will it served to lead him to strong faith in Christ. Jesus' interaction with him produced the opportune moment for him to be led into the Kingdom. There is an urgency in such opportune moments, as Jesus' "while it is day" indicates. The "night" that is coming is the end of the opportune moment for our Kingdom work and its impact on others.

59. Jesus' applying the mud gave the man a sensory aid. It focused his attention. Requiring him to go and wash attached a test to his faith. He had to act in faith to enjoy the blessing he desired.

60. The legalistic Pharisees ignored the miracle itself and picked at Jesus' "working" on the Sabbath by making mud and healing. The Pharisees were hardened in their rejection of any and all evidence that pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. Still today, those who are determined to reject God and the Lord Jesus become impervious to the impact of the Gospel.

61. The young man already believed in Jesus as a prophet from God and his healer. Jesus' speaking of Himself in the third person was an instructional technique, designed to expand the man's understanding of all that his interaction with Jesus had opened up to him—centering in his seeing Jesus as the promised Messiah. It is entirely understandable that the young man was ready to tell Jesus, who had healed him, "Just point Him out to me, sir." The man had been blind but surely had been instructed in the faith. He knew the Jewish hopes that were wrapped up in their anticipation of the Messiah and, being blind, he had probably keyed in personally on the great promises in Isaiah 35:5.

62. Once the young man saw Jesus not only as his healer but also as the Messiah, it was natural for him to bow before Him in worship. We can't really believe Jesus is the Son of God and our Savior without worshiping and praising Him in the fellowship of His people and exalting Him through lives of Christian service. Confessing (Matthew 10:32–33), listening (Luke 11:27–28), giving Jesus praise (Acts 2:46–47), encouraging and admonishing (Colossians 3:15–17), communing (1 Corinthians 11:23–26), and serving (James 2:26) are indispensable concomitants of believing Jesus is Savior and Lord.

63. Those who claim a spiritual concern and sensitivity but reject the Good News of Jesus become more responsible to God for having heard His good Word and consciously choosing their own way over God's way (see Luke 12:47–48). The New Age Movement, with its humanistic blend of psychology and religion, seeks truth from within humanity and from the natural forces of the universe. Thus its proponents exalt themselves “as gods” and worship the creature instead of the Creator. Those who become “wise” in this kind of self-styled wisdom are generally quite willfully blind to the message of God's love in Jesus, for that requires humility and repentance.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 42:14–21

Fill-in Answer: The decisive time had come like that of a woman in childbirth.

To get a feel for the emphatic movement in verses 14–16, have your group identify the fifteen “I” verbs, starting with “I have held My peace” and ending with “I will turn . . . the rough places into level ground.” Call attention to the gentleness as He speaks of the blind but also to the decisive judgment in verse 17 as He judges those who trust in idols.

64. The deaf and blind servant who needs to hear and see but refuses to is Israel herself. That's why judgment was coming.

The Law of the Lord was great from its very beginnings—as the Moral Law was thundered to Israel from Mount Sinai, and as the ceremonial law was given to Moses on the mountain as the Lord's way of mediating His grace to His people in their sin. The problem for Israel, as verses 22–25 make clear, is that they did not really listen to and value the instruction of the Lord.

65. It was the Babylonians who conquered and plundered Judah. But it was the Lord, in His judgment against His faithless people, who “gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers” (42:24).

66. The reason for the Lord's judgment at the hand of the Babylonians was that His people, who had turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to the Word of the Lord, might be led to hear and see.

Do take the time to have your group hear the promises of redemption in the first part of chapter 43. These two sections show the continuing tension in Old Testament prophecy between the word of judgment and the word of reassurance.

67. Israel was willfully blind and deaf, and so were the Pharisees in the Gospel. The promise to the blind in this lesson found fulfillment in the healing of the man born blind and his being led to see Jesus as the Messiah.

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 5:8–14

68. The Good News is not that we are to *become* children of God by following and imitating Jesus. We are to do that, of course. But the Good News that saves us is that we who once were darkness in our sinful natures now *are* light through faith in Jesus. Salvation is not contingent on discipleship, but salvation invariably produces discipleship (see 1 John 3:1–3). The result of being light in the Lord is living as children of light and finding out what pleases the Lord, because we want nothing more than to please our Savior.

Fill-in Answers: The fruit of the light is found in all that is good, right, and true.

69. We may test and prove what pleases the Lord first by being instructed in the way of the Lord through the Word and then by experiencing in our daily living the great benefits of walking in His way—enjoying blessings of positive values and protected from the negatives of a godless lifestyle (see Romans 1:26–32; 12:1–2; 14:17–18; Acts 2:44–47; Proverbs 16:7–8).

70. It is shameful even to speak of the secret sins of those in darkness, especially when they are mentioned with approval as part of freedom of speech or expression or when they are spoken of to entertain and titillate the immoral desires of the sinful nature.

71. The fruitless works of darkness are exposed for what they are when Christians provide their societies with positive examples of the benefits of the fruit of the light. The desired result of exposing the works of darkness for what they are by displaying the fruit of light is that people turn from darkness to become light in the Lord.

72. We may work at living as Christians and testing what pleases the Lord by applying the values of the Word to our lifestyle and actively involving ourselves in efforts that promote these values and combat

society's pervasive evils, such as abortion, drug abuse, Internet pornography, sexual looseness, spouse and child abuse, and race and gender prejudice.

Lesson 5

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Almighty God, by Your great goodness mercifully look upon Your people that we may be governed and preserved evermore in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 11:1–53

73. Many commentators think that Lazarus was already dead when Jesus received the message from Bethany—and that Jesus knew it—but His immediate reaction was to say, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

74. It was for the disciples’ sake that Jesus said He was glad. They would see a marvelous demonstration of His glory as God’s Son. But as Jesus talked about returning to Judea, the disciples could only remember the threat of the Jewish authorities that had caused Him to leave Jerusalem. Jesus let them know that the full twelve hours of His “working day” would not be cut short—though sunset was indeed getting close for Him.

75. The fact that so many came to visit them showed that Lazarus and his sisters evidently were prominent in Jerusalem circles and were probably well-to-do.

76. Encouraged by Jesus’ decisive “I am the resurrection and the life,” Martha boldly confessed, “I (have) believe(d) that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” Help your group appreciate the emphatic quality of *egō* used with the verb. In Greek, the *I* is built into the verb *pepisteuka*. By itself, it means “I have believed,” a form that said her faith had begun in the past and continued to the present. Using the pronoun *egō* in addition to the verb emphasizes the statement very strongly.

77. During the days of Lazarus’s illness, the sisters must have said “If only Jesus were here” to each other many times. It’s why they had sent for Him.

78. Jesus’ knowledge that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead did not negate the fact that His friend Lazarus had died, that Jesus cared about Lazarus’s friends and family who were suffering greatly, and that even after being raised, Lazarus would someday again die a physical death. All this Jesus experienced emotionally in His full humanity. As the most brutal reminder of the effects of sin in the world, death is always cause for sorrow, even for those who also know that the joy of the resurrection is to come.

79. Martha’s words establish that Lazarus was in fact dead and not just in a coma. Jesus’ praying aloud focused the crowd’s attention on Him as the one sent by God, in the act of publicly demonstrating that He is indeed the resurrection and the life.

80. Scholars generally feel that when John spoke of “the Jews” instead of just “the crowds,” He was referring to the influential Jewish leaders—even members of the Council and their representatives. Some of these were led to put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Others, in stubborn unbelief, went back to report to their superiors and to participate in deciding what to do to counter this dramatic action by Jesus. Jesus always has that either/or effect on people as they are confronted by the Gospel (see John 3:16–18; 2 Corinthians 2:14–16).

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 37:1–14

81. The vision held the promise of the nation of Judah coming to life again by the Lord's power and intervention, just as the Spirit brought new life to the dry bones.

82. The Hebrews did not distinguish between these words and concepts, especially in a literary setting such as this, but understood that the whole thrust was on the Spirit of God being called on to supply new life. In our setting, we understand that we are the dry bones, just as they were, and are dependent on the Spirit for new life in Christ.

83. "And you shall know" is still significant for us. Because we hear the Word of the Lord with hearts as well as ears and experience for ourselves the truth of His promises, our trust in Him to be our Lord and to do what He wills to do for our benefit grows accordingly.

84. Lazarus's body was lifeless and decomposing and becoming dry bones. He was restored to life by God's power just as Judah's restoration would be by God's power.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 8:1–11

85. Jesus described this radical change in terms of being born again. Just as we are not born physically by our own power but yet birth opens up a whole life to us, so we are not born again by our own power and this birth also opens up a whole new life in Christ to us.

Fill-in Answers:

- "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Only one thing can separate us and bring condemnation: our willful rejection of Christ as Savior and Lord.

- "The law [rule] of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law [rule] of sin and death." Point up the fact that this is an accomplished fact through the work of Christ. The only thing that can change this is our willful return to slavery to sin and death.

- "The righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk . . . according to the Spirit."

86. Jesus summarized the Law by quoting Scripture: "Love God with all your heart; love your neighbor as yourself." Living according to the Spirit first of all means living in faith, justified, declared righteous for Jesus' sake; then the Spirit opens up and enables a willing love for our Savior God and a desire to serve Him in serving others.

Fill-in Answers:

- "Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." They enjoy life and peace.

87. The humanistic outlook of our society looks to itself to develop the values by which life is guided, and its values are almost always relative and situational. Leaders who promote such an outlook are usually even angered when God's Law is quoted and pointed to as an absolute. They see the law as repressive, stifling the human spirit which yearns to be free and determine for itself what is good and what is evil in the given situation. But this really repeats the original sin. The result is that God is replaced by human psychology, His Law is replaced by permissiveness and self-determination, and the lasting values that give a stable foundation are eroded. Broken homes, disturbed and abused children, increased crime, pervasive drug use, unethical behavior by leaders, rampant sexually transmitted diseases, etc., are evidences that surround us.

Fill-in Answers:

- We have the ability to please God because the Spirit of Christ dwells in us.

88. As the Spirit makes Jesus personally meaningful to us as our Savior, we are led to love Him who loved us first and to do our best to please Him as our Lord by loving and serving those around us.

89. We cannot belong to Christ without the Spirit because Christian faith and life are the results of His saving work. When the Spirit of Christ lives in us, we have the living hope that He will give life also to our mortal bodies—the promise of eternal life as who we are, in glorified bodies fully equipped for life in the new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells.

90. We can work at having our lives controlled by the Spirit by conscientiously using Word and Sacrament and maintaining communication with Christ in prayer.

Lesson 6

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion

Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 27:11–66

91. Matthew began with Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus. Luke provided the information that the charges brought against Jesus in Pilate’s court was political subversion, claiming to be the king of the Jews. Pilate would not have responded to their religious concerns; one more “religious crackpot” making wild religious claims would have meant little to this pagan official, but political charges that threatened insurrection would get his attention.

The formal questioning of the governmental authority required Jesus’ answer—just as the formal question of the religious authority had (see Matthew 26:59–66). The false charges of the priests neither required nor deserved an answer. John provided more details of this exchange between Pilate and Jesus (see John 18:33–38).

92. The release of a prisoner at the time of the feast was a long-standing custom. Pilate’s specific offer of a choice between Barabbas, a known insurrectionist and murderer, and Jesus was an attempt to get himself off the hook by having them choose Jesus.

93. The dream and the warning by Pilate’s wife point up Pilate’s dilemma and his weakness in not dealing justly with one falsely accused. Does it suggest that Pilate and his wife had already talked together about this popular rabbi? Surely the attitude and actions of the Council against Jesus had not escaped his notice (see John 9:18–23). Some early traditions say Pilate’s wife became a Christian. The Greek Church even canonized her.

94. The Greek *ekrazon*, “shouted,” is imperfect tense, indicating continuing action, “they kept on shouting.” This pressured Pilate because his position demanded that he maintain the *Pax Romana*. It would not sit well with the powers in Rome if a riot broke out in his court. He surely thought it was better for him to eliminate one insignificant Jew, though innocent, than to go against the wishes of the influential chief priests, who held their positions with Rome’s approval. The crowd was no doubt made up of servants and functionaries of the Council and other hangers-on that such events attract. Other Jews, in Jerusalem for the Passover, surely also joined the crowd. At the instigation of the religious leaders, a mob psychology took over. It would not be hard to influence newly arriving spectators to join in. After all, Jesus had not lived up to their expectations of the Messiah—and they loved making trouble for Roman officials.

95. Jesus refused the drugged wine because He wanted to be in full command of His mind and senses as He, obedient to His Father’s will, faced what lay ahead of Him as He carried our sins in His body on the cross.

96. Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1 in crying out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” His cry evidences that He was experiencing the hellish consequences of human sin as the one on whom the Lord

laid the iniquity of us all. In that eternal moment, the eternal Son of God carried humanity's sins in His body and paid the eternal penalty that are their consequences—and still lovingly trusted His Father throughout, so that, His saving work completed, which He attested to with His *Tetelestai*, “It is finished,” He could die commending His spirit into His Father's hand.

97. The large and thick curtain in the temple separated the Holy Place, where the priests ministered daily, from the Most Holy Place, “the dwelling-place of the Lord,” where the ark of the covenant formerly was housed. That this was torn from heaven to earth symbolizes that in Christ God has removed every obstacle that might hinder our relationship with Him (see Romans 5:1–2).

98. Dramatic circumstances attended the crucifixion of Jesus: the darkness from noon to three o'clock, the earthquake, the opening of tombs, and the resurrection of some. That a hardened soldier such as the centurion would be led by Jesus' demeanor and by the dramatic circumstances to say, “Truly this was the Son of God,” speaks to our faith with its own impact as we read the account of the crucifixion. It encourages us to make the same confession of faith.

99. Just as recording the spear thrust into Jesus' chest declared that He had truly died, recording the Roman guard at the tomb established the fact that His body was not stolen or secreted away by His disciples.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 50:4–9a

100. The Servant needed an instructed tongue because He was to speak the Word of God to God's people. Jesus testified that His teachings were not His own but were given to Him by His Father. The Servant was to “know how” to use His tongue “to sustain with a word him who is weary.” Jesus proclaimed Good News to the poor, inviting the weak and burdened to come to Him for rest.

101. The Servant's ears needed to be wakened and opened so He would hear and understand God's assurance to Him to strengthen Him for His mission. Jesus' ears and spirit were fully open to His Father's assurances as He spoke from heaven to strengthen Jesus for His saving work.

102. This lesson ties in with the Holy Gospel in its detailed description of the suffering and mockery Jesus experienced during His trial.

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:5–11

103. Paul's beautiful statement makes it clear from the outset that Christ Jesus is none other than God Himself—“God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father,” as the Nicene Creed puts it. In His readiness to carry out the saving will of God, the eternal Word “put His crown on the shelf” to live among us as one of us, representative man.

104. The incarnate Word's commitment to the eternal plan of salvation took Him, as Jesus Christ, all the way to dying for our sins—“even death on a cross.” Jesus, the God-man, was exalted to the highest place because He had obediently and successfully carried out the saving mission.

105. It is significant that it is the name *Jesus* that is the name above every name because this indicates that His identification with us as our brother in the flesh was not temporary. It continues even now. All other names by which God may be known may teach us something about Him, but *Jesus* is the crucial name, without which we really don't know the forgiving love of God and can't live with Him (see 1 John 2:22–23). At the Day of Judgment, as Jesus sits on His glorious throne, surrounded by the hosts of heavenly angels, every tongue will confess that He is Lord. Those who knew Him and trusted Him in their lifetimes will do so joyously. Those who neglected or rejected Him will do so begrudgingly.

106. Paul described the willing humility of our Lord in these lofty words, first of all, to undergird our faith in Him but then also to encourage us to develop attitudes the same as His. This Epistle says to each of us, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”

107. We may work at developing a similarly humble attitude as we build our lives on the truth of the Good News that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. We have no basis for boasting about our “merit” before God or for exalting ourselves over others. Instead, Jesus calls us to a determined discipleship in which we learn to follow Him, our Savior, as our Lord, and become more like Him. As we continually remember His servanthood for all, our faith is nourished and His Spirit moves us to

remember that what Christ did for all He did for us. Our trust and confidence that He loves all, and therefore us, compels us to imitate Him in willing humility and lovingly serve Him in serving others (see 1 John 4:7–21).

Lesson 7

The Resurrection of Our Lord

Almighty God the Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 28:1–10

108. There was an element of urgency in the women's going out to the tomb because the local climate made bodies decompose rapidly, and Jesus had already been dead much longer than usual before such burial treatments occurred. The women wanted to finish their work before the heat of another day, and (their assumptions about) the condition of Jesus' body, made their work even more difficult.

109. The fact that the evangelists differed in details they included or omitted shows that they and their writings were basically independent from one another in recording their Gospel accounts. It was the Holy Spirit who led Matthew to include facts about the resurrection that the others did not include.

Fill-in Answers:

The angel's message is basically the same in all the Gospels. First there is his invitation to come and see, and then there is the instruction to go and tell. Both Matthew and Mark add the promise of Jesus that they would see Him in Galilee.

110. As the women hurried away from the tomb, we're told that they were afraid yet filled with joy. When Jesus Himself stood before them with His joyful greeting, they bowed low at His feet in worship. Their reaction was appropriate to their growing awareness that they were in the presence of the Son of God, the victor over death and hell.

Jesus again told them not to be afraid and instructed them again to go and tell His brothers to go to Galilee, where they would see Him. Jesus was aiming at that formal gathering with all His disciples in Galilee, where He would commission them to the mission to which He sends all His followers and assure them of His continuing presence with them. This did not preclude His revealing Himself to them in the Upper Room and in other circumstances immediately on Easter Sunday nor the appearances in the weeks that followed, but the Galilee experience would be especially filled with meaning for Him and for them.

111. Jesus called His disciples His brothers because the circumstances had changed. They were no longer disciples watching Him carry out His ministry. Now they were the ones He would count on as brothers and apostles involved in representing Him in bringing the Gospel to the world.

The First Lesson: Acts 10:34–43

Fill-in Answers: The message was "the word He sent to Israel. In the same breath, Paul said that Jesus is "Lord of all."

112. Peter assumed that Cornelius had heard about Jesus' ministry of helping and healing in the power of the Spirit. News of His miracles went through the whole region. As a God-fearer in the synagogue at Caesarea, Cornelius would have heard it too. Peter was hurrying to tell about the resurrection of Jesus, the

focal point of apostolic proclamation. They called themselves witnesses of the resurrection. Jesus confronts us through their eyewitness reports and leads us to faith.

113. In a world influenced by Greek dualism, the idea of resurrection of the body was strange and difficult. That the apostles ate and drank with Jesus verified His bodily resurrection and gave added impact to their witness.

114. Peter did not overlook Jesus as Savior, but his preaching of Jesus as “judge of the living and the dead” emphasized Jesus’ deity and stressed His either/or nature and the need of all people, Jews and Gentiles, to be decisive about Him. Read Peter’s words aloud as they are structured in the Greek and place the emphasis on “forgiveness of sins” and on “everyone who believes” so you get a feel for the Greek’s way of emphasizing them.

115. The resurrection of Jesus proclaimed His victory over death—a victory that is ours through faith in Him. It is the heart of our faith and of our proclamation.

The Epistle for the Day: Colossians 3:1–4

116. Paul’s words emphasize that Jesus was representative man. He lived for all mankind; He died for all mankind; He rose again in victory for all mankind. By faith we identify with Him and are united with Him. His life is our life of righteousness; His death is our death to sin and hell; His rising is our rising to new life.

117. In Romans, Paul clearly associated our dying and rising with Christ to our being baptized in His name. That’s when God identified us with all that His Son came to do on our behalf. Our Baptism ties us to Jesus’ accomplished salvation.

118. The result of our having been raised with Christ is that we set our minds on things above. “Set your mind” is a good translation of *zeteite*, “seek,” because it involves more than just “looking for”; it implies “wanting for your very own.” Pursuing the things above is to be our highest priority. The Study Guide does not go into it, but it will be helpful for you to explore “where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” Jesus’ exaltation as the God-man to the throne of majesty as God’s right-hand man verified both His person and the success of His saving work (see Matthew 28:18; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28). “Hidden with Christ in God” speaks of the spiritual nature of our new life (2 Corinthians 5:17), says it is found only in relation to Jesus (John 14:6), and assures us that it is ours fully and freely in Christ (Romans 6:23). The Good News that we will appear with Christ in glory stimulates and enables us to keep hearts and minds on that goal—and to live accordingly.

119. We already have new life as God’s gift through the accomplished spiritual reality of our having died and been raised with Christ. That means that the practice of our faith in worship is always a response to His gift and never a means by which we try to earn or pay for the gift. Worship is always a joyous thank You as we hear again the Good News of redemption full and free.

120. In our daily living, our having died and been raised with Christ enables us to break with the sinful nature and its immoral and ungodly expression and to aim at holiness of living that will glorify our Savior and display that we are united with Him.

121. We obviously have to give attention to everyday matters, but we need to keep them in perspective and not let them take over the priority place that belongs to Jesus. If you have time, explore Colossians 3:5–4:1 with your group, asking them to identify practical ways in which we are to express our new life with Christ in daily living.

Lesson 8

Second Sunday of Easter

Almighty God, grant that we who have celebrated the Lord's resurrection may by Your grace confess in our life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 20:19–31

122. The risen Jesus does not supply just a negative kind of peace that is the absence of turmoil. He provides a positive peace with God and a positive peace within ourselves in all circumstances through the assurance of the complete success of His saving work.

123. This gift of peace is intimately related to the mission that Jesus' followers have been assigned. When we actively represent Jesus and proclaim God's truth, the world will not always accept it peacefully. We are experiencing that more around the world and in North America today. We need strong inner peace to endure and persist in our calling.

124. Our calling to represent Jesus and to proclaim His Good News is part of God's saving will for our world, just as Jesus' being sent to carry out the saving work in His life, death, and resurrection was God's saving will for the world of every age and place.

125. Most interpreters see Jesus' breathing on His disciples as a way of getting their attention and giving them an audiovisual aid. In both Hebrew and Greek, the ideas of "wind" and "breath" and "spirit" are conveyed by the same word: *ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek. Jesus' blessing the apostles with the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday enabled their faith in His resurrection and their understanding that they would represent Him. The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost served to fill them with God's power for their outreach to the world with the Gospel.

126. We call the authority to represent Jesus the Office (or Power) of the Keys of the Kingdom. The Gospel key applied to repentant sinners opens heaven to them; the Law key applied to unrepentant sinners closes heaven to them. The Church happily announces forgiveness to the repentant; however, it is also the unhappy duty of the Church to declare the sins of the unrepentant to be not forgiven. This is a pointed application of the Law as a judgment against indifference to or rejection of God's gift in Jesus Christ. The spiritual health of the Church is not being fully promoted unless both keys are used conscientiously.

127. Thomas's experience surely is not to encourage us to a similar skepticism. Jesus dealt gently and understandingly with Thomas because this was the first contact for His followers with the reality of His resurrection, and Thomas was to be one of Jesus' special apostolic witnesses. We who live in the age of empiricism, in which we look for scientific evidence to verify things, may be happy that this first-century questioner was given sufficient empirical evidence by Jesus so that he was led to confess, "My Lord and my God!" and dedicate his life to his Gospel mission. Tradition says Thomas carried the Gospel all the way to India, where he met a martyr's death.

128. There is a difference between honest questioning, which God honors as a search for truth, and skeptical disbelief, which rejects His truth unless empirically evidenced (see Matthew 12:38–39).

129. Thomas's being convinced about Jesus' resurrection led him to state about Jesus what John had set out to convey in his Gospel: Jesus is none other than our Lord and our God. It was a fitting ending that fulfilled John's purpose.

The First Lesson: Acts 5:29–42

130. The Bible clearly teaches that not everyone will react in faith to the Word of Christ when He comes to them (see Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23). But the Bible does not explain how or why this is the case. From the beginning, Christian theologians have asked, “*Cur alii, alii non?*” —Why some, not others? We can only say with Scripture that when some say yes in faith to Jesus, it is God's gracious act of grace that has produced repentance and faith, and we do not boast but praise Him for it. When others say no to the Gospel of Jesus, it is not because the Holy Spirit is not working to convert them; it is because they reject God's grace in Christ.

131. Gamaliel's advice was to not rush into drastic action but to wait and see what would become of the movement that was proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah—no doubt, expecting that it would be short-lived. He likely reasoned that drastic action against the Twelve at that point, when thousands had responded to their message, would only make them martyrs and spur the movement forward. What was missing was Gamaliel's suggesting that perhaps he himself and the Council had been hasty in rejecting Jesus—and his pointing to the abundant evidence that Jesus was still doing His thing in Jerusalem through the apostles.

132. On their release, the apostles were “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.” Their suffering a beating for proclaiming the message of new life in Christ simply identified them more firmly with their Lord. St. Paul wrote about bearing “on my body the marks of Jesus” (see Galatians 6:17). The apostles' scars were badges of honor that displayed their faithfulness and glorified their Lord. “As every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” So much for knuckling under to man's authority!

133. The Holy Gospel told of Jesus' commissioning and enabling the apostles. This lesson shows the results of this in their faithful proclamation and rejoicing to suffer for Jesus' name.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 1:3–9

134. It was God's great mercy, His tender love and concern for us, that motivated Him to give us new birth into a living hope. This rebirth is required for life in the Kingdom, but it comes to us as God's gift of grace (see John 3:3–6). It opens and enables a restoration of the relationship with God that was lost through sin. The gift of new birth into a living hope was actualized for us by Jesus, God's Son, through His life and death on our behalf, and it was climactically actualized through His resurrection from the dead and His exaltation to God's right hand. The resurrection is the keystone in the arch of faith (see 1 Corinthians 15:14–19). Living hope in Christ changes the focus of life away from temporary things to the inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven for us who are shielded by God's power. How strong this expression is in Greek! *Dunamis* is God's almighty, invincible power. *Phourein* is a military term that speaks of being shielded all around by guards. How can we not feel safe when we stay in that secure position?

135. God's purpose in allowing testing is to prove, strengthen, and refine our faith and its application to life. The Greek word for “tested genuineness” was used to describe the testing of coins to determine their authenticity. When faith is proved to be genuine and is purified through testing, the result is that His faithful ones receive “praise and glory and honor” from their Savior. And that truly is to *His own* greater praise, glory and honor! Many of Jesus' parables speak in terms of this kind of gracious reward for faithfulness and service.

136. The evidence of their faith was displayed in the fact that they could “rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” even in time of suffering. It was this quality on the part of the first Christians, and especially the martyrs, that Jesus used to turn their world upside down.

137. Many tests surround us in our world. Though we are not yet at risk of martyrdom for our faith, our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world are being persecuted even to death. We face our tests because of the humanistic spirit that is more and more pervading our society. It puts man into the center of things as his own savior and determiner of life; it promotes a relative morality and permissiveness; it looks at

life with a secular, materialistic outlook; its motto is “If it feels good, do it.” We may safeguard our faith and hope in it all through conscientious use of the Spirit’s Means of Grace: Word and Sacraments. Continuing fellowship with Jesus in prayer and with Jesus’ people in worship and service continually remind us who we are and why we are here.

Lesson 9

Third Sunday of Easter

O God, through the humiliation of Your Son You raised up the fallen world. Grant to Your faithful people, rescued from the peril of everlasting death, perpetual gladness and eternal joys; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Luke 24:13–35

We are not told why the two left for home—whether they were convinced it was all over, were perplexed and uncertain, or just needed to get back to their everyday concerns. The Greek suggests Jesus had a hand in their not recognizing Him. It did not serve His purposes to reveal Himself immediately. He wanted to lead them into the Scriptures as they prophesied about Him.

138. Their words revealed their disappointment and disillusionment: “We had hoped that He was the one to redeem Israel.”

Fill-in Answers: The “stranger” explained that the Christ would enter His glory by way of having to suffer these things.

139. What made this necessary is the surprising agape of God that moved Him before the world was created to determine to rescue sinful mankind from death and hell through His Son. Because this plan was consistent with God’s very nature as God, it had to be carried out!

140. Jesus was giving them a solid base for their faith to which they could turn again and again. The prophetic Holy Scripture, now fulfilled in Him, would be a continuing resource to confirm their faith and hope. We can look at the Old Testament through the window of the New. When you know the answer to a riddle, it’s easier to look back and see clues by which the riddle is solved. Looking at the Old Testament in the light of its fulfillment in Christ makes it easier to recognize statements that are prophetic and situations that were prototypical.

141. Jesus revealed Himself in blessing and breaking the bread, something they had seen Him do before—the meal setting pointedly emphasizing the fellowship between Jesus and those who are His own (see Luke 22:14–20; Revelation 3:20). They remembered and reminded each other how their hearts had burned with the new understanding of the Scriptures He had opened up to them.

142. Jesus did not stay with them. He had accomplished His purpose in giving them this personal Easter experience and pointing them to its scriptural base.

143. This Emmaus Easter experience teaches us that Jesus is alive and meets us in the written Word and blesses us at table in the Sacrament of His body and blood. Here’s abundant encouragement to meet Him regularly for heart warming.

The First Lesson: Acts 2:14a, 36–41

144. Peter pointed to Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation to God’s right hand as the basis of His being Lord and Christ.

145. The effect of Peter’s strong words of judgment was that many in the crowd were cut to the heart and asked, “What shall we do?” The *kardia*, “heart,” was seen by ancients as the center of human

personality, its mind and will. They saw their need and wanted help. The fact that all of this happened by God's set purpose and foreknowledge and the fact that our sins took Jesus to the cross as surely as theirs keep us from just pointing a finger of blame at the Jews and their leaders. If "the fullness of time" had been in our own day, we ourselves might have been among those shouting "Away with Him."

146. Peter's call to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ" required them to acknowledge their unbelief and turn in faith and hope to the very One whom they had rejected, acknowledging Him to be the Christ.

147. Those who would repent and be baptized were promised that their sins would be forgiven and they would receive the Holy Spirit. Baptism is God's washing away of sins (see Acts 22:16), His gift of rebirth and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (see Titus 3:4–8).

148. God's offer was "for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself."

149. The Spirit led three thousand to believe and be baptized, confessing Jesus Christ to be Lord and Christ, their promised Messiah and Savior—and the Christian Church had its beginnings in Jerusalem.

The first Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

150. Peter's "God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Christ" relates to Jesus' showing that the Christ had to suffer and enter His glory. Both also show hearts warmed by Jesus.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 1:17–25

What enables us to live as "strangers" and truly to stand in awe of God our Father is His loving redemption in Christ. He paid the price so we now truly belong to God as His children. Luther used Peter's words almost verbatim in his explanation of the Second Article. Motivation is a key factor, for God judges motives as well as actions (see 1 Corinthians 4:5).

151. "He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times" places the coming of Christ in God's fullness of time into the perspective of God's eternal plan of salvation, carried out at one point in history, but effective for all.

152. Through Jesus, we see that God's greatest glory is His forgiving love. The fact that this truth may be seen *only* through Jesus is self-validating as God's own truth (see 2 Corinthians 4:6). Faith in Christ enables us, as Luther put it, to "fear, love, and trust in God above all things." Because Jesus is alive and promises that we will live also, our hope is much more than a vague "everything's gonna be okay." It is what Peter had called "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (1:3–4).

153. Obedience to the truth always begins with believing the Gospel of Jesus. But throughout his letter, Peter emphasized obeying the truth, not just believing it. This emphasized the importance of putting faith into action in every aspect of life so we are moved into Christian discipleship and want to catch the spirit of our Master.

154. Their purifying their souls by obeying the truth was evidenced by the fact that they had developed a sincere brotherly love in which they loved one another earnestly from a pure heart. They were tied to one another by the fact that they were tied to Jesus Christ and to God as their heavenly Father.

155. *Philadelphia* is brotherly love. It is affection for those who are like us, who have a bond with us because of a mutual bond to a loving Father. Peter called for the use of agape, a willed love that seeks the true welfare of others. Having obeyed the truth of Christ that leads to brotherly love, we seek His Spirit's power to go beyond loving those whom we like to a practical love that seeks the welfare also of those whom we find hard to love.

156. The dynamic behind being born again of imperishable seed is the living and enduring Word of God. The Greek here uses the word *logos* and referred to God's revelation in creation and in Scripture. It attaches itself finally to the One who is the *Logos* who made all things and who was made flesh and revealed God's glory in His redemptive love for us. That Word is not static but dynamic, for the power of the Holy Spirit is involved both in leading to natural knowledge of God's existence and in using the Law and the Gospel, "sharper than any two-edged sword," to penetrate with impact into the innermost being and lead people to respond to the message of Christ (see Hebrews 4:12–13; Romans 10:14–17).

157. Strictly speaking, neither God's revelation through nature nor His Law, but only His Gospel Word works spiritual rebirth and sustains spiritual life, and it does so in whatever form it is presented (written, spoken, sung, signed, remembered, etc.). A change in the medium (the external form in which God's Word is presented) or external setting (e.g., whether one is alone or with others) may have a positive effect on one person's willingness to attend externally (i.e., to read, to listen, to watch, to pay attention, to remember, etc.). Thus, parents teaching their children the Word of God, as well as others who want to spread God's Gospel Word, should communicate God's Word in its many and various forms, praying that God's Spirit would in every case impact through God's Word the hearts of those to whom that Word is conveyed.

Lesson 10

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 10:1–10

It is important that you and your group understand that this first section of John 10 does not talk about the Good Shepherd but about shepherds, religious leaders, and the way they approach and lead people.

158. The key factor that distinguishes the shepherd from the thief is the ways they get to the sheep. The shepherd enters through the door opened by a watchman who recognizes him; the thief does not want to be seen by the watchman, so he climbs into the sheep pen some other way. The shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by name, and his sheep know his voice and are ready to follow him. Jesus was talking about true sheep in God's flock, who listen only to the true shepherd—an example of a true sheep is the man born blind, who would not be dissuaded by the Council about Jesus being God's prophet. There are many who do the opposite, do not listen to the shepherd's voice, and run eagerly after the voices of false, misleading "shepherds."

159. The Pharisees did not understand for the same reason they were not convinced by Jesus' miracles: they simply did not want to accept Jesus as the Messiah.

Fill-in Answers: In this section, Jesus did not refer to Himself as the Shepherd but as the door of the sheep.

160. For the people and their leaders to be saved and find pasture, they had to go in and out through the door, that is, through Jesus, accepting Him as God's promised Savior and Lord.

Help your group understand the emphasis of the *egō eimi* statements. All by itself, the verb *eimi* means "I am," Adding the pronoun *egō*, "I," gives it emphasis—something like "I, I only, am."

161. The religious establishment had hardened the rites and rituals of the covenant of grace into a legalistic system that robbed Judaism of its true spirit. This brought the people under their control, but it reduced the covenant faith to a legalistic "doing religion." The chief priests profited from temple concessions, selling animals for sacrifices and changing secular money into temple coin. They were more interested in fleecing the flock than in shepherding it.

162. Through trust and faith in Jesus as the world's Savior, be it ever so small and frail, believers have His gift of life—and they have it abundantly (see also John 3:36). Having eternal life, we also have forgiveness of sins, salvation, membership in God's Church, the fruits of the Spirit, and all the other gifts God gives His children. It is true that our old nature manages sometimes to draw our attention to the weakness and inconstancy of our faith, to the insufficiency of our own spiritual goodness and merit, and to our frequent failures to live as His disciples. Then we begin to imagine we do not have the Shepherd's gift of life with all of its accompanying blessings. Doubts arise about our salvation. We feel obliged to earn our way back to God and the life He gives. Faith knows better. Faith leads us to walk conscientiously in His ways

and serve in His name (see Luke 9:23–25). Our assimilating and appreciating what faith in Jesus means to us grows as God deepens our understanding of His Word in the power of the Spirit.

The First Lesson: Acts 2:42–47

Fill-in Answers: About the first Christians, we're told, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers."

163. "The apostles' teaching" provided the new Christians an objective basis in the written Scriptures for their subjective Pentecost experience. "Fellowship" is what we share in common, our faith and love that are passed back and forth between us and from God. "Breaking of bread" was simply eating together, but soon became the language of the Church to refer to Holy Communion, celebrated at the end of fellowship meals. The Greek says "the prayers." The first Christians continued in the rituals of the temple—with fuller meaning—as well as in their own praying together. They encourage us to make "the prayers" a togetherness activity also in today's Church.

The Lord manifested His presence through wonders and signs done by the apostles, and the Christians were led spontaneously to respond to the needy among them by selling their possessions and pooling their resources. This "camp" setting could not continue indefinitely, because eventually all of them would be reduced to poverty. Their joy and love were attractive and contagious, but they had to get back to the mundane concerns of making a living. So, as the Church organized itself, the oversight of the care of the needy was made the responsibility of some, and their efforts were supported by the congregation's offering of firstfruits of their income.

164. Some Lutheran congregations rate rather low in "love quotient." Generally speaking, our tradition has encouraged an intellectual faith, and our worship and communing have been seen as interaction between individuals and God, without much horizontal emphasis. Getting to know others personally in settings that encourage the development of openness and the sharing of concerns and needs may lead to a higher love quotient. The small-group emphasis in today's congregations is an attempt to meet this need. Living as we do in an insulated society, we need to work at it.

165. This first lesson emphasizes the importance in a Christian congregation of congregating, of gathering around the teaching of the Word, of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and of the togetherness activity of the prayers. Jesus, the Door, is the key to all of this as the members of His flock follow Him and "go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9).

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 2:19–25

Fill-in Answers: Peter wrote: "This is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly."

These were words spoken primarily to Christian slaves (see v. 18) and applied directly to their situation. Pagan masters were often cruel in their treatment of slaves and unreasonable in their expectations of them. Living under God's grace and favor would help Christian slaves perform their duties willingly even when their masters were harsh and unappreciative. A concern for the Christian way would strengthen them to say no to degrading demands, even though it would mean unjust punishment. We might find ourselves working for harsh, unappreciative bosses and be asked to involve ourselves in dishonesty and cheating. It is hard to work in such a setting, but, unlike slaves, we have the alternative of leaving to work elsewhere. But it is hard to stand up for what is morally right in a compromising situation when our financial security is threatened as a result.

166. Jesus' "secret" was that He "continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly." God's mill may grind slowly at times, but it does grind, and it "grinds exceeding fine." We, too, may learn to focus our attention on God's will for us and leave matters up to Him, letting Him take vengeance if He wants to. When we apply Jesus' secret and aim at repaying evil with good, we will surprise our antagonists and find suffering more endurable.

167. These are the three phrases:

(1) "That we might die to sin and live to righteousness"—a theme that runs again and again through the New Testament, for example: "Put off the sinful nature and put on the new nature in Christ," "We were

buried with Christ so that we might rise with Him to walk in newness of life,” “Those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its sinful desires,” and “Whoever claims to live in Jesus must walk as Jesus did.”

(2) “By His wounds you have been healed”—another repeated New Testament emphasis. The root meaning of *salvation* has to do with “healing.” We are healed by Jesus’ suffering so we no longer live just for ourselves but for Him who for our sakes died and was raised.

(3) “But have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls”—this also recurs again and again in Holy Scripture. What better encouragement for us to pursue a new direction in our daily lives than to know that we are sheep in the Shepherd’s flock? We can follow Him happily, knowing that He will never mislead us but will take us to eternal life with Him.

Lesson 11

Fifth Sunday of Easter

O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 14:1–14

168. The basis of calming troubled hearts is trust in God (see Isaiah 26:3). “Believe also in Me” focused their thoughts on their experiences as His disciples and on the hopes that were tied to Him. It is in Jesus that we know God is our loving Father and can trust Him to help us and never forsake us.

169. “In My Father’s house are many rooms” assures us that there is room for each of us in God’s saving plan for humanity. “I go to prepare a place for you” assures us that our place in the Father’s house has been reserved and confirmed through Jesus’ accomplished work of salvation. “I will come again and will take you to Myself” assures us that our relationship with Him who is the center of our faith and life will continue into eternity.

170. Help your group relate and interrelate each of the concepts to the others by beginning each consideration with “Jesus is the way (truth) (life) because” Jesus is the way because He alone has revealed the truth and gives life. Jesus is the truth because He has provided and now reveals the way to life. Jesus is the life because His acting out the truth of God’s love makes Him the way for the spiritually dead to find new life in the power of the Spirit.

171. If Jesus is the eternal Word who was with God and was God from the beginning, the Creator of all that is (John 1:1–3), who became flesh to reveal God’s grace and truth (John 1:14; 17–18), and who invested Himself in love as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1–2) so He could be way, truth, and life for us, it is foolish and spiritually deadly to suggest that there are other ways to the Father. Christian testimony must always point to the only source of assurance: God’s surprising gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

172. Jesus said it right out: people know and see the Father as they know and see Him. The logical counterpart is this: people do not know and see the Father when they will not know and see Jesus (see John 3:31–36; 5:21–23; 1 John 2:22–23). Jesus evidenced that the Father is in Him and He is in the Father through His teachings (see Matthew 7:28–28; John 7:14–18, 45–46) and through His miracles (John 3:1–2; 7:25–32).

173. Jesus testified in word and deed to the forgiving love of God. Anyone who has faith in Jesus testifies in words and in a changed life to the forgiving love he has received and the life-renewal this has brought. Christians are equipped to do “greater works” because we are able to testify to a completed work of salvation through the incarnation of the Word, His sinless human life, His innocent death as God’s atoning sacrifice for sin, His resurrection victory, His ascension to God’s right hand, and the gift of the Holy Spirit in confirmation of His completed work of salvation (see John 7:37–39). Our testimony always has the full backing of Jesus and His Holy Spirit. Modern Christians also have means of communication available to

them that enable them to reach far more people than Jesus Himself was able to. Because our Lord has gone to the Father and has been given all authority in heaven and earth, whatever we ask in His name—consistent with His will for His kingdom—He will do it. That enables us to attempt great things for Him and to expect great things of Him.

174. Give your group an opportunity to relate personally to each concept. Jesus is the way—the one through whom God came to us and through whom we may come to God. Jesus is the truth—in Him we see the full truth of God’s gracious love for sinners and are assured that we are now forgiven children of God. Jesus is the life—as Creator of all, He is the ultimate source of life; as Redeemer He enabled restoration of life with God now and forever through the Holy Spirit in those dead in sin.

The First Lesson: Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60

175. The concern of the apostles was that involvement in details like the daily distribution of food would take them away from teaching and preaching and prayer. The solution was to organize and carry out that effort through others in the Church. Their recommendation says that all aspects of the Church’s program aim finally at allowing and supporting the ministry of the Word—and are to be carried out by people who are dedicated to Christ and ready to be led by His Spirit. It is significant that the seven were chosen by the congregation and not just appointed by the apostles.

176. The seven’s names are all of Greek origin, suggesting they were Hellenists, but this is not conclusive because some Palestinian Jews also were giving their sons Greek names—the apostles Andrew and Philip, for example. The deacons probably represented both groups, but Hellenistic members must have been reassured because of the men selected. Problem solving is most effective when it involves people who relate personally to the problem.

Fill-in Answers: Stephen was described as a man full of grace and power. He evidently was a gifted man, a man who would not involve himself just with mundane matters.

177. “Stiff-necked” means “stubborn”—like an ox that tightens its neck and resists the directions of its driver. Circumcision was the mark of the covenant, worn by each Jewish male in his flesh. To be uncircumcised meant one was outside the covenant faith. But it was not to be just an outward formality; also hearts and ears were to be “circumcised” and belong to the Lord in sincere faith and service. Stephen was telling them that spiritually they were outside the faith even though they followed all the laws and traditions of Judaism. These proud men were like their fathers in resisting the Holy Spirit. Their ancestors persecuted the prophets and killed those who prophesied the coming of the Righteous One, the Messiah. Now they had stubbornly rejected, betrayed, and murdered the Messiah Himself when He had come. They had the covenant law through Moses on Sinai, and they carefully obeyed the system of outward rules intended to safeguard the great principles of the Law. They carefully observed its outward ceremonies. But in their concern they selfishly circumvented the true requirements of the outward-focused law of love for God and neighbor.

178. The text presents a striking contrast: the members of the Council were furious and gnashed their teeth at Stephen, but Stephen didn’t even look at them. Gazing heavenward, he saw the glory of God and Jesus at the right hand of God. His testimony about this was the last straw. His judges became a mob and rushed him out to his death. Stephen imitated his Lord by praying for those killing him and by commending his spirit into God’s hand.

179. The stubborn rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by the Council was continued in their manipulation of Stephen’s arrest and their rejection of his testimony.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 2:2–10

180. St. Paul wrote, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). That being the case, we should never tire of hearing the basic story of salvation. It is at the heart of our faith. “Grow up to salvation” implies that we need continually to apply the message of Christ to our Christian discipleship. “Salvation” implies being healed of our sinfulness for a new way of life. That’s what the Good News is and does. It builds not only faith but also hope and love.

Fill-in Answers: Peter's concern was that those who came to Christ would mature into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. We need to be living stones, properly aligned with the living Stone who is Zion's Cornerstone.

181. Peter probably liked this analogy because "Peter," meaning "Rock," is the new name that Jesus gave him. His given name was Simon.

182. The result of being a house that trusts in the Cornerstone is that we will never be put to shame.

183. To those who believe, Christ is the precious Cornerstone through whom their lives are properly aligned and given full purpose. Those who will not believe stumble over Him (see 1 Corinthians 1:22–25). Help your group understand that those who are saved praise God for their gracious election in Christ (see Ephesians 1:3–8). Those who are lost cannot blame Him as if they were eternally predestined for this by the will of God. They are lost because of their unbelief (see Luke 13:34–35).

That we are chosen in grace just as Christ was God's Chosen One to save mankind emphasizes that all of it is God's gracious plan of salvation. We cannot boast! But since God is the one who has done it, we can enjoy assurance—and praise Him for it!

184. The titles that assure that God has moved into our lives with His gracious gift of salvation in Christ are validated when we live up to them as we "may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light."

185. For many of us, our ancestors were Gentiles who lived in spiritual darkness until the Gospel of Jesus was brought to them by Christian missionaries. In our own experience, we have been freed from spiritual darkness and death by rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit. Now we are privileged to be the ones who carry out the Christian mission.

Lesson 12

Sixth Sunday of Easter

O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 14:15–21

186. Once again it is important to remind ourselves of what agape love means and to see that obeying Jesus' commands is the way we are to evidence it. The two Scripture references from 1 John both emphasize the motivation of God's love and our necessary response and its expression toward those around us.

187. God in three persons is seen in Jesus, the Son, asking the Father to send the Spirit. Note that Jesus and His completed work of salvation are at the center of this. The Spirit is "another" Counselor in that He comes to take Jesus' place and do for His disciples what Jesus Himself did for them—display the saving love of God as He continually testifies to us and teaches us what Christ has accomplished for us.

188. As the Spirit of truth, the Counselor is not so much our advocate before God as He is God's advocate to us. Jesus has been and is our fully successful advocate before God (see 1 John 2:1). The Spirit comes to make Jesus personally meaningful to us as our Savior and Lord so that we find new life in Him.

189. "The world" of unbelief cannot see, know, and accept the Spirit because it refuses to see, know, and accept the Spirit's testimony to Jesus as God's Son, the Savior and Lord. This brings up the age-old question "Why do some believe and are saved and not others?" Since we, in our sinful nature, are no different from "the world," we can only conclude in wonder that it is entirely the grace of God that has led us to respond in faith to Jesus and to enjoy the life-renewing presence of this other Counselor, and we can only be surprised that others reject what Jesus offers.

190. That the Spirit was known to and already lived in the apostles is evidenced by their faith and their confession of Christ. That the Holy Spirit would be in them in the future pointed them to the promise of the baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire that would enable their mission for Jesus.

191. As Jesus said, before long the world would not see Him anymore, but the apostles would at the time of His resurrection and during the course of His appearances to them during the forty days that followed. The great events were Easter and Pentecost. Easter convinced them and convinces us that Jesus is truly "in the Father" and that we can be in Him by faith. Jesus' ascension into heaven was the conclusive evidence and built their assurance that His promise to send the Holy Spirit and fire to them would indeed happen. Pentecost then convinced them and convinces us that Jesus comes to live in us in a continuing relationship through the Holy Spirit.

The "circle of blessing" paragraph describes the spiritual process by which God makes us His own and continually confirms our relationship with Him. He loves in Christ, we love in return, and the relationship grows. The Spirit leads us to faith in Jesus and to Christian discipleship, Jesus blesses us continually with the Spirit, and the relationship grows.

192. When a Christian breaks the circle—and it is always broken from the human side—his neglect of the Word and the Sacrament and his refusal to obey the commands of Jesus to work in the Kingdom

distance him from Jesus and strain and ultimately break the relationship. Willful sins of omission are as deadly to relationship with Jesus as are willful sins of commission. Seeing this should encourage us not only to take seriously what Jesus has done for us as believers but also to take seriously the new life we are called to live as disciples. Anything less threatens the relationship with Jesus and may become spiritual suicide.

The First Lesson: Acts 17:16–31

193. Paul’s reasoning in the synagogues always involved him showing that he was not introducing something new or different, for the death and resurrection of the promised Messiah was foretold in their sacred Scriptures, the Old Testament. When Paul spoke to Greeks in the marketplace about the resurrection of Jesus, he touched a nerve and they, in their self-styled wisdom, accused him of babbling something that didn’t make sense.

194. Natural theology is the awareness of God and the information about God that is available to all people in the world around them and in their moral consciousness (see Romans 1:18–20; 2:12–15). This is the impetus that leads people everywhere to know about God generally and to attempt to worship Him in some way even without knowledge of His revelation in Jesus Christ. The points of natural theology presented by Paul that they would easily accept were these: (1) God is the Creator of the world and everything in it. (2) This Lord of heaven and earth does not live in temples built by hands. (3) He is not dependent on human service to supply His needs. (The Greek is *therapeutai*, a word used for a physician serving the needs of the sick.) (4) He is the Source and Giver of life and breath and everything else. (5) He made every nation of men from one creation, “one man.” (6) He is in charge of human destiny regarding times and places. (7) He has designed men to seek Him, but in the end He is the one who comes close to us. (8) Their own writers had acknowledges that “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Minos’s address to Zeus) and that “we are indeed His offspring” (Epimenides), so since man is a reflection of God as His offspring, it is foolish to think He is like man-made images, even of precious metals. (9) God wants repentant turning from such ignorance to acknowledge Him for who He is. (10) God will finally judge the world with justice. Up to this point, the Athenian philosophers could readily agree with Paul. All of Paul’s points were logical, natural theology, things they had thought through for themselves.

195. Paul moved beyond natural theology and began to focus on Jesus Christ by saying God “will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed,” and adding “of this [God] has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.”

Paul surely intended to give much more information about God’s forgiving love in Jesus but was cut short by the reaction of his hearers. Greek philosophy saw spirit as good and matter as less than good, even evil. Human life was seen as the spirit “imprisoned” for a time in physicality and the material universe. They scoffed at the idea of a resurrection of a physical body as proof of someone’s being God’s special man in His plan for humanity. They thought that a physical resurrection of the body was neither logical nor desirable.

196. In the Gospel, Jesus said the world cannot accept the Spirit because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. The reaction of the philosophers in Athens is a case in point.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 3:13–22

Fill-in Answers: We Christians will be equipped for decisive moments in our discipleship when our faith and our faithfulness are put to the test if in our hearts we will honor Christ the Lord as holy.

197. As we regard Christ the Lord as holy and sanctify Him in our hearts, we are consciously putting Him in charge of all of our lives. Practical implications of this abound; your group will offer some. They include subordinating our will to His (Matthew 16:24); turning from sinful desires to holy living (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8); giving priority to seeking His kingdom and righteousness instead of focusing on money and material things (Matthew 6:19–21, 24, 33); and changing resentment and hatred into forgiveness and love (Matthew 5:44–45; Colossians 3:12–14).

198. Trusting the Spirit’s guidance and blessing in our witnessing does not mean we should not prepare ourselves for witnessing. Jesus’ words to the apostles were to men who had a good foundation in the Holy Scriptures. Understanding God’s Word and its application to our own lives equips us to share it with others.

Being familiar with Holy Scripture is the key to witnessing. Even writing out and memorizing a personal testimony that incorporates Scripture that is especially meaningful may be helpful. It will provide a basic approach and some appropriate ways of expressing ourselves that the Spirit can help us adapt to the moment.

199. Gentleness and respect for others, especially those who are antagonistic, has spiritual power that exceeds bombastic, irritating efforts to force the truth on people. We may win a battle but lose the war, win an argument but lose the person. The preacher with the bullhorn at the Rose Parade, the people who sneak “John 3:16” into the TV background, the T-shirts and bumper stickers—all may just be irritations that diminish the impact of real, personal, Christian witnessing. Jesus reaches out with love and doesn’t shove faith down people’s throats. We will respect others in that way when we respect Jesus and count on Him to accomplish His purposes in the Kingdom in His own quiet, powerful ways.

200. We are to be ready to suffer for doing good if this is God’s will for us because “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.” Jesus is our supreme example in this. More than that, His suffering for doing good has freed us from our sins—their consequences and their power. We are free now, in His name, to refuse to take matters into our own hands and repay evil with evil. We may turn things over to God for His judgment of the matter. Like Jesus, we can suffer patiently and repay evil with forgiveness and love and thus possibly win even our enemies to faith in Christ.

Help your group understand that Jesus’ descent into hell was *exaltation*—a clear statement of His victory. We share that victory. Hell no longer threatens us.

201. Just as the waters lifted the ark to keep Noah and his family alive, the waters of Holy Baptism lift us up to new life in the power of the Spirit. The resurrection of Jesus, the fact that He is the living Lord, gives Holy Baptism in His name its saving power (see Romans 6:1–11; Titus 3:4–7).

Lesson 13

Ascension of Our Lord

Almighty God, as Your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, ascended into the heavens, so may we also ascend in heart and mind and continually dwell there with Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Luke 24:44–53

In writing to the Corinthian Christians, who had trouble with the concept of a bodily resurrection because of the pervasive influence of the philosophy of dualism in Greek culture, St. Paul made an issue of Jesus' resurrection as the proof of our salvation. Dualism saw spirit as good and matter as less than good, even evil. Dualists had difficulty accepting the idea that God, whom they saw as the Ultimate Spirit, would send His Son really to come into the flesh and really to be one of us as a human being. This outlook carried over into doubting the bodily resurrection of Jesus and disbelief in the resurrection of Christians to eternal life. But Paul made our salvation dependent on the truth of Jesus' resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:12–19).

202. The key to proper understanding of the Bible is recognizing the surprising Good News that God's Son truly became a man to redeem lost humanity. All other teachings have to be understood in ways that will serve that central truth (see 1 John 4:1–3). This is the only key that opens all of Scripture to our faith and understanding.

203. The apostles were not to get right to work but were to wait for “the promise of My Father upon you.” The work they were to do would not be accomplished by purely human means. It would require the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit. Still today, we are dependent on the gracious, life-giving power of the Holy Spirit to convert people and lead them to faith in Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 12:3). This says two things to us about our own mission: first, we fool ourselves if we think we can accomplish this through our own logical argument or our own forceful presentation; it is the Word of Christ that touches hearts. Second, we may take heart in seeing that we are not expected to accomplish what is impossible for us. We are to be faithful in proclaiming Christ as clearly and as winsomely as we can, but the Spirit is the only one who can touch hearts and make our witness effective. The heavenly Father will give us the Holy Spirit when we ask Him in the name of Jesus to send Him to us with power for our ministry (see Luke 11:9–13). The power of the Spirit is available to us for our own faith and life and for our proclamation also when we are focused on the Word of God, the Gospel of Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 2:1–5, 14–16).

204. Jesus' ascension has been called “the coronation of the God-man.” He ascended bodily, still our brother in the flesh, though now with a glorified body. It is none other than our Savior, our brother Jesus, who now wears the crown of glory in heaven and rules all things for the benefit of His people on earth (see Ephesians 1:16–23). That has to be the most uplifting source of joy, the most solid basis for our confidence in proclaiming Him Savior and Lord, and the greatest reason for praising God in our words and in our service.

The First Lesson: Acts 1:1–11

205. In the Upper Room, Jesus had blessed His disciples with the Holy Spirit, who caused them to believe in Him as the crucified and risen Redeemer, and during His appearances He had instructed them through the same Spirit. But now they were moving toward being given “fire-power” for their work! They could not yet “get to work” because their mission would depend on the power and blessing of the Holy Spirit. It would not succeed just through their own wisdom and skills. Only the Holy Spirit can touch hearts and tie people in faith and life to Jesus Christ.

206. The apostles still labored under the lifelong influence of Jewish anticipation of an earthly Messiah-King in an earthly kingdom of Israel. We too can impose our agenda on the Kingdom: judging the Church by outward qualities such as number of members, buildings, financial resources, or impressive programs.

207. The gift of the Spirit would give the apostles power for their mission and would enable their Gospel proclamation so it would lead people to life in Christ.

Fill-in Answers: In paraphrasing to your location, consider city, county/state/country, an ethnic group in your community, and the world. Using adjectives, we could say that the mission is to be local, national, ethnic, and international.

The ascension of Jesus assured the apostles and assures us that Jesus is God. His ascension exalted Him also according to His human nature to glory as the Father’s “right-hand man.” The final part is still to come when He returns in glory.

208. The angels assured the apostles that the same Jesus (the God-Man, our Savior and Brother) would return in glory. At that time, Paul said, everyone will acknowledge that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

209. The ascension of Jesus was an essential aspect of the glory for which He prayed in His High Priestly Prayer in the Holy Gospel.

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 1:15–23

Fill-in Answers: Paul told the Ephesian Christians that they had gained a reputation for faith in the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints.

210. Let your group analyze your congregation’s reputation in the Church at large and in the community.

211. Paul asked God to give them a Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The “knowledge” of God and Jesus means more than just knowing facts about Him; in Hebrew and also Greek tradition the “knowledge” implied intimate relationship. It was used, for example, of the man-wife relationship.

212. There is no standing pat in Christian discipleship. We either grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus or we diminish. Apathy and false security are deadly (see 1 Corinthians 10:12). God blesses with this knowledge of Jesus as His disciples when we do what we are doing in this study—inviting Him to give us wisdom and revelation through His Word. That knowledge becomes practical, everyday knowledge of Jesus as it is put into practice daily.

Fill-in Answers: Paul tells us that it is when the eyes of our hearts are enlightened that we will be able to know the hope to which He has called us, “the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints,” and “the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe.”

213. Paul said that the exalted Christ has been appointed head over everything *for the Church*. He rules all things for our benefit as we trust Him and serve Him in His kingdom of grace.

214. Paul said that the Church is the Body of Christ in the world, through whom Christ continues to carry out His saving work through the proclamation of His Gospel. More striking than that, Paul said that the Church is “the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” In being His Body in the world, His saved ones carrying out His saving mission in His name, we become His “fullness,” fulfilling His purpose as the Christ through the power of His Spirit so that He is given full glory as the Lamb who was slain and is now sitting on the throne of heaven.

Lesson 14

Seventh Sunday of Easter

*O King of glory, Lord of hosts, uplifted in triumph far above all heavens,
leave us not without consolation but send us the Spirit of truth
whom You promised from the Father; for You live and reign with
Him and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: John 17:1–11

215. Jesus referred to the hour that was near as His glorification because through it He would accomplish what He came to do and would be restored to full enjoyment and use of His divine glory—also now in His human nature. The One who sits on the throne, whose name is above every name, is none other than our Brother, Jesus. Glorifying Jesus glorifies the Father because it was the Father’s love and mercy toward sinners that prompted Him to send His Son to be the Savior. The Son’s carrying out the task in love for His Father surely brought glory to His Father.

216. Jesus said that the key to knowing the only true God is knowing Jesus Christ, whom God has sent. God’s investment of Himself in the saving work of Jesus was a total investment. He did it because He is God, and He is God because He did it—acting in complete demonstration of His character. Jesus’ request was not made for His own sake but so the Father would be glorified and His disciples’ faith would be strengthened.

Some biblical names for God: Sovereign Lord, Yahweh (I AM), Creator, Holy One of Israel, Israel’s Husband, Israel’s Righteousness, Israel’s Shepherd, Spirit of God, Redeemer, Holy Spirit, and so on.—all providing some insight into God’s person and will.

217. Jesus invites us to call God our Father. This says He is the Source of our lives and also assures us of His continuing love and care.

218. God is spirit and has no sex or gender. How we view Him, however, does influence how we see Him acting toward us. Knowing Him as Father emphasizes His relating to us in ways that are traditional for fathers—providing for us, protecting us, caring for us, disciplining us, asserting His good will for us. Societies who have thought of God as feminine have tended to a pagan association of God with the forces of nature and have emphasized dependence on the fertility of “mother earth.” Moreover, Scripture clearly refers to God as “He” and “Him,” and it is not given to us to question how God chooses to present Himself.

219. The peculiarly Christian name for God, given by Jesus when He commanded Christian Baptism, is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This proclaims God to be Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier—God over us, God for us, and God in us.

Fill-in Answers: Jesus led His disciples to confidence in Him by giving them the words His Father gave Him. His miraculous signs impressed them, but it was His teachings that deepened their faith. They told Jesus, “You have the words of eternal life.” Jesus’ prayer moved to His request that His Father keep them by the power of His name.

220. The result of the Father’s protecting us by the power of His name, His revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, is that we see ourselves as His children and also see one another as brothers and sisters in His family. This is the “family” unity for which Jesus prayed. It leads to mutual respect and active love for one another.

221. Our High Priest implements what He prayed for by asserting His redemptive love for us and for all our fellow Christians as we fellowship around Word and Sacrament.

The First Lesson: Acts 1:12–26

222. During the forty days that were concluded by Jesus' ascension, the apostles no doubt occupied themselves with various pursuits. They were not always together. Peter and others even went fishing. But in the wait for Pentecost, Luke listed the eleven apostles and those who waited with them and tells us they "with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer"—no doubt praising their living Lord and asking that His promise of power in the Holy Spirit be fulfilled. Note that some were known by two names. Bartholomew is called Nathanael in John's Gospel; James son of Alphaeus is James the Younger in Mark; Judas is Thaddaeus in Matthew. The upper room that was their meeting place may or may not have been the same room in which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and came to them on Easter Sunday. Many think it was in the home of Barnabas's sister, John Mark's mother, and that it became the regular meeting place for the apostles and others.

223. Opinions vary. They include the views that they were sons of Joseph by a former marriage; cousins of Jesus; sons of a half-sister of Mary; and the most ancient, and now the most modern, opinion: they were sons born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus (see Matthew 1:25). Whatever the exact relationship, the important thing is that they were now believers in what Christ had done for them and for us.

224. Remember, Jesus Himself had chosen twelve to be His apostles. Twelve was the appropriate number; it matched the twelve patriarchs and the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve apostles would become the "patriarchs" of the new covenant.

225. We surely must recognize that these passages were drawn out of context and applied in a rather loose fashion to the situation. We do the same with phrases and sentences of Scripture at times. Jesus did it Himself (see Matthew 26:31 in relation to Zechariah 13:7–9). The apostles were led to see that the entire Old Testament was written with an eye to the Messiah and His kingdom, so they were able to see phrases as prophetic of circumstances in the life and ministry of Jesus. (Compare Matthew 1:22–23 and Isaiah 7:10–17; Matthew 8:16–17 and Isaiah 53:4; Matthew 12:15–21 and Isaiah 42:1–4; John 19:28–29 and Psalm 69:21; John 19:36 and Exodus 12:46; John 19:37 and Psalm 34:19–20.) The qualification for nomination was "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when He was taken up from us." No novice would do. Personal contact with Jesus was necessary, for the elected apostle would "become with us a witness to His resurrection."

226. This method was not repeated again in Scripture and does not seem to have had a further place in the many decisions made by the Early Church. Today, we take our concerns to God in prayer, study His Word, and rely on His forgiving grace in Christ as we in Christian freedom make choices in this life.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 4:12–19; 5:6–11

227. Being asked to suffer for Christ is not a strange thing because Jesus Himself predicted that just as He would be rejected and suffer at the hands of unbelievers so also would His faithful followers. Instead of being surprised when this happens, we are encouraged to rejoice because our identification with Him in suffering for His name underscores our identification with Him in His glory. Suffering for the name of Christ validates the fact that we are bearing that name faithfully.

228. Judgment that begins with the family of God separates the men from the boys, as it were. Note that Peter backs this up with Scripture. Testing, to an unbeliever, means nothing more than an inconvenience or an irritation, but to a believer, testing gives an opportunity to show he has not received the grace of God in vain but is ready to serve Christ's purposes also in times of stress and difficulty.

229. Some in your group may tell of circumstances in which God allowed them to be pressed so that they would stand up and be counted as a Christian. Be ready to share an experience of your own.

God's hand is behind every circumstance in life in a permissive sense. He does not cause evil, but He allows it; He does not cause sin, but He permits it. God allows and uses circumstances to exalt us at the proper time. In the same circumstances, the devil is at work to devour us.

230. To resist the devil effectively, we need the full armor of God so that we make our stand in the Lord's strength (see Ephesians 6:10–18). We can make it a practice to cast our anxiety on God by doing that in our prayers, as Paul says in Philippians 4:4–7—praying specifically about what is troubling us or tempting us and consciously turning the matter over to Him for His action. Instead of fighting with God over the circumstances that He allows to come into our lives, we can remember that He is at work for good in everything, and we can anticipate the blessing that will result. Paul's "with thanksgiving" suggests that we might even thank God in advance for the victory that He will win for us and share with us. Then the wondrous peace of God will guard our hearts and keep us from undue fretting about circumstances that God, in His good will for us, has well in hand. That other Christians experience the same kinds of suffering encourages us to see that it is not an unusual Christian experience. God is not just singling us out for it. Others experience it and endure. By God's grace and power, so can we.

231. The ultimate assurance is that while we may have to suffer a little while, God Himself will restore us and make us strong, firm, and steadfast—ready, by His grace, for life in His kingdom here and in the Kingdom to come.